

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 13 March 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 13 March 2023 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Jackson (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie, Cinko-Oner, Gilgunn, Hamdache and Ogunro

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

45 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**

Apologies were received from Councillors Spall and O’Sullivan.

46 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**

There were no declarations of substitute members.

47 **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)**

There were no declarations of interest.

48 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

49 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)**

The Chair informed the meeting that officers are presently scheduling site visit to observe the void process for members , an opportunity for a better understanding of the current review into overcrowding with the Council’s housing stock.

50 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 6)**

51 **ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 7)**

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

52 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 8)**

Public questions under relevant item.

53 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 9)**

None

54 **MAJOR SCRUTINY REVIEW: STRATEGIC REVIEW OF OVERCROWDING IN ISLINGTON- PLANNING DEPARTMENT (Item B1)**

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Meeting received a presentation from Karen Sullivan, Director of Planning and Development. The following points were highlighted :

- Planning permission has been secured for 1,112 genuinely affordable homes across four sites i.e. Holloway Prison, Barnsbury Estate, Vorley Road and Mount Pleasant. This includes 896 homes for social rent (including 60 extra care homes) and 216 homes for shared ownership.
- 291 new homes for social rent will replace homes demolished on the Barnsbury Estate and provide better quality homes for the local residents and address overcrowding across the Estate.
- Following negotiations with developers, 55 homes for social rent will now be delivered on the Mount Pleasant site. This is a significant achievement considering that the previous planning permission did not secure any homes for social rent (all consented at 'affordable rent').
- The Director acknowledged that construction on the Parkhurst Road site (TRA site) is also underway, delivering 50% affordable housing including 41 homes for social rent, noting that the former landowners originally proposed zero affordable housing. This achievement followed a landmark legal case setting national affordable housing policy.
- In addition to CIL and s106 payments, the meeting was advised of the significance of small sites and off-site contributions for affordable housing. The Council has secured nearly £50m, which will be allocated to the New Build team to build genuinely affordable homes. Members were reminded that small site contributions are not subject to the same restrictions that apply when the Council receives grant to build homes, which is to be welcomed.
- In terms of annual targets, the meeting was advised that 775 new homes per year are to be built in the borough., This target is based on a very detailed and rigorous analysis of site availability and when sites are likely to come forward.
- Aim of the Council is to ensure that at least 50% of new homes are to be genuinely affordable (70% social rent and 30% intermediate i.e. London Living Rent or shared ownership).
- The Director acknowledged that concerns exist on the affordability of the shared ownership tenure, noting that no shared ownership housing is planned for the Barnsbury Estate.
- It is important to note that Islington's Local Plan and policies on affordable housing exceed London Plan policies with regards to the provision of affordable housing. A very careful balancing act is required between providing good quality homes versus quantity of homes. The Council has exacting planning policies which provide guidance on space standards and the size of new homes (number of bedrooms). Members were advised that officers in Planning and Development are involved in detailed negotiations with colleagues in Housing Needs on each site to ensure that the size of the new homes reflects ward level demand.

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- The Director stated that the borough is already densely developed with low levels of developable land and that any developable sites tend to be constrained.
- The Council's planning policies place great weight on the quality of life (amenity) for future residents, for example on issues such as space standards; sunlight and daylight in homes and open spaces; aspect, ventilation and overheating; privacy and overlooking; outdoor space; and play space.
- On providing affordable homes in Tall Buildings, the meeting was reminded that although Islington Planning policies (as set out in the Local Plan) and London Plan restrict tall buildings (above 30 metres) some sites are allocated for tall buildings within the borough.
- Planning policies require that tall buildings have exceptional design and must have an acceptable impact on the local microclimate (e.g. wind, sunlight and daylight and overshadowing of surrounding buildings and open spaces); sustainability; bio-diversity; streetscape; townscape; heritage; and views.
- The Director informed the Committee of exceptions to Islington Tall Buildings policy, that recently the Planning Committee granted planning consent on housing sites which were not allocated for tall buildings for example the Holloway Prison site and the Barnsbury Estate, and that in both cases, the harm caused by the breach of the tall buildings policy was considered to be outweighed by public benefits including the delivery of genuinely affordable housing. The Vorley Road site had also been allocated for a tall building.
- It was noted that construction costs and viability may be a factor in not providing affordable homes in very tall buildings as there is the view that costs tend to increase significantly for buildings over 18m tall.
- Not all parts of tall buildings may be suitable for all residents, for example families and disabled and older people. However, housing colleagues have also stated that there is a significant demand for social homes in tall buildings given the severe nature of the housing crisis in Islington.
- A number of challenges regarding delivery of affordable homes which are not unique to Islington but nationally recognised include the adoption of the Local Plan and First Homes policy and the government's ongoing review of its policies on the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) which will introduce an entirely different approach to securing affordable housing on sites that are not owned by the council.
- Meeting was advised that the available land for residential development in Islington is mostly public owned, and very little privately owned land is available for residential development. In addition to the above challenges, the emerging GLA and Government approach to the fire safety of tall residential buildings is creating uncertainty and delay.
- In terms of opportunities, the Director informed the meeting that Planning Officers are in continuous discussions with the New Build Team so as to bring forward affordable housing on council owned sites such as the Finsbury Leisure Centre.
- Officers are also in regular discussions with external landowners to bring forward development on sites that are not owned by the council for example

Archway Campus site with potentially up to 100 new genuinely affordable homes being built.

- The Council is in proactive discussions with owners of residential sites in the Borough encouraging them to come forward with schemes (including private landowners, RPs and the Corporation of the City of London).
- Planning Officers are also encouraging the use of new architectural practices to test innovative approaches to address the challenges of high density schemes.
- In response to a question from a member of the public on when the Council will be reviewing its approach to roof extensions in conservation areas, the Director acknowledged that there had been extensive communication with the resident on this issue.,
- In response to a question about the high maintenance costs of tall buildings to bring them to decent homes standards, the meeting was advised that tall buildings come with a range of challenges, some as a result of their design which is historical, however this will not be the case with the newly designed tall buildings.
- On the request for average service charges on the different buildings, the Director of Housing Needs indicated that this information could be made available.
- Clarifying the issues of social housing and affordable homes, the Director acknowledged that defining the different tenures can be challenging, that anyone in council owned properties is in affordable housing and largely paying rent that is set according to the national formula. In the case of intermediate, housing is targeted at those not eligible for council housing and unable to afford market housing, primarily for those with household income of up to £90,000.
- Meeting was advised that the Council recognises tenures like shared ownership and London Living rent (a bit complicated as it is targeted on those with middle incomes which is calculated on a ward by ward basis. The Director noted that the London Affordable rent is not accepted by Islington Council as it is not considered to meet priority housing need in the borough.
- The priority for the planning team is social rent housing which is reflected in the recently consented schemes, and that there is no intermediate tenure provided in the Barnsbury scheme.
- With regards to the Council's target of 775 homes, the Director acknowledged that sites have been identified after extensive technical work, that the plan is going through a rigorous assessment with an independent Inspector.
- A member welcomed the suggestion that architectural design of council homes should be developed through engagement with the community but had concerns with tall buildings as the way forward in light of the Grenfell incident some years ago.
- A member welcomed tall buildings in so far as the design is of high quality and safe guards relating to fire safety are properly taken into consideration.
- The Executive Member advised that presently to the south of the borough, there are a number of high rise buildings, that the overriding factor at the

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moment is how to address the increasing number of people on the housing register which needs to be urgently reduced.

- On the issue of fire safety, the meeting was advised that although all local authorities are awaiting the outcome of the governments consultation on building regulations, the GLA in the interim has now introduced in its planning process a stage 2 referral requirement which states that any building above 30m will require a second stair case to address safety concerns.
- The Director reiterated that Islington is not against tall buildings being built as long as they are sited in the right place and meet the tall building policies.
- Meeting was advised that as at February 2023, the Council has 11 projects on site being constructed with 3 due to be completed in the next 3 weeks delivering 75 new council homes. A further 83 new homes are planned to be completed during the end of 2023/24 year.
- In terms of monitoring of council homes and benchmarking with other neighbouring authorities, the Director of New Build advised that some data will be put together and brought to committee at a later date, that nothing exists nationally.
- Meeting was advised that the GLA, the Mayor of London and the Department of Local Government and Communities have separate registers which is primarily to track funding and not pertaining to the actual delivery of social housing, that officers will provide the Committee with some inhouse work carried out by Islington officers and some comparison data from other London boroughs at a future meeting which will enable members the opportunity to scrutinise the Council's delivery of social housing.
- The Chair reiterated that Committee is looking at overcrowding and how to address it, that it is important for members to narrow down the exact number of homes being built specifically council social rented homes and not housing association dwellings.
- In response the Director of New Build stated that the Council target of direct delivery of 550 new homes by 2023 has been substantially met, that a further target of 750 homes is being proposed for 2026-2027 financial year which fits into the earlier projections stated by the Director of Planning in her presentation.
- On the request for comparison data with other neighbouring authorities, the Director of New Build noted that this will be brought back to the Committee at a future meeting, noting that there is no single but from different sources.

The Chair thanked the Director of Planning, Karen Sullivan for her presentation stating that going forward in light of this ongoing challenge for the Council, the Committee may in the future be revisiting this issue and therefore invite the Director back to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- That comparison data with regard to delivery of social homes be provided by the Director of New Build at future meeting.
- That a breakdown of the average cost of maintenance of tall buildings be provided by Housing officers.

55

OVERCROWDING AND HOUSING ALLOCATIONS (Item B2)

Committee considered a further update on the Overcrowding and Housing Allocations by Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy and the following points were highlighted:

- 15,402 households are presently registered on the Council's Housing list, that it is anticipated that by September 2023 it will exceed 16,000.
- Of the 15,402 households, 2,902 are currently in overcrowded accommodation, 4 of which meet the criteria for statutory overcrowding, 551 are severely overcrowded and the remainder are in moderate overcrowding.
- Meeting was advised that currently 976 homeless households have been placed in temporary accommodation provided by Islington Council.
- The levels of overcrowding have appeared to rise markedly since the beginning of the covid 19 pandemic, or perhaps more accurately, the numbers of overcrowded households who have decided to register for a social housing move have risen.
- Cost of living issues and the broader housing crisis are likely to also impact on this issue. The availability of homes at the more affordable end of the private sector is reducing significantly in the last 2 years and reports show that the homes available are up to 17% more expensive. In this context it is likely some households on benefits or low incomes will rent smaller homes that they can afford within local housing allowance levels and this will contribute to rising overcrowding levels.
- Meeting was advised that currently under-occupying and applicants on the Housing Register are awarded the highest priority for a transfer as an incentive for them to give up large properties and they have to bid for properties of their preferred choice. Successful bids are based on the date they have registered. Significant individual support is required to assist under occupiers to bid. There are currently over 676 under occupying tenants registered for a move.
- Meeting was advised that there are more under-occupiers in the stock who are not registered for housing and who may be reluctant to consider a move, that work is underway to identify these residents and through the Housing Management Services area teams and through a variety of publicity and campaigns.
- Meeting was advised that the number of social housings lets has declined year on year, that in 2021/2022 only 1022 council and housing association homes were let through the register.
- The Director reminded the meeting that Covid 19 undoubtedly impacted on the number of social homes that were relet and delayed some new build schemes, however it is unlikely any significant increase in social lettings will be seen in 2023.
- On Committee's request for officers to consider options in addressing overcrowding within the council housing stock there is focused work

underway through the Rightsizing and Under-Occupation work which aims to address levels of under occupation in the council stock and by association support the response to overcrowding.

- Meeting was reminded that the Draft Housing Allocation scheme was out for public consultation which closed on 17 March, that less than 9% of Partner residents objected and 75% of residents welcomed the proposed changes to the scheme.
- The Director reiterated that none of the proposed changes will provide new affordable homes but will address accommodation needs for those on the housing register.
- In response to a question, the Director stated that there is no estimated waiting time for residents on the housing waiting lists as it is a choice based letting system and people tend to bid for a variety type of properties, noting that only 6% on the housing register will be rehoused in the next 12 months.
- With regard to households seeking larger size accommodation, the Service is exploring with families whether they can move onto one bedroom property so that it can be allocated to such households especially when such families are experiencing damp and mould issues.
- On whether there is any data about households from neighbouring authorities being placed on the Council's housing register, Director advised that the information was available, that victims of domestic abuse ranks high on those placed in temporary accommodation.
- Meeting was advised that there is no scope for private sector in addressing overcrowding, that a 2022 report by the bureau of investigative journalism states that vacancy in the private sector is not available for individuals in Islington. Meeting was advised that there is no prospect of residents on the housing register being placed in private accommodation.
- On the question of whether the review of the allocation scheme would make a difference, the Director acknowledged that there will be a slight improvement for only those especially experiencing damp and mould as they would receive significant more points due to health hazards.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted

56 FIBRE BROADBAND ROLL OUT PROGRAMME - REPORT (Item B3)

Committee considered a report on the Fibre Broadband Rollout programme by Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy and the following points were highlighted:

- Members were reminded that committee will be receiving an update every 6 months on the progress of the fibre broadband rollout.

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- Meeting was advised of some significant progress, that connections to households has commenced and survey has been carried out on 5000 properties.
- The Director advised of a recent press release from one of the providers regarding the fibre broadband connections to community centres which is good news as it addresses accessibility concerns for vulnerable residents.
- On the lack of timelines for rollout, the Director advised that the Council had no control over the providers on its rollout programme, that council can only cajole and encourage them to provide the service, that the Council is hopeful that over the next 3 years over 90% of the programme will be rolled out.
- On the question posed by a leaseholder that Islington has been not been proactive with the result that it has created a digital divide with only 400 public owned properties being connected in comparison to the 55,000 properties in the private sector, the Director reiterated that Islington has a Master way Leave which it negotiates with the 2 providers aimed at protecting Islington assets in terms of future maintenance , safety , building regulation etc, reiterating that Council cannot enforce it on any provider who have voluntarily signed it.
- The Chair noted that this programme will be kept on review stating that this issue was beyond the control of Islington Council. The Chair welcomed any further communication on this issue with the leaseholder to be copied into him.

RESOLVED:

That an update be provided on the progress of the fibre broadband rollout in the next 6 months.

57 DRAFT OVERCROWDING QUESTIONNAIRES TO PARTNERS OF ISLINGTON COUNCIL AND TO RESIDENTS ON THE HOUSING REGISTER WHO ARE LIVING IN OVERCROWDED CONDITIONS. (Item B4)

Committee considered the draft questionnaire document which will be circulated to partners of Islington Council and households who live in overcrowded conditions and on housing register seeking alternative accommodation.

Members were invited to comment on the proposed questionnaires before they are

issued to partners and residents.

RESOLVED:

That members comment on the proposed questionnaires

58

SOCIAL HOUSING (REGULATION) BILL (Item B5)

Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy updated the meeting on the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill and the following points were highlighted:

- The Social Housing (Regulation) Bill has been introduced to ensure the council is publicly accountable, honest, and transparent when improving the quality of services to tenants across Islington.
- The Bill has been making its way through the parliamentary process, introduced into the House of Lords in June and received its third reading at the end of October. It is now being considered by the Commons before receiving Royal Assent.
- The Bill, trailed in the Social Housing White Paper in 2020, has two very notable focus areas, fundamental reform to the remit and powers of the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) – from reactive to proactive regulation; and a focus on Health and Safety matters including tenant empowerment.
- Health and safety regulation for social housing is broadly contained within the 'consumer standards', these apply to Islington Council in the same manner as Housing Associations – there won't be any special treatment.
- The new approach to proactive regulation will require upfront information from landlords which the Regulator will likely assess against the new tenant satisfaction reports to corroborate the landlord's evidence. Members were reminded that committee received a report on Tenancy Satisfaction Measures at the 2nd of February 2023, meeting.
- In response to a question, the Director advised that Housing Associations have a head start on Islington Council in more proactive regulatory style, as Islington Council have not been subject to In Depth Assessments (IDAs) as well as being organisations which are more concentrated and specialised on delivery of social housing.
- On what the Council is doing to support housing associations tenants, the Director advised that a meeting has been arranged for resident to meet the Chief Executive of the Housing Ombudsman on 30 March at 1pm in the Town hall which has been publicised in rent statements and leaflets. Also the chief Executive of the 5 Housing Associations will be at the next meeting in May, an opportunity for members to scrutinise their performance on different issues.
- The Director acknowledged that Islington's Satisfaction measure which were carried out by an independent company has shown an increase from 60% last year to 72%, noting that there is room for improvement going forward.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

59

TENANT CHARTERS REPORT (Item B6)

Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy updated the meeting on its Tenant Charters Report and the following points were highlighted:

- Meeting was advised that this is the final version having been considered at 2 previous earlier meetings, that the charter will be piloted during 2023 and reviewed during 2023/24 with all 26,000 tenants of Islington Council.
- The Tenants Charter is focused on strengthening the relationship between residents and Islington Council and embodies all the great work happening across Islington to create positive relationships with residents. It also challenges Islington Council to go further – presenting an opportunity for us to take the lead in accountability and customer oversight.
- By adopting a 10 point charter some of which include, Islington Council committing to develop a stronger relationships which will be based on openness, honesty, and transparency. The Council will build a stronger two-way relationship so as to build a fairer and more resident focused housing service.
- The charter also focusses on delivering excellent customer services and experiences – We will be easy to deal with and resolve your enquiries and keep to our promises. We will strive to continuously improve our services and will be fair, inclusive and value diversity.
- The charter solely focusses on Islington council tenants only , that the private rented sector charter is out for public consultation and will be brought back to committee for consideration after the end of the period.
- On the involvement of young people, the Director advised that a Training Academy has been set up for young people and in particular looked after children, that currently the service involves 3 young people who work alongside colleagues in Housing accommodation and advice. In addition the service works in conjunction with colleagues in the Children Services.
- In addition to the above the charter will promote effective communication so that residents will receive clear, accessible, and timely information from Islington Council on the issues that matter to them, including important information about their homes and local community, how Islington Council is working to address problems in their area, and information about performance on key issues and Tenant Satisfaction Measures. The Council will also inform residents on what has been done with feedback received, suggestions for improving services and lessons from complaints.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

60

DAMP AND MOULD (Item B7)

Committee received an officers update on Islington Council's plan to address Damp and Mould from Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy and the following points were highlighted:

- Meeting was advised of the progress made to date on the damp, condensation and mould programme that was established in November 2022.
- Going forward, the Council now encourages its tenants to raise concerns working alongside a proactive staff. Residents are now shown how to identify and report these issues, what steps the Council will and can take when reported and when tasks will be completed.
- The Council is learning from complaints and resident feedback which will help to improve its performances especially in instances where damp and mould reappear and not appropriately resolved. Islington Council will now have a rolling process to review complaints, assess what went wrong and as a result make changes where needed to policies, procedures and staff behaviour.
- In 2022/2023, the Council also engaged in wider resident and partnership activity which has resulted in creating a Tenants Charter and Tenant empowerment framework, private rented sector charter.
- In the final quarter of 2022, the council conducted 22 community drop-in sessions across Islington to discuss with residents a number of issues such as cost of living crisis, damp and mould etc.
- The Director highlighted a number of cases of maladministration considered by the Housing Ombudsman in the report noting the various actions taken by the Council which included compensation being paid.
- Meeting was informed of the 5 point plan to address the damp, condensation and mould issues which includes reviewing all damp and mould cases from the last three years; investing an extra £1m every year specifically for a new damp and mould action team; training non-specialist staff to be able to identify damp and mould when visiting homes; managing a dedicated line for calls from council tenants and working closely with other local partner agencies to provide joined-up help and support to residents.
- In addition to the above, the Director stated that a framework has been designed in collaboration with partnership services setting out the Council's approach to damp condensation and mould and communicating and its zero tolerance approach to interventions. The framework sets out three categories to respond to this approach, urgent which would receive an immediate response, tenancy and property audit which will involve proactive interventions and every visit counts which is a comprehensive approach.
- The Director reiterated the Meet the Housing Ombudsman 30th March 2023 to be held in the Council Chamber, an opportunity to allow the Housing Ombudsman to explain to the tenants of Islington Council the work of the Ombudsman, noting that Islington Council is the first London Council to participate in this work.
- In terms of monitoring and KPI's, the Director noted that although this is a complex and broad programme, officers are working on KPI's going forward noting that the Service is looking at two levels of measure, the first being an ongoing measurement of success that goes well beyond the current programme of works which indicates how many cases are coming in and how well it has been addressed.

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Meeting was advised that another measure in line with expected government regulation regarding response times of social housing providers will be brought to committee in due course.

- On the remote technology to address damp and mould the Director acknowledged of a number of pilots being carried out on some of the sites which will be analysed so as to ascertain its effectiveness.
- On the issue of housing disrepair cases and compensation claims which tenants were being subjected to it was agreed that communications to tenants and in particular vulnerable tenants will need to be robust, encouraging tenants to avoid the pitfalls of using the services of ambulance chasing legal firms who promise compensation as the only way of addressing damp and mould is to notify the Council itself directly.
- Member suggested that beside leafletting tenants to communicate with tenants, officers should use the TRA's and Estate Manager to highlight what the Council is doing on this issue, highlighting the available process.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee will receive an update in the next 6 months

61 **WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 (Item B8)**

The Chair reminded meeting that 5 Housing Associations representatives were expected to attend this meeting but due to the packed agenda, item has been deferred to the next meeting on 8 May 2023

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

that the Committee will be inviting 5 Housing Associations to the meeting in May

The meeting ended at 10.00 pm

CHAIR