

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 9 May 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 9 May 2023 at 7.30 pm.

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

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

62 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

63 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

64 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

65 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

66 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair informed meeting that since the last meeting he had met with housing officers to discuss potential scrutiny topics which might be of interest to the Committee to review in the 2023/24 Municipal year.

It was also noted that Housing Services officers were presently undertaking an exercise to recruit resident representatives on to the Committee, details of which will be provided later.

67 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be B1, B2 & B7(taken together), B3, B4,B5 and B6.

68 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

The Chair informed the meeting that questions relating to the Peabody development on the Former Holloway Prison site, submitted by Rose Marie-Mcdonald had received a written response.

Rose requested that any changes due to the recent changes to address fire safety for buildings over 30m, should not have an impact on the number and actual sizes of social housing be provided that amended plans should be shared with the residents.

Cllr O'Halloran in response to the question on who is eligible for the social housing on the Holloway Site, meeting was advised that allocation of homes would be via the council's letting office, that homes would go to the nearest estate affected as they are given high priority.

On the implementation of fire safety changes and its possible impact of the proposed social housing, meeting was advised that this will be looked at and that any changes would require it being brought back before the Planning Committee.

69 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 8)**

None

70 **DAMP AND MOULD - OFFICER UPDATE (Item B1)**

That Committee received an extensive progress report on Islington's damp, mould and condensation from Jed Young, the Acting Corporate Director of Homes & Neighbourhood and the following points were highlighted: –

Meeting was advised that of the 3,471 properties that had reported damp and mould issues between January 2020 to Dec 2022, contact has been attempted with 2772 and actual contact has been with 1,626 households.

1152 have indicated that they do not have damp and mould in their properties, 474 do have damp and mould in their properties which would require a visit for a diagnostic survey and of these 212 jobs have now been completed, 42 are in progress, 175 are pending works, 44 are either with the surveyor not been able to gain access to the property, some are duplicate or works are no longer required, and one has been referred to the legal team.

In addition to the above, the Director advised that further qualitative analysis on resident feedback will be analysed which will be used to improve services.

Meeting was informed that additional data of tenants in properties, who have reported damp and mould, known to Adult Social Care and Children's Social Services has been approved, that the Service is currently in the process of adding this to this to the existing dataset. This will improve the Service's understanding of risk factors and guide service delivery.

Further work is underway to understand a deeper understanding of demographics and disproportionality.

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Meeting was advised that after internal officer consultation, Tenancy and Property Audit will now be called Tenancy and Property Visits.

During March and April 2023 a pilot of the above work has been conducted at Halton Mansions to review its impact related to tenants and on services, results of which are in the process of analysis, this will be available at the next meeting of the Committee.

All Islington tenants within the 152 properties and nine block have been sent a letter about the visits and that so far approximately 60 tenanted households have completed the form, with further appointments booked for visits over the next couple weeks, due to tenants receiving a letter and providing a suitable time for a visit.

In addition to the above, Leaseholders are invited to join the Community drop-in sessions.

Initial officer feedback has shown that officer visits have been positively received by tenants, that a further community drop-in session for Halton Mansions, where it is presently being piloted was held on 20th April 2023.

Results from the Housing Allocations Policy consultation, which closed on the 17th March 2023 has now been analysed and will be presented to Corporate Management Board after which it will be considered at the July Executive meeting, that 950 responses were received from residents, as well as 81 partner organisations also responded with only 10% of partners not supporting the proposed changes.

Meeting was informed of the training programme offered to technical and non-technical housing officers is well underway so as to bring awareness of damp and mould and well as customer care

Trauma informed training is an established course delivered by Homeless Link with on-going training for Housing officers.

Further training is being scoped for staff outside the Homes and Neighbourhoods department to bring a better understanding and awareness to officers who have contact with residents.

Briefings of damp, condensation and mould are being included in induction packs and presentations to existing and new staff.

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Islington Council hosted the Meet the Housing Ombudsman event on 30th March 2023. 150 people attended the event online and in-person.

The special investigation of the Housing Ombudsman continues with officer meetings to start at the end of April 2023, results which will be due in September 2023.

Meeting was informed that KPIs are being refined, that member feedback will be welcomed, noting local authorities are still awaiting guidance from central government on some of the indicators, that the draft KPIs stated in the report have been shared for comment with Housing Quality Network who have been commissioned to be Homes and Neighbourhoods critical friend.

The five largest Housing Associations operating in Islington will be attending the June 2023 Housing Scrutiny meeting to highlight their programmes on addressing this issue and their performances on a range of housing related issues.

Learning and best practice continues to take place with other local authorities and Registered Social Landlords, as well as London Councils, Housing Quality Network and other professional bodies.

The progress on the damp and mould programme continues to be shared at various boards across the council including the council's leadership, safeguarding boards and Islington Housing Group etc.

Technical equipment, like sensors and other early intervention and prevention tools, are being scoped for procurement.

The Chair welcomed the progress of the team, noting that going forward it is imperative that officers take a deep analysis of the causes of damp and mould acknowledging that at this stage it is understandable that officers are keen at present on remedying and repairing historical cases as this will assist the Committee reassure resident's that their concerns are being addressed.

RESOLVED:

That the update on damp and mould be noted.

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Item was taken in conjunction with item B7, New Build Benchmarking data.

Ian Swift in summary updated the meeting on what had been carried out so far as part of the committee's review exercise on overcrowding and includes:-

Islington has significant levels of housing need in the borough.

That overcrowding is one of the areas of housing need that is observed in both the homelessness and housing register pathways.

Committee has received a series of presentations which illustrated the work taking place within the council and with partner agencies to address the issues of overcrowding in Islington.

The council has worked in partnership with the University College London which has produced a detailed questionnaire for all households overcrowded and seeking larger accommodation through the Housing Register. Questionnaire have been distributed to the 2,909 overcrowded households on the housing register and the results will be considered at a future Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting.

Committee also received a comprehensive report outlining the latest data available on overcrowding and the work currently undertaken to address this issue. This data highlighted that only 6% of people on the Housing register will be rehoused into permanent council and housing association accommodation in the future.

Households from minority ethnic backgrounds are three times likely to be affected by overcrowding than white households.

A number of key findings from a recent National Housing Federation research programme shows that for example, four in ten (41%) are in overcrowded homes, children are sharing a bedroom with an adult. Also in one in four overcrowded homes (26%), children are having to share a bed with someone else and that over half of all respondents (52%) have had to sleep somewhere other than their bedroom, such as a living room, bathroom, corridor or kitchen due to overcrowding.

It was noted that through its review, Islington Council is calling for a long-term, national plan for meeting housing need, with the aim of driving a drastic increase in the number of affordable homes over the next decade.

In response to a question on identifying housing needs and its relationship with the planning process, the Director reminded members of the recent presentation by planning officers which highlighted for example with the former Holloway prison site and its various housing mix, that there is constant discussion and collaboration between officers in Housing Needs and Planning Officers to assess housing demand and requirements.

On the request for benchmarking data with other neighbouring authorities, the Corporate Director advised that the briefing notes two sources , GLA Housing Starts

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and Completions and DLUHC and secondly data from other local authorities with similar development programmes. It was noted that presently there is no single source to provide accurate comparison.

Members were advised that the specific benchmarking task has been undertaken using data that relates to the financial years 01/04/2018 to 31/03/2022 therefore the numbers shown for Islington do not include all of the new build homes that will contribute to the delivery of our 2018-2022 550 target.

That the data used for benchmarking shows that Islington had 161 completions in this period, but this does not include 35 completions from the first quarter of 2018 (as the financial year starts in April) and 77 completions that are yet to be reported to the GLA and DLUHC.

Members were advised that when considering performances against the target of 550 over the 2018-2022 period Council delivered a total of 527 new council homes (combined starts and completions).

That the slight shortfall of the original target is due to one scheme (Hathersage and Besant) not being able to proceed due to viability issues arising predominantly from external market factors.

In response to a request for a 10 year period of comparison data and the possibility of including information from boroughs south of the river, the Director acknowledged that officers will endeavour to provide the information noting that schemes that have been granted planning permission may represent a challenge but counterparts will be approached.

The Chair reminded the meeting that the review on overcrowding will continue into the new municipal year as the committee will still be taking evidence from some of the boroughs housing association and residents feedback.

Chair also acknowledged that addressing overcrowding remains a priority for the Council, that more data and in-depth analysis and innovative approach will be required.

RESOLVED

That the update be noted.

That officers seek to obtain comparison data from other authorities over a period of 10 years

72 PREPARING FOR THE END OF PF12 - 12-MONTH REPORT BACK (Item B3)

Committee received an update on the successful reintegration of street property homes managed by Partners into Council Services from Hannah Bowman, Assistant Director Strategic Planning & Investment. The following points were highlighted:

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On 4 April 2023 the c. 2800 tenanted homes and 1200 leasehold homes returned to council management at the end of the council's 16-year Housing Private Finance Initiative (PFI) 2 contract with Partners for Improvement in Islington (Partners).

27 staff joined the council from Partners as part of a TUPE transfer to continue to deliver the services to council residents.

The transition was a culmination of a three and a half year programme of work, by the council and Partners, overseen by a multi service Programme Board within the council, to deliver a smooth and successful transition of service from Partners to the council.

Members were reminded that the committee provided recommendations for improvements to the programme and that a year on from the reintegration the briefing before committee reflects how the homes have been reintegrated into Council service delivery highlights continued plans to ensure services are fully integrated into service improvement plans by the council.

The meeting was informed that a range of performance indicators were identified to help review the impact on the council services of the reintegration of PFI 2 homes, so that the housing services key landlord contact points were a key, that the repairs service was a key area for review as street properties have a range of characteristics that are different from Council estate stock and pose different challenges in service delivery.

Although there have been areas of more significant impact, overall the additional properties have not resulted in high levels of impact on services, demonstrating that service preparations have in general been successful and adequate.

Meeting was advised that call volumes at Housing Direct actually saw a fall when compared with the previous year for the first seven months of the year, that this drop was more pronounced following the first 2 months of the year, which may indicate a small but significant surge in repair reports or servicing enquiries during the initial two months of the integration. However, there does not appear to be an on-going and sustained pressure on the call centre as a result of the integration.

The Service has experienced a significant growth in work as a result of managing a large number of repairs jobs raised on PFI2 homes as they have returned to LBI to be managed, over 11,500 jobs this year. Overall, the total number of repairs jobs has increased between April 2022 and March 2023 including PFI 2 jobs, but the PFI 2 jobs have remained consistently around 11% of the total number of jobs, that this has been within a backdrop of increases in jobs being experienced in all stock. The service has reported that the cost and complexity of these jobs are higher than for the majority of stock.

In terms of gas repair jobs, the Assistant Director noted that the level of repair work for gas boilers peaked during the winter period, that the number of gas repair jobs

are generally above the 12% threshold throughout the year. The service has indicated that this is as a result of the gas boilers in PFI 2 homes nearing the end of their economic life because of the contract with Partners only included a single replacement programme for boilers as part of the decent homes works at the beginning of the contract. An above average increase in boiler replacements have been experienced during the year as a result of this, as well as a revised approach to boiler breakdowns to help better reduce the risk of damp and mould in homes.

The number of legal disrepair cases that were inherited from Partners skews the true picture otherwise represents new cases related to these homes, however, there are clearly higher levels of disrepair claims for these street properties, than the proportion of stock that they represent. The service has fed back that this reflects their general experience of prevalence in different property types. It had also been anticipated by the service that claims may come forward or be restarted because of the change in management being seen as an opportunity to raise issues directly with the council.

In terms of income, rents for street properties are generally higher than for estate properties and therefore the level of debt per home has been higher, because a single week's arrears would have a higher monetary value than for the equivalent sized estate properties. The level of debt is therefore not in line with the proportion of homes being monitored. Collection rates between Partners and the council on an annual basis have been maintained within a 1% variance, indicating that performance of both organisations has been broadly similar.

The proportion of enquiries received from former PFI2 residents is proportionate to the proportion of stock at 12%, however there are some particular areas where they feature particularly highly including ASB and noise related contacts, making contact by phone and contacts about mutual exchanges as figure 8 demonstrates.

On the issue of service charges meeting was advised that the way service charges are billed between the council and Partners is different, as Partners continue like many providers to bill leaseholders in April for the coming year, whilst the council does this from September to September for costs incurred April to April. This is an approach the council has found to be successful for their collection arrangements, however leaseholder income is a key contractual requirement for Partners and therefore their service has not been aligned to this approach so it be noted that this reflects the 'gap' in service charge billing experienced by the leaseholders returning from Partners.

Most Homeowners pay their service charge by monthly direct debit from September and therefore sums owned as a total bill reduced down each month from September to September in line with this repayment profile.

Homes returning from PFI 2 attract a lower annual services charge because they are street properties and do not receive and pay for services such as caretaking, estate services and concierge. Therefore, charge levels are well below the 12% of total services charges, that their volume of properties represent.

Complaint levels in general are in line or below the representative levels of stock, except for in the peak period in November and December reflected in both the repairs and housing operations complaints levels. This timing coincides with the peak of jobs and complaint about damp and mould, due to the local and national focus on this important issue.

Although complaints levels have not been unduly high for the returning stock, services and the complaints team has fed back that the complaints received have followed other service trends of being a bit more complicated in general, either because of the nature of the properties or being the reopening of old issues of dissatisfaction, where residents are hoping to get a different outcome from previous enquiries to Partners.

A single replacement of boilers in homes during the contract term means that many of the boilers replaced during the works period at the beginning of the contract, are now coming to the end of their expected life. This constraint impacts in a number of ways but effects are already being felt in terms of the boiler replacement capital budget, with significant additional resources being required this year as a result of the PFI homes being reintegrated. A peak was anticipated but this has been higher than expected.

The service has also experienced very high levels of expectation from leaseholders about the quality of repair, maintenance and investment the council can provide to them. This may be a reflection of the much higher property values among this leaseholder group and a limited appreciation of the financial constraints and restricted income under which social housing providers operate.

The transfer of staff from Partners to the service has been found to be beneficial for the tenancy services management team, they have brought with them familiarity with the residents and their issues, consistency for residents who were familiar with their assigned housing officers, as well as, considerable expertise in anti-social behaviour and neighbour nuisance.

The Tenancy Team are currently undergoing a restructure process for the whole service, which will help to address these issues and will benefit all residents by addressing other issues highlighted by residents, Members, our critical friend and partner organisations that will lead to service improvements.

With regard to the integration of staff, feedback from services has been that the transfer of staff, where this was close to a full contingent of staff coming into the council, has been a positive experience both for the staff transferring and the council. The council has really benefitted from the expertise and knowledge of staff, who understand the challenges and complexities of working in our street properties and bring experience of this to service delivery.

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Within the repairs team, staff moved over earlier than expected and with substantial ease to the council's terms and conditions, ensuring consistency across the service and that staff can benefit from the additional employment benefits offered to council employees.

Meeting was advised that learning from the process and what went well and could be done better can be applied to future transfers into the council and eventually for the integration of PFI 1 services in 2033.

Meeting was advised that data transfer overall has been a success, although challenging and resource consuming programme of work, which for housing services was run alongside business as usual in most cases, presented some significant time and resourcing pressures.

The Assistant Director noted that ultimately the delivery of data held into the council's systems worked well and the historical data is fully accessible to the council from Partners records, either through business-as-usual systems or Sharepoint repositories.

It was also noted that Services have, however fed back some useful improvements they would like to see regarding the keeping of records, which the PFI Clienting Team will pick up in our improvement work with Partners senior management team.

Resident communications on the reintegration seems to have been relatively effective, although some residents did inevitably contact Partners after the transfer, these were not large in number and were quickly redirected to the right service. Some residents still make contact about the transfer with the Programme Manager, who still have his details from the letters that were sent out explaining the transfer arrangements in March 2022.

Generally, feedback received by the service teams has been positive about the return of services to the council. Residents are positive about being more closely linked to the council.

Leaseholder expectations continue to be very high and the satisfaction levels inherited from Partners were very low. They will have benefitted from the change in collection timings this year, which may be well received by some, but we are equally mindful that the loss of the £10k rolling 5-year cap (which was a government requirement for PFI schemes) is likely to be seen as a negative impact of the change by this group, as investment programmes on this stock begin.

A number of engagement activities have been offered to returning residents to understand their experience and any issues related to coming back into direct management. Unfortunately take up has been generally low despite this. The Assistant Director in summary advised that the transfer of services went relatively smoothly for residents, which was a key objective of the programme for integration, that some key learning points have been picked up, that consideration be given to areas of work which needs more resource applied or to be started earlier has been identified to inform future service transfers.

In addition to the above, meeting was advised that the working relationship with Partners, if anything has been strengthened through the reintegration work and the joint commitment to ending the contract well was an important component to the success of the work programme.

The Chair welcomed the integration of Partner managed properties back in to the council ownership, that it is essential that information about the process be captured in quarterly reports going forward as it is important that performances are monitored. The Executive Member for Housing and Neighbourhood welcomed the suggestion.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted

That the performances of the integration process be monitored by its reporting in quarterly reports.

73 FIBRE BROADBAND UPDATE (Item B4)

Ian Swift updated the Committee on the programme and delivery of Islington Broadband, reminding the meeting that the roll out of fibre broadband remains a high objective of the council.

Meeting was advised that since the last update in March, no further service connections have been made live by the providers (60 at Spriggs House and Barratt House as at the date of the last report 1 March).

A suggestion for local MP's court to exert some pressure on the local providers and possibly highlight the issue in the local press was noted.

On the delays, 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.

RESOLVED:

That progress of the rollout programme be reviewed in the next 3-6 months.

That Communications and campaign be enhanced to ensure that pressure is placed on the local providers.

74 **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q3 2022/23) (Item B5)**

Councillor Una O'Halloran, Executive Member of Homes and Communities and Neighbourhood and Jed Young Interim Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhood was present and outlined the report. The following points were highlighted:

Meeting was advised that a new indicator H13 to be included in quarterly reports, this is the % of residents who are satisfied or satisfied with the whole experience of having works carried out, an opportunity for members to assess the performance of the repairs being carried out.

On the numbers of people sleeping rough, meeting was advised that in comparison to central London local authorities, Islington is to be commended having reduced the numbers sleeping rough from 50 years three years ago to a number of 6 and that evidence has shown that these are new people possibly from other borough. The council has a lot of support in place.

Members were advised that following the end of consultation period the Private Landlord Tenant Charter which received substantial response has been accepted by Council and will be circulated to members.

On the issue of accreditation and licensing, the meeting was informed that this is with the Community and Safety team, details which is available for committee and can be circulated.

In response to a question about H3 indicator, the number of affordable new homes completed by the Council and the target, the Director acknowledged that it was a typographical error, that this will be clarified and correct figures be circulated.

The Chair commended the work of the small team managing those who are sleeping rough on Islington Streets.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

That data reported on H3 be clarified and circulated to members

75 **COMMUNAL HEATING MINI-REVIEW - 12-MONTH REPORT BACK (Item B6)**

Stephen Platt, the Assistant Director Property Services provided an update on the Committees recommendation following its review exercise on the Council's communal heating systems. The following points were highlighted:

Meeting was advised that considerable progress has been made implementing the scrutiny's recommendations, with work to continue over the next few years.

Improving the Communal Heating Service is a key focus for the Property Services Team in both maintaining existing boilers and looking for new low carbon alternatives.

On the question whether the Service is considering Solar Power as an option to communal heating, the Director noted that all options are being considered, that this was not a final solution but will supplement the energy supplier.

On the question of having heating meters installed, meeting was advised that Council have plans to have it rolled out to all its properties in the borough, that having heating on 24/7 days was not sustainable especially during this period of high cost of energy.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the service on implementing its recommendations is noted.

76 NEW BUILD BENCHMARKING DATA - UPDATE (Item B7)

Item taken in conjunction with Item B2 – Strategic Review of Overcrowding in Islington

77 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 (Item B8)

The Chair thanked members of the Committee, housing officers, external stakeholders and members of the public for their contributions to the work of the Committee.

The Chair reminded the meeting as evidence regarding the Committee's review into overcrowding is still ongoing in particular evidence from the boroughs Housing Associations, the Committee's work will continue into the 2023/24 municipal year as this needs to be taken into consideration.

In the interim members were invited ahead of the next meeting to consider possible draft recommendations.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme 2022/23 be noted.

The meeting ended at 10.10 pm

CHAIR