

London Borough of Islington

Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee - 14 October 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 14 October 2024 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Jackson (Chair), McHugh (Vice-Chair), Gilgunn, North, O'Sullivan, Cinko-Oner and Donaghey
Councillors: Chapman and O'Halloran
Also Present: Donaghey

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

- 26 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**
Apologies were received from Councillor Graham and Co-optee Rose McDonald.
- 27 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**
There were no declarations of substitute members.
- 28 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 29 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**
Minutes should reflect that Councillor McHugh was the Vice Chair of the Committee at the meeting of 26 September and not Councillor Cinko-Oner.

Also minutes should note that both Donaghey and McDonald are co-optees and not Councillors.

Meeting was also advised that there are a total of 48 community centres in Islington, 3 of which are directly managed by the Council.

The 3 community centres highlighted in the minutes and managed by Islington Council are Andover, Jean Stokes and Vibast.

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RESOLVED:
That subject to the amendments noted above, the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2024 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.
- 30 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**
Chair informed meeting that the reporting and performance of Islington Libraries falls within the remit of the Committee, that he will meeting relevant officers to discuss the format or reporting to the committee soon. Any suggestions from members should be emailed to him or the clerk of the committee.
- 31 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**

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MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW -ISLINGTON COMMUNITY CENTRES - PRESENTATION
(Item B1)

Committee received a presentation on Islington's Community Centres from Cllr Chapman, Executive Member for Equalities, Communities and Inclusion, Raj Chand, Corporate Director Communities, Strategy and Change and Lorna Hughes, Interim Assistant Director, Heritage, Culture Equalities & Community Partnership. The following issues were highlighted:

- Community Assets serves a vital role in that it Islington aims to provide a thriving network of places which aims to fulfil the Council's mission of tackling inequality, reducing poverty and strengthening community cohesion.
- Islington owns and manages a wide range of assets – buildings and land – that will help deliver the missions that are set out in the 2030 Plan.
- Meeting was advised that the Council's Strategic Asset Management Plan will be considered at the Executive in November 2024 which sets out how Council's assets align with and support delivery of the missions.
- Community Centres are key to the above mission in that it plays a vital role in bringing residents and communities together, strengthening community cohesion, and providing a range of activities and services at a local level that support early intervention and prevention.
- Council owns 48 community centres, with a good geographical spread across the borough, sitting alongside other community spaces and services such as libraries, Family Hubs, and Access Islington Hubs.
- The review of community centres in Islington will establish how Council can make better use of the community centre offer to maximise the benefits and ensures they provide the support and activities that residents and communities need.
- A cross-departmental working group has been established to review its community asset offer.
- The overall aim of the review is to explore how community centres can meet the needs and aspirations of local communities.
- Meeting was advised that the review should provide a better understanding in that members will be able to assess the current position, its usage, its management and stock condition of each centre.
- The review will also understand and map local needs, using data and resident insight to identify priorities for local communities; providing access to a range of services, facilities and activities that address this need; exploring how to reduce duplication by working together on delivery of services that provide a more streamlined but comprehensive offer.
- The review should ensure that Islington has a well maintained and affordable portfolio of community centres and enhance partnerships with voluntary community sector spaces and organisations to provide a broad spectrum of support for residents.
- In response to a question of any example of a well run community centre, meeting was advised that members will be able to assess other comparative models from Newham and Barking and Dagenham.
- On the query about informal arrangements of some community centres, meeting was advised that this relates to accessibility and usage which in some cases has been on an ad hoc basis, identifying the key holder is not clear and the booking system remains opaque.
- In response to comments about dilapidated community centres, meeting was advised that a number of them having been built in the 1950's are not in a good structural state, that to put it into good stage would require some huge investment to

bring them to high standard with for example the replacement of central heating and boiler system.

- Meeting was informed that the relevant section regarding community centres within the Strategic Asset Management Plan will be scheduled for the Committee at a future meeting.
- The Assistant Director acknowledged that community centres do attract income for its use, that breakdown details of income generated of each community centres will be provided at a future meeting. In addition to the above, details of heating cost, its usage and by which community etc will be shared with committee.
- In response to a question about community centres managed by tenant organisation, meeting was advised that details of licensing arrangements will need to be looked into.
- Suggestion for the review to incorporate community centres managed by voluntary community groups and to liaise with locality trade body who have rules and best practices was noted. Also the need to encourage those community groups that receive funding from Council to use Council community spaces instead of those in the private sector was noted
- In response to the above, Executive Member agreed that a mapping exercise would help identify local need which will then be matched and linked to one the other community assets within that locality that provides the activities.
- On the issue of contracts, the Chair acknowledged that Committee recognises the issue of confidentiality in such matters, that if required by members this will be made available to committee members by arranging with officers in a private setting .
- In response to a question, the Assistant Director advised that each community centres will have different purposes and missions; that it will be difficult to find a one size fits all; that there is a recognition that with the many management structures which have arisen in an ad hoc way over the years it will be a challenge for Council to get to the point and able to recommend that this is the best way a community centre should be run.
- On heating cost for community centres, members were reminded that in the covid period, community centres had experienced high cost similar to members of the public, that community centres do not attract social tariffs.
- Details about each community centres such as heating and utilities cost, contracts, future plans to take it back in house and accessibility will be provided to committee. In addition to this Executive Member advised that in conjunction with officers 3 locality based workshops will be scheduled with ward councillors, an opportunity to discuss the portfolio of assets within their locality with officers.
- Meeting was advised at the next meeting, expert witnesses involved in the community centres managed by voluntary sector will be invited to share their experiences

The Chair thanked Executive Member and officers for providing committee an overview of the role and use of community centres, that going forward he would schedule an informal meeting with officers.

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ISLINGTON BROADBAND (Item B2)

Ian Swift, Director of Housing Needs and Strategy updated Committee on the Fibre Broadband Programme in Islington Housing Estates:

- Since Committee received an update on the programme there has been an increase in connectivity from 50% to 60%.
- The Council will continue to work with each of the providers to reach its goal of delivering fibre broadband to 90% of council homes across the borough by the end of the programme in 2025.

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- BT Openreach has reached an agreement with highways to commence cabling which will result in more council properties being connected.
- With regards to reliability concerns of broadband in the community centres and how it is being monitored, the Director advised that a report will be brought to committee in January 2025 which amongst other updates will address this issue.
- On concerns that most of the technology might be outdated by the end of the rollout programme, the Director advised that although difficult to keep pace with technology the programme aims to fulfil the manifesto pledge of broadband connectivity to all its Islington residents and that this is being achieved.
- On the issue of listed buildings and connectivity, meeting was advised that when residents have raised issues it has been resolved within 48 hours and that it's good relationship with counterparts in the Planning department has resulted in being able to obtain listed building consent so as to install broadband.
- The Chair thanked Ian Swift and his team for all the work being carried out, noting that with the latest provider now on board the rollout will commence at speed.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

That report regarding the reliability of broadband in community centres be scheduled for the January meeting.

34

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY (Item B3)

Ian Swift, Director of Housing Needs and Strategy updated Committee on Islington's Homelessness Prevention and Rough Strategy. The following points were highlighted:

- Meeting was advised that following committee's comments on the draft strategy, it went out for resident consultation, undertaken by an independent company so as to ensure that officers do not circumvent their voices.
- Residents feedback is incorporated in the Action Plan and findings.
- In addition, officers liaised with the secretariat behind the All Party Parliamentary group for ending temporary accommodation, Just life with their feedback incorporated into the draft strategy.
- The strategy represents the value of Islington Council but more importantly helps to reduce homelessness and eliminate rough sleeping.
- Director advised that Islington is unique in comparison to other inner city London boroughs as it does not have any refugees released from Home office hotels, rough sleeping on its street due to the proactive work undertaken by Islington officers.
- Members were reminded that most of the refugees living in hotel accommodation have a right to stay in the country so by its staff engaging them earlier Islington has been able to avoid rough sleeping.
- Meeting was informed that Islington have low number of people in temporary accommodation, that presently there is an overspend of £2.25m projected for the year which is considerably lower than other neighbouring boroughs.
- The Director welcomed member input and feedback so that changes could be incorporated before it's consideration by Executive.
- Member welcomed Council's innovative way of avoiding rough sleeping especially with regards to refugees released from Home office hotel and that this be

incorporated in the draft strategy, as the upstream activities by officers will result into huge cost savings.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

35

HOUSING OMBUDSMAN ACTION PLAN (Item B4)

Committee received an update on the Housing Ombudsman Action Plan and the following issues were highlighted:

- Meeting were reminded that the Housing Ombudsman had concluded their special investigation into Islington Council in October 2023 and published their findings and that Islington Council had accepted the findings and confirmed its commitment to service improvement.
- It was noted that besides finding areas for improvement the Housing Ombudsman has commended Islington on its proactive approach to remedying areas identified for improvement and those had begun ahead of the launch of the investigation.
- An action plan was developed and shared with the Housing Ombudsman in response to their 21 recommendations and Homes and Neighbourhoods, with corporate colleagues in the complaints team and public health, have been working through the delivery of the agreed actions over the past 8 months, making considerable progress and improvements to services.
- Meeting was advised that the Housing Ombudsman has confirmed that they are satisfied by the progress so far and the evidence provided, so they will not be monitoring the Council's progress further against the action plan but will be returning to their usual monitoring practices for Islington.
- Director informed meeting that Council has been discharged in April 2024 and although no further action is required, committee will be kept updated until some of the few remaining actions had been completed.
- On challenges ahead, meeting was advised of a number issues, that there is a £1.8billion gap in investment funding to keep the housing stock in condition; overcrowding ;supply of housing and the new rent settlement which has had an impact on funding challenges for Council.
- On the removal of winter fuel payments and its impact on pensioners, meeting was advised that support and funding is in place for vulnerable residents to access and in instances where dwellings experience damp and mould as a result of residents not putting on their heating, the Director advised that this should be reported to relevant officers so that it can be immediately remedied.
- In response to a question on lessons and possible innovation, meeting was informed that Islington Council remains the only local authority that has been able to exchange data with the regional health system on vulnerable people to damp and mould alongside property conditions.
- In addition, meeting was informed of sensors being placed within properties to monitor damp and mould, noting not a unique innovation to Islington council but is welcomed.
- The Director advised that although most of the actions relating to the 21 recommendations had been implemented the report highlight some actions remain uncompleted, this should be completed by the autumn of this year with Committee receiving an updated report later in the year.
- The Chair thanked all officers for meeting this challenge and welcomed the sign of all the actions being implemented by the autumn.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted

A final report be scheduled for the committee

36

HOUSING REPORT - VOIDS PROGRAMME (Item B5)

Sinem Yinak and Mike Hall presented the Housing report on Voids . The following points were highlighted :

- Report before committee shows a good outcome on how the Service processes voids right from the point when a property becomes vacant to when it is rented.
- The Investigative voids team undertakes a lot of intensive work in trying to ascertain if the property is used for fraudulent purposes as it is important for the Council recover the property so that it can be given to those on the allocation list.
- In instances where Council have been informed that a vulnerable resident's dwelling has been taken over by criminal activities by third parties, officers will not classify it as being misused but will be managed sensitively.
- Works undertaken to bring back voids into use are checked and monitored by inhouse officers to ensure that they are up to the minimum standard in line with Council's Void Quality standard which was agreed by members some years ago.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that all efforts are made to minimise waste when void properties are being restored however in some cases it is unavoidable especially if the item ie bathroom, kitchen units have exceeded its usable life or unusable.
- Meeting was advised that in London, Islington is within the upper quartile for the key to key hand back, similarly with the number of empty property per thousand properties in the housing stock, that properties are being turned around quickly and this is due to the joint effort with colleagues in the tenancy team .
- On the average number of voids properties being brought back into use, meeting was advised that it tends to be between 900 and 1000 over the last 15years, noting that during the pandemic, the figures went upwards following the high number of deaths . The Director advised that meeting will be provided a breakdown on the annual voids at a future meeting.
- Meeting was advised that the void team has been doing good work converting properties that have been bought on the open market and now being used for temporary accommodation , that the partnership working between the empty void team and the repair team is commendable.
- On the works being carried out to restore houses, the Director informed meeting that years ago 100% of the work was undertaken by contractors but this has now reduced since Council brought it back in house .
- With regards contracts of the two main external contractors, it was noted that the existing contract is nearing its end so is presently being scoped before it goes out for tender.
- In response to a question about delays to restoring void properties in particular the removal of lumber, meeting was advised that this has eased and Council has other options in place for removal.
- Meeting was advised that irrespective of whether contract was undertaken by the main contractor or it be subcontracted, officers had meetings weekly, that there was good quality controls in place to monitor the works carried out and also there is a VPM in place to check on at the end of the project. In addition the Service has a mechanism in place to monitor quality of works and costs.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted

That information relating to void properties on an annual basis be provided.

37

JOINT PROTOCOL ON S 17 FAMILIES BETWEEN CHILDRENS' SOCIAL CARE & HOMES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS (Item B6)

Ian Swift, Director of Housing Needs and Strategy updated committee on Joint Protocol on S17 Families between Children's Social Care & Homes and Neighbourhoods. The following points were noted-

- Report before committee is at the request of both the Chair of Children Services Committee and the former Vice Chair of the Committee. All stakeholders have been consulted in the development of the framework, noting that this is a partnership co-developed with Children Services
- The protocol applies to families who are homeless or in urgent housing need, who have children under 18 years old, or are pregnant.
- The protocol has been developed in partnership with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Households in Temporary Accommodation and with Justlife to ensure families experiencing homelessness is tackled at a national level.
- Islington has no homeless families in bed and breakfast hotel in comparison to other central london local authorities which is to be welcomed.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that there has been no judicial review or judgement against the Council, that where issues arise and its brought to the attention of Officers this is quickly resolved.
- Challenges range from quality of accommodation, length of period in temporary accommodation and distances of accommodation offered.
- It was noted that the average wait in temporary accommodation in Islington although increased recently from 52 to 63 weeks, this is low in comparison to neighbouring authorities where some families are in temporary accommodation up to 10 years
- Meeting was advised that families with children in temporary accommodation are treated as a priority and also single people, noting that presently 6% of those classified as homelessness are single.
- In respect to relationship with housing association and the need to build 3-4 bedroom homes, Director advised that there is a good working relationship with planning department in that they consult on every site whether council owned or housing association the need in that locality.
- In addition, members were reminded that the Council's property purchase programme with has resulted in the purchase of a number of 3-4 bedroom type of properties is to be welcomed and importantly the properties are exempt from the right to buy as it is designated temporary accommodation for homelessness families.
- In response to a member suggestion, that the protocol should include other risks to children beyond the one highlighted in the report, the Director stated that this will be included.
- Islington Council has adopted a principle that whoever gets the child support will get the accommodation requirement for that child which tends to be predominantly female. For instance if it is a case of a female with 1 child they will be given a 2 bedroom and the male will get a one bedroom.
- Members were reminded that further changes or amendments to the protocol will be welcomed.
- Chair thanked officers for the Protocol and in particular the work undertaken

RESOLVED:

That the protocol be noted.

38 **WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25 (Item B7)**

That an officer report on Council's proposed plans to changes to Communal heating hours be included in the Committee's work programme.

Also an officer update with regards to Osborne, the contractors who have gone into liquidation and were involved in the new build homes on Andover Estate.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

CHAIR