

Cabinet Supplementary Agenda 2



7. Update on the Housing Transformation Programme (Pages 3 - 6)

Letter from Martin Wheatley, Chair, Independent Housing Improvement Board - Observations on report being considering at the 26 July Cabinet meeting.

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Housing Improvement Board

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Mr Jason Perry
Mayor
Croydon Council
Town Hall
Katharine St
Croydon CR0 1NX

21 July 2023

Dear Mayor Perry

UPDATE ON THE HOUSING TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME JULY 2023

This letter contains the Improvement Board's observations on the officer report which you are considering at the 26 July Cabinet meeting.

Progress since December 2022

My board colleagues and I commend the very significant progress in improvement of the housing service over the seven months since the last programme update. We would particularly like to acknowledge the completion of the repairs re-procurement and the approval by tenants of the council's regeneration proposals for Regina Road. Building on the adoption last year of the Resident's Charter, the council is pressing on with rebuilding its relationship with tenants and leaseholders, with a strong process now under way with support from TPAS. That these and other difficult issues have been taken forward strongly in the last six months is a testament to the commitment and oversight which you and the Deputy Mayor have provided, and the hard work of Susmita Sen, her leadership team and many others in the housing service.

It is right for us to give credit for the progress which has been achieved and is described in the officer report, but also important for us to emphasise that the day-to-day experience of the council's tenants and leaseholders is still a very long way from achieving minimum standards, let alone the excellence to which the council rightly aspires, and all of us would support. My colleagues who live in council properties still experience themselves, and hear about from other residents, too many instances of poor service and poor attitudes and behaviours by staff, at least as much in the non-housing council services, like waste -- management and fly-tipping, which adversely affect their wellbeing and quality of life as much as poor performance in the housing service. Too often residents raising legitimate concerns receive responses like "I have been doing this job for 21 years, I think I know what I'm doing."

The council will only be able to claim its housing performance is acceptable, let alone excellent, when there is real, sustained change in what tenants and residents see happening, across the range of activities and processes which contribute to their experience.

Priorities for the second half of 2023

During the rest of this year, several current projects need to achieve success:

- The mobilisation of the new repairs contracts and contact centre. It is vital that the council and its contractors start in the early weeks and months of the new arrangements as they mean to go on. Weakness early on risks establishing low expectations by council and contractor staff, and residents, which will be very much more difficult to address later.
- Completing the set-up of the damp and mould team and ensuring it achieves positive impact and the confidence of tenants and residents.

- Making the Residents' Charter real: transforming the way the council interacts with tenants and residents, both in day-to-day contacts over practical service issues, and in how it listens to their views on the management of the service and involves them in making it better.
- Completing the current assessment of asset conditions. Understanding properly the condition of all the council's stock, with a focus on that which seems likely to pose the greatest risks, is vital.

These and other workstreams all need to progress a long way before the end of the year, but data challenges, sector skills shortages and the usual apprehension until some degree of trust is established, mean that the programme will need very close monitoring and management over the coming months.

Performance management

We would also emphasise the importance of completing the process of redesigning performance management. Strong performance management is the only way the council can manage housing and other services towards, first, a standard of performance which is acceptable, and then towards excellence. We would urge focus on the following:

- Completing the process of selecting performance measures which capture all the important dimensions of customer experience.
- Thorough audits of data quality, so decision-makers can rely on their accuracy. The current stated position on some measures does not appear to us to be credible.
- Identifying performance targets for March 2025 which, if achieved, will demonstrate the service is working at least to a minimally effective standard for tenants and residents, and give the Regulator confidence that the council's performance is no longer at the critically unsatisfactory level which led to their intervention in 2021. A careful balance needs to be struck, for each target, between ambition and realism.
- Understanding, for each target, the critical path which will lead to the expected improvement and setting interim targets.
- Building an effective, orderly, set of business processes which ensure, for each cycle of target reporting, that the data is valid, that the reasons why the expected improvement is or is not being achieved are understood, that there is effective external assurance and challenge by our board, involved residents, and councillor Scrutiny, and that politicians and officers make timely decisions on resourcing and activity to keep the programme on track.

The Board has been working productively with officers on performance management in recent months, and much progress has been made, from a starting point in which the data and systems expected in a social housing landlord were almost wholly absent. But there is a way to go before measures, targets, and a system are securely in place. It is vital this is completed before the end of 2023.

Housing as a corporate priority

As I made clear in my letter of 7 December last year, housing improvement must continue to be tackled as a corporate priority, for three sets of reasons:

- Alongside financial performance and governance, the housing service is the focus of the Government's external intervention and Directions.
- Many of the challenges which need to be overcome are not unique to the housing service, in particular, building effective systems for performance management, procurement, ensuring stable staffing by capable people at all levels, and a culture focused on delivering the services residents need and pay for, and treating them with respect. Improvement in the housing service needs to fit

in with and be supported by corporate action, particularly during a phase when several extremely challenging aspects of improvement need to be completed alongside each other.

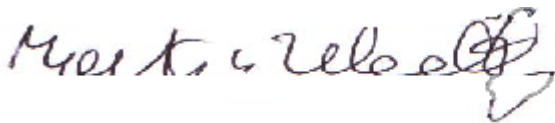
- The experience of tenants and residents in council properties is shaped by the performance of other services, notably waste, cleaning up fly-tips and graffiti and parking enforcement. They often feel there is an institutional tendency to think lower standards are acceptable in council estates than in other parts of the borough. We therefore look forward to the close engagement of the council's corporate management team in supporting improvement in the housing service and in functions elsewhere in the council which affect the wellbeing and quality of life of tenants and residents.

Membership

The effectiveness of our board depends on its membership being balanced and complete. For various understandable reasons, vacancies have occurred, and it has been taking too long for them to be filled. It is very positive that we now have new representation from London Councils, as well as from the Panel, but I hope very much we can now move swiftly towards the recruitment of further members with a political background and with professional housing and/or asset management experience.

I am copying this letter to the Deputy Mayor, to colleagues on the improvement board, with my thanks for their hard work over the last seven months, to Katherine Kerswell, Susmita Sen, Velvet Dibley and Democratic Services, and to Tony McArdle (Improvement and Assurance Panel). It will be posted on the Board's web page.

Yours sincerely



Martin Wheatley
Chair, Independent Housing Improvement Board

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