

Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 18 May 2021 at 6.30 pm. This meeting was held remotely via Microsoft Teams

MINUTES

- Present:** Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair);
Councillor Jeet Bains (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Luke Clancy, Paul Scott and Caragh Skipper
- Also Present:** Councillor Clive Fraser
Councillor Jade Appleton
Councillor Patricia Hay Justice, Cabinet Member for Homes
Sarah Hayward, Interim Executive Director of Place
Ozay Ali, Interim Director for Homes and Social Investment
Yvonne Murray, Director of Housing
Yaw Boateng, Chair of Tenants and Leaseholders Panel
Leslie Parry, Tenants and Leaseholders Panel
- Apologies:** Councillor Stuart Collins

PART A

12/21 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

It was agreed that the minutes would be deferred to the next meeting of the sub-committee..

13/21 Disclosure of Interests

There were none.

14/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business.

15/21 Investigation into conditions at 1-87 Regina Road, South Norwood and the Housing Service Improvement Plan

The Interim Executive Director of Place introduced the item and outlined details in a [Presentation](#).

Following the presentation Members had the opportunity to ask questions.

Points of Clarification

- In response to a question on whether the decision to extend the contract was a key decision or delegated decision. Officers said at paper presented to Cabinet was not a key decision paper.
- Further clarification was sought on funding for services and Members were informed that services were funded through rent collection and is fed into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), The HRA which was separate to the general Fund was not impacted by the S114 as it was ring fenced. The impact to the HRA fund had been the five year rent cap. HRA could be spent where it could have a wider benefit for resident. Whilst some of the fund could be spent on staff if needed but most posts in the department was funded through the General Fund.

A Member questioned how long the issues with disrepair at Regina Road had occurred for as the ARK report provided a useful timeline and The Cabinet Member advised that it was one of the first questions that had been asked in trying to uncover what had led to the failings. A resident had advised that issues started on 2017 but was not to the extent that had been witnessed recently with the worst of the disrepair occurring in a matter of months in the winter of the lockdown period. There had also been report of water leak through the electrics of the properties on February 2021.

In response to a question on current voids which was thought to be approximately 2% of housing stock and how this was related in terms of people in temporary accommodation, officers said that there was 1.8% of current stock that were voids. Only half were ready and available to let and the focus was to get all the properties back in use to alleviate the number of people in temporary accommodation.

A Member asked for clarification on the discrepancies between this paper and the Cabinet papers as the Axis contract average void turnaround days of 24 which was outside the 10 day target. Officers said that the figures presented in the Cabinet papers were the overall figures. The 24 day alluded to was the period the property was with the contractor, the overall period would be longer. Further details on this would be provided following the meeting. Details on the amount of voids would be circulated to members following the meeting

A Further question was asked on what that challenges were with re letting of properties. Officers said that when properties were handed over from the voids team as ready, they properties were placed on the website and advertised for bidding. Following bidding, the person was invited to view the property, they then sign the contract. The whole process adds to the turnaround time and for reporting purposes the total amount of days from beginning of void till contract signed by new tenant were included in reports.

In response to a question on why only a limited conditions survey was carried out in 2017 given the age and nature of the building, officers said

acknowledged that a more detailed survey should have taken place. Reports on conditions of assets were now being undertaken and will inform future asset management plans

Concerns were raised on the level of emails that were sent by Councillors highlighting issues that were not acted on. Officers acknowledged that upon investigation, there had indeed been repeated attempts by residents, MO and third parties to communicate their concerns and some of the responses they received were unprofessional, It was evident that there had been a distinct breakdown of relationship between tenant and staff of Axis as well as the Council and this was being addressed by senior staff.

A Guest highlighted concerns that there was a high number of repairs that were not being logged due to responses received by residents when the highlighted issues and the number of times they has to contact about the same issues before its logged and accepted as a need for repair.

It was asked how performance management of the housing department was being undertaken. The sub-committee was informed that there had been issues in the past but there was now an Executive Director in place who would have oversight on performance.

It was commented that the ARK report highlighted issues in every areas of the service with things wrong at all levels and it was asked what the plan was going forward. Officers acknowledged that it was rare for failings to have occurred in all areas. The priority was to address culture which was one of the key areas that required attention and focus including ensuring line of visibility at senior level.

A Member suggested that in the spirit of being more proactive than reactive that it would be beneficial for Cabinet Members to conduct estate walks in order to connect with residents. The Cabinet member responded that she had been very committed to conducting Estate Walks and did o whilst she was deputy and would continue to be involved in theses visits. Action Plans have been developed through the information gathered from going out and meeting with residents. It was pointed out that despite the Estate Walks, what was occurring would not necessarily have come to light.

In response to a question on what extent the impact of Covid and lockdown would have had on completions of repairs and the situation at Regina Road, officers said that during the first lockdown, less repairs were completed due to lack of staff as well as tenants not confident in allowing people to come into their property. Emergency works were conducted the number of works completed during the summer increased and during the second lockdown in winter only urgent repairs were dealt with which resulted in a serious backlog. The kitchens and bathrooms programme was also suspended during the initial lockdown period due to safety reasons. There was a lot more pressure on the contractor on lifting of lockdown.

The Chair challenged that at the February 2020 sub-committee meeting, it was highlighted that there was already a backlog of repairs and members

were at a time presented with a plan on how this would be cleared, then series of lockdowns as a result of the Pandemic further exacerbated the matter and caused further backlogs. The sub-committee had been presented a series of data which reflects that contractually the backlogs were being dealt with but in practice this was not the case. This was a major impact and disruption on residents and their families' lives, minor and major repairs not being managed well had a severe impact on the wellbeing of residents

It was highlighted by a Member that there were serious concerns regarding monitoring of calls whilst staff were working from home. Calls were not being recorded and this was listed as an issue in the ARK report and it would appear that some members of staff had been taking advantage of the situation at a time when services should have been at a high standard due to vulnerability of residents. Officers agreed that one of the actions that had to be taken was to ensure recording of all calls, monitoring of calls through spot checks and mystery shopping exercises using residents as well as independent people.

Members challenged that these were practical questions that should have been asked recording call recording as part of Council Silver and Gold meetings and there appeared to have been a disconnect as the crisis management that emerged from the pandemic was managed extremely well but was a lack of pro activeness in other areas.

Officers agreed that there were actions that needed to be taken as highlighted in the ARK report, about the management going forward on this contractor as well as others

A Guest commented that one of the issues discussed on a regular basis as part of the housing complaints panel was the apparent disconnect between Axis, the Council and residents. This appeared to be a general historic issue that should not be linked to the pandemic

In response to a question on whether the considerable amount of funds spent following the Grenfell disaster on installing sprinklers in tower blocks across the borough had impacted on other works, officers said that the planned maintenance works for the Council had remained the same for the past seven years. This was a fundamental issue as there had been limited investments on planned maintenance of older stock for a long period of time. The expenditure on homes had reduced in real terms over the last seven years when it should have increased in line with inflation and taken into consideration that the stock was older. A realignment of investment for the Council should come out of the surveys that were being conducted and that the Councillor would have to spend a lot more money on planned maintenance or regeneration.

It was further commented that the planned maintenance budget had remained the same for seven years and it was asked why this was the case for such a long period of time. The Cabinet member stated that the seven years covered the period that the HRA account was subject to a CPI - 1 which meant that

rents had been capped by government and this impacted the budget and in order to operate within means, the HRA had to factor in some cuts and was the principle that the budget had to be operated on. This cap had now been lifted and rent levels had been increased and it would enable further investment going forward as some works were being done but not to the extent that was needed.

It was highlighted that the Council needed to seriously look at the conditions of some of its stock which had been built was a maximum 50 year life span which had now exceeded that time frame.

A guest stated that from a resident's point of view it was hoped that any regeneration does not lead to gentrification and for plans to bare this in mind as this was occurring too often.

It was asked to what extent issues in the housing service was down to fragmented organisational structure which included but was not limited to split responsibilities, silo working and fragmentation of housing roles and why it had taken so long for senior management to acknowledge that the set up was not working in the interest of tenant. Officers pushed back on this point that there had been a proposed restructure by the interim Chief Executive that had been published in December 2020 that proposed to bring all the services under a new director. Following the report a decision was made to appoint an executive director. The consultation finding from the restructure was that a single director was the most favoured outcome.

The point was made that this was only just a new decision, the issues with the structure had been in place for a number of years and it should have been recognised that the set up was not in the best interest of the residents of Croydon.

Officers said that at the time the decision for the original structures was based on informed decisions, but this decision was later not reviewed as per protocol.

The report alluded to high caseloads for housing officers and it was asked how this was being managed as high caseloads would contribute to officer's ability to give attention to quality of care and attention to residents. Officers said that it was a small number of staff that provided poor services and exuded unacceptable behaviours. There had been a number of restructures which led to reduction of tenancy officers, but created tenancy sustainability officers to work with residents and to mitigate some of the work that would have to be carried out by tenancy officers. Other models of work had been considered and would be explored going forward. The Cabinet Member for Homes added that it was important to listen to the staff and the restructures that occurred happened under serious circumstances and staff would have been under immense pressure and this should be recognised in the contexts of how arrived at the situation.

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In response to a question on what immediate actions following the ARK report would be taken to address the culture to improve care, respect and empathy for residents which was highlighted as a fundamental issue, The Cabinet Member for Home said that Councillors, The Leader and Cabinet members had reached out to residents. They led the way as to how it was expected for everyone to operate. An Action Plan had been out in place. Residents will be listened to and their responses would form the basis of the Plan. To Change culture, the Executive Director of Place added that unacceptable behaviour was being challenged, working alongside officers with training provided on expected Responses. The Interim Chief Executive and the Interim Executive of Housing had met with staff to outline their expectations. Cultural change takes time and the Executive Leadership team was committed to changing culture by challenging behaviour and setting expectations.

The Leader made a point on how to involve residents and said this was not mapped out in full and collaboration would need to take place to formulating the best ways to involve them going forward. The Council could not achieve the change it needs to without the residents and their judgement.

It was asked how risks listed in the ARK report had been updated in the corporate risk register, the Executive Director of Place said it had, the risk register was under revision and would be presented at the next General Purpose and Audit Committee meeting.

The Chair thanked officers and guests for their attendance and participation in the meeting.

16/21 Exclusion of the Press and Public

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 22.49 pm

Signed:

Date:

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