

Tenant & Leaseholder Panel

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 9 February 2021 at 6.30 pm. This meeting was held remotely.

MINUTES

Present: Yaw Boateng (Chair)
Councillors Patricia Hay-Justice, Lynne Hale, Louisa Woodley, Michael Neal and Jeet Bains

Also Present: Jill Arboine, Ishia Beckford, David Mundy, Grace Osoata, David Palmer, Marilyn Smithies, Kim Wakely, Leslie Parry.

PART A

1/21 Welcome and Introductions

The Panel Members, Councillors and officers in attendance introduced themselves.

2/21 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Sharon Swaby and Binta Barry; this was due to technical difficulties.

3/21 Disclosure of Interest

There were no disclosures at this meeting.

4/21 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2020 were agreed as an accurate record.

The Chair informed the Panel that he would sign the minutes once the recent social distancing measures had been relaxed enough to allow him to do so.

5/21 See the Person Campaign

The Chair introduced the item and explained to the panel that he has implemented a new aspect of the meeting which would see a service or

department to provide the Panel with an insight into the positive impact that they are having within housing.

The Chair invited the Chair of the See the Person campaign to speak about the actions that had been carried out by the organisation and to outline any future plans.

The Chair for the See the Person Campaign provided the Panel with a brief background of the organisation, highlighting that they are a tenant led campaign founded in 2017 with members across the country. The organisation currently received donations from over 30 organisations but they required further support.

The Chair of the See the Person Campaign also detailed some of the negative stigma that social housing received from various sources such as television programmes, and stated that they organisation is striving to change this stigma. A media guide had recently been launched, which was available to download from their website, and was primarily for journalists to assist them with portraying tenants in a more positive way.

The See the Person Campaign have also developed an 'It's Not Okay Guide' which is a toolkit designed to help to remove the stigma of social housing. This guide was developed through discussions with various tenants, in conjunction with Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and outlined what constituted good and bad practice.

The Chair of the See the Person Campaign then explained how members of the Panel and members of the public could follow their social media accounts. There were weekly meetings which needed to be funded so the organisation was always looking for more donations. It was further noted that people could help by paying for zoom meetings, or facilitate training sessions and setting up meeting events and campaigns.

The Chair of the See the Person Campaign also detailed the pledge to the organisation; the purpose of the pledge was to provide support to the organisation and many housing authorities had implemented a similar scheme.

The Chair for the See the Person Campaign concluded and noted that he was willing to return for another meeting with a full presentation if necessary.

6/21

Budget/Rent setting 2021/22

The Finance Manager for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) introduced the item and informed the panel that she was introducing a paper the was titled The Housing Revenue Account Rent, Service Charge, Garage Rent and Budget Setting and the budget that was discussed was for 2021/22.

The Finance Manager acknowledged the financial troubles that had impacted Croydon in 2021 and stated that this was the reason for the slight changes in the 2021/22 budget. This was due to the fact there has not been a large capacity for non-urgent changes.

The Finance Manager stated that the main challenge during COVID-19 for the HRA had been to keep up with the planned maintenance programme; it had been forecasted that there would be an under-spend on planned maintenance that they would have to catch up on in the coming years. They also suffered some financial losses due to reduced rent collection causing the debt within the HRA to rise slightly higher than in previous years. Some of the debt had already been paid back and they were not expecting to begin the new-year with any significant financial pressures.

The Finance Manager informed the Panel that they would be recommending to Cabinet and Council to increase rent in 2021; the increase would become Consumer Price Index (CPI) from September plus 1% which amounts to a 1.5% rise in rent. This would also be the case for garage rent and service charges.

These decisions had been taken with the expectation that housing benefits will be changed which would allow tenants to be able to meet the increased rent charges. The increase in rent will provide just over £1,000,000 additional income for the HRA to be spent on tenant services, which will mainly be used to cover staff costs.

There had been an increase in pension costs due to employer contributions to pensions rising, and this would be covered by the additional funds generated from the increased rent. There are also inflationary pressures for utility costs and increase on-costs as a result of repairs and disrepair claims.

The Finance Manager told the Panel that the HRA were still recovering from the 1% reduction in rent for the past four years. If the rent reduction had not been in place then the HRA would have recovered £30 million more rent for their tenants.

The problem had been exacerbated due to the inflationary pressures which had caused costs to increase whilst the income for the HRA from rent was decreasing, and there was no possibility to reduce the services provided to their tenants.

The Finance Manager informed the Panel that the HRA intended to retain some of the receipts from right to buy sales, however they can only use them towards new affordable housing. The HRA planned to acquire new properties in 2021/22 and would use part of their GLA grant to purchase some of those new properties. This would help to increase the amount of housing stock for the HRA helping them to meet the rising demand for homes throughout the country.

The Finance Manager stated that the HRA had also expected that there would be a need for additional work to be carried out for higher level fire safety assessments and new fire doors. This would be a key factor in the long term planning of the HRA, as they would need to find a way to cover these additional costs.

The Chair asked the Finance Manager to elaborate on her points regarding the increase in costs that the HRA had to endure due to rising pension and staffing costs. The Chair was of the belief that these costs were covered by central funding. In response to the Chair the Finance Manager stated that there were management costs which covered the staff who ran the HRA on a day to day basis. This included staff members who were responsible for collecting rent from tenants, the staff that worked as caretakers and staff that ran their maintenance programmes.

A resident present enquired that given the HRA's plan to increase rent, would there be a situation in which the Cabinet and Council would consider going beyond the HRA's recommended rent increase due to the current financial position of Croydon Council. The Finance Manager responded by informing the resident that there was a statutory cap on the amount that they could increase the rent by. Therefore it was not possible for the rent to be increased further than the recommended amount.

The resident further queried whether the report included the recent declaration of sites that Brick By Brick had withdrawn which they were originally planning to develop. In response the Finance Manager stated that she did not believe that it included the recent declaration, but agreed to confirm this at the next Tenant and Leaseholder Panel.

Resolved - That the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel agreed to note the report.

7/21 **An update on the council's financial position, renewal plan & staffing proposals**

The Chair informed the panel that item seven on the agenda which addresses the Council's financial position, would be deferred until the next Tenants and Leaseholder Panel meeting.

8/21 **Capital Programme 2021/22**

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement introduced the item and provided the panel with an overview of the key headlines within the report.

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement explained that the Council had faced significant financial challenges which resulted in a section 114 notice being issued in November 2020. During this time, the council re-addressed its corporate priorities in order to help manage the financial problems during the

COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the Corporate Plan 2018-2022 was replaced with a new set of priorities and ways of working, which had established its aims as working within our means and balancing the books, whilst providing value for money with their residents.

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement confirmed that they would be focusing on tackling ingrained inequality and poverty within the borough, following evidence in order to tackle the underlying cause of inequalities and hardships such as systemic racism, environmental injustice and economic injustice. The Council would also continue to provide social care services for vulnerable residents in the borough, and would keep these individuals safe and healthy.

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement stated that as of 2021, the council had 13,751 tenants at homes within the HRA and these homes had been maintained and improved through the capital maintenance programme. In addition, they also manage 595 properties that were either service tenancies, general fund owned properties or council flat properties on behalf of private landlords. The Council also had 2,460 leasehold homes, and currently owned 1,119 blocks within the HRA; this required a significant amount of work in order to maintain the conditions of these homes and blocks.

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement noted that the council had been reviewing and implementing the new responsibilities for landlords that had been brought in through the fire safety bill and building safety bill. Practical steps had been taken ahead of the introduction of this new legislation to reduce risks to their residents, such as the implementation of 15 hardwired smoke alarms to replace battery operated smoke alarms.

Following the council's declaration of a climate emergency in July 2019, they had installed ground source heat pumps to three high rise blocks on Chertsey Crescent, College Green and Dartmouth House. These heat pumps would provide low carbon renewable heating solutions to the residents of those blocks.

In summary of their performance for 2020/21, the Capital Programme had been disrupted this year on two fronts. Firstly from the COVID-19 pandemic as due to the first lockdown between March 2020 and July 2020, the construction industry had initially stopped before slowly restarting under strict social distancing guidance. This had a significant impact on the ability to deliver the planned programme as some work took longer than planned and others had been deferred until the next financial year. The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement then explained to the Panel that the second aspect was the financial situation within the Council and the issue of the Section 114 notice in November 2020, which had resulted in strict spending controls being imposed across the whole organisation, including the HRA. This caused delays to planned start dates for several projects.

It was confirmed that despite the difficulties faced, work had been completed at Long Heath Gardens; 20 rooms on street properties had been replaced,

new windows in 18 blocks or 186 flats and 24 houses had been installed. They had modernised kitchens in 132 homes and bathrooms in 124 homes, conducted electrical checks across 2,131 properties and carried out remedial works where necessary. They had also continued work at 98 to 176 College Green to install rain screen cladding, replaced the roof and windows and upgraded the lift. The intention was for work to begin on the neighbouring block in 2022. It was also noted that work had begun at 56A to 76D Chertsey Crescent; installing rain screen cladding, replacing the roof and windows, upgrading the lift and installing ground source heating. They also intended to start similar work to Dartmouth House. It was confirmed that currently 99.58% of properties met the government's decent home standard and the average energy efficiency rating of their homes was 68.87.

It was further confirmed that the HRA have been provided with £26,771,000 of new investment for maintenance and improvements for the next financial year. In addition to that, they would be just short of £1,600,000 for cyclical work, which involved making sure that they were doing servicing and routine inspections for compliance and to ensure the performance of key pieces of equipment.

The Interim Head of Assets and Involvement detailed the repairs investments for 2021/22, as detailed in the officer's report.

In response to the Chair, the Interim Head of Assets and Involvement explained that the HRA was ring fenced and could only be spent on social housing related activities, so the rent that came in from tenants and leaseholders should only be spent on activities related to tenants and leaseholder homes and local community spaces.

A Panel Member then noted to the Panel that despite the fact that the HRA's finances are ring fenced, the reason that the expenditure from the HRA was being approved by the Spending Control Panel was to ensure that all of the money spent through the HRA was monitored and justified.

9/21

Responsive Repairs and Planned Maintenance Contracts Update

The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance introduced the item and gave a presentation detailing the contracts for responsive repairs and planned maintenance. It was explained that the current contract had been awarded in April 2014 for 15 years, with a seven year break clause, which occurred in March 2021.

The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance stated that the Council has looked extensively at the performance and the relationship since the start of the contract. This involved benchmarking their performance against other local authorities and housing associations of similar sizes and other social housing providers to see how the expenditure compared. The Council also compared their performance using key performance indicators against similar groups and organisations with similar types of stock, similar size and similar

demographics. They also conducted extensive research to gain feedback from residents, stakeholders, staff members of Croydon Council and Access Europe and external stakeholders including directors of other housing services and colleagues and Councillors.

The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance informed the Panel that they presented a report to the Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee in February 2020, and liaised with the relevant Cabinet Members. The Scrutiny Sub-Committee accepted the recommendation to carry on with a full options appraisal and asked them to come back with a more detailed report.

The Scrutiny Sub-Committee agreed the recommendations and requested a further, more detailed, report to be presented. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many activities were stopped such as site visits, and the team were unable to take those forward and carry out a detailed investigation as planned. Due to the timescales, it was agreed to extend the existing contract for a further four years. It was added, however, that the contract had a 12 month no fault break clause. The decision of this extension would be published in the Federal Bureau Report in February.

In response to the Chair the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance informed the Panel that the reason for the break clause in their contracts was so that the Council could measure the performance of their contractors and ensure that it was still the best option moving forward.

10/21 **Housing White Paper**

The Resident Involvement Manager introduced the report and gave a presentation which outlined the key elements of the White Paper, a proposal to work in partnership with residents in responding to future statutory and regulatory requirements and sets out Croydon's current position in relation to the proposals in the Paper.

The Resident Involvement Manager informed the Panel that the White Paper was a product of the Grenfell tragedy in which many things were highlighted in regards to health and safety within social housing, dialogue between landlords and their tenants and dealing with any complaints from tenants.

The Resident Involvement Manager stated that the White Paper is a charter for social housing which means that it affects all social housing residents including council and housing association tenants.

The Resident Involvement Manager stated that the council were currently undergoing a desktop review in which they were assessing how they were meeting the standards in the White Paper. He also stated that he wanted to develop a Resident's Working Group which would oversee the council's response to the White Paper.

In response to a resident the Resident Involvement Manager confirmed they would distribute the presentation and the appendix to the Panel Members.

The Chair asked the Resident Involvement Manager whether the council would also look at the causes of the complaints and how they could be avoided, in an attempt to reduce the number of avoidable complaints being made. In response the Resident Involvement Manager acknowledged that one of the council's weaknesses was their difficulty with learning through their tenants' complaints. He also stated that there were discussions about bringing housing services under one directorate and this would help to improve communication within the service.

11/21 **Any Other Business**

The Director for Housing Assessments and Solutions introduced the item and provided an update on the proposed senior management restructure.

The restructure was being led by the Chief Executive and it was launched on the 10 December 2020 and the consultation ended on 29 January 2021. The consultation and restructure was for the senior management teams, which included the Chief Executive, the Executive Directors, Directors and Heads of Services. The changes had led to the removal of the Director of Housing Assessment and Solutions post, which had been replaced by the Director of Housing post and had seen all of housing services being assigned to them.

It was explained that this would allow the council to have greater oversight of all of the HRA services in one place and have greater accountability.

The Chief Executive was currently in the process of collating the feedback from the consultation and this would be published in due course.

The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance asked the Panel whether a representative from the insurance company could attend future meetings in order to address certain issues with insurance within tenants and leaseholders. In response, the Chair asked the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance to send an email to the Resident Involvement Manager with a summary of her problems with insurance, and further stated that they could add this topic as an item for the next meeting.

The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance also asked about the situation regarding unfinished construction work on her estate. In response, the Head of Assets and Involvement asked her to send either him or the Resident Involvement Manager an email so that they could find out from the Electrical Contract Manager why they had not completed the works.

A resident asked the Interim Head of Assets and Involvement whether he could clarify when the electrical work would resume on Church road. In response the Interim Head of Assets and Involvement stated that he would

speak to his colleague in the General Building Works team who was leading this project, to find out more information.

The Chair asked the Panel whether the bike sheds on Handcroft Estate were also present on other estates throughout Croydon. In response, the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance informed the Chair that the bike sheds were not on every estate. These bike sheds were installed as part of an initiative to encourage residents to ride bikes rather than drive where possible.

The Chair also asked why residents should be required to park their bikes in the bike sheds rather than inside their flat. In response, the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance stated that bikes take up a lot of space, creating an obstacle in hallways that could be dangerous in the event of an emergency.

The Chair then asked whether residents were consulted about whether the bike sheds were necessary. The Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance stated that she was unsure about the details of the consultation as it was conducted by the better health team rather than the housing department.

A resident asked the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance whether the bike sheds could be removed from the estates as many residents do not use them. In response the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance informed the Panel that residents would receive a letter shortly which would explain the need for keeping communal hallways clear, so they would continue to encourage people to use communal bike sheds.

A resident asked the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance whether the residents of Ashwood Gardens care home would also receive a letter, as disabled residents usually charge their mobility scooters in the hallway. In response the Head of Service for Repairs & Maintenance informed the Panel that the Council were looking at implementing a storage facility which would allow residents to charge their scooters whilst they were stored.

A resident asked the Panel why the waste was being collected on her estate late at night. In response, the Waste & Recycling Manager informed the Panel that the reason that they were collecting late at night was because during lockdown none of the waste vehicles could receive an MOT or be serviced as service stations were not open. This had led the Council to schedule double shifts, both late at night and early in the morning, due to lack of vehicle availability.

12/21 **Date of Next Meeting**

It was confirmed that the next meeting would be held on 29 April 2021.

(Correction: This meeting was postponed until 28 July 2021)

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The meeting ended at 8.30 pm

Signed:

Date: