

Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 30 November 2021 at 6.30 pm

This meeting was held remotely and a recording can be viewed on the Council's website

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair), Jeet Bains (Vice-Chair), Kola Agboola, Jade Appleton and Louis Carserides

Also Councillor Patricia Hay-Justice

Present:

Apologies: Councillors Luke Clancy and Caragh Skipper

PART A

31/21 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 May 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

32/21 Disclosure of Interests

Cllr Jade Appleton advised that in a prior role at the Local Government Association she had worked with some of the members assigned to the Independent Board.

There were no other disclosure of interest made at the meeting.

33/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business for consideration by the Sub-Committee at the meeting.

34/21 Update on improvements to the Housing Directorate and progress towards a Housing Strategy and review of the Housing Revenue Account

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 7 to 18 of the agenda which detailed the progress made with setting the budget for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report had been provided for the Sub-Committee to review the Council's new approach to the Housing Revenue Account and its Business Plan.

The Cabinet Member for Homes, Councillor Patricia Hay-Justice introduced the report, during which the following was noted:

- Communication with the residents at Regina Road had increased with information now more readily available such as residents being informed of who their caretaker was. Meetings had been held with the Residents Support Group, and following a recommendation from the Sub-Committee a hybrid approach to holding the meetings had been used.
- The performance around following-up repairs and communicating with residents on the status of their repairs had improved.
- The Housing Improvement Plan was being created and included recognition that cultural change was necessary. Work had already commenced on this with senior staff emphasising the need for better engagement with residents.
- Martin Wheatley had been appointed as the Independent Chair of the Housing Improvement Board and would be leading the next board meeting on 7 December at Stanley Halls.

Following the introduction by the Cabinet Member, the Council's Interim Corporate Director for Housing, David Padfield, was also invited to provide an update. It was confirmed that the key aspects of the improvement work were the following:

- Development of a Housing Improvement Plan
- Establishment of a Housing Improvement Board
- Progress towards a Housing Strategy

It was noted that six positions on the Board had already been filled, with three remaining.

The biggest priority at the moment was to recruit to the vacant Heads of Service posts within the Housing directorate, with six vacancies to be filled. Key performance indicators had been identified for Housing, with all areas identified still of concern.

It was confirmed that a review of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan would be presented to the Cabinet in March 2022. The Plan would provide a breakdown of income and costs, together with details of surplus deficits, reserves and balances within the Housing Revenue account over thirty years.

The ARK Report had identified eleven issues as requiring immediate action. These recommendations had now been addressed, although progress on some was ongoing. One of biggest challenges was the need to change the culture of the Council, which was an issue that had been highlighted in both the Report in the Public Interest and the ARK report.

Following the introductions the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the information provided. The first question sought clarification on the residents' survey with concern noted about the number of residents who had responded to advise the service was either average, poor or very poor. It was agreed that a detailed breakdown of responses would be circulated following the meeting. There was a concern that more recent engagement may indicate that the number of people dissatisfied with the service had increased further.

In response to a question asking what were the key obstacles to delivering improvement within the Housing Service, it was advised that capacity was a clear barrier but this was being addressed as a priority. The business plan was needed as soon as possible as without it, the strategic requirements could not be met.

Further information was requested on the main concerns of residents highlighted in the survey. It was confirmed that the main points arising from the survey concerned responsive repairs and communication. Work was underway to address these concerns with the Council's contractor for repairs, Axis. It was acknowledged that performance in this area had not been satisfactory and options such as locating the Axis team with the in-house repair team were being explored.

It was highlighted that there had been other issues arising out of the first report issued in July that needed to be addressed, with confirmation sought on how the new programme approach would respond to these. Reassurance was given that the recommendations would be addressed, with documentation likely to be available early in the New Year. It was emphasised that some of the issues raised in the report were ones being faced across the industry.

It was confirmed that surveys would be undertaken regularly in order to provide qualitative data with which to inform the Improvement programme and to highlight any new areas of concern promptly.

There were a number of concerns raised by the Sub-Committee about specific areas, including issues with heating, lack of hot water and expensive bills. It was confirmed that the contractors were working to ensure that these issues were addressed as a priority. Heat efficiency continued to be a problem and would be fed into the Council's asset management strategy work.

The Sub-Committee welcomed further information on the steps being taken to improve the methods used for assessing issues when they arose and the response provided. Work to increase communication with residents to provide advice on heat efficiency was also welcomed.

It was confirmed that the Housing Improvement Board would review its draft terms of reference at its next meeting on 7 December, with the final version due to be presented to the Cabinet for sign-off on 21 March 2022. It was agreed that the terms of reference could be shared with the Sub-Committee.

In regard to the responsive repairs contract, it was questioned how many of the indicators for the contract were currently below the expected level of performance. In response it was confirmed that the contractor had been issued with an improvement notice. There was a particular concern amongst the Sub-Committee about response times for urgent repairs, which had been exacerbated by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, however outstanding repairs were now being rapidly addressed.

In response to a question about whether there was any pattern to the repairs required, it was confirmed that data collection had demonstrated that further recording was required to identify any patterns. A new IT system was due to be launched in May which will provide a database to enable trends to be identified.

The concerns raised about void properties were acknowledged and confirmation was provided on the workstreams being created to identify the standards to be achieved and processes required in order to improve turnaround going forward. The Sub-Committee agreed there was a need for investment to improve the condition of the Council's housing stock and where the condition of housing fell below the expected standard, action should be taken to resolve the issues as a matter of urgency. As previously mentioned, it was confirmed that an Asset Management Strategy was being developed which would outline the condition of the Council's assets and any work

Questions were raised about the redesign of the housing service and how engagement with residents would be improved. It was confirmed that that reorganisation of the Service would be key for delivering improvement and engagement was still ongoing to inform the new structure.

There was concern that any improvement work would be hampered by the Service having six vacant Heads of Service Posts. Reassurance was given that, although it was not ideal, interim processes were in place including acting up opportunities for existing staff. Permanent recruitment to these vacancies was ongoing and being advertised via established council networks to ensure a wide range of applicants. Although accepted that the interim arrangements, there was concern about how this would impact upon the workload of staff and whether this was manageable given the urgent need to improve the service. It was suggested that alternative options for advertising the vacancies should also be explored, if the traditional routes were not successful.

In regard to key performance indicators (KPIs), it was noted that there was not enough contextual data to benchmark performance against other local authorities and questioned whether this could be obtained. It was advised that current system for sharing benchmarking data used local authorities with a similar level of housing stock. It was requested that future reports include comparative data to indicate how the Council was performing in comparison with other local authorities.

Assurance was given that training on customer care was a key part of the induction process and work continued on developing training plans targeted towards more specific situations.

The Sub-Committee was provided with an overview of the proposed approach to creating the business plan and from the response given by Members the following comments were noted:-

- It was agreed that lobbying for 100% right to buy receipts should be taken forward.
- The implementation of the Levelling-Up White Paper would require councils to be led by these standards and this would inform the Asset Management Strategy.
- There was concern raised about the capital work spend and whether routine work had been paused due either the capacity to deliver or the capital spend and whether this would cause greater pressure next year.
- The importance of meeting the deadline for the HRA business plan being brought to Cabinet in March was acknowledged and concern was raised about whether this deadline could be met given the resources available. Assurance was given that this was a priority.
- It was confirmed that any new homes purchased by collaborative organisations would not be part of the right to buy and would be homes for individuals on the council's waiting list.
- In regard to the new compliance standard around cladding, it was agreed there needed to be a clear rationale for prioritisation, such as which health and safety issues need to be addressed either immediately or in the longer term, in order to inform the Council's capital spending going forward.

It was confirmed that there was an upcoming meeting with LNQ, Hyde and other private rental providers to discuss standards going forward. The Sub-Committee recommended that the Housing Strategy should look to enhance and improve Housing Association accountability where possible.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and asked councillor colleagues to remain in order to confirm recommendations and conclusions.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

1. The Sub-Committee took reassurance from the commitment displayed by the new Interim Corporate Director of Housing towards driving forward change in the department. Furthermore commitment and

determination displayed by all officers to proceed on improvements in an open and transparent way was welcomed.

2. It was agreed that further reports to the Sub-Committee needed to include a greater level of data on the current performance of housing services, reassure Members that it was being managed effectively.
3. Although the department was working to fill vacancies at a senior level through the recruitment of interim staff, it was important for the long term sustainability of the service to recruit permanent staff as a matter of priority.
4. The amount of case work received by the Council was concerning, particularly how this would impact upon officer, in a service with recruitment issues and outstanding vacancies.
5. It was also evident that front line staff had to deal with extremely sensitive and distressing calls on a regular basis, with a greater level of support and training needed to empower staff to manage these situations effectively.
6. The recruitment issues in the service were also having an impact upon the pace of change, slowing the improvement work.
7. The quality of engagement with residents was an area that required improvement in particular the use of language in communication
8. From the information provided, the Sub-Committee concluded that the service was on the right track and welcomed confirmation that a robust business plan for the Housing Revenue Account was being developed. The Sub-Committee requested the opportunity to review a draft of the business plan, in order to provide feedback.

Recommendations

The Streets, Environment & Homes Sub Committee agreed to make the following recommendations to the Cabinet Members for Homes:

1. Provision be made for a dashboard to be included on the Council website that detailed the progress made with the delivery of the improvements outlined in strategy
2. Key performance indicators should be regularly provided to Members, as a progress update. In particular, a commentary should be provided explain the reason for any red ratings, the provision of benchmarking data and analysis of any trends.
3. Steps needed to be taken to explore ways of improving engagement and communication with residents, such as exploring the possibility of setting up a network to hold regular community meetings to keep residents engaged in the improvement journey.

4. Frontline staff need to be provided with training and support to be able to manage challenging situations effectively
5. Given the number of senior vacancies within the service, work should be prioritised to recruit permanent senior staff in all areas of the service as a matter of urgency.

35/21 Work Programme

Consideration of this item was deferred.

36/21 Exclusion of the Press and Public

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at Time Not Specified

Signed:

.....

Date:

.....