

Scrutiny Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 9 July 2024 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

- Present:** Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair);
Councillor Adele Benson (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Claire Bonham, Jessica Hammersley-Rich, Ellily Ponnuthurai,
Nikhil Sherine Thampi and Joseph Lee
- Also Present:** Councillor Lynne Hale, Stuart King, Chrisni Reshekaron and Rowenna Davis (joined online)
- Apologies:** Councillor Sue Bennett and Danielle Denton

PART A

42/24 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 16 April 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

43/24 Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

44/24 Urgent Business (if any)

The Chair decided to consider three items of urgent business – (i) update on Homelessness Strategy, (ii) ground maintenance, and (iii) Red Clover Gardens allocation process; given their immediate relevance and potential impact on ongoing discussions.

Update on the Homeless Strategy

The Sub-Committee considered an urgent item on the Homelessness Strategy and Transformation update. Susmita Sen, Corporate Director of Housing, and Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor, Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation, introduced the item, highlighting the risks and consequences of the Council not having a Homelessness Strategy in place.

The Chair invited the Sub-Committee to ask questions. The first question concerned the steps being taken to mitigate the risks associated with not having an up-to-date strategy. The officers responded that the Homelessness Strategy is a statutory document, and efforts were focused on ensuring the strategy's approval by the Council. The officers also mentioned ongoing communication with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government, which had offered support. The officers emphasised the importance of cooperation with central government, noting that some grants could be reduced if the statutory requirement for a Homelessness Strategy was not met.

The Sub-Committee sought reassurance that the strategy was not rushed due to statutory deadlines, which could compromise its quality. The officers gave assurance that significant time was devoted to developing the strategy, which included a thorough review of borough-wide needs and full consultation with residents and partner agencies. The Sub-Committee then asked if there was scope within the strategy to adapt to more challenging and ambitious plans. The officers explained that the strategy was designed for regular review, allowing for adjustments to be made based on service performance. The officers also assured that deadlines were arbitrary, and many objectives were expected to be delivered ahead of schedule.

The next question focused on cooperation with partners and reducing the time between referrals from the Council's partners and the Council's response. The officers reported progress in working with partners, significantly aided by the development of the Homelessness Strategy. They described close collaboration with various partners to improve processes and communication. When further challenged on response times, the officers stated that they aimed to engage with referred individuals within 14 days and had already reduced waiting times from six months to two months. They noted that extended wait times were partly due to a significant backlog of approximately 2,000 cases. However, the officers assured that a walk-in service was available for those who were homeless, offering same-day assistance. The Sub-Committee then asked about the origins of the backlog and how the strategy would address it. Officers explained that the backlog was primarily due to resource allocation issues. The key to resolving this was deploying appropriate resources effectively, with a focus on prevention to reduce the influx of new cases.

The Sub-Committee asked about occupancy checks, particularly regarding sublet properties and tenants willing to downsize. The officers reported that about 73% of occupancy checks had been completed, identifying households not occupied by the right individuals and those where circumstances had changed. The checks also uncovered safeguarding concerns and disrepair issues. There were around 150 households that had not engaged with visiting officers, and all collected information was being integrated into ongoing work. Further questioning by the Sub-Committee inquired about strategies for reaching residents who did not engage, such as through evening or weekend visits. The officers confirmed that these measures had been implemented, leading to the identification of non-engagement. The next steps involved reviewing other Council-held information, such as housing benefit data, and potentially issuing notices.

Another question from the Sub-Committee concerned the renegotiation of the street homelessness contract. The officers explained that the current outreach contract would expire at the end of the financial year, and they were working

over the summer with key partners to establish criteria for selecting a new outreach provider. The intention was to go to tender later in the year, allowing the new contractor to begin work next year. The officers mentioned ongoing sessions with communities and other stakeholders, with a focus on providing the best support as timely as possible. When further challenged by the Sub-Committee, officers noted their close collaboration with Homelessness Link and former rough sleepers to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

The Sub-Committee then asked whether the Council was considering a single provider for the contract. Officers explained that the current plan involved one contract with a single provider but noted that this approach was under review in collaboration with Homelessness Link. They also mentioned that in addition to local outreach contracts, support was available from a contract commissioned by the Greater London Authority.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting:

- The Sub-Committee requested the recirculation of information regarding what has been done around culture and performance standards, as well as an update on current efforts. The officers agreed to provide this information.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

- The Sub-Committee was hopeful that culture, skills, and training would take further prominence before this paper is presented to the Full Council.
- The Sub-Committee recognised the importance of identifying the needs of street homelessness stakeholders and suggested reflecting on previous contracts to assess what could have been done differently.
- The Sub-Committee acknowledged that the pre-election period provided an opportunity for more extensive work and engagement with partners, resulting in a significantly more informed version of the strategy.
- The Sub-Committee expressed optimism that the improvement of the service is within the Council's reach.
- The Sub-Committee stressed the need for a briefing on the NEC system.
- The Sub-Committee called for an in-depth review of the homelessness service in October 2024.

Grounds maintenance

The Sub-Committee considered an urgent business item regarding ground maintenance. The Chair emphasised the importance of ground maintenance and requested a brief update from the officers. Mary Larbie, Director of Housing Management, provided an update, highlighting that the service was under-resourced and that they were developing short-, medium-, and long-term plans to address this issue.

The Sub-Committee asked how the officers would ensure that the new contractors offered best value and whether the Council had considered expanding the contract for highway maintenance. The officers explained that when bringing in new contractors, they always compared the potential cost to what it would be if done internally. The Sub-Committee further inquired whether the costs would be compared with existing highway management contracts. The officers clarified that these contracts were slightly different.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting:

- The Sub-Committee agreed to invite Streets and Environment Scrutiny Sub-Committee Members to a meeting when the ground maintenance would be discussed.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

- The Sub-Committee expressed optimism that the service could only improve from its current state.

Red Clover Gardens allocation process

The Sub-Committee considered an urgent business item regarding the Red Clover Gardens allocation process. The Chair requested the officers present to explain the allocation process and the considerations taken into account before allocating these homes. Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor, Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation, explained that the allocation was aimed at families and single individuals living in temporary accommodation. The Sub-Committee then inquired further about the selection criteria. The officers explained that they used existing assessments and prioritised those who had been in temporary accommodation for the longest periods. It was also mentioned that the Council had to consider affordability, as rents were based on the local housing allowance.

The next question from the Sub-Committee focused on the type of accommodation available and the renting arrangements. The officers

explained that the Council discharged their duty, and the shorthold tenancy agreements would be with the housing provider. They detailed that there were 85 units in total, comprising 53 one-bed flats, 22 two-bed flats, and 10 three-bed flats.

The Sub-Committee then asked about the stage of the allocation process. The officers confirmed that all flats had been allocated.

The final question from the Sub-Committee concerned the previously mentioned discharge of the Council's duty. The officers clarified that the Council did not own the property, and a management company was appointed to oversee the property and handle any day-to-day maintenance work.

45/24 Asset Management Strategy 2024-29

The Sub-Committee reviewed a report on pages 3 to 22 of the supplementary agenda, detailing the Asset Management Strategy proposal. Cllr Lynne Hale, Cabinet Member for Homes, introduced the item. It was noted that the Sub-Committee had initially considered the Asset Management Strategy in February. It was also mentioned that the previous strategy, agreed upon in 2019, failed to fully address the long-term investment needs of the portfolio.

The Chair clarified that during the earlier Homes Scrutiny meeting, the Sub-Committee only considered the guiding principles, not the written strategy itself. The Chair also mentioned that the strategy was intended to be reviewed alongside the Regeneration Framework and asked about the timeline for its development. The officers explained that the framework was still being developed and had been delayed due to the stock condition survey. The officers added that they planned to include a new-build approach and expected completion around autumn 2024.

Sue Hanlon, Interim Director of Housing – Estates & Improvement, gave a presentation outlining the consultation process, key principles of the strategy, key statistics, aims for the next five years, and key year one actions for delivering the strategy.

The first question from the Sub-Committee concerned the progress, prioritisation of stock, findings, and actions from the stock condition survey. The officers reported a 52% completion rate by the end of June and expected to reach 60% by the end of September 2024. The officers explained that they categorised homes into houses, flats, sheltered accommodations, and general needs accommodations and analysed completion percentages for each type. The officers assured that there were no major concerns about specific stock and used the Health and Safety Rating System for immediate concerns. Then, the Sub-Committee further challenged how the survey ensured that the hardest-to-evaluate properties were not left until the end. The officers explained that initially they focused on easier stock but redirected efforts in February to more challenging properties like flats and maisonettes.

The next question considered the differences between the previous and proposed strategies. The officers explained that both focused on similar areas due to regulatory and statutory requirements. However, the new strategy emphasised more integrated working and alignment with the regeneration framework. It also fostered a culture of cooperation across various housing departments.

When asked how the strategy met the Borough's current needs, officers explained that it was an overarching document, and assured that they were constantly testing assumptions using data, including the stock condition survey, to identify needs and implications more accurately.

A question about a table on page 7 of the supplementary agenda pack and how to interpret the numbers was asked by the Sub-Committee. The officers explained that it outlined the number of checks needed for each action. Compliance areas required regular safety checks, linked to the strategy's pillar of "safe & compliant homes," with a goal of 100% compliance.

Subsequently, the Sub-Committee asked a question on incorporating good practice into the strategy. The officers responded that they worked with other providers and local authorities, considering political changes and government guidance, such as Awaab's Law. The strategy was designed to be a live and dynamic, allowing for necessary changes. The Sub-Committee inquired further about horizon scanning and preparation for changes in central administration. The officers explained the pre-election pause was beneficial, allowing time to gather more information on the new framework, especially around regeneration, and to make informed investment choices. Another question about investing in properties where people want to live was linked to the Homelessness Strategy and horizon scanning. The officers highlighted the importance of communication with bodies like the Greater London Authority and Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), with plans to present the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan in early 2025.

The next question asked by the Sub-Committee related to the integration of five underlying principles listed in the strategy. The officers confirmed that they were used in option appraisals, ensuring robust decision-making regarding the asset management.

The Sub-Committee also asked a question on performance measurement. The officers responded that this would be covered in operational delivery plans which were in the pipeline. They also explained that the aim of the strategy was setting the vision and direction.

The strategy's interaction with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan was also queried by the Sub-Committee. The officers explained that the strategy set out the Council's goals, with the next HRA Business Plan iteration outlining operational delivery based on insights from the stock condition survey and available grants.

Subsequently, the timeline for moving from reactive to predictive and planned maintenance was discussed. The officers explained that they were expecting significant progress within the strategy's duration. They aimed for a ratio of 65% planned investment works and 35% responsive repairs, ensuring supply chain readiness.

The next question asked by the Sub-Committee considered making the housing portfolio more sustainable. The officers explained that short-term actions like improving EPC ratings through additional insulation were planned, but some investments, including renewable energy, would take longer to be implemented, but were being considered by the Council.

The following question asked by the Sub-Committee related to the satisfaction survey and how many people participated in it. The residents responded that an independent company selected between 600 and 700 residents quarterly. The results were calculated based on the responses from this selected group of residents.

The final question asked by the Sub-Committee considered building information modelling and whether it would be too soon to implement it due to the lack of capacity among Council's staff. The officers explained that the Council did not have a choice, and this would have to be rolled out due to the building safety agenda. The officers assured that they already had a team working on the building safety. Then, the next step would be to trial it and obtain feedback from the building safety regulators. Subsequently, it would be rolled out to other high-rise buildings.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting:

- The Sub-Committee further challenged the claim that 'nearly half of the residents participated', what it meant and how many residents took part in the survey. It was agreed that this will be further checked by the officers and information will be provided.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

- The Sub-Committee welcomed the shift towards planned investments, viewing it as a positive move away from the reliance on responsive repairs.
- The Sub-Committee appreciated the increased efforts to ensure greater resident involvement in the planning process.

- The Sub-Committee commended the strategic document for its clarity and comprehensiveness.

Recommendations

Following its discussion of this item the Sub-Committee agreed to submit the following recommendations for the consideration of the Executive Mayor:

- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends clarifying before consideration by full Council, how the Asset Management Strategy interlinks with the HRA Business Plan and what mechanisms will be used to inform decision making e.g. the use of options appraisals.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that, before it is considered by full Council, that it is acknowledged within the Asset Management Strategy that changes to culture and ways of working are instrumental to the successful delivery of the strategy's objectives.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends, before consideration by full Council, how satisfaction survey data is presented in the Asset Management Strategy is clarified, particularly in relation to the number of residents participating in the survey and how the participants were selected.

46/24 Housing Resident Engagement Strategy for Croydon 2024-29

The Sub-Committee reviewed a report on pages 23 to 93 of the supplementary agenda, detailing the Resident Engagement Strategy 2024-29. Councillor Lynne Hale, Cabinet Member for Homes, introduced the report, highlighting its objectives and strategic aims. It was emphasised that the strategy was co-designed with residents and staff, with the assistance of the Tenants Participation Advisory Service. Mary Larbie, Director of Housing Management, highlighted that the strategy was aligned with the Exit Strategy and underscored the importance of developing the Customer Assurance Panel.

The Chair opened the floor for the Sub-Committee to ask questions. The first question addressed capturing informal feedback during day-to-day activities and how the Council would ensure a culture that systematically captured such feedback. The officers responded that this cultural change was embedded in all Council actions. The officers also highlighted the importance of the NEC system for analysing data and tracking work more effectively. The officers stressed the need for a proactive workforce capable of escalating issues when necessary and emphasised the importance of empowering staff, especially regarding service level agreements, to challenge each other.

The Sub-Committee further questioned how informal feedback from residents was captured. The officers explained that this could be achieved through internal surveys, mystery shopping activities, and scrutiny services, where experts evaluate the service provided. They stressed the importance of officers being aware of other areas and sharing information across teams.

The Sub-Committee then inquired about monitoring whether officers were picking up and returning residents' calls. The officers explained that they recorded some calls and monitored phone activity by team. They assured that they continuously reviewed the service and were committed to better meeting residents' needs. The Sub-Committee also asked about linking phones with Microsoft Teams. The officers responded that they had a relatively new system that accurately monitored calls, particularly abandonments, and that teams were configured around this system. The officers added that they constantly monitored industry practices and considered necessary changes.

The next question from the Sub-Committee focused on the accessibility of engagement work, particularly for the 'silent voice' mentioned in the report, young people, and people with disabilities, including learning disabilities. The officers responded that they actively sought to identify groups from whom they did not hear enough and tailored their approach accordingly, using activities like surveys or door-knocking. These approaches were evaluated for future use. Regarding engagement with young people, the officers explained that they worked closely on digital access and monitored good practice examples nationwide. For residents with disabilities, some community centres were equipped with loops, and a three-year tenancy audit programme helped identify and address gaps.

The Sub-Committee then asked about trust and the profile of survey responses not reflecting Croydon's ethnic diversity, and findings related to engaging global majority residents. The officers stressed the importance of understanding barriers and were committed to addressing them. They highlighted that targeted engagement allowed the Council to hear a broader range of voices. The officers acknowledged that some residents distrusted the Council and were reluctant to engage. They emphasised the importance of communicating implemented changes and their effectiveness.

The Sub-Committee stressed the importance of a wide range of activities, including door-knocking. The officers responded that the strategy did not include all engagement types used by the Council but assured there were regular door-knocking activities. They also mentioned the need to better communicate how resident feedback influenced the Council's work. For young people, the officers worked closely with other departments and care leavers, leading to the allocation of homes for care leavers and their involvement in further conversations. They also noted that some residents might be better reached through different agencies.

The next question focused on neurodivergent residents and those caring for neurodivergent children, as well as the level of staff knowledge in this area. The officers responded that improving the current situation requires a better understanding of residents' needs. They also emphasised that mental health was the most pronounced issue. The officers assured that this aspect could be strengthened at the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) level and highlighted that the strategies are living documents that can be adjusted as needed.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting:

- The Sub-Committee requested additional information regarding the training and involvement of contractors and subcontractors in the cultural transformation process. It was agreed that officers would provide further details on this matter.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

- The Sub-Committee appreciated the work that has been conducted so far.
- The Sub-Committee looks forward to the implementation and acknowledges that addressing cultural challenges will be crucial.

Recommendations

Following its discussion of this item the Sub-Committee agreed to submit the following recommendations for the consideration of the Executive Mayor:

- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy be updated ahead of consideration by Full Council to include more information on:
 - o how barriers to engagement will be proactively identified, and
 - o how engagement activities will be tailored to accommodate the diverse needs of Croydon's population, and
 - o how engagement work can be proactively targeted to specific harder to reach groups.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy place greater emphasis on improving the data gathered on protected characteristics and equality.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy is updated ahead of full council to include more specific examples of the types of engagement activities that the Council is planning to deliver.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy stress the importance of not trying an initiative such as door knocking once as repeating certain actions help build trust over time which can lead in turn to positive engagement.
- The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that a system of recording both informal feedback and views on resident experience with housing (sub)contractors is developed.

47/24 Period 10 Financial Performance and Key Performance Indicators Reports

The report was introduced by Oragh Guarnori, Head of Strategic Finance, who presented the key highlights. It was explained that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget was forecasting a £12 million overspend due to an increase in demand for responsive repairs. This overspend was expected to remain at a similar level by year-end. The officers explained that to balance this budget, they would need to use HRA reserves. Similarly, the capital budget currently faced a potential overspend of around £10 million, which would also necessitate using reserves. However, the officers noted that they were working on mitigating and minimising the capital overspend.

The first question from the Sub-Committee concerned the projected savings and a forecasted savings slippage of £1.1 million for this year, and whether it would be absorbed into future savings targets, along with any associated risks. The officers explained that it was expected to carry the savings forward and attempt to achieve them in the next financial year.

The next question from the Sub-Committee asked if the officers anticipated anything that could adversely affect the end-of-year position. The officers assured that they had tried to account for all factors and did not anticipate any additional issues.

The Sub-Committee then inquired about a mentioned revenue gain of up to £4.5 million from claims for homeless people living in temporary accommodation, and where the money would be allocated. The officers responded that it would be allocated to the general fund.

Next, the Sub-Committee asked when the full list of KPIs would be completed. The officers explained that the directorate monitored hundreds of measures, but not all would be relevant for the Sub-Committee. The officers assured that they were aiming to share the preliminary list of KPIs in September 2024.

The Sub-Committee also questioned the high vacancy rate and what was being done to recruit and retain staff. The officers responded that there was a significant need for a substantial recruitment programme. It was also mentioned that many posts were vacant due to the ongoing restructures. However, in some teams, such as housing needs, extensive recruitment had taken place in recent months, with permanent staff joining the Council. The officers highlighted that they had been working closely with Human Resources to better promote job offers.

Lastly, the Sub-Committee asked if any substantive changes to the budget development process were anticipated. The officers explained that for the HRA, the budget setting process would be different next year due to more advanced information from the stock condition survey, asset management strategy, and restructuring efforts. For the general fund, the budget setting process had already started and was more informed about costs and other

drivers compared to last year, although the process would remain largely similar.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions:

- The Sub-Committee noted with concern that, with less than a year remaining before the Exit Strategy, a clear set of KPIs has yet to be established, making monitoring more difficult and trend analysis challenging.

48/24 Work Programme 2024/25

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

The meeting ended at 9.39 pm

Signed:

Date:

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