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Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 13 July 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 Kola Agboola, Jade Appleton, Louis Carserides and Luke Clancy

Also Present: Councillor Patricia Hay Justice, Cabinet Member for Homes
Councillor Clive Fraser,
Alison Knight, Interim Corporate Director of Housing
Yvonne Murray, Director of Housing Assessment and Solutions
Sarah Atwood, Finance Manager
Saheed Ullah, Head of Asset Planning
Sharon Murphy, Head of Tenancy and Resident Engagement
Sharon Day, Project Development Manager
Sarah Lawton, Interim head of Temporary Accommodation
Yaw Boateng, Tenants and Leaseholders Panel
Lesley Parry, Tenants and Leaseholders Panel

Apologies: Councillor Caragh Skipper

PART A

17/21 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 18/05/2021 were deferred to the next meeting.

18/21 Disclosure of Interests

There were none.

19/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business.

20/21 Housing Improvement Plan and Board

The Cabinet Members for Homes introduced the item and outlined details in a [Presentation](#)

Following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions

In response to queries raised by the Sub-Committee, the following was clarified:

- The Housing Improvement Board was an independently Chaired Board with its own Terms of Reference which had undergone a review with changes made to the TOR
- The Membership of the Board was being looked at to ensure appropriate reflection of representation of equality and diversity
- A number of other blocks had been identified as having damp problems, with two of them being classed a priority
- A number of meetings had taken place with residents to talk through issues
- Analysis of historic allocations, to look at how allocations had been managed and if the policy was fit for purpose was an action in the Improvement Plan

During the consideration of the recommendations, the Sub-Committee discussed the following:

- In assessing what went wrong, in particular with the issues at Regina road, it was acknowledged that there had been serious failings in the system. There were serious lessons that has been learnt and were taken forward as part of the redevelopment of the strategy. The new Housing Improvement Board would hold all aspects of the Council to account and it would be vital to ensure that all work streams worked well in tandem and identify interdependencies. Case work Management was an area of priority to be addressed as part of the improvement work
- To address the areas of concerns with the Axis contract as highlighted by the Ark report, several joint workshops with council and contractor staff at operational level had taken place with discussions on all aspects of the contract as well as how adapted ways of working as a result of the Covid pandemic. The ideas captured as the sessions would be developed into an action plan that would be fundamental to the Improvement Plan.
- The Action Plan would be finalised, project officers had been identified for wok streams and this would be discussed at the next meeting of the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel.
- There were issues with current levels of vacancies as a result of competitive market across London for experienced Council and Housing Association officers. Contractors had also experienced issues with recruitment as a result of Brexit which was having and impact of their ability to retain staff. They were however resourced at the level they should be based on the amount of work they were expecting following data that was presented to them by the Council that the beginning of the contract that they had submitted their tender on the basis of.

- There were block by block visits taking places across the whole borough with efforts initially concentrated on areas that were of similar concerns as Regina Road.
- A Roadshow had commenced that would run till September, starting at high rise blocks with lower levels of engagement in an attempt to create more line of visibility through a targeted knocking exercise to introduce/reintroduce officers to tenants.
- There was a lot of work to be done on communication to residents that the information that had been gathered from them was going into a planned process of work. Communication needed to be more explicit going forward with residents as well as with Ward Members.
- Further work was needed on the complaints process , including training for staff on the definition of a complaint and the management process
- Council officers had approached London Councils to identify which Boroughs were determined as exhibiting good practice in resident involvement. Officers had approached those LA's to gain knowledge.
- Through the Housing Strategy, officers had been exploring avenues to identify available resources to drive forward change. A number of Directors from London council, housing associations and several organisations had come forward to feed into the strategy
- The Housing Improvement Board would act as a representative tool for tenants and be a positive forum and would act as an advisory group to the Council .This Board would be a vessel for tenants to utilise to communicate their views and be listened to.

Requests for information to be sent to the Sub-Committee:

- How much funding is spent on repairs (responsive and programme repairs) on Wates blocks
- Schedule of roadshows and engagement
- Number of flats affected by damp related issues across the whole council housing stock
- Number of dispute cases against the council – this year and 2-3 previous years as well as some clarification as to how these link to monitoring of performance of the responsive repairs service
- Housing supply determination underpinning the development of the housing strategy (supply from council housing / housing associations / other)
- A plan of the interdependencies between workstreams

Further meetings:

Responsive repairs contract management and monitoring framework (incl. feedback from officer workshops) – planned for August with Tenants and Leaseholder Panel

Voids – planned for September with Tenants and Leaseholder Panel

Outcome of officer workshops to be provided at the July Tenants and Leaseholder Panel meeting

Sub-Committee's conclusions

1. The Sub-Committee welcomed the update provided on the emerging housing improvement plan and was assured that the emerging plan was on the right track. It was noted that the pace of progress has been impeded by the transition of the new executive director and some restructuring within the service, but the Sub-Committee accepted that this work was essential to ensure the right lines of accountability were in place to underpin the improvement plan.
2. The Sub-Committee looked forward to the evaluation framework being developed, once the Housing Improvement Board was set up. In particular, the Sub-Committee was interested to find out how it would link back to the Council's wider improvement plan and the Corporate Risk Register.
3. The Sub-Committee concluded that the 10 work streams were well defined and appropriate to drive improvement (some recommendations are put forward on the work streams by the Sub-Committee below).
4. The Sub-Committee recognised the value of using the work of the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel to feed into the improvement agenda and would advocate this approach being embedded into the new ways of working developed by the housing service, incl. post-delivery of the housing improvement plan over the next couple of years.
5. The Sub-Committee welcomed the work of the panel on the development of a Tenants Charter which would be a great vehicle to improve tenants' understanding of the level of service they should expect as well as their rights and responsibilities. It was felt that this would lead to a greater level of direct accountability between tenants and the Council.
6. At a previous meeting of the Sub-Committee, there was agreement that the ARK report failed to establish how/why/what caused the inaction in response to case work put forward by local councillors and/or MPs. The Sub-Committee remained concerned that without a fit for purpose case management system, similar issues could reoccur. It was welcomed that work had started on identifying a new Case Work Management system and there was a clear process for housing related case management in the meantime.
7. One of the main areas of concern identified by the Sub-Committee was around communication and engagement. Although initiatives had started to be developed and implemented, it was felt that more work was need to ensure both residents and their elected representatives were suitable notice of any events.
8. The Sub-Committee warmly received the new housing structure as it placed resident engagement at a senior management level thereby

creating greater and clearer direct accountability lines on these matters.

9. The Sub-Committee felt that the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Housing Improvement Board lacked important details and welcomed confirmation that the ToR would no longer be approved at Cabinet, allowing additional time for these to be refined (see recommendations on this topic below).
10. The Sub-Committee noted the challenges within Responsive Repairs Service, particularly in regard to recruitment which had been impeded by covid and Brexit along with having to compete with residential and commercial sectors to attract staff. In light of this, the Sub-Committee commended the prioritisation of gas safety works and the rapid progress achieved in such a short period.
11. The Sub-Committee noted there would be an informal meeting in August to undertake a deep dive on the responsible repairs contract, which will be undertaken jointly with officers and the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel.

Sub-Committee's recommendations:

Communication and residents' engagement

1. A communications and engagement plan was needed to map out all the one-off engagement exercises as well as new communication practices to be embedded in new improved ways of working. That plan should be informed by involving the Tenants and Leaseholder panel, incl. in the development of the new Tenant Handbook.
2. Further consultation with residents was needed during roadshow exercises, engagement with Residents Associations and Tenants forums as well as through the Tenants and Leaseholder panel to identify what they would like to see be made publicly available to further enhance transparency on the progress of the delivery of the housing improvement plan
3. Work was needed to improve communication with tenants on planned works / planned surveys. Should work be delayed or the original stated deadline missed (often due to reasons beyond officers' control), tenants should be kept informed, so they do not feel that it is a case of just nothing happening.
4. There needed to be better communication of the responsive repairs contract's social value, including apprenticeships (opportunities and about the types of roles they can lead to)
5. There needed to be better corporate definition of complaint and improving understanding of it and streamlining the complaints process and promoting it amongst council tenants and leaseholders
6. It was recommended that support be given to the initiative of the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel in the development of a Tenants Charter
7. It was recommended that a diagram is produced to map out the communication routes of case work / enquiry / complaints /escalation

process to clarify to councillors and MPs ways of escalating urgent housing casework as current guidance provides a 10 day turnaround which was not adequate for urgent housing case work.

8. Further consideration was needed on the recommendation in Government's Housing White Paper on the use of technology and how it could be incorporated into one of the workstreams of the housing improvement plan. This should include:-
 - The exploration of best practice and existing software packages on tenancy management, repairs and other housing issues and any that are used for general housing communications.
 - Consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel meeting on use of technology to inform this work.

Housing Improvement Plan Workstreams

1. It is recommended that a plan for the strategy development in Workstream 1, including indicative timescales, be developed and shared with the Sub-Committee once available.
2. Workstream 7 should be expanded to include in its scope the issue of buildings nearing the end of their life, with further consideration given to how these options are to be assessed including in relation to the future of some Brick by Brick sites in the vicinity of some of these buildings
3. Workstream 8 needs to address the issue of resourcing / workload allocation & management within the service. Staff can be given the right skills and cultural/behaviour training but if their workloads are still unmanageable as highlighted in the Ark report, they will be set-up to fail. This workstream should also include within its scope long-term workforce planning and apprenticeships.

Board Terms of Reference

1. Further work should be undertaken to consider best practice on the set up of such Housing Improvement Board, particularly regarding membership and review/consider the following before finalising the ToR, including:
 - Number of tenant representatives
 - Ensure that tenant representatives are not only from formal Residents Associations and Tenants Forums as many areas where the council has housing stock where there is no RA (no RA criteria necessary?)
 - Backbencher representation and/or mechanism for backbenchers' input
 - Meeting observers
 - Webcasting of meetings
 - Holding meetings in a hybrid manner to enhance inclusivity so that people with disabilities and / or caring responsibilities can put themselves forward as board member/observer
 - Term of the chair (elected/number of mandates/criteria/skills, experience and behaviours required)

2. It is requested that the revised ToR are circulated to the Sub-Committee before approval and ensure ToR included as appendix marked as draft in the cabinet report.

The Housing Improvement Board once set up should be given a role to inform the budget setting process (MTSF as well as HRA) and the upcoming HRA review (if timings of review allow).

21/21 Review of Temporary Accommodation

The Director of Housing Assessment and Solutions introduced the item and outlined details in a [Presentation](#)

Following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions

During the consideration of the recommendations, the Sub-Committee discussed the following:

- There were five schemes available and a breakdown of each scheme would be sent following the meeting
- Fire inspections and fire drills took place on each scheme to ensure that fire safety standards were met, with the quality team tasked with carrying out inspections
- It was important to note that when a Borough placed a resident in accommodation in Croydon, they retained responsibility for that resident.
- There were approximately 2096 families in temporary accommodation and this figure was similar to neighbouring boroughs.
- There was a threat that with the end of Furlough, there could be a rise in people presenting as requiring Council assistance due to not being able to pay their rents and mortgages
- The cost of temporary accommodation increased by 10% in 2021/21
- There was more work that needed to be done on improvements to engagement and communication with residents as well as ensuring a robust complaints systems

Request for Information

- Data on placements, both in and out of the Borough

In reaching its recommendations, the Sub-Committee came to the following Conclusions:

1. The business case document had yet to be reviewed by the Executive Leadership Team which prevented it being presented to the sub-committee. It would be beneficial for Members to review the processes of officer appraisals
2. It was reassuring to hear about the continuous work on challenging issues which impact the General Fund.
3. It was important that continuous learning and best practice from peers take place.

4. The Sub-Committee was not reassured on the private housing teams processes in managing quality and standards

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The Sub-Committee recommended that:

1. A briefing to be provided to the sub- committee giving an overview of the business case
2. Future reports be comprehensive to avoid instances where the sub-committee has to repeatedly request further information.
3. Data be provided on empty units in the Borough, both private and council

22/21 Work Programme

The Sub-Committee **NOTED** the work programme for the remainder of the 2021 municipal year.

23/21 Exclusion of the Press and Public

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 10.54 pm

Signed:

Date: