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Scrutiny Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Monday, 23 October 2023 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 Kola Agboola, Claire Bonham, Danielle Denton and
Ellily Ponnuthurai

Also Present: Councillors Sue Bennett and Lynne Hale

PART A

21/23 Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

22/23 Urgent Business (if any)

There was no urgent business for the consideration of the Homes Sub-Committee at this meeting.

23/23 Draft Housing Strategy

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 21 to 40 of the agenda which provided with a draft version of the updated Housing Strategy which covering the 2023-28 period.

Councillor Hale introduced the item. The draft version of the Housing strategy provided a foundation for the development of the forthcoming strategies, including Asset Management Strategy, Resident Engagement Strategy and Homelessness Prevention, and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

The first question considered the conducted consultation – what the impact of it would be and its main conclusions were. It assured that the report from the consultation would be shared with the Sub-Committee members. It was added that one of the largest comebacks from the consultation was around the issue of respect for residents.

The next question considered the previous Housing Strategy and how the previous strategy related to the new one. It was explained that for a long time the Council did not have a housing strategy, and the previous one was from ten years ago. Taking into consideration this long period of time, the previous strategy was not relevant from the perspective of the new strategy. It was

added that to develop the strategy, the officers interviewed relevant officers and researched other boroughs. It was also highlighted that the Housing Strategy would be a live document.

The subsequent question considered the data gathering, particularly where and how the data was gathered and then how it was analysed to make the informed decisions. It was explained that census and Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) were two main sources of data. It was acknowledged that data gathering in Croydon had been poor and this issue would need to be addressed in the near future. Then it was explained that this was not included as a priority in the strategy as it was in-ward facing. However, it was assured that data and informed decision-making were key priorities for the housing transformation.

The next question considered the hierarchy between the priorities. It was suggested that potentially the first priority could be an overarching one. It was responded that the priorities were not numbered based on their hierarchy or importance. It was acknowledged that potentially the first priority could have an overarching function.

The next question asked about the potential expansion of the Decent Homes Standard to the private sector and how the licencing scheme would feed into it. It was explained that the strategy ensured that the Council would be able to respond to either of them. If the licensing scheme was introduced, then it would be up to the borough to determine the details. It was mentioned that the licencing scheme could also have a negative effect on the Borough, for instance the supply of rentable accommodations could decrease. Also, if the licencing scheme was introduced, it would most likely not be a borough-wide scheme, instead it would be focused on particular areas.

Then a question was asked about the support for tenants who were living in unacceptable conditions. It was advised that there could be other measures outside of the licensing scheme, for instance additional fines. Then it was mentioned that other protection measures include a designated private sector team, also the capacity of this team would be expanded. It was important to ensure that the Council could use its powers against private landlords.

Another question considered what was done for the elderly residents. It was explained that Croydon had a very high percentage of residents over 65, therefore, it was of significant importance. This would need to be reflected in demand measures, e.g. sheltered accommodations that were in very poor conditions. The focus was predominantly on the accommodation and caring for vulnerable people.

The next question concerned domestic abuse victims and why they were not in a higher priority group for rehousing. It was added that the strategy did not specify the plans for the improvement of access to housing for domestic violence victims. An example of a Council that has a dedicated Housing service for domestic abuse victims was given. It was agreed that the domestic abuse part of the strategy could be strengthened. It was explained that

Croydon had a different operating model with most of the domestic abuse services provided through the Family Justice team. It was added that the aspiration of the service would be to upscale and expand the knowledge of the relevant housing officers. It was also added that Croydon Council has been underreporting the figures to DLUHC, therefore, the reporting and data gathering across the services required improvement. This led to a concern about whether this underreporting could result in the insufficient funding for Croydon.

The next question related to collecting information and the report on affordable housing providers. It was explained that the Council was actively working on the supply of new homes. It was acknowledged that the strategy should focus more on improving the level of supply and demand information, and the Council's approach to London Mayor's target.

Another question concerned overcrowding issues and how it could be ensured that the system was fair and did not prioritise less overcrowded households. It was advised that there were two crucial areas to help with this issue. First, the housing supply and what kind of housing would be supplied in the borough. The other matter related to the housing allocation scheme, which was due to be reviewed. Then it was asked whether the right to extend would be available to Council's tenants. It was explained that it would be one of the housing supply measures added to the strategy.

The next question considered whether there were any plans to improve the occupational health processes. It was explained that this area could be strengthened. It was also added that the team had been recently expanded.

A request we made for more information on the mental health scheme. It was explained that the Council had been trying to embed mental health into the service provision provided by Croydon Homes. In terms of homelessness, it was highlighted that many cases could have been prevented, if the mental health problems were addressed earlier. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the Council to have a more proactive approach to mental health.

The next question considered the potential use of the garages. It was explained that it was not included in the strategy. However, reviewing underused garages could be beneficial and this could be added to the strategy.

The next question considered the second priority and the Council's plans to improve energy efficiency. It was also asked whether the Council was seeking any additional funding, such as from the Greater London Authority. It was acknowledged that this section could be expanded. It was added that the energy performance certificate level was particularly low for private sector.

It was noted that satisfaction survey seemed to indicate that antisocial behaviour was one of the main areas of concern. However, it did not seem to be reflected as a high priority in the strategy. It was explained that it was mentioned in the strategy and the Council was committed to tackle anti-social

behaviour in both social and private housing sectors. It was highlighted that domestic CCTV devices seemed to be a rising problem and that residents could often be reluctant to report issues to the Council's officers. It was responded that the Council would like to conduct a survey asking residents what the Council could do better to obtain more insight into the issue. Also, it was acknowledged that there should be closer cooperation with the Police. It was commented that often when the residents report anti-social behaviour incidents to the officers, no action was taken. It was reported that in many cases action was taken, however, the Council could improve its communication and increase visibility of its actions.

The next question asked about expanding the welfare advisory service in the Council. It was responded that there were three welfare advisors in the Council. The Council would like to better promote what support options were available. It was acknowledged that it was important to ensure that income officers also provide necessary support.

The next question was about evictions and what was done to ensure that tenants were not evicted based on arrears only. It was advised that the hardship fund was the main support. This fund was available for any resident who did not receive housing benefits or universal credit for housing. The Council reached out to many of those residents, as it was important to act as early as possible. The Council had also been using NEC system to identify where support was needed and each new tenant was approached by the income officer. A supplementary question about a policy for not evicting tenants was asked. It was explained that the Council did not have such a policy.

The next question asked about working with Education department on temporary accommodation and its impact on children's access to education. It was explained that this was not considered in the strategy. However, this could be included in the strategy and in the co-produced delivery plan.

The next question asked about the timeline for the development of the delivery plan. It was explained that the delivery plan should be an addendum to the strategy, and the strategy should be presented to the Cabinet in December.

Actions

1. A request was made for a copy of the consultation report to be shared with the members of the Sub-Committee.
2. A request was made for further information on the number of private landlords that have had a prosecution brought against them by the Council as a result of poor housing standards.
3. A request was made for a summary of the escalation process used by the Council in the event of non-payment of rent by a tenant.
4. A request was made for the number of prosecutions against the private landlords.

5. As the delivery plan was still being developed, the Sub-Committee agreed that it would like be briefed on its content once available.
6. A request was made for further information on the financial impact of the underreporting figures to DHLUC.

Conclusions

1. The Sub-Committee commended the amount of work that had been invested in the creation of the new Housing Strategy and welcomed the co-production approach used.

Recommendations

1. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that Housing Strategy includes details of how the Council will improve the availability of priority housing for domestic abuse victims and residents from other vulnerable backgrounds. Staff should be trained to detect and tackle abuse-related issues.
2. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the following areas should be explored for inclusion in the Housing Strategy and accompanying delivery plan: (i) a simplified downsizing process; (ii) how to utilise underused garages; (iii) green energy grants; (iv) tackling licencing problems with houses in multiple occupations; (v) overcrowding; (vi) cooperation with Education division to ensure that children placed in temporary accommodations are not excluded from education.
3. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Housing Strategy should include more detail on the following areas: (i) energy efficiency; (ii) actions to tackle antisocial behaviour, (iii) mental health.
4. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that, given the shortage of available housing in the borough, the Housing Strategy needs to provide strategic direction on how the supply of available housing in the Borough will be increased, and supported by a delivery plan providing tangible outcomes.
5. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Residents' Complaint Process is reviewed to ensure it provides efficient resolutions to resident complaints.
6. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the delivery plan being developed to accompany the Housing Strategy must include clear time lines for delivery and SMART objectives, outline any interdependencies and indicate the key risks to deliver and how they will be mitigated.

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 41 to 56 of the agenda which provided an update covering the following areas: (i) Tpas (leading engagement expert); (ii) the current status of work; (iii) methodology; (iv) discovery sessions; (v) leadership; (vi) communication standards; (vii) trust and accountability; (viii) structure and process; (ix) design sessions; (x) outcomes.

Councillor Hale introduced the report. It was highlighted that it was the Council's approach to create the first-class resident engagement structure and this paper carried through the customer standards, the white paper and the Resident Charter. A presentation on the development of the Resident Engagement Structure was delivered.

The first question concerned the negative past experiences of residents, and how the Council would rebuild trust whilst many members of staff remained the same. It was explained that one of the factors was to engage a group of staff members who would act as champions. The cultural change had been happening, however, the pace of change could have been quicker. It was also important to ensure that all staff members were accountable for their interactions with residents. It was stressed that it was very important to give an opportunity to members of staff to go through the cultural transformation and see the benefit of better customer service. A supplementary question about performance management was asked. It was confirmed that performance management was built into the one-to-one appraisal process – this included ensuring that members of staff delivered what they promised and there was a system to monitor that. In addition to that, there was a training programme and case studies available. It could also be done through the recognition of high-quality behaviours.

This was followed by a question about [ARC Independent Investigation report](#) and whether there had been any work done around understanding why members of staff behaved in an unacceptable manner. It was explained that there were issues with engagement, empathy and care for residents. The Council had been working on ensuring that maintaining acceptable standards was everyone's responsibility and officers were able to report and escalate incidents if necessary. It was also added that the Council recently procured customer service training and there was a professionalisation agenda to ensure that officers had all skills necessary to do the required tasks.

Another question considered how the Council identified and approached disengaged residents. It was explained initially residents that were involved in existing activities were approached. However, the Council also approached many other residents – through letters, but also directly by the team members. There were around 25 members of staff and 25 residents involved. It was added that many residents would only like to be involved in a certain issue. Therefore, it was important to accommodate that, and ensure that there were different pathways available. Then a question about the platforms used for engaging with residents was asked. It was explained that a website review

was underway. It was challenged that the Council had not done any work on the Council blogs and notice boards. It was assured that the Council had been looking at various possible options to reach the residents. It was also mentioned that the notice boards had many problems associated with them – people did not read them and there were no resources to keep them updated.

The next question considered the identified *key ingredients* mentioned in the report and whether the messages coming from a diverse group were similar. It was explained that various different groups came up with similar conclusions.

Another question considered the lack of emails summarising what has been agreed on during a phone or in-person conversations. It was explained that the Council has been reviewing services and would continue to do so in a wider perspective. It assured that the culture was causing the lack of summaries and follow-ups rather than capacity. It was stressed that the communication model and standards needed to be strengthened. It was also mentioned that the Council had purchased a Customer Relationship Management system that would improve the record of engagement with residents. However, it was not rolled out yet – before it was completed, the Council wanted to ensure that other elements of NEC system were working well.

Actions

1. A request was made to update Councillors on how to report or escalate examples of bad practice.

Conclusions

1. The Sub-Committee commended the work and acknowledged that this piece of work was needed and significant progress.
2. The Sub-Committee acknowledged that this piece of work was necessary. However, it was very important to make it to a high standard, even if it would take more time to complete it.
3. The Sub-Committee took reassurance from the acknowledgement of officers that there was a need to change the culture within the service and that this work was ongoing. It was agreed that the Sub-Committee would be able to assess the pace of change when it looked at the cultural transformation workstream at its meeting in April 2024.

Recommendations

1. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that ward councillors are informed when there is a planned resident engagement event within their constituency.

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 57 to 59 of the agenda which provided an overview of a statutory requirement for the Council to prepare a 30-year Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account on an annual basis to set out the long-term financial position of the ring-fenced general fund account.

Councillor Hale and Susmita Sen, Corporate Director for Housing, introduced the report and stressed that it was a statutory requirement for the Council to prepare an HRA business plan, and that the Council was keen to ensure that the business plan became a more robust part of the business planning process.

The first question considered how this year's HRA business plan compared to the last year's one, and what were the principles and priorities coming through. It was explained that the largest priority at the moment was damp and mould. There has been around 1800 damp and mould cases that the Council had worked on. It was added that another priority was prevention of disrepair. It was stressed that there was a need to have a capital programme focused on ensuring that buildings were safe and watertight.

The next question considered the timeline for completing the remaining 75% of stock surveys. It was explained that it took approximately six months to complete a quarter of the surveys. It was highlighted that many social landlords would review 20% to 25% of stock each year. Therefore, completing this many surveys in a considerably shorter amount of time had been a challenge for the Council. By the end of December 2023, the Council would like to have completed one third of the stock surveys, and then they would like to maintain this pace for the rest of the financial year. One of the challenges has been to gaining access to the flats – at the moment the access rate was around 50%. However, in some cases data from other surveys could be used for other flats, e.g. external walls data for the block of flats placed in the same building. Also, the team has been using other opportunities, e.g. when there was a repair scheduled, to conduct surveys.

The next question considered the access rate and what was being done to increase it. It was explained that residents did not necessarily see the benefit in allowing officers into their homes. The team had been working on improving the communication and ensuring that residents were well-informed. It was also highlighted that the access rate might be affected by residents subletting their homes or the properties being vacant. However, it was added that the Council has been undertaking a programme of tenancy audits. This would be a three-year programme that was to be rolled out next month.

Another question was asked about whether the surveys were prioritised in any way. It was explained that they were not prioritised because there was very little information available. However, they had been looking into targeting large panel system blocks. At the beginning of the programme they surveyed many houses, and they would like to focus on flats and maisonettes to better reflect the Council's stock.

The next question was asked about the risk from the Council only having one contractor and what was the plan to ensure that they delivered their services. It was explained that it had been challenging to maintain the pace and at the same time ensure that the collected data was accurate and objective. To ensure the quality of the surveys, there has been quality checking undertaken. It was also mentioned that there was a lot of work done when the contractor was selected to ensure that they fully understood what was expected from their work. It was added that it would be important to keep the momentum going and ensure that the time between making contact with the occupier and the actual survey was as short as possible.

Another question considered what has been done with the collected data. It was assured that the data was not only stored, but also there were actions arising from them. Around 240 homes were identified as concerning and not meeting the decent home standard. Many of those houses had damp and mould, and these cases would be referred to a designated team in the Council. A supplementary question was asked about any other safety concerns. It was explained that a large proportion of buildings were built when aerated concrete was used. Therefore, there potentially might be some issues in regard to that.

Another question considered the cap on rent. It was explained that the inflationary increase on the rents could go above 7%. Although, it was highlighted that in recent years the government had kept it at 7%. It was explained that the service charge was determined based on the actual spend. This would usually be estimated based on the last full year's spend. It was highlighted that service charge was not subject of governmental caps.

Another question considered the plans to involve residents in the asset management strategy, and what was the plan to achieve it. It was explained that when the Council worked on larger projects (e.g. a block of flats), they tried to engage residents very early on and keep them informed in regard to the investment plans. Additionally, in the near future engagement activities and surveys would be conducted. This would allow the Council to have a better understanding of what the residents would like to do. It was also added that for larger projects, the residents would be approached directly, and then they would be involved in overseeing the project.

The next question considered when there would be a reduction in the backlog of repairs and maintenance work. It was assured that the backlog was being monitored on daily basis, and overall there had been positive progress in reducing the backlog. Then an additional question considering the cost of clearing the backlog was asked. It was explained that there had been issues with the previous repair and maintenance contract. Therefore, the contract was re-procured, and there were three different companies delivering the repairs. It was acknowledged that the repairs and maintenance work was being progressed. However, the cost was higher than initially anticipated. It was assured that the overspend would not be a significant problem as the Council had enough reserves – around £50 million, and that decreasing the number of repairs was a priority. It was added that data gather through the

stock condition survey, would allow the service to better plan the repairs and maintenance work in the future, and reduce the number of reactive repairs.

The next question considered legal exposure and risk in relation to disrepairs. It was explained that the Council had been profiling the disrepair budget as there was a significant number of cases. In addition, as the Council had been working on the backlog, they were prioritising cases that bore more risk than others. The cases should be cleared in 18 months. It was also assured that the Council was fully aware of that risk, therefore, it was added to the corporate risk register. Another question in regard to risk was asked – it considered the risk associated with the decent home standard. It was explained that there was lack of clarification and certainty from central government. Therefore, the Council needed to make assumptions around it, and then when more information was provided by central government, the budget would be updated accordingly. A supplementary question considering the additional resources for the implementation of the standard was asked. It was assured that the Council's had sufficient reserves to support the annual budget.

Then another question was asked about the development of the plan and whether the Council conducted any benchmarking and comparison exercises. It was explained that in this area it would be very difficult to benchmark across different boroughs, as the stock held could vary significantly. It was added that when Croydon's capital spend was considered, it would be very low in comparison to other authorities. A supplementary question was asked about the in-year capital underspend. It was explained that it was predicted that the Council would overspend by £2.8 million on the revenue side of the repairs and maintenance and would overspend by £4.1 million on the capital side of HRA. It was caused by the pressured on both more minor and major works.

Actions

1. A request was made to share the engagement strategy with the Sub-Committee members.
2. A request was made to provide a briefing on data gathering and how it would be used in the future.

Conclusions

1. The Sub-Committee acknowledged that there had been a significant improvement in the approach to developing the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and the plans were promising.
2. The Sub-Committee commended the identified priorities for the Business Plan and agreed that they reflected the current needs within the service and of residents.
3. The Sub-Committee was reassured that the Council had sufficient reserves available to cover the overspend on the repairs backlog.

4. The Sub-Committee agreed that the information provided through the stock survey would form a crucial evidence base for the forthcoming Business Plan and agreed that it needed to be progress as quickly as possible and include as wider as variety of housing types as possible to provide better inform the development of the Plan.
5. The Sub-Committee noted that gaining access to properties to complete the surveys was impacted the completion rate and agreed that further work was needed in this area.

Recommendations

1. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that there is further engagement with residents on the benefits of the stock survey, including work with the contractor, using the social values aspects of their contract.

26/23 Work Programme 2022/23

The Sub-Committee considered a report on pages 61 to 66 of the agenda, which presented the work programme for review.

Resolved: That the current work programme for the Homes Sub-Committee is noted.

27/23 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 24 July 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

The meeting ended at 9.55pm

Signed:

Date:

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