

Scrutiny Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Monday, 28 October 2024 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Ellily Ponnuthurai (Chair);
Councillor Adele Benson (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Leila Ben-Hassel, Sue Bennett, Claire Bonham, Danielle Denton
and Jessica Hammersley-Rich

PART A

60/24 Minutes of the Previous Meetings

The minutes of the previous meetings held on the 9 July and 11 September 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

61/24 Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

62/24 Urgent Business (if any)

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

63/24 Update on Key Performance Indicators

This item was considered as part of the Housing Responsive Repair Service Update.

64/24 Update on the Housing Revenue Account and Housing General Fund

The Sub-Committee reviewed a report on pages 37 to 40 of the agenda providing an update on the Housing Revenue Account and Housing General Fund. Cllr Lynne Hale, Cabinet Member for Homes, introduced the item, highlighting a predicted overspend of £2m for the HRA against a budget of £103m. Key areas of concern included damp and mould, void repairs, communal repairs, estate inspections, and ongoing legal disrepair cases. A substantial overspend of approximately £15.7m was also predicted for temporary accommodation, primarily driven by increased reliance on nightly paid accommodation.

- Cllr Lynne Hale – Cabinet Member for Homes
- Orlagh Guarnori – Finance Manager

- Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor - Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation
- Sue Hanlon – Director of Assets
- Simon James – Change Manager

The first question from the Sub-Committee addressed the Council's confidence in forecasting, especially in light of new government policies and landlords exiting the market. The officers explained that the roll-out of the NEC system would enhance tracking of temporary accommodation placements and associated costs. While acknowledging that precise predictions were challenging given economic and legislative changes, the officers explained that based on the information they had, they also allowed for more flexibility in the budget.

The Sub-Committee then inquired whether additional pressures, such as the fast-tracking of decisions on asylum seekers' applications, were considered in forecasts. The officers confirmed that additional placements, including for asylum seekers, were accounted for. They highlighted a proactive approach involving collaboration with the Home Office, allowing early support to asylum seekers and facilitating moves to alternative accommodation. The officers reported that these kinds of early intervention were having a positive impact on housing outcomes.

The Sub-Committee inquired further about the percentage impact of this proactive approach. The officers explained that they were placing approximately 100 new individuals in temporary accommodation each month, equating to around 25% of applications, with additional capacity for 50 placements per month. A follow-up question asked whether the Council was only obligated to place asylum seekers with positive decisions who were families. The officers clarified that obligations were similar to those for any homeless person, with priority given to applicants with children. Single applicants were also assessed for vulnerability, although the officers acknowledged that most placements involved families.

The Sub-Committee's next question concerned the expected completion date for the Sycamore estate and whether any budget reduction was anticipated. The officers responded that they were working closely with the leaseholder and anticipated completion by March 2025, with reoccupation following soon after. Financially, the forecast assumed Sycamore would remain as it was for the rest of the financial year, resulting in a £1.6m budget pressure. The Sub-Committee also queried whether estates like Concorde, Windsor, or Sycamore House, once back in use, could be utilised for nightly stays. The officers clarified that both estates were currently part of the temporary accommodation portfolio and fully occupied, so additional use for nightly stays was not under consideration.

The Sub-Committee then asked about communal repairs and how they were budgeted. The officers explained that £1m had been allocated for both internal and external communal repairs, though by the end of September, nearly the entire budget had been spent. This was partly due to additional

costs from delayed cyclical repairs, particularly guttering, and estate inspections that had identified issues. The officers noted they were taking steps to address these problems proactively in the future to avoid further unanticipated expenses.

The following question concerned whether the stock condition survey had informed the budget-setting process, specifically regarding voids. The officers responded that, as the stock condition survey began in November last year, it had not been available when setting the budget. However, the current data would support improved budgeting in the future. For voids, however, budgeting was still largely influenced by the number of voids from the previous year rather than stock condition survey results.

The Sub-Committee then sought clarification on the primary causes of the overspend on voids. The officers identified the poor condition of returned properties as a major factor, with around 30% of these voids resulting from tenant deaths. These properties often required substantial clearance, which could cost up to £1,500 for property clearance and £700 for garden clearance.

Further inquiries were made into what the Council was doing to prevent properties from being returned in poor condition. The officers explained that tenant visits had been introduced, prioritising annual in-person visits for residents over 65 and vulnerable individuals. During these visits, tenancy services officers would assess how residents were coping and identify any support needs, including the possibility of moving to sheltered accommodation if appropriate.

Regarding asbestos surveys and gas safety checks for void properties, the Sub-Committee asked if there was a standard approach. The officers confirmed that asbestos surveys were conducted as needed, though existing surveys were used when available, with costs covered by a separate budget. Gas and electrical safety checks were standard when properties became void. They added that contractors such as Mears and Wates could start work once the gas was capped, with K&T Heating completing the gas work.

The Sub-Committee next raised the issue of legal disrepairs and the aim to clear the backlog by March 2025. The officers reported that there were 545 legacy cases dating from 2018 to 2023. They had cleared cases from 2019 to 2021 and were currently working through 2022 cases. New case intake had reduced to around 35-40 cases per month, down from a previous 50-60. While they may not clear all cases by the deadline, officers expected to have addressed 350-400 cases. The officers explained that a part of the budget might need to be carried forward to 2026 to continue this work.

In anticipation of the next fiscal year, the Sub-Committee inquired about budget-setting processes to improve future estimates. The officers explained that the 2024 HRA budget would likely be influenced by the upcoming social rent policy announcement. Close collaboration with the repairs team was essential to take better account of case volumes, particularly for damp, mould, and legal disrepairs. For the General Fund, the Medium-Term Financial

Strategy included a growth budget to address increased demand for temporary accommodation, while identifying savings in other areas.

The Sub-Committee raised concern about the demand for repairs related to damp and mould and whether there would be an additional budget allocation to address these cases. The officers confirmed that these issues must be budgeted for due to legal obligations and waiting time requirements.

The final question asked by the Sub-Committee addressed housing extensions for Council accommodation. The officers responded that investments were being made in housing extensions, but these were costly and would only be approved, if necessary, with no other resizing options available.

Conclusions

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

- The Sub-Committee welcomed the intention to build in the growth into the budget next year for damp and mould.
- The Sub-Committee recognised the reduction in disrepair cases and commended the Council for actively addressing the backlog of outstanding cases.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the new approach to addressing repairs in communal areas and the introduction of cyclical planning for this type of maintenance.
- The Sub-Committee commended the early work with asylum seeker applicants to manage the impact of the Home Office being based in Croydon and on the Council's , and homelessness service. .
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the preventative approach taken by the Council, especially around working with elderly and vulnerable tenants.

Recommendations

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

- The Sub-Committee recommends introducing a more systematic approach to capturing issues raised by elected members and residents regarding issues of disrepair in communal areas.

65/24 Housing Responsive Repair Service Update

The Sub-Committee reviewed reports on pages 31 to 36 and 41 to 49 of the agenda providing an update on the Housing Responsive Repair Service Update and KPIs. The report was introduced by Cllr Lynne Hale, Cabinet Member for Housing, who clarified that the procurement exercise for the repairs contract occurred in 2022, with the contract awarded in 2023 and mobilised in August that year.

- Cllr Lynne Hale – Cabinet Member for Homes

- Susmita Sen – Corporate Director of Housing
- Orlagh Guarnori – Finance Manager
- Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor - Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation
- Sue Hanlon – Director of Assets
- Simon James – Change Manager

The first question asked by the Sub-Committee addressed improvement plans for contractors and whether these were standard in the sector. The officers clarified that while the improvement plans were not part of the contract or they were not introduced due to considerable underperformance, the plans were introduced to ensure continuous improvement of the provided services. It was further explained that these plans targeted specific areas for improvement, such as ensuring contractors consistently displayed ID badges. This kind of issues were reviewed at cyclical improvement meetings.

The Sub-Committee then inquired about performance data collection and the number of residents surveyed. The officers explained that the Acuity survey, conducted by an independent third party, sampled approximately 15% of repairs completed in the previous month. As a transactional survey, it was based on residents' most recent repair experiences. Acuity asked residents 10 questions leading to monthly reports that provided insight into reported issues and highlighting areas that needed improvement.

The next question focused on the reasons behind the fluctuation in the rate of repairs completed at the first attempt. The officers explained that achieving a “first-time fix” was their target, however, it was acknowledged that it could fluctuate. This was often due to the availability of van stock. They provided an example, noting that K&T Heating recently conducted a van stock review in preparation for winter to improve the “fixed now” percentage. Contractors attempted to carry parts for the 20 most common repairs and additional stock for the top 100 most frequent repair types. Officers noted that contractors regularly review the types of repairs undertaken to ensure their van stock aligned with demand.

In response to a question regarding K&T Heating's recent “deep-dive” review and resident involvement, the officers clarified that the review, completed between July and September, focused on “fixed now” performance and included resident involvement. The review led to adjustments in van stock and the availability of parts in local stores to allow operatives quick access to items when needed.

The Sub-Committee then asked about the learning from previous contracts concerning subcontractor management. The officers explained that Wates used approved subcontractors, with the Council involved in the approval process. Earlier this year, the officers observed inadequate management of subcontractors, particularly in communication with residents. In response, Wates introduced a subcontractor portal to better track work status and improve communication. The officers clarified that Wates was responsible for maintaining communication with residents.

The next question concerned the rate of improvement in contractor performance. The officers noted that KPI fluctuation was mainly due to a focus on clearing overdue jobs between April and June, many of which were legacy cases from the previous contractor. They highlighted that satisfaction scores for this period may have been lower as a result of these overdue cases. The officers stated that they hoped to enter a stabilisation phase in year two, in which small monthly improvements across contractors could be observed.

In response to a question about sharing best practice for achieving quick repair turnarounds, the officers explained that contractors attended a weekly voids meeting to maintain an accurate understanding of current standings. In terms of voids, contractors were generally meeting their targets. However, the officers stressed the importance of the Council's role in supporting the process, particularly during the pre-termination period, to help ensure timely turnarounds.

When asked about the rising number of minor voids ready for letting, the officers responded that this was largely driven by volume fluctuations. They explained that while they worked on an assumption of 30 voids per month, there were instances when the volume rose to around 45 voids per month, creating pressure on contractors' capacity to meet targets and potentially causing delays.

The Sub-Committee then asked about the 21-day target for major repair voids and how this target was determined. The officers explained that voids were categorised into minor, major, and unlettable types. Minor voids, requiring repairs under £4,500, had a target of 12 days, while major voids, needing work under £10,000, had a 21-day target. Occasionally, there were unlettable voids with severe issues, such as subsidence or fire damage, which were not assigned specific targets.

The Sub-Committee asked about the winter resource plan and whether K&T Heating operatives provided temporary heaters when heating issues could not be immediately resolved. The officers confirmed that temporary heaters were available, with each operative carrying 12 electric heaters and additional units stored locally. They further explained that the winter resource plan was mainly focused on ensuring adequate operative availability to address increased demand.

The Sub-Committee then questioned the compensation available for residents facing increased electricity costs due to repairs, such as when industrial dehumidifiers were used. The officers clarified that if temporary heaters were provided and heating was not restored within 48 hours, the Council would contribute to residents' electricity costs after the initial 48-hour period.

In response to a question about improving the relationship with residents as part of the improvement plan, the officers highlighted that K&T Heating had established an administrative team to support the scheduling team, with a

focus on updating residents when follow-up work was required. They noted that improved communication had already led to a reduction in complaints regarding K&T Heating.

The Sub-Committee inquired about services available for residents without access to cars or those with disabilities, questioning whether assistance could be provided for property clearance. The officers stated that a handyperson role had been introduced to support families, with signposting available to charities that could assist. The officers noted that the Council had considered recharging residents for clearance services but found this challenging due to the difficulties in debt collection from former tenants.

The Sub-Committee asked about tenancy termination processes. The officers explained that they worked with residents to ensure they understood their obligations, with property visits conducted shortly before the end of tenancy to check progress. When challenged on whether such visits should occur earlier, the officers clarified that these checks are part of mid-term tenancy audits, although these inspections do not include loft spaces.

The Cabinet Member added that they were constantly trying to utilise data and as a result of that they recently set up a dedicated leaks team.

The Sub-Committee then focused on Social Value KPIs, asking for examples of initiatives. The officers provided examples such as contractors attending a knife crime awareness event at Crystal Palace Football Club to support the crime reduction KPI, as well as each contractor committing to create ten apprenticeships within the first 15 months of service.

A follow-up question asked how the impact of social value KPIs was measured and what action was taken if targets were not met. The officers explained that all contractors met their targets last year, demonstrating their commitment to delivering social value. However, the officers acknowledged that more work was needed on impact measurement, including gathering resident feedback. They also noted that contractors were involved in identifying domestic abuse cases, although further data collection would be required.

The Sub-Committee revisited a recommendation from a previous meeting about providing domestic violence training for subcontractors. The officers confirmed that all approved subcontractors had received training delivered by the Council in July.

Turning to resident engagement, the Sub-Committee inquired about the role of resident liaison officers and whether these officers participated in walkabouts on Council housing estates. The officers confirmed that the resident liaison officers were in place but clarified that participation in estate walkabouts was not part of their role.

In response to a question about the repair authorisation process, officers explained that the threshold for authorisation initially stood at £250 but was reduced to £150 due to budget pressures. The process required the repair service manager to authorise work between £150 and £500, the head of service for £500 to £750, and the director for anything above £750. Authorisation typically occurred within 48 hours, though emergency repairs could be authorised by phone if necessary.

The Sub-Committee inquired into the relatively high number of stage 2 complaints regarding Wates. The officers attributed this to legacy repairs, which often resulted in higher-than-usual complaint volumes, especially at stage 2. They identified a trend where initial responses offered specific fix-by dates that were later missed, leading to escalation. To address this, an Experience Officer was appointed to track stage 1 and stage 2 complaints requiring work, liaising with both residents and contractors to ensure promised actions were delivered. The officers noted that very few complaints became disrepair cases, as residents typically pursued the dedicated disrepair process instead.

The Sub-Committee also asked about engaging residents reluctant to contact the Council. The officers shared examples from damp and mould focus groups, which had gathered valuable feedback and provided residents with a chance to challenge service delivery. They also aimed to contact residents who submitted complaints within three days to obtain more insight.

The final question from the Sub-Committee concerned the potential for a dedicated housing complaints team. The Cabinet Member highlighted ongoing efforts to improve accessibility, including work with the Boston Consulting Group on out-of-hours accessibility for residents. The officers explained that their initial priority was clearing the complaints backlog, allowing them to assess the service more accurately. They were currently reviewing process blockages in consultation with residents and acknowledged that further development was required. The officers noted that, previously, a lack of data and research prevented them from effectively addressing blockages, though new changes were to be introduced.

Actions

Following its discussion on the Housing Responsive Repair Service Update, the Sub-Committee agreed the following action to follow up outside of the meeting:

- The Sub-Committee requested to receive information on the number of unlettable voids currently in the Borough.
- The Sub-Committee requested that data provided to the Sub-Committee cover a longer time frame, include targets and minimum service level provisions for all applicable measures, and be accompanied by a more detailed narrative.

Conclusions

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

- The Sub-Committee acknowledged the extensive work on data management and noted that performance was stabilising. Additionally, the Sub-Committee appreciated the transparent approach regarding contractor performance.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the triangulation of third-party survey results with the Council's work.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed improvements in subcontractor management, including the introduction of an approved list of contractors and, in the case of Wates, the implementation of a portal for subcontractors.
- The Sub-Committee noted that K&T Heating was now carrying electric heaters for situations where heating issues could not be resolved on the first visit.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the establishment of the K&T Heating back-office team, resulting from the service improvement plan.
- The Sub-Committee commended the winter resource planning processes.
- The Sub-Committee praised the Council's engagement with focus groups.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the introduction of a dedicated leaks team.

Recommendations

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

- The Sub-Committee agreed that further work was needed to define how the impact of social value aspects of the contracts would be measured. As such recommends work to establish appropriate metrics for monitoring impact is prioritised to ensure that the maximum potential of social value is realised.
- The Sub-Committee recommends that the Council explore whether existing contracts and other resources could be utilised to assist residents who may have barriers to clearing their properties through offering reduced rates for property clearance, particularly for those without access to cars or those with disabilities.
- The Sub-Committee recommends that the process for applying for and deciding on property extensions be made more transparent and accessible for residents.
- Following the Boston Consulting Group's focus groups, the Sub-Committee recommends exploring the feasibility of establishing a dedicated housing complaints process or team.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed that there was a scheme to support the residents with higher electricity costs caused by the use electric heaters and dehumidifiers due to repair needs, and recommends

reviewing the communication and information provided to residents to raise awareness about its availability.

66/24 Placement Policy for Temporary Accommodation and Private Rented Sector Offers

The Sub-Committee reviewed a report on pages 51 to 110 of the agenda providing an overview on the Placement Policy for Temporary Accommodation and Private Rented Sector Offer. The report was introduced by Cllr Lynne Hale, Cabinet Member for Housing. The Cabinet Member highlighted the challenges posed by rising property costs, which were making it increasingly difficult to procure sufficient and affordable accommodation. It was noted that, while a Placement Policy for Temporary Accommodation was not a statutory requirement, having such a policy was considered good practice. The Cabinet Member emphasised that the policy includes criteria for identifying vulnerable residents.

- Cllr Lynne Hale – Cabinet Member for Homes
- Susmita Sen – Corporate Director of Housing
- Orlagh Guarnori – Finance Manager
- Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor - Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation
- Sue Hanlon – Director of Assets
- Simon James – Change Manager

The first question from the Sub-Committee asked why the Placement Policy focused heavily on geographic location rather than a broader set of factors. The officers explained that a key objective of the policy is transparency, particularly regarding out-of-area placements. They noted that this policy, like others, focused on the factors considered when deciding to place residents out of area. The officers emphasised that the preference was to place residents within the borough wherever possible, and the policy clarified the factors that influenced placements when this was not feasible.

The Sub-Committee then inquired about the data and input from residents used in developing the policy. The officers stated that the policy development process included substantial benchmarking work, examining policies from other London boroughs and considering the Homelessness Code of Guidance. The officers also reviewed local data and practices, noting that in Croydon, approximately 65% of placements are within the borough, 29% in other London boroughs, and 6% outside of London.

Further questioning from the Sub-Committee referenced some other London boroughs' placement policies, which were more detailed regarding the assessment process. The officers explained that the suitability assessment was conducted on a case-by-case basis, with consideration of sustainability factors such as affordability, health conditions, and educational needs. The officers noted that these factors were based upon governmental guidance,

with geographic placement becoming a secondary consideration after suitability is assessed.

The next question related to how the policy accounted for the unique characteristics of Croydon. The officers confirmed that they considered Croydon's specific circumstances, including current practices, supply, and the affordability of accommodation. The policy also considered the impact of placements from other boroughs into Croydon. Despite these unique factors, the primary objective remained placing as many residents as possible within the borough.

The Sub-Committee then asked whether there was a property exchange programme for residents in temporary accommodation. The officers responded that no such programme was currently in place.

A query was raised regarding guidance on school travel times, specifically for primary school children. The Sub-Committee engaged with South West London Law Centres that recommended a maximum travel time of 45 minutes one way, which was based on the governmental guidance, while the policy sets a 90-minute limit. The officers explained that the 90-minute guideline aligns with the Department for Work and Pensions' travel time standard for employment and was also used by other boroughs. However, they indicated a willingness to review this guidance, noting that travel times should reflect borough-specific characteristics. The officers also highlighted competing priorities, such as minimising split households, and stated that the policy will undergo a review after one year to address any necessary adjustments.

The Sub-Committee asked about measures to ensure assessments were unbiased. The officers explained that developing the policy led to a closer examination of assessment practices, and they recognised the need for thorough training to ensure unbiased assessments.

In response to a question about the policy review process, the officers stated that they plan to review the policy within the next 12 months. The officers provided an assurance to the Sub-Committee that they would closely monitor for any unintended consequences and address them as necessary.

The Sub-Committee then asked about reviewing cases of residents who could not be placed within the borough. The officers explained that all homelessness-related decisions are subject to a statutory review process. Anyone receiving a homelessness decision can request a review, which would be conducted independently by a separate review team. The Sub-Committee further asked if there was a built-in process for reassessing the needs of placed individuals or families over time. The officers responded that individual reviews are limited to the legislative review process, but the policy itself will be reviewed after 12 months. When asked about proactive measures to address changing circumstances that could raise safeguarding concerns, the officers clarified that the Placement Policy only governs placement decisions. For ongoing assessments, a suitability review process allows residents to request a review at any time. The officers acknowledged that a

more proactive approach would be beneficial, but noted that data limitations currently significantly limited their capacity to do so.

The Sub-Committee raised a question about the checks conducted on temporary accommodation properties. The officers explained that the Council recently completed occupancy checks on all temporary accommodation, with each property visited. A dedicated procurement team also inspects properties, taking photographs, and evaluating hazards. Additionally, the officers explained that an approved landlord list was introduced, with clear expectations set for new suppliers. The temporary accommodation management team worked with landlords if tenants reported any disrepair issues. Further inquiries from the Sub-Committee addressed checks on out-of-borough accommodations. The officers confirmed that the same inspection process applies to both within and out-of-borough properties.

The Sub-Committee then asked about issues with discretionary housing payments and delays in families receiving payments. The officers clarified that when temporary accommodation was required, discretionary payments were not needed. However, for households struggling to pay rent, delays may have occurred as the assessment for discretionary payments can take several days. The officers explained that there should not have been any backlog for discretionary payments, nonetheless.

Conclusions

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

- The Sub-Committee welcomed the introduction of this policy. However, the Sub-Committee stressed that the Placement policy is focused only on geographical consideration. The subcommittee would like to see a more holistic document addressing other aspects of placement such as the process, rights, various other factors.
- The Sub-Committee noted that their main concerns related to aspects not addressed in the policy, rather than its current contents.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the practice of officers visiting all temporary accommodation properties.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the commitment to review the policy 12 months after its introduction.
- The Sub-Committee welcomed the approach to maintain a list of approved landlords.

Recommendations

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

- The Sub-Committee recommends exploring the feasibility of a property exchange programme for temporary accommodation tenants.
- The Sub-Committee recommends that temporary accommodation officers receive training in areas such as cultural sensitivity, domestic abuse, and autism.

- The Sub-Committee recommends assessing the Placement Policy for Temporary Accommodation and Private Rented Sector Offers impact on children’s educational outcomes.
- The Sub-Committee recommends exploring ways to proactively inform residents about their rights, including providing an information pack for residents in temporary accommodation. This pack would outline their rights and escalation routes.
- The Sub-Committee recommends that commute times for children adheres to the Governments Department for Education travel to school guidance says that: maximum journey time for a child of primary school age should be 45 minutes each way, and 75 minutes each way for a child of secondary school age, including any time taken to walk to a pick-up point. It urged the Council to practise primary school aged children.
- The Sub-Committee recommends adopting a more proactive approach to safeguarding, potentially including a flagging system to alert tenancy officers about the ages of children sharing rooms.

67/24 Work Programme 2024-2025

The Sub-Committee expressed their interest in adding a deep dive into the private rental sector to the Work Programme.

68/24 Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Recommendations

The Sub-Committee noted the Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Recommendations report.

The meeting ended at Time Not Specified

Signed:

Date:

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