



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Monday 18th November, 2019**, Rooms 18.01 & 18.03, 18th Floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

**Members Present:** Councillors Melvyn Caplan (Chairman), Antonia Cox, Adam Hug, Matt Noble, Mark Shearer and James Spencer.

**Also Present:** Councillor Rachael Robathan (Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration), Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services), Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director - Growth, Planning and Housing), James Green (Director of Development), Neil Wightman (Director of Housing), Jon Lock (Acting Head of Housing Operations), Aaron Hardy (Policy and Scrutiny Manager) and Toby Howes (Senior Committee and Governance Officer).

**Apologies for Absence:** Councillor Guthrie McKie and Councillor Emily Payne

#### 1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 It was noted that Councillor Emily Payne had replaced Councillor Richard Elcho as a substantive member of the Committee.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

#### 3 MINUTES

##### 3.1 RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record of proceedings.

#### 4 CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PROPERTY AND REGENERATION UPDATE

- 4.1 Councillor Rachael Robathan (Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration) introduced the report and confirmed that the Council had now

obtained London Living Wage (LLW) employer accredited status. The Council was ahead of a number of other London boroughs in implementing the LLW. Councillor Robathan added that the LLW offered staff fair wages and also motivated staff to deliver the high quality services expected

- 4.2 The Committee sought an update on the Fair Funding Review and the Spending Review and the approaches the Council was taking towards these matters. Members asked whether there would be any consultation or technical debates this year for the local government finance settlement, in view of the short timescales involved.
- 4.3 Members noted that the Community Contribution rates in the first half of this year were down compared to the last year and asked what steps were being taken to increase contributions. Further details were requested regarding the breadth of the procurement review. Members sought updates with regards to the Beachcroft, Church Street and Lisson Arches regeneration schemes. With regard to Dudley House, a Member expressed concern that there was no longer to be social housing on site, even though this had been initially proposed. In respect of tenants in renewal areas, clarification was sought as to what constituted under-occupancy.
- 4.4 A Member commented on the successful consultation on Infill schemes in his ward which had the support of residents. The Local Lettings Policy was also welcomed, however it was asked how this could be made to benefit residents more who already lived locally in that area. With regards to the Coroner's Court, Members sought an explanation as to how the costs were covered.
- 4.5 In reply to issues raised by Members, Councillor Robathan informed the Committee that a robust financial planning process was in place to address all scenarios in respect of the Fair Funding Review and the Spending Review. With regards to Community Contributions, she advised that two letters were sent to the relevant residents and brochures would also be sent out detailing the charities that had received funds and what they were doing with them. Councillor Robathan stated that an important review of procurement was taking place and it would align procurement in all service areas and the procurement of Adult Social Care and Children's Services would be brought together. Turning to Beachcroft, Councillor Robathan advised that work was taking place in respect of the internal fit outs with the contractor, and construction was on target. Engagement was ongoing with regards to the Church Street scheme and consideration was also being given as to how to engage with residents whose first language was not English. There were challenges to overcome at the Lisson Arches site, however every effort was being made to make progress with this site.
- 4.6 In respect of the Local Lettings Policy, Councillor Robathan advised that how this was implemented was dependent on the circumstances of the particular locality and the input of ward councillors was welcomed. She emphasised the importance of keeping local people within their community and in identifying and prioritising families who were in high need. Councillor Robathan had visited Dudley House and had looked at affordable homes on the site. She commented that the studio flats were spacious, whilst the two-bedroom flats

consisted of two separate units with a shared living room. Members heard that applications for flats in Dudley House were oversubscribed, with 300 applications for 197 units. With regards to the tenant policy in renewal areas, there had been extensive debate on this matter. Although in some cases, there would be instances where people would be re-housed in properties that had less space than they were used to, there was flexibility within the policy to provide an additional bedroom in some circumstances. Turning to Coroner's Court, Councillor Robathan advised that the Council shared the costs with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the London Boroughs of Merton and Wandsworth and the cost allocation between the four councils had been agreed. The Council was the lead partner and work on the Coroner's Court was due to take place soon.

- 4.8 Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director – Finance and Resources) advised that the local government finance settlement had been due to be announced in the first week of December, however because of the General Election, it was due to follow shortly after the Election. The Government was aware of the implications for local authorities in not receiving the settlement until later than planned and the Council's budget for the next year had been designed to soften the blow. Gerald Almeroth advised that the Government would undertake a technical consultation with local authorities after the first year spending round, whilst consultation on the Fair Funding Review was due to commence in the New Year.
- 4.9 James Green (Director of Development) advised in respect of Lisson Arches that lessons had been learnt and that an update could be provided on this at a future meeting.
- 4.10 The Committee requested a breakdown of types of housing units for developments in future reports, to be provided with a definition of under-occupancy for housing renewal areas and an update on Lisson Arches.
- 4.11 **ACTIONS:**
1. Information on development schemes to include a breakdown of how many housing units are social/intermediate and how many are new/provided (Action for: Neil Wightman, Director of Housing Services).
  2. Definition of under-occupancy in housing renewal areas to be provided (Action for: Neil Wightman, Director of Housing Services).
  3. Update on Lisson Arches to be provided (Action for: James Green, Director of Development).

## **5 CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE**

- 5.1 Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing Services) introduced the report and advised that there had been improvements in performance in respect of the Contact Centre. Changes had also been made in respect of billing for leaseholders, following suggestions by the Committee and this was due to take effect from 1 April 2020. A new adviser had also been appointed

in the Homeless Prevention Team.

- 5.2 The Committee commented that some leaseholders were still confused about service charges for major works and protection works and sought details as to what steps were being taken to explain to leaseholders what was being asked of them. It was remarked that residents preferred evening surgeries to discuss this. The importance of explaining the financial terms of payment of these works was emphasised and it was asked whether different financial terms depending on the type of leaseholder were offered. Members welcomed the achievements of the Housing Solutions Service, however it was commented that there were capacity issues and it was queried if any additional resources could be made available. An explanation was also sought as to why there had been a drop in the number of full homelessness duty acceptances.
- 5.3 Members welcomed the progress made in implementing traffic management orders (TMOs) on housing estates and they asked when this was likely to be completed. An update on fire safety works was also sought and it was asked whether the Council was satisfied that there were no buildings that had flammable cladding.
- 5.3 In reply to issues raised by the Committee, Councillor Smith advised that improvements were being made in respect of Section 20 explanations to leaseholders concerning major works and protection works, however more effort could be made to ensure the information was clearer in future and resident surgeries on this matter were also available. There were also a range of payment options available for leaseholders. Councillor Smith acknowledged that the Housing Solutions Services were dealing with a number of cases and discussions needed to take place with regard to resource pressures. There was a substantial focus on fire safety and Councillor Smith felt reassured that there were no flammable cladding or materials on Council homes. In respect of implementation of TMOs, Councillor Smith stated that further details could be made available. In some of the remaining areas where the TMOs were yet to be implemented, some residents had stated that they were preserving parking spaces by using bollards, however in such cases they had been advised that this was not legally enforceable without a TMO being in place.
- 5.4 Jon Lock (Acting Head of Housing Operations) added that 60 sites had gone through the process of TMO implementation to date and there had been a re-consultation in some areas. He confirmed that enforcement was taking place where TMOs had been implemented.
- 5.5 Neil Wightman (Director of Housing) stated that evening surgeries for leaseholders in respect of major works and protection works could be offered. There had also been consultation with leaseholders on this matter and a YouTube feature explaining how it worked and the options available was shortly to be released. Neil Wightman stated that there had not been significant negative feedback from residents on this issue. Steps were being taken to improve the Housing Solutions Service and there were some temporary additional resources available. With regards to the drop in full homelessness duty acceptances, Neil Wightman stated that no particular reason for this had been identified, however this could be looked at in more

detail and it was possible that the drop may be partly attributable to the effectiveness of frontline homelessness prevention services. Neil Wightman also stated that checks could be undertaken to ensure there was no flammable cladding on new developments.

## 5.6 **ACTIONS:**

1. Investigate as to why there had been a drop in full homelessness duty acceptances (Action for: Neil Wightman, Director of Housing).
2. Provide information on what has been done to ensure that new developments do not have flammable cladding and are complying with fire safety regulations (Action for: James Green, Director of Development).
3. Update in early 2020 to be provided on the rollout of TMOs and enforcement where this has been undertaken (Action for: Jon Lock, Acting Head of Housing Operations and Kevin Goad, Director of City Highways).

## 6 **HOUSING MANAGEMENT SERVICES UPDATE**

- 6.1 Neil Wightman (Director of Housing) gave a presentation on Housing Management Services, including progress made since the Task Group recommendations and the strategic priorities of the department. Neil Wightman advised that his priorities were:
- Responsiveness and quality of repairs service
  - Better Service for leaseholders
  - Support vulnerable residents
  - A new housing services offer and increase resident involvement
  - Prevent homelessness
- 6.2 Neil Wightman explained that the 'Our Voice' survey had identified the desire to provide the right culture to deliver services and to be customer focused. Improvements to the service included the introduction of 'Gober' customer care training, a Members enquiry team, the 'Your Voice' newsletter and there was also continuous learning and immediate satisfaction monitoring. In future, speech analytics data would be used to drive improvements. Neil Wightman also set out the improvements to the repairs and maintenance performance and for leaseholders.
- 6.3 Members noted the improvement in the repairs performance but commented that there was still a relatively large number of responses that were dissatisfied with repairs carried out. The Committee welcomed the improved culture and the willingness in taking ownership of matters raised by residents. Members asked what steps were being made to ensure more staff were visiting estates and identifying problems. Details were sought about the timescales involved for the ongoing improvements to Housing Management Services. Monitoring of follow-on work where jobs had not been completed was also necessary to prevent residents having to make multiple calls and it was asked what escalation process was in place where multiple calls had to

be made. Members asked why there had been a recent spike in calls from residents. Information was sought on the processes in place for self-evaluation of the service. Members also asked if there were any other ways of measuring residents' satisfaction other than through post-call surveys. The Committee commented that whilst the Westminster on Meals service had been successful, it was not the answer to all issues residents may encounter.

- 6.4 In reply to issues raised by the Committee, Councillor Smith acknowledged that the number of repairs reported as unsatisfactory was still too high, however a better relationship between the Contact Centre and the Repairs Team was being developed to ensure that the appropriate worker was allocated to the repair job. There was also software in place to capture more in-depth feedback from residents. Councillor Smith emphasised that ownership and presence on estates was at the heart of the service's priorities and an estate action plan would embed this. The Westminster on Wheels service was also being reviewed to make it more flexible. Councillor Smith added that there were a number of ways in which customer satisfaction was measured and the speech analytics project would provide further means once it was completed.
- 6.5 Neil Wightman advised that complaints often arose in respect of communal repairs and a re-organisation of Estate Services was taking place so that more simple repairs could be carried out there and then, rather than going through the reporting process first. The Committee heard that a new mobile working solution for staff was due to be launched in mid-December. With regards to the recent spike in calls, Neil Wightman advised that this was common at this time of year. Where there were multiple calls concerning a particular job, this would be internally looked at. Neil Wightman informed Members that the new management structure would go live on 1 December and the next phase would involve improving customer access to frontline staff and increasing post repair inspections. Turning to self-evaluation of service, Neil Wightman stated that this involved looking at complaints data and managers had the authority to undertake an internal call-in of a particular case.
- 6.6 The Committee noted that there were still a number of performance indicators rated 'amber' as opposed to 'green' and requested an update on Housing Management Services in six months' time.

## **7 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR ON ESTATES TASK GROUP REPORT**

- 7.1 The Chairman welcomed the contributions made during the course of the Task Group's work and commented on the worthwhile meetings that had taken place, which had raised a number of questions and issues about how the process of tackling anti-social behaviour on estates operated. He felt that a number useful and challenging recommendations had been made. It was recognised that residents had not received enough support on some matters and there were a number of complex issues and cases to address. There also needed to be more work done to ensure that the right decisions were made for residents and also for specific individuals.

- 7.2 Members welcomed the recommendations of the Task Group and emphasised the need to take up a more joined-up approach to tackle this issue. It was asked if there would be more integration of teams, such as working more closely with the Council's Noise Team and Children's Team.
- 7.3 Councillor Smith welcomed the report and advised that there will be more joint working to tackle this issue, adding that anti-social behaviour occurred not only on estates. Consideration was also being given as to whether additional resources could be brought in.
- 7.4 Neil Wightman also welcomed the report and the recommendations of the Task Group which he felt were challenging, however every effort needed be made to fulfil them. He commented that implementing some recommendations may involve bringing in additional resources and that improving enforcement was a key objective, including the timescales in which it was undertaken. Neil Wightman added that there were already steps being taken to integrate services more to tackle this issue and a meeting with Children's Services to discuss this would take place on 22 November.
- 7.5 Jon Lock stated that working closely with other teams was important to ensure that anti-social behaviour was tackled more effectively and a relationship with the Noise Team was being developed.

7.6 The Committee agreed the recommendations of the Task Group.

## **8 WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER**

- 8.1 Members had before them the Work Programme and Action Tracker.
- 8.2 In response to a query from a Member, Aaron Hardy (Policy and Scrutiny Manager) was to consider when the Housing Revenue Account business plan could be considered.
- 8.3 The Committee noted the Work Programme and Action Tracker.

## **9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT**

- 9.1 There was no other business.

## **10 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

### **10.1 RESOLVED:**

That under Section 100 (A) (4) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business because they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information on the grounds shown below and it is considered that, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information:

Item 11.

**11 MINUTES**

**11.1 RESOLVED:**

That the confidential minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record of proceedings.

The Meeting ended at 8.41 pm

**CHAIRMAN:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_