

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee



Minutes

Tuesday 16 January 2018

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Alan De'Ath (Chair), Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Harry Phibbs, and Donald Johnson

Other Councillors: Councillors Lisa Homan (Cabinet Member for Housing) and Wesley Harcourt (Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport & Residents' Services)

Officers: Kim Dero (Chief Executive), Hitesh Jolapara (Strategic Finance Director), Kathleen Corbett (Director for Finance & Resources, Housing), Glendine Shepherd (Head of Housing Solutions), Peter Smith (Head of Policy and Strategy), David McNulty (Programme Manager, Housing), Nick Austin (Lead Director for Environmental Services), Gerry Crowley (Property and Place Manager), Valdrin Rexha (Parking Garages & Ancillary Services Manager), and David Abbott (Scrutiny Manager)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillors Donald Johnson and Harry Phibbs.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair noted that the Committee's previous clerk, Ainsley Gilbert, had left the Council in January – and on behalf of the Committee he wished him the best in all his future endeavours.

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2017 were agreed as a correct record.

4. FINANCIAL PLAN FOR COUNCIL HOMES 2017-18

Councillor Lisa Homan (Cabinet Member for Housing) and Kathleen Corbett (Director of Finance and Resources in Housing) introduced the report that covered the proposed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget and the Financial Plan for Council Homes. She noted that in July 2017, the Council announced the introduction of the Fire Safety Plus Programme to make sure the Council's homes and other properties met higher standards. This cost in the region of £20m. In addition, the HRA would be making a revenue contribution of £14m to fund capital investment costs, mainly funded from the HRA general reserves.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked if there were any potential for saving money by sharing services between estate management companies. Councillor Lisa Homan responded that some estates had discussed sharing caretaking services and while nothing had been formalised the Council didn't rule it out as an option. Councillor Phibbs said it was disappointing that there hadn't been any real progress. Kathleen Corbett said recently there had been a lot of mergers and change in the sector – she felt it was best to wait until the market was more settled.

A resident noted they were part of an estate services monitoring group that was looking at the services provided and any overlaps – so there were groups looking into this issue. Councillor Homan reiterated that there had been initial discussions and she felt it was important to do this with residents to ensure the quality of provision remained high.

Councillor Adam Connell noted that the Government's rent cap was ending and asked if officers had modelled the impact of this change in the budget. Kathleen Corbett said that had already been factored into the 40-year business plan.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked what the Council's policy on shops was regarding reducing HRA debt. Should we sell them? Kathleen Corbett replied - six or seven years ago the Council sold some of the HRA's 'prime' shop portfolio so the stock that was left were secondary investments of lower values. At this time, the Council was not actively selling shops. Councillor Lisa Homan added that the Council's shop portfolio generates over £1m per year and if they were sold we would have to find that revenue elsewhere.

Councillor Harry Phibbs highlighted scaffolding as a major cost that residents were frustrated about (the length of time it was up etc.). He noted that the Committee had made a number of recommendations on improving this and asked for a progress update on implementing them. Councillor Lisa Homan said there had not been enough big planned maintainable schemes since the recommendations were made for savings to be calculated but the ideas were being put into practice. There would be a review in future.

Councillor Harry Phibbs noted that the Council had set-up a Council-owned company to renegotiate contracts to save money, including HRA contracts. He asked for an update on those savings. Kathleen Corbett said any contract renegotiation would take a while to come through in the figures. Savings in the current period were offset

by additional investments in Fire Safety Plus and other programmes but in future years there would be savings.

Councillor Phibbs asked if the Council was ruling out reductions in service with contract renegotiations. Councillor Homan said the Council wanted residents to work with officers to ensure quality – this had already started with resident monitoring groups looking at a wide range of contracts, the caretaking contract with Pinnacle PSG for example. These groups had found a number of areas of overlap and would be reporting their findings in March 2018.

RESOLVED

That the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

5. 2018 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Hitesh Jolapara (Strategic Finance Director) introduced the report that set out the budget proposals for the services covered by the Committee. He showed slides that gave context for the scale of the challenge facing local government in recent years. H&F's general government grant had reduced from £160m in 2010/11 to £90m by 2018/19. He noted that the 2018/19 budget assumed a continued freeze in council tax and no increase in fees and charges in Children's Services, Adult Social Care, and Housing Services.

The Chair, referring to 3.3 of the report, asked if it was correct that the Government was recommending Councils raise council tax by 6 percent. Hitesh Jolapara said Central Government grant assumptions were based on H&F raising council tax and the precept by a combined 6% per year to 2019/20, though ultimately it was the choice of individual local authorities.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked if the Section 106 funding in the budget papers was guaranteed or if it was dependent on negotiations with developers. Hitesh Jolapara, referring to paragraph 3.16, noted that the Council currently had £72m of Section 106 contributions banked. Kathleen Corbett added that officers carried out monthly monitoring of these funds as part of the Council's accounting processes.

Councillor Donald Johnson asked if the recent collapse of Carillion PLC had changed the Council's appetite for risk regarding the ongoing use of Section 106 funding. Hitesh Jolapara said it was closely monitored on a regular basis.

Councillor Harry Phibbs noted that he was pleased to see efforts to make better use of the Public Health budget. He asked if there was scope to use Public health funding to help alleviate homelessness and alleviate general fund pressures for housing and specialist treatment. Hitesh Jolapara said Councillor Ben Coleman, the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care, was looking at substitution to see where the money made the most impact. He felt there was huge potential there.

Councillor Harry Phibbs highlighted 7.21 of the report on the Homeless Reduction Act – he noted that Crisis (the homeless charity) had argued the act would reduce costs over the longer term and asked if those savings were reflected in the budget.

David McNulty (Programme Manager working on implementation of the Act) said a pilot in Southwark had shown an increase in pressures across the homeless housing solutions system. The pilot had led to more people presenting and moving through the system. Councillor Lisa Homan noted that the Council was working hard to identify properties to help as many people as possible. The Council had started a property guardian company to help people to get people back on their feet. Creating affordable housing remained a huge challenge across London.

Councillor Adam Connell noted the loss of Council homes due to the Government's high value void sales policy in 7.8 of the report. He asked if officers were any clearer on the impact of this. Kathleen Corbett said it still wasn't clear but the Council would not have to pay the sale proceeds to central Government next year.

Councillor Adam Connell asked about the growth required after not being able to successfully source temporary accommodation. Kathleen Corbett said the Council had been consistently outbid by other local authorities. Council's with families in bed and breakfasts had been paying over the odds for provision.

Councillor Adam Connell asked about the scheme to keep libraries open longer. Councillor Wesley Harcourt stated that the Administration was committed to not closing any libraries and were looking at maintaining or increasing their opening hours. The new opening hours scheme was called 'smart open', inspired by a visit to Kentish Town where library cards gave access to libraries outside of the normal opening hours.

Councillor Harry Phibbs suggested officers could explore certain libraries hosting cash machines – both a social benefit to residents and a source of revenue. Officers said they would consider the proposal along with Amazon locker locations, Post Office services etc.

Councillor Adam Connell noted the additional £20,000 coming from new adult learning provision and asked what the new courses were. Kim Dero said officers would provide an answer after the meeting but the team was always trialling new courses. 'Start your own business' courses were particularly successful.

RESOLVED

That the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

6. A DRAFT CONSULTATIVE REPORT ON H&F COUNCIL'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO MAJOR INCIDENTS IN JUNE AND SEPTEMBER 2017

Peter Smith (Head of Policy and Strategy) introduced the draft report and noted that in 2017 there were two major incidents in and around Hammersmith & Fulham that required the authority to implement its emergency planning procedures – the fire at Grenfell Tower in June and an explosion on a tube train in Parsons Green in September. The report reviewed the Council's response to those incidents at both strategic and operational levels and considered the views of local businesses and

community organisations that participated in a 'hackathon' event convened by the Council to examine the views of partners.

The report identified action taken to improve the Council's readiness and response to major incidents and made recommendations for additional action for further improvements. The Committee was invited to discuss the report's findings and consider the draft recommendations.

The Chair thanked officers for producing the report and asked what the timescales for implementation of the recommendations would be. Peter Smith replied that some actions had already been taken and the others were going to Cabinet in March for approval.

A resident asked that the active role of TRAs be recognised regarding Grenfell and Parsons Green. Councillor Lisa Homan felt this was a valid point and noted that this had been recognised formally at Full Council following the Grenfell Tower fire. Kim Dero noted that the TRAs contributions, helping manage the donations process and reaching out to Grenfell families in hotels in the borough was greatly appreciated and recognised in the report. The Council had also organised a hackathon event in recognition of the important role that community organisations play. The Chair added that the Council's civic awards were coming up and a number of TRAs had been nominated.

Councillor Adam Connell, referring to 9.2 of the report, asked how the additional £110,000 was being used to increase the resilience of emergency planning team. Nick Austin (Lead Director for Environmental Services) replied that the money was being spent on additional staff and training for the team.

Councillor Donald Johnson thanked officers for a very thorough report. He highlighted the need for parking enforcement to discourage vans and other vehicles parking illegally and blocking the emergency services. He felt there should be more proactive management with the Council contacting businesses and communicating the risks.

Councillor Johnson also asked if any crisis communications specialists had been in touch with the Council. Kim Dero said the Council had commissioned specialists to work with key officers and councillors to help the organisation build resilience.

Councillor Adam Connell, noted the recent news story about an emergency missile alert in Hawaii, and asked if it was possible for the local authority to use automated text alerts in the borough. Kim Dero said that at the Hackathon, residents said social media (and apps like WhatsApp) were the best route to get information out to the community. The website would also be used to build resilience and community planning.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked about the Grenfell survivors still in hotels in the borough (5.4 of the report). Gerry Crowley (Property and Place Manager) assured the committee that the Council's outreach team were supporting the 27 families currently placed in the borough by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

(RBKC). He noted that most of those families were under offer for permanent accommodation from RBKC.

The Chair, Councillor Alan De'Ath, noted that when Parsons Green was evacuated and the roads were blocked off, he was allowed through the barrier unchallenged at around 11am in the morning. Kim Dero said she would feed that back to the Borough Commander.

Councillor Adam Connell welcomed the additional emergency planning training for staff mentioned in the report and asked if there would be large scale exercises to test the organisation's readiness. Nick Austin said the Council should be carrying out tests regularly. There would be service exercises taking place shortly and there was a London-wide exercise planned for March. H&F were also planning exercises involving the community, building on the ideas that came out of the Hackathon.

RESOLVED

That the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

7. GARAGES – UPDATE ON LETTINGS PERFORMANCE AND REFURBISHMENT

Valdrin Rexha (Parking Garages & Ancillary Services Manager) presented the report that provided an update on the impact of recent changes to the Council's lettings policy for garages and underground parking. The key changes were:

- To amend the garage licence to allow garages to be used for storage. The previous agreement allowed the storage of a car or a motorbike only.
- To increase charges for private borough residents from £23.08 to £35 per week and to allow lettings to non-borough customers at £50 per week.
- To agree a procurement strategy to refurbish 1,130 garages by 2021/22 with new contract awards to be approved by the Cabinet Member for Housing.
- To rent surplus parking spaces in secure underground car parks such as Walham Green Court to customers who don't live in the block.

Valdrin Rexha also noted that the service had updated the Council's website to allow you to book a garage online rather than having to send in a paper form.

The Chair commented that some residents had asked for additional utilities in the garages e.g. a water tap or electrical plug. Valdrin Rexha said the few electrical outlets had to be removed due to the burden of safety inspections and the difficulty of correctly determining charges but officers would explore the use of water-butts to provide water supply.

The Chair asked if there were rules on what people can and can't store in garages. Valdrin Rexha said there was a clear policy on what can't be stored and officers carried out spot checks. They took fire safety very seriously.

Councillor Donald Johnson asked if the garages were properly secured and well lit. Valdrin Rexha replied that most garages away from blocks had their own lights and there was CCTV in a lot of garage areas.

Councillor Wesley Harcourt asked where Woodlane was on the schedule of refurbishments as it was suffering from lime coming down from the concrete above. Valdrin Rexha said Woodlane was on next year's programme.

Councillor Wesley Harcourt recalled an issue at planning committee around the size of the units not being able to fit larger 4x4 vehicles. Valdrin Rexha said the garages typically measured 5.20m by 2.15m and some modern vehicles were simply too large to fit in them – however, all garages were suitable for storage.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked, with the increase in numbers of electric cars, if there were any plans to put charging points in the garages. Valdrin Rexha said there weren't plans to put them in garages but the Council was looking at putting charging points on estates in future. Councillor Wesley Harcourt noted that trials had already started with charging points installed in lamp posts in Westcroft Square.

Councillor Harry Phibbs commented that it would be a better use of space to knock down some of the garages sites and use them to build much needed new housing. Valdrin Rexha said the Council was carrying out feasibility studies for a number of standalone garages sites, but nothing was confirmed.

Councillor Harry Phibbs asked what the rent arrears position was for the garages. Valdrin Rexha said the arrears stood at £40,000. If people failed to pay the Council would either set up payment plan or take the garage back.

RESOLVED

That the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

8. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

The next meeting was scheduled for 19 March 2018. The work programme was noted.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.55 pm

Chair

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