

The Economy, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Thursday 16 July 2020

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Ann Rosenberg, Adronie Alford, Helen Rowbottom, Rowan Ree and Rory Vaughan (Chair)

Other Councillors: Councillors Lisa Homan and Andrew Jones

Officers: Gerry Crowley (Head of Allocations and Lettings), Glendine Shepherd (Assistant Director, Housing Management), Mark Meehan (Chief Housing Officer), Chris Reynolds (Programme Manager, The Economy Department), Jo Woodward (Chief Planning Officer), Karen Galey (Assistant Director, the Economy Department) and Charles Francis (Committee Services)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. ROLL-CALL AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Adronie Alford declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to Item 6 – The Economy – Recovery Overview and Lessons Learnt, as she had been a user of Adult Education Services in the past at the Macbeth Centre. As this did not give rise to a conflict of interest, Councillor Adronie Alford remained in the meeting and participated in the item.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Alford expressed concern that the agenda had not included an update on the work of the Arts Commission. The Chair explained he understood the importance of bringing a report on the Arts Commission to a Committee meeting. However, he felt that items relating to changes to the

Council's Housing Allocation Scheme and the Covid-19 pandemic needed to be considered as a priority.

The Chair confirmed that a report providing an update on the Arts Commission would be considered at the next meeting.

In relation to the actions of the previous meeting, Councillor Rowan Ree highlighted he had not received information on the following: planning fees, cost savings from the fire safety plus scheme and information on the small tap big change programme.

The Clerk confirmed this information would be re-circulated outside the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27th January were agreed as a correct record.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions received.

5. PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME

Gerry Crowley (Head of Allocations and Lettings), introduced the report which set out six proposed changes to the Council's Housing Allocation scheme. The Housing Allocation Scheme sets out the rules by which the Council allocates affordable rented accommodation. The purpose of these changes was to help ensure those residents with the greatest need were prioritised for the right housing solution.

Details were provided on the six proposed changes, which were:

1. To improve the way in which the Council allocates its housing stock and to ensure this is done in a fair and transparent way by introducing an online digital platform. The platform will enable the Council to advertise its housing stock to those on the housing register and allow applicants to play a more active role in their housing journey.
2. To take action, to ensure that those residents living with disabilities are prioritised for the right housing solution. Therefore, accommodation which has been adapted or is deemed adaptable by our Occupational Therapy service is prioritised for those that need it most.
3. To help more young adults leaving care with the best possible start as they transform to adulthood, by increasing their priority award to Band

1 whilst increasing the annual quota for Children Leaving Care from 30 to 40 housing lets.

4. To avoid and reduce the number of households in expensive temporary accommodation, officers recommend a change to the policy which will allow those homeless households that work with our housing prevention service and have their homelessness successfully prevented by accepting accommodation in the private rented sector, to remain on the housing register.
5. To qualify to join the Council's housing register, applicants are required to meet the local residency criteria, i.e. resident in the borough for 5 of the last 7 years. So young people with SEN are not disadvantaged, it is proposed to change the policy, to ensure that time spent outside the borough to access SEN services will be disregarded, this will ensure that young people with special education needs are not disadvantaged as they transition to adulthood.
6. To propose that Local Lettings Plans are automatically implemented for all new housing developments consisting of five or more social housing units. The lettings plans will prioritise qualified local residents living on the effected estate or the immediate locality before opening up to the rest of the housing register

The Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive overview and invited questions from the Committee.

In relation to the first proposed change, Councillor Adronie Alford explained she was worried about residents having the necessary access to go online and secondly, she asked, what actions were officers taking to manage the expectations of those residents applying online for housing. In response, Gerry Crowley explained that although all the fine detail was still a work in progress, residents would be able to use computers at a variety of municipal buildings, and an accessibility programme would be also rolled out in parallel (to new Housing Allocation Scheme). He explained that arrangements would be made to ensure those residents without internet access were not excluded. In terms of managing expectations, Gerry confirmed that, presently, properties / choice were not overly visible and the intention was to create a bespoke online product which could advertise properties, the outcomes of properties and create data sets which would be able to inform residents where their best opportunities for housing lay.

Commenting further, Councillor Lisa Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing, explained that a new bespoke online platform would bring far greater transparency and one of the greatest benefits would be allowing residents to consider properties without having to visit them in person and so immediate housing options could be discounted if they were not suitable. It was noted

that the Council had used the Locata system in the past, but this had become clunky and dysfunctional which was one of the reasons why it was discarded.

Councillor Adronie Alford reiterated the points which had been made about Locata and explained she was worried there was a possibility that the new online platform might follow the same path. In response, Gerry Crowley explained that officers were very mindful the issues which had beset Locata in 2013 and lessons had been learnt.

Councillor Rowan Ree commended the recommendations within the report and the proposal to develop a new online platform. He highlighted it was important to involve residents throughout the transition to a new system. Noting the 5 main suppliers, Councillor Rowan Ree asked whether officers had liaised with other Councils to learn from their experiences. Gerry Crowley explained that officers needed a 'green light' before they could proceed further, but confirmed that the Council had spoken to other Authorities. The Committee noted the 5 main suppliers were already on the Council's procurement framework, so it would be relatively easy for them to be invited to demonstrate their systems, and officers had already drawn up the Council's specification.

Asking a supplementary question, Councillor Rowan Ree noted recommendation two sought to improve access to those in the greatest need and he asked what provision was being made for members of the armed forces (currently serving or veterans). He explained he was aware of the exemptions to the residency test for veterans and asked officers to comment further. In response, Gerry Crowley explained that the Council had signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant, and, in terms of the allocations policy, the residency test did not apply to the Armed Forces. Additional priority was also given to the Armed Forces. Gerry confirmed that new Government Guidance had been issued and the Council was in the process of responding to this. In addition, the Council was currently looking at introducing a Champion for the Armed Forces on Housing's front-line team.

Action: That Gerry Crowley provide the Committee with a copy of the Council's proposed response to the new Government Guidance on Housing Allocation for the Armed Forces.

Councillor Helen Rowbottom accepted that residents would be able to use terminals in municipal buildings to access the online platform, but thought that the Council needed to be more proactive in relation to access, especially during the Covid period. She asked whether the new online platform would have the ability to save search preferences and also send / generate text messages to those on the housing register. In response, Gerry Crowley confirmed that as the new online platform was bespoke, there would be an ability to build in functionality around automation, texting, emailing, and some of the features which had already been considered included automatic notifications for particular cohorts such as disabled families waiting on adapted properties.

Providing assurance, Mark Meehan, Chief Housing Officer, commented he had successfully introduced online platforms at two other Local Authorities and a thorough consultation with residents would be undertaken to help identify any groups which might be excluded from the online process. In terms of transparency, the online platform would also enable residents to see what types of property became available and where these were within the borough. Making a final point, Mark Meehan explained that the new Armed Forces guidance was issued on the CLGF website last week and all Committee members would be provided with an internet link to this. He also confirmed that the Council had a close working relationship with the Oswald Stoll Foundation, based in Fulham

Councillor Lisa Homan confirmed that, as well as these work streams to improve digital inclusion, the Council would be working closely with the Citizen's Advice Bureau's digital champions. It was noted that just over a week ago, 35 residents attended the Housing Reps Forum (which significantly exceeded previous attendance).

The Chair reiterated there would be a public consultation about digital exclusion and, if the right system was chosen, this would benefit everyone. More information, rather than less was best, and it was likely that this would change people's behaviour (in terms of housing allocation applications). It was noted that the online platform could not alter the housing stock the Council held, but the increased transparency would assist in managing residents' expectations. The Chair confirmed he endorsed the six recommendations in the report, but also highlighted the important topic of homelessness within the Private Rented Sector that had not been raised so far. The Chair commented that recommendation four was vital, as this addressed residents' concerns that, if they accepted accommodation in the Private Rented Sector, then they would not lose their place on the Housing Register.

The Chair asked how the offer for young adults leaving care would change with the proposals (made in the report) and what assistance would they receive moving to a more independent setting. In response, Gerry Crowley confirmed that before any young adult left care, there was a full assessment process, as well as a leaving care panel that would convene to consider a priority matrix to assess whether the young adult was ready to move. An assessment would also be made about what types of support were required and Housing worked closely with Children's Services to ensure an appropriate tenancy was offered.

The Chair asked what the time frame was for the proposals to be considered at Cabinet and, subject to approval, when the recommendations might be implemented. In response, Gerry Crowley explained he was unsure of a Cabinet date at this stage, but in terms of the ICT platform roll-out, he confirmed it would take at least six months.

RESOLVED

That the Committee endorsed the six recommendations within report.

6. THE ECONOMY - RECOVERY OVERVIEW & LESSONS LEARNT

Mark Meehan (Chief Housing Officer), provided a brief introduction. He explained that Chris Reynolds, (Programme Manager, The Economy Department), would provide the Committee with a short slide presentation which covered those measures taken by the Economy to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on the department during the initial 'response' phase, those lessons learnt to date, and those plans currently being implemented by services during the transition from response to 'recovery' phase.

Chris Reynolds explained that in June 2020, the Economy Department undertook its own 'lessons learnt exercise' where services were asked to consider 'what we've learnt from the crisis, have changed and want to keep, stopped and can let go, need to return to in some form and need re-imagining. All these findings were recorded in a 'lessons learnt log'.

Chris Reynolds explained that the consistencies observed across the department included:

- That Economy Department services were robust and had adapted quickly to a more solution-based and risk-focused approach to service delivery.
- That The Economy Department had a committed workforce that had adapted quickly to the situation and was focused on delivering services in new ways.
- That the workforce transition to remote working had been facilitated by the technology systems in place which had been functioning well.
- That borough residents had proven to be amazingly resilient but needed further support to develop IT capabilities and the confidence to adapt to new ways of working.

The presentation provided details on a series of key changes and developments across the constituent departments within The Economy Department and some of the key service headlines were as follows:

- **Homelessness services** have continued to improve the welfare of rough sleepers and enhance Partnerships with the voluntary sector, businesses and statutory agencies. Emergency accommodation has been delivered to over 275 rough sleepers and people at risk of rough sleeping at pace, and into good quality emergency accommodation. 52 people accommodated without recourse to public funds.
- **Growth & Planning services** have evidenced that they can be delivered almost entirely remotely, with decisions continuing to be

made to enable development/regen in the borough. The Development Team has delivered positive/alternative methods of consulting with residents and stakeholders, trialling live/online consultations, as well as innovative new technics, such as 'fly-throughs' (virtual/online journeys) of developments.

- **Neighbourhood services** have continued to improve resident welfare and minimise the impacts to Sheltered Housing residents. The team have increased the number of phone lines open to residents to compensate for reception closures and remote working, and supported residents by carrying out a schedule of telephone welfare checks and delivering regular service update newsletters to sheltered residents. The team are in the process of carrying out phone surveys with all 950 Sheltered residents to address the current gap in direct customer feedback about our service.
- **Economic Developments Enterprise Team** introduced a three-month rent holiday to commercial tenants and market traders. Employment Brokerage support for residents and employers is now online and phone based, and the team continues to share jobs and apprenticeship opportunities with VCS partners, directly referring residents to vacancies.
- **Adult Learning Services (ALSS)** have continued to deliver 58% of courses online during the crisis.

Commenting on the presentation, Councillor Andrew Jones, Cabinet Member for The Economy, underlined the importance of the lessons learnt log (and the data that still needed analysis) and thanked officers within the Economy and Housing Teams for all their hard work. In particular, that officers had succeeded in distributing several waves of funding, engaged with hundreds of businesses, shown innovation in online working and kept enterprise clubs and almost 60% of adult education provision going during the lockdown period.

In relation to Sheltered Housing provision, Councillor Lisa Homan confirmed that during the lock down period, the Council conducted a deep clean of all its sheltered housing and also regularly cleaned communal areas which ensured there were no outbreaks. Cllr Homan expressed her thanks to the Pinnacle caretakers and staff who undertook the cleaning. With regards to compliance work (such as fire safety and electrical testing), it was noted that the lockdown had created a small backlog, but this was being actively addressed and had reduced significantly. Councillor Homan expressed her thanks to all Housing staff for their commitment and attendance throughout the lockdown period and the various workstreams which had continued.

Councillor Helen Rowbottom noted that the different departments had been working differently and it was interesting to see which facets could be retained in future working (such as high levels of engagement with residents). Asking a supplementary question, she asked how the Council intended to respond the activities which had taken place with future proofing, especially within the

Economy Department and how buildings and space might be used differently in the borough / the implications this would have on both private and public property.

In response, Mark Meehan commented that staff had been extremely resilient and productive but had also been working extremely long hours. Therefore, it had been important during the lockdown period in particular, that senior leadership kept in regular contact with the workforce and that mental health and well-being levels were monitored. It was noted that 80% of both the Economy and Housing workforces had been working from home and there had been no adverse service impacts.

Joanne Woodward, Chief Planning Officer, confirmed that Planning had investigated how management levels, case officers, enforcement and technical support officers were working. Moving forwards, the Planning Service recognised that collaboration was key, especially with regards to large cases where input from colleagues across a variety of disciplines was important. A key message was that it was now not about working from home, but working from anywhere. It was important that colleagues got together when possible. Site visits and planning enforcement activities had posed a series of different challenges during the lockdown period but the service had been ably assisted by residents which had monitored activity within their local communities.

Karen Galey, (Assistant Director, The Economy), echoed the previous sentiments and confirmed that while some large-scale meetings had been held successfully online, residents' feedback had suggested that face to face meetings remained important. Although ensuring 60% of the Adult Learning Service could be delivered online, this had brought about a number of other challenges which needed to be addressed, most notably the risk of social isolation and ensuring there was improved engagement in the future was important.

Councillor Helen Rowbottom explained that she had wondered whether staff had enjoyed a different pace or a flexed role during the lockdown period. Asking a supplementary question, she enquired whether there might be an opportunity to look at the Oxford Economics Report and in particular, the sectors the Council would need to develop to future proof the economy in Hammersmith and Fulham at a future Policy and Accountability Committee meeting.

In relation to engagement with local businesses, Councillor Rowan Ree asked officers about the percentage of businesses the Council had spoken to during the lockdown period and whether the Council had contacted businesses or vice versa. In response, Karen Galey explained that at the start of the lockdown a comprehensive communications campaign was launched, as a considerable amount of information needed to be disseminated to businesses in the Borough. It was noted that the Borough was already well networked, but the Council also set up weekly meetings with all the business champions in the borough, which were Chaired by Councillor Guy Vincent. Overall, Karen Galey confirmed it was difficult to gauge what the impact on businesses had

been, however, it was encouraging that there were a number of resilient sectors within the economy such as science, digital and tech (tempered by the reliance on hospitality, retail and creative which had been badly affected).

Councillor Rowan Ree asked about the communications the Council had undertaken with the larger employers in the borough, including how many employees were external to the borough and would normally commute in. In response, Karen Galey explained the Economy Department had been advising all businesses about safely reopening, including the reintroduction of staff to the workplace. Karen Galey explained that one of the largest challenges for the borough, was the staff for the businesses tended to reside outside the borough and so were reliant on public transport (where there was little confidence at present).

Returning to Councillor Helen Rowbottom's previous point about using space differently, Karen Galey explained that businesses, as well as the Council, would be looking at ways to consolidate space and the impact would be felt across the borough (and have an impact on the local economy and high street). Karen Galey confirmed, this was where the 'shop local, shop safe' campaign had been introduced to safeguard the resilience in the local economy.

Councillor Rowan Ree noted the Council had been issuing various guidance to businesses, and he asked what the levels of compliance had been like. In response, Karen Galey conformed that overall the levels of compliance had been good, notwithstanding the extra resources which had been used in some areas, such as keeping the market open in North End Road (so that residents could redeem their rose vouchers).

Councillor Rowan Ree noted the report mentioned the numbers of planning applications had decreased but also that the Planning Department were looking at new ways of generating further income and asked for further details on this. In response, Joanne Woodward conformed that the number of household applications had declined by 30% between April and June 2020. However, in the last few weeks, there had been a significant recovery and now householder applications were very close to pre-Covid levels. She confirmed that there was very little change in the numbers of major applications and indeed developers had shown a willingness to press forward with larger schemes during this period. In terms of innovation, Joanne Woodward confirmed that the Planning Department had used digital Design Review Panels to raise revenue and also to offer a better service. With regards to raising revenue, it was noted the Council could not alter the fees and charges for householder developments, but was in a position to increase its charges for larger schemes through mechanisms like Planning Performance Agreements and pre-application fees. It was noted that fees were regularly benchmarked across London, but offering improved and an enhanced digital service was a growth area.

Councillor Adronie Alford commended the work of sheltered housing staff. Councillor Adronie Alford asked a series of questions which were: whether deep cleans in sheltered housing would be maintained, whether or not the

Macbeth Centre would ever re-open for practical classes, and finally, she expressed concern at the lack of social distancing she had observed on the North End Road (given the Council's enforcement role).

In response, Karen Galey explained that officers would be conducting a review of the Macbeth Centre to ensure it was safe to re-open and also looking at its digital offer, but the intention was to re-open the centre. Karen Galey also confirmed that stewards were patrolling the North End Road and the Council was aware that enforcing social distancing remained an ongoing challenge. Glendine Shepherd, (Assistant Director for Housing Management) confirmed that a new robust cleaning schedule had been put in place with Pinnacle Cleaning. Although this would not be deep cleans, this would be additional cleaning, especially of communal areas. Previously, these areas had been cleaned every several days and now they would be cleaned twice a day for the duration of the pandemic.

Councillor Adronie Alford thanked officers for their responses, but remained concerned about how practical classes could be delivered. In response, Karen Galey explained that risk assessments were currently ongoing for the Macbeth Centre and when it was safe to open, the intention was to re-open the centre in September 2020.

The Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive report and made a series of points which officers were asked to respond to.

Firstly, the Chair was pleased to see the business continuity planning which had been done (with ratings 1 to 4) and in a lot of key functions, many were operating at level 2 and then moved to level 1 (an equivalent pre-Covid service) after 6 April 2020, which was testament to the hard work of officers. Secondly, he thanked officers and Councillor Guy Vincent in their roles supporting the Business aspects, especially in disseminating the emergency grant funding to local businesses and he asked for further details on this. And finally, the Chair praised the work which had been done on rough sleeping and assisting residents to access temporary / emergency accommodation and he asked for further information on this, and, in particular, the work which was being done to ensure that people did not return to rough sleeping.

Responding on business continuity, Karen Galey explained that the government had provided the borough with over £40 million of grants. The majority of this was used to provide rates and rent relief for businesses (especially those in hospitality and retail which were particularly badly affected) and it was a challenge to ensure this was disseminated as quickly and efficiently as possible (with the right money going to the right people). Karen Galey also provided details of how the discretionary 5% top up grants were used to help those businesses which had not received funding from any other sources, as well as the rent holiday and payment plans which had been developed to help commercial businesses. Details were provided on the London Growth Hub and the one to one advisor support that was provided to businesses including the setup of a business hotline.

With regards to rough sleeping, Glendine Shepherd, Assistant Director for Housing Management, confirmed the Council responded to the government policy of 'everyone in' and had accommodated over 275 rough sleepers (including rough sleepers, those using night shelters and those at risk of becoming rough sleepers) to ensure there were no rough sleepers in Hammersmith and Fulham. At present, officers were developing robust pathways for individuals, so nobody returned to the streets and so far, individual solutions had been found for approximately 120 to 130 persons. Glendine Shepherd confirmed the Council was working in partnership with St Mungo's to assist residents sustain their tenancies in the future.

Mark Meehan, Chief Housing Officer, confirmed the Council was very quick to respond to the government's 'Everyone In' campaign and could not have achieved this success without its partners. It was noted that there had been no deaths (to date) from the cohort of 283 rough sleepers and the Housing Department was awaiting further funding announcements from the government in the near future.

Adding further comments, Councillor Lisa Homan explained that as Cabinet Member for Housing, she had received a number of referrals about people who were perceived to be homeless at the onset of the pandemic and there had been a fantastic response from officers and the voluntary sector to these requests.

The Chair noted some of the general themes which had emerged during the pandemic, not least the emphasis on flexible working and working from home. He asked how new ways of working was going to be taken forward corporately, as this would be a sea change (far less face to face meetings) in the way in which the Council delivered services in the future (such as the possible loss of area housing offices).

In response to the Housing points, Glendine Shepherd confirmed that Housing officers were now conducting far more visits to residents on the estates (with the PPE), rather than residents visiting Council buildings. There were also additional telephone lines, so a variety of services were more accessible. She also confirmed that corporately, the Recovery Board was actively investigating new ways of working across the Council.

At the invitation of the Chair, Adriaan van Zyl, Chairman of the Housing Representatives Forum, noted the new ways of working which had been previously discussed, but highlighted it was essential that Housing officers were available to residents in person to assist them. In response, Mark Meehan confirmed that going forwards, there would be mixed economy of staff working from home but also a proportion of staff conducting visits to residents, so hopefully staff would become more visible on the estates. No decision had been taken about closing any of the area housing offices and what the lock down period had illustrated was that it was possible for officers to work anywhere using portable ICT such as phones, tablets and laptops.

Summing up the discussions, the Chair thanked officers and senior Councillors for all their efforts during the lockdown period, given the large

amount of extra work which had been done by the Housing and Business Departments of the Council. The Chair welcomed the flexible working approach (which had worked well) and confirmed the Committee would appreciate looking at the continued recovery phase for the Economy and Housing Departments at a future meeting.

RESOLVED

That the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

7. WORK PROGRAMMING

The Chair introduced the item and suggested the Committee could be provided with an update on the work of the Arts Commission and Upstream to the next meeting.

Meeting started: 6:30 pm
Meeting ended: 8:21 pm

Chairman

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