

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Monday 18 July 2022

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Jacolyn Daly (Chair), Paul Alexander, Asif Siddique (joined remotely) and Adronie Alford (joined remotely)

Other Councillors

Councillors Nikos Souslous and Omid Miri

Guests

Michael Angus (Barons Court Project)

Stewart Proudley (St Mungos)

Chris Francis (The Upper Room)

Alyssa Muck (BEAM)

Mark Dronfield (Turning Point)

Stephen Tooby (Thames Reach)

Officers

Mark Meehan (Chief Housing Officer)

Richard Buckley (Assistant Director, Residents and Building Safety)

Lucy Baker (Prevention and Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager)

Simone Melia (Head of Homelessness Prevention)

Gerry Crowley (Head of Allocations and Lettings)

Nicky Pooni (Property and Place Manager)

David Abbott (Head of Governance)

NOTE: The meeting was not quorate as some members attended remotely, so it was held as an informal briefing.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors David Morton, Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness), and Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 January 2022 were noted.

4. **COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE (TO NOTE)**

The Committee noted the terms of reference.

Change of agenda order

The Chair explained that Item 6 would take priority on the agenda to allow officers to attend another meeting following their briefing to the Committee.

5. **HOUSING REPAIRS BRIEFING**

Mark Meehan (Chief Housing Officer) and Richard Buckley (Assistant Director, Residents and Building Safety) gave a short briefing to the Committee on the state of the housing repairs service. Mark Meehan noted that a detailed report on repairs was planned for the November meeting, including an update on the capital programme, the housing pipeline, and plans to spend £600m to improve housing in the borough.

ACTION: Mark Meehan

Councillor Paul Alexander asked how much compensation the Council had paid out for delayed repairs so far. Mark Meehan said £154,000 had been paid out this year.

Councillor Adronie Alford was concerned about the performance of contractors and repeated service failings. She asked how long it would take to improve the situation. Mark Meehan said the service should be in a steady state by September and if it wasn't, officers would reconsider the delivery model.

6. **ROUGH SLEEPING, HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION**

The Chair introduced the item and the officers and guests in attendance.

Officers attending from the Council:

- Lucy Baker (Prevention and Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager)
- Simone Melia (Head of Homelessness Prevention)
- Gerry Crowley (Head of Allocations and Lettings)
- Nicky Pooni (Property and Place Manager)

Guest attending from third sector organisations in the borough:

- Michael Angus (Barons Court Project)
- Stewart Proudley (St Mungos)

- Chris Francis (The Upper Room)
- Alyssa Muck (BEAM)
- Mark Dronfield (Turning Point)
- Stephen Tooby (Thames Reach)

The Chair noted that the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) had been activated in the borough in recent days to provide shelter for people sleeping rough when there was an increased risk of death due to the weather. She thanked officers in the Street Outreach team and all others involved in facilitating it.

Officers presented the report which gave an update on rough sleeping, homelessness prevention, temporary accommodation, and the private rented sector.

The Chair asked officers how the Council communicated what support was available to those at risk of homelessness. Simone Melia (Head of Homelessness Prevention) said information was available on the Council's website and was disseminated to partners. There was a duty for public agencies (job centres, hospitals, prisons etc.) to refer people at risk to the Council. Gerry Crowley (Head of Allocations and Lettings) added that officers were also working with Housing Associations to develop referral protocols. Alyssa Muck said BEAM did prevention work – they identified people at risk of homelessness and provided services for them as quickly as possible.

Simone Melia said the Council didn't record the 'pre-prevention' work that took place before the 56-day relief duty period officially started. She said officers did a lot of work in that period including providing support and helping people into work or training, but it wasn't recorded.

The Chair asked what programmes were available to provide social, financial, and digital inclusion to people. Stewart Proudley (St Mungos) said IT equipment was available and there were training courses and online learning opportunities, but uptake was relatively low. Many of the people affected didn't own laptops or smart phones. He added that the online nature of so many services was a barrier for people. Stewart Proudley commented that the goal at St Mungos was not just housing people in the short-term but putting them on a pathway out of homelessness – which often meant some form of drug or alcohol treatment. He felt there needed to be an integrated offer with services provided at the right phases.

The Chair asked if appropriate pathways were available. Officers said there were several pathways including supported accommodation, Housing First, and social housing.

Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health) agreed that digital inclusion was an important factor. She noted that was why the Council was developing co-located services, so people were there to explain how to use the services available to them.

Councillor Paul Alexander, in reference to paragraph 27 of the report, said he supported the Council's approach to avoiding the use of bed and breakfast

accommodation for families. He asked how many other people were in bed and breakfasts at present. Gerry Crowley said the Council did work with a small number of providers that met the Council's standards. Out of 1100 households in temporary accommodation, 100 were in bed and breakfasts and they were only used for single households.

Councillor Asif Siddique noted that around half of rough sleepers in the borough were migrants and asked housing was provided to that group and whether they were put through immigration processes as a condition of support. Lucy Baker (Prevention and Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager) said officers had to look at each case individually as eligibility was very complicated. They may be EU nationals who had pre-settled status but were not in receipt of benefits, some avoided statutory services because they were afraid of the Home Office, others had the right to be in country but not to public funds. Across West London Councils had jointly commissioned specialist immigration advice and had a fast-track process for EU settled status. She noted that officers would exhaust all options with any rough sleepers they found. If they were unable to assist, they would advise them of what was available in the third sector or if there was a supported way to return to their home country.

Councillor Siddique asked what support the Law Enforcement Team (LET) provided. He also asked if it was correct that numbers of rough sleepers were increasing. Lucy Baker said homelessness officers worked closely with the LET team. They had a monthly street population group looking at cases causing detriment to the local community. For example, Shepherds Bush Green was an area of concern as it attracted a range of groups including rough sleepers, people drinking, people sleeping outside, and a wider street population. Support was coordinated between the LET, the Police, and Community Safety officers. She added that while there were large groups of people on the Green, only two had been identified as rough sleepers.

Councillor Siddique asked what officers were doing to attract landlords to provide housing. Nicky Pooni (Property and Place Manager) said there was a daily outreach programme to attract landlords through local estate agents and the internet to encourage them to work with the Council. They also worked in partnership with Housing Associations and held regular meetings to ensure they were meeting demand.

Michael Angus said the Barons Court Project saw lots of people with no recourse to public funds and few other options for support. He said he was especially concerned about the 'nearly homeless' as the cost-of-living crisis had the potential to tip lots of people into homelessness. He recalled a recent conversation with someone who couldn't afford to cook or even keep the fridge on. Having somewhere to live was not much comfort if you couldn't afford to use any of the amenities.

The Chair asked if the Council was prepared for the cost-of-living crisis to worsen. Gerry Crowley said the Council had managed to meet demand to this point. They had an efficient property procurement team and good relationships with landlords. He said he was confident they could meet demand.

Councillor Omid Miri asked if Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were the main source of funding for that provision. Simone Melia said the DHP often filled the gap between benefits and housing costs and allowed the Council to either keep people where they were or move them into accommodation. She noted that the benefits team worked very well with Homelessness Prevention which wasn't the case in many other authorities.

Councillor Miri asked if the majority of funding was from Government grants or raised by the Council. Simone Melia said the bulk was from Government, but some came from other sources, including a Council top up.

The Chair asked if more could be done to maximise the income of people at risk of homelessness. Gerry Crowley said officers carried out an assessment of the household and individual. They looked to see whether they were entitled to benefits they weren't aware of.

The Chair asked if Housing Associations were giving the same advice. Gerry Crowley said they tended to be very astute about affordability assessments. The Chair suggested a piece of work on income maximisation and financial inclusion.

ACTION: David Abbott

The Chair asked officers who was leading the Council's response on the cost-of-living crisis. Dr Nicola Lang said Lisa Redfern (Strategic Director for Social Care) was the lead officer.

The Chair asked the third sector representatives what else could be done to support their work. Stewart Proudley from St Mungos highlighted their tap to donate scheme. He said it was a good way to engage and help people. They also provided people with information to give them the confidence to interact with people sleeping rough.

Alyssa Muck from BEAM said they encouraged members of the public to donate to remove financial barriers. It helped build confidence and showed people where their money was going. BEAM was looking to widen its footprint there, especially in the prevention space.

Members discussed the situation on Shepherd's Bush Green. It was noted that the Green had been known for a long time across London as a place to congregate during the summer months. The situation made it very hard to work with local rough sleepers. The Chair asked Stewart Proudley if there was an opportunity to run activities at the St Mungos hostels for the street populations around Shepherd's Bush Green. He said they had already started a pilot. Members requested a review of the first 6 months of the collaboration pilot began in November.

ACTION: Simone Melia / Stewart Proudley

Councillor Siddique asked if the LET team could work with housing officer and the third sector to direct people to local resources. Lucy Baker said housing officers worked closely with the LET team and shared intelligence. The LET team also made StreetLink referrals or called into the housing team directly.

Councillor Siddique asked if the third sector organisations had plans to support people through the ongoing cost of living crisis. The Barons Court project were looking to open a second winter centre to provide warm spaces for people in addition to food and some essentials. Organisers were collecting items and looking for premises in preparation. Funds were in place to run from November to March serving around 50 people per day.

The Chair summed up the discussion and thanked everyone who participated.

RESOLVED

1. The Chair requested a piece of work on income maximation and financial inclusion to be scheduled for a future meeting.
2. Members requested a review of the first 6 months of the St Mungos collaboration pilot for the November meeting.

7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates scheduled for future meetings:

- 14 November 2022
- 23 January 2023
- 20 March 2023

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 9.23 pm

Chair:

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