

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Tuesday 25 July 2023

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Jacolyn Daly (Chair), Paul Alexander, Sally Taylor and Adronie Alford

Other Councillors: Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing) and Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) (attended remotely)

Guests:

Troy Francis (Corporate Director of Operations, Southern Housing)
Hardeep Majhail (Head of Region (London), Southern Housing)
Adam Bulewski (St Mungo's United Rep)
Martin Thirlaway (Local resident)

Officers:

Sukvinder Kalsi (Strategic Director of Finance) (attended remotely)
Richard Shwe (Director of Housing)
Ed Shaylor (Assistant Director of Housing Standards)
John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs)
Roy Morgan (Assistant Director of Housing Management)
Alice Hainsworth (Head of Homelessness Prevention and Assessment)
Lucy Baker (Prevention and Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager)
Sam Cunningham (Housing Programme Manager)
Debbie Yau (Committee Coordinator)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Asif Siddique.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

Matters Arising

The Chair referred to the "Officer responses to actions required arising from the meeting on 20 March 2023" tabled at the meeting and said the document would be attached to the minutes.

NOTE: The Officer responses is attached as Appendix 1

Councillor Adronie Alford raised an amendment to the first sentence of the fifth paragraph under item 4 to read as "Councillor Alford said the Committee should review the Housing Revenue Account on a regular basis to see if some savings could be identified".

Councillor Alford asked about the income and deficit of the Housing Revenue Account for the final quarter of 2022/23 and the first quarter of 2023/24. In response, Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) said the final figures would be published in the coming September.

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2023 were agreed to be an accurate record.

4. ROUGH SLEEPERS AND HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

Alice Hainsworth (Head of Homelessness Prevention and Assessment) presented the report which provided a high-level summary for the Committee on rough sleeping and homelessness. She highlighted the Housing First model, first introduced in the United States some 8 to 9 years ago, that had proven to be the most sustainable method of ensuring former rough sleepers did not return to the street. She noted that a range of services were in place to help prevent rough sleeping and support people to recover and move away from the streets for good. She informed the Committee that at any one time, the number of rough sleepers in the Borough was approximately 5 to 7 people which was low for an inner-London Borough.

Councillor Sally Taylor referred to the success of the work to improve rough sleeping at Shepherds Bush Green last year and asked if similar activities would be held around there this year.

Lucy Baker (Prevention and Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager) noted that unlike last summer when more people slept out on the Green due to the exceptionally hot weather, only one person was found sleeping out on Shepherds Bush Green in July this year. The Homelessness Prevention and Assessment team would continue tackling rough sleeping through a range of support options and work with the Council's enforcement team in a multi-disciplinary way. The team attended monthly meetings with the Shepherd's Bush Green Action Forum, discussing matters relating to the street population and anti-social behaviour in partnership with local residents and the police.

Councillor Adronie Alford asked about the reasons for rough sleeping and the potential for relapsing. Roy Morgan (Assistant Director of Housing Management) noted that it was rare for people who had stayed in temporary accommodation to be referred to the service again. Officers said rough sleepers often faced family or personal challenges – or had fallen victim to external circumstances like being evicted by their landlord.

Noting that the number of households living in temporary accommodation in England had recently hit a 25-year high, the Chair expressed concern about the impact to the Council and its ability to respond to the increasing demand. Roy Morgan said so far in H&F there was only a small increase in the number of people arriving at the front door, however he agreed that more substantial increases in the number of rough sleepers would have an impact on the Council's budget and agreed to provide an update on the numbers at the next meeting.

ACTION: Roy Morgan

Question from the floor

Adam Bulewski (St Mungo's United Rep) addressed the Committee and referred to recent industrial action at St Mungo's (a homelessness charity) that had taken place due to pay disputes. He highlighted the pay disparity between the senior management and frontline workers and said it had made it difficult to retain experienced staff. St Mungo's had a contract with the Council to provide support for homeless people in H&F so he hoped the Committee could look into the matter and intervene.

Councillor Paul Alexander thanked Adam Bulewski for bringing up the matter and said the Committee would look at this more closely as the industrial strike might affect the Council's delivery of homelessness prevention services.

Richard Shwe said he understood the issue and undertook to discuss the matter with Adam Bulewski further outside the meeting.

ACTION: Richard Shwe

Summing up, the Chair reiterated her request for the team to report on the impact of an increasing number of homeless households and placements into temporary accommodation on the Council's budget at the next meeting.

ACTION: Roy Morgan

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

5. PRIVATE AND SOCIAL HOUSING STANDARDS

Troy Francis (Corporate Director of Operations, Southern Housing) briefed members on the Council's partnership with Southern Housing which was a new housing association formed in December 2022 by a merge between Optivo and Southern Housing Group. He then outlined its vision, mission, and strategic objectives for 2023-26. With a turnover of £592m, Southern Housing currently owned or managed 77,000 homes in England, among them 30,000 were in London. It put residents at the heart of its services, as exemplified by the Resident Governance structure and its support to vulnerable residents. Troy Francis highlighted the patchless and patch models specifically designated for H&F with the former offering more flexible one-stop service while the latter allowed more integration. He went through the profile of its 1,147 homes in H&F and its local priorities.

NOTE: Southern Housing's presentation is attached as Appendix 2

Councillor Adronie Alford asked about the outcome of their work on damp and mould. Troy Francis advised that damp and mould was one of the challenges they faced in terms of both services and contractors and said they needed to grip the issue and deliver results. In response to Councillor Alford's question about the scheme of independent living for old residents, Troy Francis said that the scheme had not attracted the expected number of applicants. He considered that it was necessary for the Council to strike the right balance and commission different forms of housing to respond to local need. Replying to Councillor Alford's further enquiry, Troy Francis said that the scheme managers would conduct on-site visits about 3 to 4 times a week.

The Chair asked about the subletting situation among Southern Housing leaseholders. Troy Francis noted that they had received information through various channels about leaseholders subletting properties without notifying Southern Housing. Hardeep Majhail (Head of Region (London), Southern Housing) added that they were monitoring the situation and made visits to the properties concerned.

Private Housing – Licensing and Enforcement

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) explained that Ed Shaylor (Assistant Director of Housing Standards) reported directly to the Strategic Director of Environment and acted as a critical friend to the Director of Housing to ensure that proper checks and balances were in place to monitor the work of the Council as a landlord.

Ed Shaylor noted that deficiencies in low quality housing could be dealt with by the Council using property licensing and statutory enforcement powers. He discussed the new licensing schemes approved for implementation from June 2022, which included additional licensing for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) outside the scope of mandatory HMO licensing, and selective licensing for rented dwellings in 24 specified streets. He also outlined the enforcement actions taken by the Council against those committing housing offences.

Addressing the Chair's question, Ed Shaylor noted that H&F had approximately 5,000 residential leasehold properties of which over 2,000 were rented out to tenants and that leaseholders were required to notify the landlord for subletting the property. Sometimes tenants would approach the Council for assistance because of landlords' inaction. The Council would mediate between the parties and allow the landlords an opportunity to fix the problem. Those landlords who breached the regulations could face enforcement action by the Council.

On the Chair's further enquiry about rogue landlords, Ed Shaylor referred to the difficulties of dealing some landlord business models and it was not an easy task to track down who the landlord or property owner was.

NOTE: Additional information on rogue landlords is attached as Appendix 3

Councillor Alford referred to properties being subdivided and having unsafe staircases and cramped conditions - with cookers sitting next to beds, for example. She raised concerns that prosecutions and enforcement action did not seem to be taking place against the owners.

Ed Shaylor said that the Council had taken 20 successful prosecutions in the last 9 years and now imposed financial penalties for managing an HMO without a licence or breaching HMO regulations up to £30,000 which was often higher than the fines set in the Magistrate Court.

The Chair was concerned about maintaining housing standards across the borough as she had observed a number of unfit premises. Ed Shaylor said all new built properties should be developed according to national housing standards. However, converted properties presented problems. Officers assessed the condition of a range of rented properties and follow-up action would be taken if any of them had space or overcrowding issues.

Councillor Sally Taylor asked how residents could report overcrowding issues anonymously. Ed Shaylor said whistleblowers could contact officers through the Council's website or email the housing teams responsible for managing Council housing blocks. Richard Shwe added that the website would soon be revamped to incorporate more joined-up initiatives with the Environment Department.

Councillor Frances Umeh said the Council was committed to raising housing standards for residents in the borough and to hold landlords to account. She appreciated the work of the housing team and the Committee in highlighting the issue of good housing standards for residents.

Councillor Paul Alexander noted that some Council or Housing Association tenants had seen major repair issues take many months to resolve. He was keen to see a partnership approach going forward to identify the causes and fix issues far quicker. Richard Shwe assured members that the team had put new processes and procedures in place to raise standards and resolve issues faster.

Question from the floor

Adam Bulewski (St Mungo's United Rep) said being a member of the Renters' Union, he had witnessed many changes for property renting in the last 15 years and believed the situation would get even worse in the next 10 years. Richard Shwe pointed out that housing had been a national crisis for decades. Local authorities had sought to improve the situation locally, for example, by turning around voids faster, putting residents first, improving repairs, and improving the relationship between the Council and its contractors.

Councillor Umeh said she agreed that housing was a challenge and a national crisis. She said social housing was a vital springboard to social and economic prosperity, and the Council had committed to building 3,000 homes in the next 4 years.

Concluding the discussion, the Chair requested the housing team to provide further information in respect of licensing.

ACTION: Ed Shaylor

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

6. REPAIRS IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) introduced that he had become the permanent Director of Housing on 23 March 2023. He presented the report, including a review of the current situation, how the Council was putting things right, six key interventions made under the Repairs Service Improvement Plan, improvements to complaint management, enhancing capacity and quality, and investing in the Council's housing stock.

NOTE: Presentation on Repairs Improvement Plan is attached as Appendix 4

The Chair remarked on the improvement to the reception arrangements at 145 King Street with regard to security. In response, Richard Shwe noted that the Tenants' Association was very upset with previous performance but there began to see some improvement at the meeting two weeks' ago. He considered the matter needed a year to improve properly. He was pleased to note that 11 contractors turned up at the Association's meeting, which was an example of better service model through which things could be done better and quicker. In this regard, Councillor Sally Taylor said she had received positive feedback from a participated resident and she really appreciated the work of the housing team.

The Chair noted that in February 2023, the Government had tabled amendments to the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill to require landlords to investigate and fix damp and mould in their properties within specified timeframes. She asked about the Council's response. John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs) briefed members on the Council's two-tier approach to deal with damp and mould. Having validated the need to tackle

the problem, the dedicated Damp and Mould Team would offer a “Home MOT” service to residents of affected properties. This aimed to provide a suite of additional home services, ensuring the inhabitant's dwelling remained fully functional and fit for purpose. Officers would contact the residents to manage the progress of improvements. Richard Shwe added that through the housing officers’ regular visits aimed at resolving the problems effectively, the “Home MOT” was also a strategic tool to cultivate a more trusting relationship and enhance residents’ satisfaction with the housing service.

Responding to Councillor Paul Alexander’s question about voids and disrepair, and issues relating to retrofitting boilers in some flats, John Hayden referred to the level of disparity of work for different void specifications. While four extra contractors had been engaged to start in September, high quality product specifications would mean related works might take 3 to 4 years to complete. The Council aimed to clear the backlog while measuring residents’ satisfaction of the new “Home MOT” initiative under the Repairs Improvement Plan.

Councillor Frances Umeh thanked the Committee for their feedback and support for the new housing repairs services. She expected that the housing team would continue to listen to the residents and improve the delivery of the service.

Members noted that under the Complaint Management Strategy, a dedicated resolution team had been established to deal with all cases that reached the Housing Ombudsman. Resident, Martin Thirlaway, was concerned that team members might become victims of their own success and be made redundant when they were no longer needed. Richard Shwe assured him that the housing team aimed to provide high quality services and good officers would find suitable roles.

In conclusion, the Chair welcomed the strategy and initiatives under the Repairs Improvement Plan and the housing team’s commitment to providing better housing services for residents.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

Members noted the work programme, and the Chair’s suggestion to discuss the following items at the next meeting on 14 November 2023:

- Greening the Housing Stock
- Voids Management
- Homelessness Prevention
- Housing Ombudsman

8. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings:

- 14 November 2023
- 30 January 2024
- 26 March 2024

Meeting started: 7.00 pm

Meeting ended: 9.30 pm

Chair:

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Links to Appendices

- Appendix 1 – [Matters arising – Officer responses](#)
- Appendix 2 – [Southern Housing's Presentation](#)
- Appendix 3 – [Additional information on rogue landlords](#)
- Appendix 4 – [Presentation on Repairs Improvement Plan](#)