

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Tuesday 26 March 2024

PRESENT

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

Other Councillors: Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness)

Officers:

Jon Pickstone (Strategic Director of Economy)

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing)

John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs)

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 noted having reviewed both the recording and the minutes of the meeting held in November 2023, she was satisfied that no actions were outstanding from it. She reminded members that within the constitution, councillors might request information and updates from Housing and Homelessness officers at any time, and they did not need to be made formally during meetings.

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. HOUSING OMBUDSMAN P49 REPORT ON HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) apologised on behalf of the Council to residents who had been affected by the issues raised in the Housing Ombudsman report. She said where appropriate, residents who had been let down had been compensated and the Council had worked hard to put things right. Going forward, the Administration would make sure that residents could live in safe and decent homes and get the services they needed, as committed in the Housing Strategy and Manifesto.

Jon Pickstone (Strategic Director of Economy) presented the Housing Ombudsman Special Report on Hammersmith and Fulham (H&F) Council. He noted that the Council's journey of improvement predated the Ombudsman's intervention. As an outcome of the report, the Council was ordered to publish and provide the Ombudsman by May 2024 with an action plan to deal with the issues raised in the Ombudsman's 8 key orders and 10 recommendations. In terms of H&F's response, Jon noted the Council had reiterated its regret in different ways, from meetings and correspondence with affected residents, in the media, and at formal council meetings. H&F's commitment was underlined by the establishment of a Chief Executive-led Taskforce to strengthen housing services and leadership. In going through the wider actions, Jon drew members' attention to the breath of the transformation in Housing, which was wider in scope than the Ombudsman Report. He said that Housing Services should be approached holistically with different teams delivering intended outcomes in synergy. To contextualise the situation amongst other social landlords, he highlighted that H&F had the lowest combined number of key orders and P49 recommendations out of the RSLs that the Housing Ombudsman had reported on.

Councillor Adronie Alford said she had heard the same commitment of listening to residents and making improvements in the past but she was still receiving complaints that council officers were not listening and contractors were not completing work.

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) offered his sincere apology to the tenants and leaseholders for the Council's poor performance of housing services. Richard recalled shortly after he came on board about a year ago, a brand-new Repairs team was created to embark on a journey of transformational change. During this period, Contract Officers were appointed to work with individual contractors for about 12 hours daily. As a result, the resident satisfaction rates had increased from 60% to 90% and one of the under-performed contractors no longer worked for H&F. Apart from managing contractors, the Repairs team had also enhanced its partnership with the Direct Labour Organisation for Repairs (DLO) and strengthened the in-house team to undertake repair services for sheltered housing. Richard said with the dedicated staff on board, the Housing Services team was now ensuring the right people would deliver their commitment on time.

Jon Pickstone highlighted the Repairs team was conducting over 50,000 repairs a year and that the majority of them were completed to the satisfaction of the residents. For individual cases requiring correction, they would be acknowledged and rectified as soon as possible. The recent substantial reduction of repair backlog with the number of outstanding repairs over 12 weeks falling by 90% reflected service improvements were happening.

The Chair suggested officers going through the Housing Ombudsman's orders and the actions taken in response to them. John Hayden noted that among the eight key orders, five were related to repairs and repair management while the other three concerned complaint handling. They involved different systems which needed to be connected and handled by a single point of contact for Housing Services team to manage homes rather than individual services. He and Richard Shwe gave a detailed account on what the Housing Ombudsman had said and the corresponding actions taken by the Housing Services, as set out on the tables on pages 14 and 15. John also briefed members on the Ombudsman's 10 recommendations which the Council was committed to deliver.

Councillor Alford referred to the poor performance of previous housing repairs contractors, despite promises from the Cabinet Members at the time, and said she had no faith the next set of contractors would be better.

Jon Pickstone said the Repairs team had managed the current contractors well and it was in the process of replacing one of them. John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs) highlighted the need to transform contractor procurement in the coming September. Meanwhile, the Housing Services had made a big step change by requiring contractor to pre-inspect a multiple repair within five days of reporting and sending the agreed work schedules to the resident. The contractor, being the single point of contact, would then arrange multiple traders to conduct the required work with a view to completing the job like a routine repair within 20 days. John also noted the needs of tailoring the services differently for vulnerable residents especially when dealing complicated repairs. Another step change was to require the approved subcontractors who had taken up some of the work from the contractor to attend the team's office to ensure quality delivery.

On communications enhancements, Richard Shwe referred to the new housing depot and housing officers where residents could meet with officers to understand what needed to happen. Councillor Alford asked about the location of the new depot as she had seen one contractor displaying council's logos, including the H&F's, when she travelled across London. John Hayden shared with members the locations of the new depot and other two potential ones. He assured that the Repairs team, by reviewing the van tracker, knew the duration of each job done and the number of jobs completed on that day.

Noting that some residents had taken day off work for repairs appointment which ended up being cancelled/no show, Councillor Sally Taylor was concerned whether the Housing Services team would proactively arrange to book another appointment for them. John Hayden noted for appointments that did not proceed, his team would reschedule them within the 20-day period unless it was booked up. Richard Shwe added that if evidence had showed

that the contractor/subcontractor was not there at the appointed time, they might be removed from the contractor list according to the contract terms.

On the Chair's question about contractor transition, John Hayden noted lessons had been learnt from the previous two transitions, i.e. not to leave the historical outstanding repair cases for the new contractor. They would be dealt with by the departing contractor under a contingency plan. When the new contractor started in September, they would work on fresh requests. Meanwhile, the Repairs team, the contractors and DLO would work hard together to clear the backlogs while keeping up with the required standard. Richard Shwe stressed that it was a unique way of contract management involving mobilisation, decommissioning of services, and requiring additional contractors/ subcontractors to be on board to enhance their understanding of the business.

Councillor Umeh said she looked forward to effective contract management and holding contractors accountable to ensure delivery of quality services to the satisfaction of the residents. She also hoped that the ownership and commitment demonstrated by the senior leadership would help meet the challenges of the next contractor transition.

The Chair considered it was important to ensure residents information was recorded correctly. Echoing her view, Councillor Paul Alexander remarked that apart from delivering quality repairs, document control and process management in capturing the problem, plan and outcome were also important. In response, Richard Shwe highlighted the weekly meetings of the Service Improvement Board in the past 12 months through which parties from different work streams understood what needed to be improved. Heads of service were held accountable for their respective areas, from what needed to occur to managing resources at the right pace. Jon Pickstone added that the call centre had also improved record keeping by making sure the right information with the necessary details was accessible by all relevant parties at the start of the process.

In terms of repair quality, Richard Shwe and John Hayden noted there were six distinct types of properties in H&F and information on their conditions was available under the stock condition surveys which sought to standardize the stocks. In this regard, Councillor Umeh noted the Council's record-breaking investment on the stock over 12 years to ensure H&F homes were modernised and fit for purpose. This helped to show the impacts on the number of repair cases. John Hayden also referred to the one-year pilot repair scheme for sheltered housing at the White City. It was intended to replicate the pilot scheme for other estates. He said that 5 to 10 Estate Actions Days would be held whereby councillors and officers would walk around with residents and do MOT reviews of the communal facilities on those estates. The drop-in visits would be repeated every two to three months to obtain direct feedback from the residents on the needs and quality of repairs. John highlighted this was a significant step change in bringing the housing services out.

Councillor Alexander considered it was important to record the outcome of all work procurement no matter whether they were invoiced or not. John Hayden

gave a detailed account on the phased payment for jobs and paying the completion charge upon the quantity surveyor's satisfactory post-inspection in terms of quality and value. He also briefed members on how to work out the payment for jobs that had not been invoiced.

As regards Councillor Alford's question on the number of jobs conducting post-inspections, John Hayden advised that it was planned to pre-inspect all multiple complicated repairs which was about 14,000 cases per year and usually took 20 to 60 days to complete. Physical post-inspections would be carried out for about 10% of emergency repairs (which made up some 40% of the 50,000 repairs cases a year) including those costing £500 or more while some others would be done through calls.

On management of repairs to completion, Councillor Alexander suggested categorising the repair cases into communal, tenanted and sheltered housing repairs. John Hayden noted the Repairs team had focused on sheltered housing in terms of feedback and assurances since last September. They attended the sheltered scheme meeting once a month, reviewed the repairs cases with the DLO and followed them up the next month to bring confidence to the residents. The communal repairs shall come under the Estate Action Days. John understood that the new Area Neighbourhood Managers would review with estate residents monthly on the short-, medium- and long-term estate action plans for communal repairs work. He reiterated the post-inspection commitment for tenanted repairs.

Councillor Alford asked about the level of compensations made and the outstanding lump sum. John Hayden said compensations were made according to the compensation guidance. For incomplete cases, the Repairs team might recover part or all of the payment already made to contractor to protect the Services. John undertook to provide the requested information, including the level of compensation.

ACION: John Hayden

The Chair asked how compensation payments would be monitored to ensure consistency, accuracy and transparency in amounts offered, as recommended by the Ombudsman. Jon Pickstone referred to more recent Ombudsman cases and noted the level of compensation made by the Council ahead of the Ombudsman Report was generally fairly consistent with their recommendation.

The Chair was concerned about policy updates that had been devised in response to the Housing Ombudsman's order to comply with their complaints handling code and share learning with them. She asked how members could ensure the new policies were implemented properly.

Richard Shwe noted the policy updates to expressly state that any actions promised in complaint responses would be time tracked through to completion, with a clear escalation pathway if repairs were delayed beyond agreed or expected dates. In addition, the Corporate Complaints policy had been reviewed against the new statutory Complaint Handling Code promulgated by the Housing Ombudsman to take effect from April 2024. The

regulatory approach in complaint handling was impactful on the policies and procedures in conducting repairs. Richard noted the Housing Services team was working hard in the right direction. For example, photographs taken on the completed repairs work might have partly led to the recent reduction of severe maladministration cases (among other decisions including maladministration and service failure). Councillor Umeh agreed with Richard that this Council did put residents first as demonstrated by the auditors' strong assurances on the big 6 building safety compliance areas (gas, asbestos, fire, electric, water hygiene and lifts).

Jon Pickstone remarked that to meet the national standards of the new and evolving regulatory environment, extra staff would be engaged and that the Council would learn the best practices of other local authorities.

The Chair queried the governance of the Chief Executive-led Taskforce and the progress made since its establishment in May 2022. Jon Pickstone remarked that the Taskforce focused on the Housing Services' repairs and complaint-handling work to make sure they were delivered to the required standards. The Taskforce was also concerned about the outcomes of the Service Improvement Board and Damp and Mould Action Group as well as other governance meetings under it. He said the repair statistics demonstrated the process was working. Richard Shwe added that the Taskforce was helpful in challenging the Housing Services appropriately on how to improve service delivery. Councillor Umeh agreed and noted the Taskforce really helped drive changes forward for the Council to live up to its commitment and investment. For example, the Damp and Mould Action Group comprising members from different council teams was a cross-council collaborative approach tackling multiple issues including housing and public health. Jon said it was encouraging to note that the Ombudsman had recognised an 86% reduction in outstanding damp and mould cases in H&F in 2023.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

5. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings:

- 23 July 2024
- 12 November 2024
- 27 January 2025
- 23 April 2025

The Chair suggested discussing the following items at these meetings:

- Homelessness Prevention and Temporary Accommodation
- Private Rented Sector Policy
- Voids Management

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.40 pm

Chair:

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