

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Tuesday 23 July 2024

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Jacolyn Daly (Chair), Asif Siddique, Sally Taylor, Omid Miri and Adronie Alford

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

Officers:

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing)

Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness)

Laura Palfreeman (Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager)

Ed Shaylor (Assistant Director, Housing Standards)

Stefan Robinson (Head of Policy and Programme Management Office)

Clancy Connolly (Policy Officer)

Debbie Yau (Committee Coordinator)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence. Councillor Asif Siddique was attending remotely.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Omid Miri to the Committee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

Matters Arising

In response to the Chair's request, Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) gave an update further to the discussion at the last meeting. He noted the Repairs service continued its major improvement yielding a high resident satisfaction

rate of 80/90, as compared to 40/50 when he first came on board. The satisfaction rate of the contact centre had also increased to 90% in the last three months, with no overdue complaints for the last five months. The Repairs service had turned things around by strengthening contract management including engaging the DLO for sheltered housing repairs work and enhancing independent inspections before and after the repairs. The Repairs team had been triaging to make sure the right trades were providing the required services at the right time. On the outstanding information requested at the last meeting on complaint-related compensation, Richard undertook to look into the matter and provide the information.

ACTION: Richard Shwe

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 March were agreed to be accurate.

4. UPDATE ON THE HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND ROUGH SLEEPING UNIT

The Chair explained that this meeting shall focus on homelessness prevention and temporary accommodation which was distinct from rough sleeping. Homelessness was one that residents might find themselves in through no fault of their own and facing a future without the fundamental need of a shelter and it could be very frightening. The purpose of the Committee's scrutiny was to understand the achievable ambitions behind the statutory mechanism. The Chair said she was keen to bring in strategic and delivery partners when the Committee scheduled a discussion on rough sleeping.

Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness) gave a presentation on the report, including ways to access the homelessness service, the Council's homelessness duties, homelessness demand, the help and support offered by the Council, accessing Council and housing association properties.

Councillor Omid Miri appreciated the report and presentation. Noting it was the ambition of the Homelessness service to reverse the current proportion of households approaching the service at the Prevention stage (30%) and Relief stage (70%), he asked about the alarming indicators, if any, that could be used to achieve this.

Clare Dorning advised that the Homelessness Prevention team would improve communication for example via the website so that residents being served an eviction notice could approach them earlier for help allowing work to be done as soon as the 56-day prevention period started. The team could also communicate with parents evicting their 18+ year old due to a clash of lifestyle for example and talk them into helping the 18+ year old to find private rented sector (PRS) accommodation in a few months' time while the young person was being put onto the housing register. Following proactive lines of negotiation for planned departure of the 18+, homelessness was thus prevented. Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) also referred to the case study 1 (page 13) on the successful prevention of the risk of homelessness.

On eviction by friends and families, the Chair considered a healthy stock of social housing and more affordable PRS properties would help relieve the pressure on homelessness prevention.

Councillor Miri sought elaboration on PRS prevention offer. Clare Dorning explained that for a household at risk of homelessness and willing to move into PRS properties, to incentivise that willingness leading to homelessness prevention, the household would be placed on the housing register.

Councillor Adroine Alford expressed the concern about officers' decisions leading to unintended undesirable consequences. For example, placing a homeless carer out of the borough would increase their expenses rendering the service to the vulnerable residents in the borough.

In response, Richard Shwe referred to the multi-agency approach adopted some six months ago. The Homelessness Assessment team would work with colleagues in Adult Social Care, Children's services and health professionals to pool all available resources together to help and support vulnerable residents in need. Clare Dorning noted that to enhance service delivery and improve residents' experience, the Homelessness service had increased face-to-face presence in the reception of 145 King Street to provide initial general advice directly to affected residents. She added that the allocation of temporary accommodation was sometimes subject to the supply available on that day.

The Chair noted from hearsay that there was a list of properties that were available to all London councils for the homeless approaches to swap temporary accommodation among the boroughs. Clare Dorning clarified that each local authority had its own temporary accommodation profile with some having greater supply of hostel accommodation and hence less need for PRS properties. She highlighted that there was a statutory duty for the councils to notify another borough to which a homeless household they had placed. The notice helped the receiving borough to pick up responsibilities of adult social care or children services etc for the households. She added that this was an extension of multi-agency collaboration outside the borough.

On closer cooperation with some other councils, Richard Shwe said that the Housing Service did liaise with councils in West London about having more cooperation. However, families to the south of H&F were reluctant to move across the A4 and go up north.

In reply to Councillor Alford's questions, Richard Shwe noted that being a housing service officer was a stressful and tough job, and bringing staff back to office might help generate more support among them. It also enabled the dedicated officers in the Homelessness Prevention team to operate a 5-day week providing immediate services to residents in need.

Clare Dorning referred to the Homeless Reduction Act which had brought a major change by giving the local authority the responsibility to assess every single approach instead of asking five screening questions as in the past before 2018. The volume of approaches and cases now became less manageable, and officers' caseloads would increase further in case of staff

turnover or sickness. In addition to the high caseloads, officers were required to meet the legal requirements in taking each case through every stage. These factors combined necessitated a Homelessness Action Plan that helped to deliver a range of services to deal with homelessness at different stages.

Responding to Councillor Miri's enquiry about the target of having all the Housing Service's posts filled by the end of July, Clare Dorning was pleased to note that this was on track and it was good to see existing and new staff coming together to manage the caseloads.

Councillor Miri noted the oldest case at present was 18 months and expressed concern about households being homeless for such a long time. Clare Dorning clarified it referred to a mixture of things. It could be a household already in temporary accommodation being issued with a backdated decision. Or it could be a case of lost contact usually single person cases falling to the bottom of the to-do list. In any case, these households were not disadvantaged.

Councillor Asif Siddique commended the team's hard work. Noting that the Homelessness service was managing 1,085 open cases at the moment, he asked how many of them were placed out of the borough and the timeline for them to return, and the number of cases who were aged over 70 and/or disabled.

Clare Dorning said that it normally took the households on the housing register two to three years before securing an allocation and they had to stay in the temporary accommodation until then. Those who were placed outside the borough might sometimes be moved back through temporary accommodation transfer subject to supply within the borough. She undertook to provide the number of out-of-borough households and the requested demographic information of the open cases after the meeting.

ACTION: Clare Dorning

Richard Shwe added that there were in-borough properties available in sheltered housing for 60+ but they might need to be upgraded. The Chair agreed with Richard that "sheltered housing" should be re-branded, for example, as "independent living".

Councillor Siddique was concerned about the procedures after a household was being served an eviction notice and approached the service. Clare Dorning said the Homelessness Prevention team would carry out upfront work such as providing useful information and advice for example the right to stay and court cost to enable the households to make informed decisions. Temporary accommodation would be planned but would not normally happen until about three days before the actual date of eviction. If they were taking universal credits or receiving housing benefits, they might be brought to temporary accommodation earlier to avoid incurring more debts due to unaffordable rent.

With reference to her casework with people facing homelessness, the Chair noted there was a lot of misunderstanding due to residents feeling anxious about the situation. She considered the Council should improve communication with the residents on top of meeting the statutory requirements.

Richard Shwe agreed that the legal discussion might frighten the vulnerable households. He considered using plain English and a layman approach in receiving the approaches. Councillor Francis Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) pointed out that this was equally true for the many partners working with the residents risking of homelessness in the borough. She remarked that there were much more to be done to improve communication, including housing officers offering advice in person at the family hubs.

Councillor Sally Taylor echoed the need to enhance communication as according to her casework, residents facing eviction always told her that there was nothing the Council could do until they were actually homeless. It was important for the Council to get the homelessness prevention message across, including to the ward councillors.

Richard Shwe appreciated this was indeed the practice in the past. The Council had changed the policy and strengthened the prevention arm with the help of the PRS and other teams.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

5. HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR POLICY

Stefan Robinson (Head of Policy and Programme Management Office) explained that the Policy Team had been working in collaboration with the Private Rented Sector (PRS) Team to set a clear policy position on how the Council would support residents to access high quality private rented homes in the borough. He then presented the background leading to the draft H&F PRS Policy, including how the PRS had grown significantly over recent years, and the work undertaken to engage with 270 renters, landlords and local residents through a survey, focus groups or interviews.

Ed Shaylor (Assistant Director, Housing Standards) outlined the powers, namely, environmental health power and public health power used by the Council to intervene with the private landlords. He also briefed members on his team's involvement in the borough's housing standards, including those Council properties on the private rented market and temporary accommodation. He then continued the presentation to outline the priorities and draft commitments of the PRS policy.

Noting the powers available to the Council to intervene with the private landlords, Councillor Omid Miri considered it was necessary to strengthen communication and enhance renters' awareness about their rights.

Ed Shaylor agreed with the Chair that private landlords needed to ensure safety standards were met in rented premises just like restaurant operators. It was also important for the renters to know how to exercise their statutory rights. He then detailed what private renters could do in seeking rent payment orders or settling deposit disputes at a county court, and lodging complaints against the letting agent through the property redress scheme or ombudsman schemes.

Councillor Francis Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) supplemented that one of the draft policy priorities was shaping the national conversation. H&F would support the introduction of a landlord register across the borough to provide residents with public information on the quality of the properties and landlords. She believed landlords would become more effective in their role through the process.

In this regard, Councillor Miri pointed out that landlords were providing housing supply and the average rent might go up if they were forced to exit the market due to increased demand on them. To ensure landlords and renters understood where they could seek support, he suggested providing a one-page briefing note to the ward councillors to help spread the message. Ed Shaylor said consideration would be given to briefing the councillors on the PRS policy.

ACTION: Ed Shaylor

Councillor Asif Siddique asked for the number of local authorities having a PRS policy in place. He was also concerned that the scheme of HMO licensing in H&F was not as successful as those in some other London councils. He wondered if it was due to the high licence fees.

Stefan Richardson estimated that based on the Policy Team's research, approximately half of the London boroughs examined had some form of public PRS policy or strategy, and that these were becoming increasingly common because of the rise in the number of PRS homes. Generally, the councils would tend to include the PRS as one of the objectives in their housing strategy. He noted that H&F's draft policy was more ambitious compared to other authorities. At an appropriate juncture, this piece of work would be incorporated into H&F's housing strategy.

Ed Shaylor noted that the fee structure for HMO licensing was set by the Cabinet in December 2021, with the fees and charges schedule being adjusted in line with inflation every year. The level of H&F's licensing fee, which covered the administration cost of issuing the licence and the general management and enforcement of the scheme, was fairly average when compared with that of other boroughs. In addition to licensing HMOs, the Council had also run a selective licensing scheme for rented-out properties on 24 streets including the King Street. The PRS licensing schemes covered about 20% of the private housing stock in the borough.

The Chair asked whether renters who lived in licensed properties were aware of this and the redress that was available to them. Ed Shaylor speculated that renters were probably unaware and hence publicity through social media

might be considered. Councillor Miri suggested sending letters to inform the renters in these licensed properties.

Regarding Councillor Siddique's further question, Ed Shaylor noted that to encourage the landlords applying for the licences, there was an early bird discount for a few months when the licensing scheme was first launched in 2017. On flexibility of licensing, Ed said the landlord could apply to vary the licence between an ordinary selective licence for a family and an HMO licence for 3 or more sharers. The Council's licensing scheme aimed at regulating the properties in terms of safety and space standards. Officers were not involved in the selection or management of tenants, although licence conditions require licence holders to obtain references and deal with ASB.

Noting online application was the only option available to landlords, Councillor Adroine Alford pointed out that some landlords were still struggling with technology. Ed Shaylor said officers could assist those landlords to input the data for them over the phone and to process checks instead of digital payments if necessary.

Councillor Alford asked about officers' working hours post-covid as she could not locate an officer for assistance on a case she considered very serious. Ed Shaylor noted that officers in his team were working full-time in hybrid mode. They organised their visits and completed their paperwork at home or in the office. In the rare situation that an emergency visit was required, officers who did not live far could be engaged at short notice.

Councillor Alford expressed concern that only 270 people had responded to a consultation relating to 30,000 private rented properties. While agreeing more responses might show greater statistical significance, Stefan Robinson stressed that clear efforts had been made to promote the survey and engage residents with it through a wider range of networks and promotional activity, such as via the faith forum, renters' rights groups, resident e-news, community groups, and partners in voluntary community sector as well as via a press release and paid social media promotion. He highlighted that the 270 responses provided a good understanding of the local picture. He explained that the consultation involved a range of different engagement types, including in-depth sharing of experience through conversation and case studies which provided a good depth of understanding of the local experience and could be used to inform the Policy. Stefan mentioned that the Policy would likely undergo substantial development following the consultation.

Councillor Umeh added that the private rented sector was made up of people on disposable income, benefits or caught up in challenging circumstances. She also noted that renters were over-represented by specific minorities (or global majority) of black, and brown Asian who for one reason or another chose not to engage in the survey. She reassured the Committee that this survey together with research and different surveys had helped to support recommendations for a national landlord register, which could provide information on levels of rent and service charges, and develop a decent home standard for the PRS.

In terms of home standards, Councillor Miri asked whether the Council would check the quality of the in-borough temporary accommodation instead of relying on the London-wide scheme currently run by the Ealing Council. Ed Shaylor advised that the Procurement Team of the Housing Service did check all the temporary accommodation they had sourced. Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) referred to the bed bugs situation found in a temporary accommodation last summer. He was pleased to note that the PRS Team, being the independent person holding the Housing Service accountable, had considered that the Housing Team had followed the procedures and met the required standards.

On the way forward, Councillor Umeh noted after revising the draft policy based on feedback from the consultation and this meeting and aligning it with changes in the central government's legislation, the draft policy would be finalised by the Cabinet in Autumn for delivery and engagement with all relevant parties over the course of 12 months.

Summing up, the Chair hoped that communication with residents would be strengthened.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report on draft PRS policy.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings:

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

The Chair suggested discussing the following items at these meetings:

- Hidden homelessness and rough sleeping (with third sector partners)
- Voids and Repairs
- Follow up to the Housing Ombudsman's recommendations

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 9.21 pm

Chair:

Contact officer Debbie Yau
 Committee Coordinator
 Corporate Services
 E-mail: Debbie.yau@lbhf.gov.uk