

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Tuesday 6 September 2016

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Alan De'Ath (Chair), Lucy Ivimy and Harry Phibbs

Other Councillors: Ben Coleman, Lisa Homan and Vivienne Lukey

Officers: Nilavra Mukerji, Director of Housing Services, Jane Martin, Head of Neighbourhood Services, John D'Souza, Partnership Director (Mitie), Marcus Cox, Director (Mitie)

13. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors Lucy Ivimy and Harry Phibbs arrived late and apologised for having done so. Councillor Ben Coleman, Cabinet Member for Commercial Revenue and Resident Satisfaction, sent his apologies for lateness owing to another meeting.

Councillor Sue Fennimore, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, and Councillor Andrew Jones, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration had sent her apologies for not being at the meeting.

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 July were agreed to be accurate.

16. OLDER PEOPLE'S HOUSING STRATEGY

Councillor Lisa Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing, explained that when she had taken over as cabinet member, older persons housing had not been one of the areas she thought needed significant improvements. It had become clear to her that the council needed to do more to make sure that its older residents were given the accommodation and support they needed. The new strategy was intended to ensure that better collaborative work was done by the council's housing and adult social care departments to support older people. Councillor Homan explained that she and Councillor Vivienne Lukey, Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care, wanted residents views on the strategy which would shape it before the strategy was agreed.

Nilavra Mukerji explained that the Older Person's Housing Strategy stemmed from the Housing Strategy which had committed the council to look further at options for older people. The demographic of the borough made it vital that the council improve its housing options for older people as there would be a 20% increase in the number of borough residents aged between 65-85 years. He felt that the best outcome for residents was to be able to live in their own home as it was better for them and cheaper for the council. The borough faced significant challenges in delivering what residents wanted owing to the age and type of existing specialised housing stock and land values in the borough. The housing department's aim was that by 2018 the council would be able to offer residents advice on a range of housing options and then provide them with appropriate accommodation. He also wanted to continue to build good relationships with colleagues in adult social care to provide more integrated support services.

Pauline Hutchinson asked where residents could currently go to seek advice about the choices available for housing for their old age. Nilavra Mukerji said that the Housing Options team, based at 145 King Street could provide advice to anyone, whilst those living in social housing could also speak to their housing officers. Ms Hutchinson also said that it was important that when re-housing older residents the council helped to maintain their relationships with former friends and neighbours. She raised a particular case which Nilavra Mukerji agreed to discuss with her outside of the meeting.

Anthony Wood noted the low number of unpaid carers in the borough and said that any information on why there were fewer than in other areas would be useful to solving the issue. Mr Wood said that much of the strategy was very good and was well researched but asked for more information about the idea of 'tenure swapping'. Councillor Homan explained that the idea of tenure swapping was to rent an under occupied property from a resident which the council could then use as accommodation for others in need, whilst providing the owner with a more suitable property to live in, either through a specialist provider of retirement homes or through the council's own stock. The ownership of the properties would not be affected. Mr Wood said that he was concerned that the local plan did not include a target for the number of specialist housing units to be built. Councillor Connell, Chair of the Planning and Development Committee, explained that the London Plan set a target of

60 such homes per year, whilst the local plan had been written to prevent the loss of the borough's existing specialist stock. Mr Wood also said that he felt the council ought to raise council taxes by 2% to fund better social care. Councillor Lukey explained that the council had decided not to pass on government cuts in this area to residents as tax rises; instead the council was making savings in other areas to make sure that social care was well funded.

John Flynn suggested that the council speak to private providers of sheltered and extra care housing to see if they could be tempted to develop additional capacity in the borough. Councillor Homan noted that the performance of some companies had not been particularly high, but agreed that it was an idea which was worth further investigation.

Gwen Cook explained that services to help residents keep active were very important. She felt that the Agewell fitness classes were very useful in doing this, and she hoped that they could be extended. She also thought that the Health Trainers Scheme for adults up to the age of 74 could be useful in keeping residents able to live in their own homes.

Councillor Connell asked how the older person's housing strategy linked with the council's approach to improving the private rented sector. Councillor Homan said that many older people living in the private rented sector benefitted from more secure tenancies, and it was only usually when residents became very vulnerable that they came to the attention of the council. Rita Nath-Dongre said that Hammersmith United Charities worked closely with charities and community organisations, such as Age UK and the Irish Cultural Centre, to identify vulnerable older people living in the private sector. Nilavra Mukerji added that there was no private specialist housing provision in the borough and so there were only limited areas of overlap between the two strategies.

Councillor Lucy Ivimy arrived at this point in the meeting.

Anthony Wood explained that he had proposed that an Older People's Commission be set up by the council to look at services more generally. He felt that this commission would be able to help suggest how the new strategy could be taken forward. Councillors Homan and Lukey said that they had welcomed Mr Wood's suggestion and that a commission would be set up when resources to support it became available, likely during 2017.

Councillor Ivimy asked how the work of housing officers was co-ordinated with the work of staff in adult social care. Councillor Homan explained that officers worked closely together to support residents, although she recognised that there was more to do to make the service completely joined up. Nilavra Mukerji agreed, saying that staff in the two departments had learned a lot about each other's roles and skills; officers were continuing to look at models for more joint working to give residents the best possible advice.

17. SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE

Councillor Harry Phibbs arrived at the beginning of this item.

Councillor Lisa Homan explained that residents had been unhappy with the re-organisation of the Wardens Service by the previous administration. She said that the council had listened to residents and that services for sheltered residents were getting better. Councillor Homan explained that the recently undertaken sheltered housing review had been about people rather than just bricks and mortar and that every resident had been surveyed as part of the review.

Jane Martin explained that the needs assessment which formed part of the review had given officers lots of information about what residents needed. Loneliness had been identified as an issue and housing staff had therefore worked with colleagues in adult social care to remodel the befriending service. The Sheltered Housing Service had achieved all of the targets in its improvement plan with staffing returned to normal levels, the guestroom policy being updated and the handyman service extended. A plan to improve the service further was being developed in response to the findings of the needs assessment.

Adrian van Zy said that he had been signposted towards sheltered housing by a doctor. He had been housed by the council and was very pleased with his new accommodation which both met his physical needs and allowed him many opportunities to meet new people and get involved in new things.

John Ryan said that there were lots of improvements being made in sheltered accommodation through the investment group; Pinnacle had even volunteered to build a Japanese Garden at one scheme. Marilyn Mackie said that it was important that maintenance was considered, as in her view there were already issues with grounds maintenance at sheltered schemes.

Pauline Hutchinson said that she felt the Sheltered Accommodation run by Hammersmith United Charities was of a very high standard and ought to be used as a model by the council. She was particularly impressed with the sense of community at the schemes.

Anthony Wood said that he felt sheltered schemes needed a proper staff presence rather than the visits from specialist housing officers. He felt that scheme managers ought to be employed to look after the welfare of residents and help to avoid them becoming lonely. Councillor Ivimy explained that she had been the cabinet member responsible for redesignating scheme managers as specialist housing officers but that this had been forced upon the council by changes to housing benefit rules. She had hoped that they would be able to continue to meet the welfare needs of residents in sheltered housing. Councillor Homan said that the recent needs assessment had been commissioned to ensure that services were targeted at those most in need. She said however that there was not sufficient money available to return to a system whereby dedicated scheme managers could be provided.

Nilavra Mukerji said that budgets were tight, and that the government's cut to social rents hadn't helped this. Officers had been trying to bring in alternative resources, for example from adult social care, to help meet residents' needs. Residents discussed the possibility of raising service charge levels to cover the cost of a better service. Nilavra Mukerji explained that any increase would have to be affordable for all residents. Anthony Wood said that he had discussed a range of options for bringing more money into the service, but that it was a very difficult area.

Tony Smallwood explained the difficulties of living in sheltered accommodation with an alcoholic in the same block. Councillor Phibbs asked whether the needs assessment included a figure for the number of alcoholics living in sheltered accommodation. Nilavra Mukerji explained that the question 'are you an alcoholic' was not easy to include in a survey. The needs assessment process had been agreed with colleagues from adult social care and where officers had more serious concerns these would be referred to adult social care. Those who needed support with alcoholism would be referred to appropriate agencies as soon as the issue was identified.

Gwen Cook said that cycle parking at sheltered schemes ought to be improved. Councillor Brown added that more parking for mobility scooters also needed to be provided. Nilavra Mukerji said that improving cycle parking on estates across the borough was something officers were looking to do, but that officers' time was currently being spent on controlling parking on estates. The issue of providing parking for mobility scooters was more complicated as the spaces needed to be secure and not too far from a resident's front door.

Councillor Phibbs asked how the waiting list for Sheltered Accommodation was prioritised. Jane Martin said that the waiting list was organised in accordance with the housing allocations scheme which included priority for medical needs, under occupancy and time on the waiting list. She explained that the average length of time spent on the waiting list for sheltered accommodation had been inflated by residents seeking a property in a particular scheme.

Anthony Wood said that he did not think there were 125 sheltered properties in the borough which met the lifetime homes standard. Nilavra Mukerji agreed to look into this statistic. He also clarified that the 100 people on the waiting list for sheltered housing were those who had expressed an interest in social housing; there were more people over 60 on the Housing Register but who did not wish to live in sheltered accommodation.

Roz O'Connell said that she felt it might be worth reviewing whether 60 was too young an age to allow residents to move into sheltered accommodation. Gwen Cook said that she felt having younger residents in schemes was vital to create mixed communities which did things together.

A resident asked what the budget for the handyperson scheme was and where that money came from. Nilavra Mukerji agreed to circulate this information with the minutes of the meeting.

18. DELIVERING IMPROVEMENTS IN OUR REPAIRS SERVICE - REVIEWING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Councillor Ben Coleman, Cabinet Member for Resident Satisfaction, explained that when he had been Chair of the Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts PAC, residents had made it very clear to him that they were very unhappy with the service provided by Mitie and that they felt ignored by the council. Councillor Coleman explained that parts of the contract with Mitie were good, but that in his view the monitoring of their performance had not been good enough. It had taken longer than he had hoped to make progress on the issue but a trial of a new way of monitoring satisfaction had now started. This trial was based on new software called rant and rave which sent text messages to a third of residents who had either made contact with the call centre, had a visit from Mitie staff or had a job completed. The new system gave the council more information about what residents thought of the service, and also gave Mitie instant feedback on work which allowed them to solve problems for residents and take action where issues with staff were identified.

John D'Souza, Mitie Partnering Manager, explained that Rant and Rave had given Mitie's management a lot of information which they could use to improve their services; for example, residents had been particularly upset about door entry system and TV aerial repairs taking a long time and so Mitie were trying to respond faster to these as they were having a significant impact on residents. Mr D'Souza said that the response rate to text messages was only about 20%, and that Mitie wanted to try to improve this; they were also trying to get telephone numbers from residents so that they could be contacted.

A resident raised a concern about scaffolding at Meadowbank sheltered housing scheme having been left up for months with work not being completed. Nilavra Mukerji agreed to look into the issue. The Chair explained that the PAC would be considering an item on scaffolding at its December meeting and that views on the council's use of scaffolding would be very welcome then.

Roz O'Connell felt that the rant and rave project was very helpful in that it allowed Mitie to fix issues quickly. She said that it was important that residents responded so that a true picture of performance could be built up.

Gwen Cook said that she felt that having a new way of monitoring Mitie was not enough to improve the service. She explained that Mitie had taken over a year to resolve a problem in her flat and that she had been forced to make lots of phone calls and go through the formal complaints process to get this resolved. Councillor Coleman said that Ms Cook's experience of Mitie was completely unacceptable, and it sounded like the communication by Mitie had been very poor. He explained that in his view the council's contractors represented the council and so apologised to Ms Cook. He said that Mitie were committed to improving their performance and that whilst he accepted that rant and rave would not resolve all of the issues he hoped it would make a big difference. Marcus Cox, Director at Mitie, apologised to Gwen Cook for

the poor service she had received. He explained that he wanted to meet with her so that he could find out how things had gone so badly wrong. He would feedback what he had learned to Councillors Homan and Coleman.

Pauline Hutchinson said that the lights on Cheeseman's Terrace were not being repaired. Marilyn Mackie felt that lights were not noticed because estate inspections were not done at night. Roz O'Connell explained that the repairs working group had set up a sub-committee on lighting, and that that group would be carrying out a survey of the council's estate lights; these meetings were being delayed because of officers not being available. Councillor Coleman asked Paul Monforte to make sure that the group was properly supported. Councillor Phibbs felt that it was frustrating that issues with lighting continued to arise as they had been a problem for some years. John D'Souza explained that at Cheeseman's Terrace some of the lights were connected to the highways street lighting system and so the issue there was more complicated.

A resident asked whether rant and rave would be expanded to cover other contractors and services. Nilavra Mukerji explained that if the trial was successful the scheme might be extended, however, it wouldn't work so well in areas where it was harder to tell if a service had been delivered well or not.

Thomas Flynn said that he thought the repairs working group should be given responsibility for scrutinising Mitie's performance. Nilavra Mukerji explained that he felt the group couldn't effectively carry out scrutiny as well as do all of the great work it was to improve services. He said that the council was looking to introduce mystery shopping to ensure that services were being delivered well.

Roz O'Connell said that she felt that the complaints system needed to be improved. Councillor Coleman agreed and said that the council was already looking at how to improve its handling of complaints.

The chair thanked residents for their contribution and said that he hoped that repairs would be discussed again to see if rant and rave really did make a difference to satisfaction.

19. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair reminded the committee that the next meeting would be held at St John's Church, Fulham on 1 November, starting at 7pm. The meeting would be considering high street regeneration, the idea of a social lettings agency and an update on the proposals to make the borough's library service more sustainable.

Meeting started: 6.10 pm
Meeting ended: 9.00 pm

Chair

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