



MINUTES OF THE PARTNERSHIP AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 21 March 2013 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Van Kalwala (Chair), and Councillors Green, Harrison, Naheerathan, HB Patel, RS Patel and Krupa Sheth

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillors Clues

1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 7 February 2013

RESOLVED:-

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2013 were approved as a true record of proceedings.

3. Matters arising

Kisi Smith-Charlemagne, Policy and Performance Officer, informed the Committee that further information regarding the statistics on how crimes were reported had been provided by Superintendent Gideon Springer and would be circulated to the Committee.

4. Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) - performance update

David Bishopp of Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) gave a presentation highlighting the performance of the company against similar local authorities and ALMOs as well as other housing associations. In comparison to local authorities and ALMOs it was explained that BHP had improved in terms of value for money; including overheads and major works. In terms of key performance indicators (KPIs) customer satisfaction was in the middle to upper and upper quartile. BHPs performance improved in terms of costs and major works compared to other authorities with major works moving from 16th position to 5th. It was highlighted that BHP no longer operated as a development business but had undertaken a small development of 330 homes which had led to the misleading poor performance figures. It was noted that the comparisons were against local authorities that undertook large developments and was not a fair comparison. David Bishopp highlighted that rent arrears continued to be a poor performing indicator due to the external pressures of the economic climate and changes to welfare, with decent homes also showing as poor due to changes in the way performance was recorded and tenants refusing works. It was highlighted that Brent was performing well compared to traditional London housing associations, being third in terms of overhead costs and fourth in terms of housing management.

Members raised residents concerns of not receiving replies to complaints and issues being raised. David Bishopp explained that complaints were meant to receive an initial response within 10 days then passed to the relevant department for a full response and agreed to forward any unanswered complaints to the relevant department. Following discussions, members queried the difficulties in re-letting properties despite a housing shortage. It was explained that the allocation process enabled tenants to refuse properties that they did not wish to live in for a variety of reasons such as desirability, size and location. A revised choice based lettings scheme was being devised to restrict tenants from refusing more than three properties to improve re-letting. It was noted that the current re-letting target was 27 days with average re-let time of 26 days the previous month. It was noted that properties requiring major works would often have a longer re-let time which would affect performance statistics. Following queries it was explained that the financial information had only just been completed for the end of year and is sent off for comparison with a final report being received in September. It was explained that the KPIs were reported on a quarterly basis. Members queried the level of performance in relation to the standard of decent homes and re-letting. It was explained that the decent homes indicator was misleading due to many tenants refusing works, with these homes being included within the indicator. It was noted that rent collection was targeted at 98% and was currently operating at 98.4% although future difficulties were anticipated in line with the current climate and welfare changes, with 67% of tenants currently receiving housing benefit. Members queried how rent arrears were addressed and how we compared. It was explained that we could not be compared to housing associations due to secured tenancies. A rent collection team would address any arrears and follow an escalation policy before the final stage of a court possession order being sought. If a forwarding address was passed on then a debt collection agency would be engaged with one officer collecting arrears from former tenants with the target return greater than the costs to employ them. David Bishopp informed the Committee that numerous tenants would leave with rent arrears and up to 30 persons being evicted. Following queries it was explained that approximately £500,000 worth of rent arrears was accrued for the current financial year with a potential total debt of £1.5m from rent arrears. It was explained that this debt was calculated into the business plan due to the difficulties in collecting rents. Members queried whether tenants not paying utility bills resulted in energy companies removing the meters. It was noted that this problem had not been raised but David Bishopp agreed to investigate further. Following queries it was explained that a drop in capital project costs and a self-financing scheme had resulted in lower maintenance costs with £200m of historical debt being written off by central government. It was explained that an asset review was taking place and repairs were carried out on an appointment based system, with performance recorded by the length of time taken to complete repairs. Repairs were currently targeted to be completed in 10 days but following a current average success rate of 6.8 days, the target for the next financial year was being reduced to five days.

RESOLVED:-

Members noted the report

5. **Registered social landlord performance**

Tony Hirsch, Policy and Performance Manager informed the Committee that there had been a significant change to the approach of housing regulation and how performance was managed at a national level. The national indicator set had been abolished in line with the Localism Act 2011, along with the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), with its role being undertaken by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). It was noted that the HCA focused on issues surrounding economic and financial performance rather than customer standards with the view to only intervene as a last resort where serious detriment to tenants was likely to be caused. It was explained that the view taken was that organisations should manage themselves with tenants taking a role in overseeing performance with seven core standards being undertaken around customer standards and economic standards. It was clarified that under the housing reform, rents were likely to increase due to the lower subsidy available with an uncertain future post 2015. It was explained that the welfare reform changes would also cause performance uncertainty due to the under occupation penalties, changes to the council tax regime and the impact of universal credit being paid directly to the recipient. Providers of social housing had previously undertaken work to encourage employment, training and tackling poverty of residents. It was felt with the loss of the national indicator set it would be difficult to comparatively measure partner's performance, particularly as they will be required to agree performance measures with tenants. It was noted that the overall performance of partners was good and improving and following receiving the annual figures in September, a report would be brought to the Committee in October looking at qualitative satisfaction and ways in which partners could work with the Council.

Following discussions, members queried the low target and performance surrounding satisfaction with customer service centre provision at the A2 Dominion. Tony Hirsch felt that this may be partly due to the welfare changes and the pressures tenants were facing financially and need to have an understanding approach when dealing with such issues yet a strict approach regarding rent. The Committee were informed of a new tenancy strategy that was being developed to offer greater flexibility, enabling more sanctionable activity regarding rent arrears to reduce arrears and if necessary allow a court order. Members queried the fairness of benefits in relation to working persons. Tony Hirsch felt the changes to welfare would have numerous impacts such as ability to collect rent with a proactive approach needing to be undertaken. It was explained that advice would be available on the options available to person in relation to occupancy although it was noted that it may not always be possible for persons to downsize, resulting in a lack of larger homes. It was queried why RSL performance information was no longer provided. It was explained that partners had a greater focus on their own performance and the satisfaction of the tenant rather than that of their peers. It was queried whether performance information could be included within a service level agreement. It was explained that how the council worked with partners needed to be reviewed to try and prescribe all partners to present consistent performance information following the loss of the national indicator set that was previously used.

6. Brent data - the multi agency data hub (update)

Alisdair MacLean provided a presentation introducing the intelligence hub database and provided an updated analysis on the latest statistical information from the 2011 census. He highlighted key statistical information such as demographic of the population, religious composition, race, accessibility of language and age. The

information could be comparable by ward, demonstrating trends in movement such as increased population and changes to living standard. Alisdair MacLean gave a demonstration of the Brent data hub, which allowed all partner organisations and members of the public to access numerous datasets and documents. The database was searchable, allowing excel exportation and it was hoped in future that partner organisations would be set up as administrators, allowing them to upload and update their own data. Following queries it was explained that the data was updated on a quarterly basis or when an updated version was available and despite a few issues with several links, the hub was working well. It was agreed that a link to the hub would be sent to the Committee with a member workshop taking place in April to look at profiling individual wards. It was explained that the hub allowed voluntary organisations to access information to support funding bids. Members queried the statistics surrounding households who did not have English as a first language and felt that the figures could be misleading as they may be fluent as a second language.

RESOLVED:-

Members noted the report

7. The gangs task group draft report for discussion

The Chair introduced the report and highlighted that subject to a few amendments and further recommendations to be included the report would be sent to the Executive.

Members noted the good work carried out by the task group and queried the impact of gangs on girls. The Chair noted that there was a knowledge gap surrounding the impact of gangs on young females and noted that there may be some cross over with the work to be carried out by the Health Partnership Overview and Scrutiny task group addressing violence against women and girls.

It was highlighted that addressing gangs over the next two years would be a major project particularly working with the entire family. A member training session would be held in the future as well as training for community volunteers which Councillors were also welcome to attend.

RESOLVED:-

Members noted the report

8. Partnership and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme

RESOLVED:-

Members noted the work programme

9. Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting will be confirmed at the Annual Full Council meeting on 15 May 2013.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.25 pm

Z VAN KALWALA
Chair