



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 14 September 2017 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Daly, Harrison, Hylton, Kabir and Naheerathan

Also Present: Councillor Conneely

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of interests

Cllr Harrison declared that she was a member of the BHP Board until end of September 2017

Cllr Long declared that she had a sister who lives in a tower block managed by BHP.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 July 2017 were approved as an accurate record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

The Committee heard updates on the following matters arising:

Information on unit cost of March 2017 fire safety assessments

Officers explained that the requested information was not currently available but a report would be prepared in due course and send to the relevant scrutiny officer for circulation to all members.

Availability of funds from the original £10m received from the installation of mobile phone masts

Phil Porter (Strategic Director, Community Wellbeing) informed the committee that no specific information was available on breakdown of expenditure but that Council was aware of £144 000 annual income received from phone companies, majority of

which goes to the Housing Revenue Account , with a reserve of £568 000 kept as contingency funds. Councillors requested a detailed response on the above matter, including the number of BHP buildings in Brent which have phone masts and a review of any future contracts with phone companies, to be circulated to all members of the committee.

Outcomes from housing association meeting on 16th August

The committee heard an update regarding the meeting on 16th August, when a forum of housing associations and registered providers representatives met to discuss various fire risk issues. A decision was made for an ongoing sub-group to be set up. The sub-group, chaired by the BHP Fire Safety Lead, had its first meeting on 4th September and identified key areas as part of its work programme. Officers said that feedback from the sub-group work programme will be presented to the committee once the programme is completed.

In relation to fire safety, the Chair made reference to a BBC Newsnight report aired on 13 September 2017 on cyanide issues in a tower block in Brent and asked for a confirmation on which particular block it was on about and if any actions need to be taken. Officers explained that no specific information was available at this stage but the Council was in discussion with DCLG and landlords and soon as specific details were available they would be published on the Council's website.

Issue related to un-adopted land between Brent Council and RPs.

Officers explained that Brent Council meets with registered providers on quarterly basis and the issue had been discussed but no project as such had yet been initiated.

Co-opted members

Members heard that the deadline for recruitment of co-opted members had been extended to 29th November 2017 in order to allow for more applications to be submitted. In addition, plans were being put in place to raise the profile of the recruitment via liaison with Communications and Communication engagement groups and all members were encouraged to share the information.

6. BHP Performance data

Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director, Housing) presented a report focusing on BHP Performance, resident engagement and council properties stock. He explained that although fundamental issues still exist, the Council had identified the reasons for it and actions were taken to improve it. Four particular areas of concern were highlighted – delays when calling the contact centre, repairs, rents and health and safety. The transition period, coupled with IT issues and management shortage, affected performance and led to an increase in complaints. Nevertheless improvements had been made since then and with the service moving back in house they expect a significantly improved relationship.

With regards to rent collection, Mr Osinaike explained that despite poor performance in Quarter 1, this area was now doing well with significant percentage of rent collected since August 2017. With regard to health and safety, he updated the members that a specialist consultancy had been engaged to undertake a review

of all compliance process, during October, in terms of gas, electricity and fire safety as review staff roles and responsibilities. Finally, on the issue of resident engagement, members heard that despite all efforts, statistics show that only 3% of the residents engage with the Council, with a substantial silent majority of 97% remaining unengaged. In order to tackle this, the Council intended to explore further engagement options, including social media as well as type of residents targeted and meeting format. In addition, a paper was recently presented to the BHP Members and Resident Panel and the comments received would be taken into account in the preparation of the resident engagement strategy.

In the discussion which followed, members asked further questions on customer experience and the performance on the contact centre. They felt that the delays in customer enquiries and the responses received were unsatisfactory and instead more focus should be paid on face to face engagement with tenants and leaseholders.

In response, officers explained the fundamental issues off BHP service delivery still existed, which made it difficult to have direct contact with residents. However, issues had been identified and transformation programme in place. Members were reassured that the Council was determined to make the new structure more flexible and responsive and actions were being taken to improve this, including a new head of customer service due to start soon and service managers posts currently being advertised. In addition, the Council was looking to set up a dedicated customer insight team to provide insight on the different customer types as well as an improved housing management computer system to ensure that information held is correct and managed well. Once the above system had been put in place, members would be presented with an equality impact assessment, particularly on the levels of vulnerable residents living at BHP properties.

Further area of discussion brought up at the meeting was the variance in ground maintenance in different estates and ways to identify blocks in Brent who have unsatisfactory levels of service. Officers explained that the issues were known to Council and plans were in place to tackle them. Overall, estate inspectors were responsible to check quality of service but due to recent events, resources were redirected to fire safety. However, increased number of estate inspectors was possible there was scope for re-instating inspection but timescales for this could not be confirmed. Officers also said that the contract with Wettons was being extended for 12months during which a procurement process would start. Other alternative options included the digitalisation of information as a way of monitoring resident satisfaction through surveys.

Members also sought information on the issue with asbestos and in particular the programme on removal of asbestos from council properties and any data available. They expressed concerns that this had been an ongoing issues, with repeated investigations of asbestos on the same areas resulting in significant charges to the leaseholders as a consequence. Officers explained that an asbestos log exists but quality of data was unsatisfactory and properties were often being identified on ad hoc basis, particularly during repairs. Asbestos compliance practices were also being reviewed.

Finally, the committee touched upon the issues with voids and whether that has been reviewed and on what basis were properties prioritised and allocated.

Hakeem Osinaike said that information on the above was not sufficient to allow for strategic decision to be made. He explained that the issue was treated as a priority with workshops on voids planned to discuss it. The move of BHP back in house would also ease communication with responsible officers, with the overall process due to be agreed and reviewed by December 2017.

RESOLVED that:

- i) final plan on resident engagement to be brought for further discussion to the Housing Scrutiny Committee upon completion
- ii) equality impact assessment to be done on vulnerable residents living at BHP properties
- iii) report on voids and what actions would be taken to tackle them

Following this item, it was **RESOLVED** that the order of business be amended as set up below.

7. Implementation of actions previously recommended by Local Government Ombudsman

Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs) presented a report on the outcome of the recommendations made by the Local Government Ombudsman in August 2016 and the further recommendations by the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on 23 November 2016 on how London Borough of Brent should deal with cases of domestic violence and the implementation of the actions which resulted from this.

Further recommendations included a review of West London reciprocal arrangements (arrangements between West London areas on what happens to tenants who move from one borough to another and how not to lose their social tenancy) which were eventually taken over by the pan-London agreement to which all Local Authorities were now signed up to. In order to avoid having two separate agreements, a decision was made by directors that the west London agreement was put on hold and that the pan-London agreement was adopted on a trial basis. A project group was set up between BHP and housing needs officers to review those processes and new procedures had been drafted and sent out to officers. Training on domestic abuse was also being delivered by Shelter. In addition, the Council was leading on a mystery shopping exercise across six participating boroughs which would test how officers were dealing with cases on domestic abuse and would set a benchmark against which to measure improvements. Finally, Mr Coaker stated that an Outcome Based Review had been launched, which highlighted some housing issues and the findings of which would be discussed at a scoping event due to take place in October 2017 and make recommendations to enhance the service.

At a question by members on numbers of suitable accommodation available to victims of domestic abuse, Mr Coaker explained that availability was dependent on certain factors and each case would need to be looked on an individual basis,

based on its tenure, location and protected status to determine which scheme to use. At a question on whether any Invest4Brent Properties could be used on a short term basis for victims of domestic violence. Officers explained that these were private properties but could be used if deemed suitable.

Members further enquired on the issue of retaining social housing status and right to buy in cases where the victim has to relocate and stressed the importance of ensuring that victims were not punished by the process or end up as private tenants. Mr Coaker, reassured the committee that in general detainment of social housing status was on a like for like basis but that secure tenancy depended on the individual circumstances as well as the policies and procedures of the receiving borough. The issue had already been identified in the OBR and was yet to be tested via the pan-London agreement. In addition to this, officers explained the OBR was still in progress, with housing services staff actively involved in the OBR process. A visioning event would be held on 4th October 2017 when all data that had been collected would be shared with stakeholders to develop ideas and feed into the workshops and mystery shopping initiative. Committee members were invited to attend the event and contribute to the discussion.

The issues of monitoring of work done on vulnerable residents, such as children and elderly was also mentioned in the discussion and the efficiency of the processes put in place to respond to calls for domestic abuse were also scrutinised by the committee. In response, officers assured the committee that the Council had taken appropriate actions to deal with this, including commissioning an OBR and initiating a mystery shopping exercise. In addition, Hakeem Osinaike explained that a performance management structure and comprehensive procedures were also in place which enabled Council services to track progress and deal with any issues accordingly. Finally, the committee stressed the importance of staff training and performance, which the officers reassured was being looked at and that a dedicated team of officers would be set up to specialise in cases of domestic abuse.

RESOLVED that:

- i) OBR/pan-London domestic abuse progress report to be presented to Housing Scrutiny committee by March 2018
- ii) update on OBR progress under matters arising at next Housing Scrutiny meeting on 1st November
- iii) annual update on staff training on dealing with victims of domestic abuse

8. Rent and Management of Travellers site

Hakeem Osinaike presented to the Committee a report on rent and management of the Lynton Close travellers' site. He explained that Lynton Close was an Irish travellers community of settled families who rent pitches from Brent Council on which they live in permanent mobile homes. The report set out progress that had

been made against four key areas - financial inclusion, overcrowding, fire safety and anti-social behaviour- and the next steps to be taken.

In the discussion which followed members had an opportunity to scrutinise some of the site's financial issues. With regards to rent collection and arrears, Mr Osinaike explained that in addition to Council rent, residents of Lynton Close were paying rent to a private mobile home provider. The implementation of a benefit cap had meant that some resident could not receive a full housing benefit and therefore were not in a position to pay the shortfall, thus resulting in an accumulation of arrears (total arrears figure was £238 000). He explained that although there were no plans to waive the arrears, the Council would not seek enforcement but would instead review rents of this site and will seek to propose to Cabinet a reduction of these charges to make the rents more affordable.

Furthermore, members asked questions on the contract with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), which manages the site on behalf of Brent Council, what was included in it and how would planned future improvements be paid. Members heard that the cost of the OCC management constituted the greatest single cost and despite the competitive tendering exercise carried out on 2016 the procurement process did not generate any savings. Officers explained that no council tax money was being used in the scheme and in essence it was self-funded, with revenue gained from rents used to pay for the site management resulting in a net nil. Non-collection of rent, however, remained an area of high risk so the Council was now in meetings with OCC to discuss the issue with the high cost of the contract and work was in progress. On the question on how improvements would be paid, Hakeem Osinaike explained that this would be done through the Capital programme. As a point of clarification, he explained that although money was available to spend, they were not ring-fenced and sat within the realm of HR.

In terms of overcrowding, the committee heard that this was largely a result of the constant movement of people to and from the site which made it difficult to keep track of the number of residents living in each property and caused issues for both current residents and the Council. In efforts to improve the situation the Council was putting together a team whose aim would be to visit the site, understand better the individual needs of each family and find appropriate housing options for them. The overall aim was to engage with residents and hear their views before coming with proposals on how best to improve the situation and tackle ongoing anti-social behaviour issues.

Members asked for an update on progress made with finding a second site, to accommodate growing number of travellers and whether there were plans to prioritise travellers under the allocations policy. Officers responded that there were no plans for a second site but instead the Council may seek to find a larger, more suitable site. With regard to the allocations policy, there was work ongoing between families living at the site, OCC and BHP and housing needs service on finding out what the situation at the site was and the level of overcrowding it created, which in turn would give the Council a better understanding on the level of overcrowding as a whole, the need to look for a larger site and whether or not current allocations policy needs revision. Decision on this would need to be made by December 2017.

Finally, members discussed the issue of fire safety and health and safety on the site. In line with BHP's wider fire safety policy, Fire Risk Assessments (FRA) were carried out annually for high risk properties, including sites like Lynton close, with a copy of the most recent assessment available in the agenda pack (Appendix C). Officers explained that although the Council had statutory responsibility for the site, it was down to the occupants to look after their individual caravans. Issues such as accessing the site by emergency services were ongoing, with access to the site regularly blocked by abandoned vehicles. In addition, spacing between caravans was mentioned, with concerns expressed about not meeting the required distance of six metres between caravans.

Further fire safety related issues included the lack of adequate provision of sockets in the kitchen facilities and storage of cylinders on site which posed a fire risk. Hakeem Osinaike explained that conversions were inevitable albeit costly and that plans were being made to gradually replace all kitchens and toilet units. Furthermore, smoke alarms and heat detectors were installed in all mobile homes at Lynton close, with the Council and BHP maintaining a close relationship with London Fire Brigade which makes regular site visits and informs residents of the fire safety issues created by overcrowding.

The discussion was joined by Cllr Conneely who made a contribution by explaining that Lynton Close was a very well established site with generations of travellers living there. She insisted that the Brent was not meeting the legal requirement for total number of pitches available, which presupposed the need to find a larger more suitable site where residents could relocate.

RESOLVED that:

- i) traffic enforcement report in June/July 2018 to be presented at a scrutiny meeting in the next municipal year;
- ii) work to continue on finding a larger travellers site and explore increasing number of pitches;
- iii) report on children and adolescents from Gail Tolley (Strategic Director, Children and Young People) to be shared with the committee
- iv) Housing Services team to share with committee members a breakdown of the contract with Oxfordshire County Council.

9. Scope - task group on fire safety in social housing

The Committee unanimously agreed to have a task group on fire safety in social housing with an invitation to join to be extended to other Brent councillors.

10. Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme 2017-18

Noted

11. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

J LONG
Chair