



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday 22 February 2018 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Daly, Harrison, Kabir, Naheerathan, Maurice

Co-opted members: Ms Michele Lonergan and Ms Karin Jaeger

Also Present: Councillor Mahmood

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies were received from Cllrs Hylton and Shaw

2. Declarations of interests

None declared.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 January 2018 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Matters arising (if any)

None

5. Deputations (if any)

None

6. Petitions (if any)

None

7. Order of business

RESOLVED that the order of business be amended as set up below.

8. Brent based Registered Providers (RP) Delivery of Social Housing

The meeting was joined by Debbie Smith (Head of Region, Genesis), Carl Byrne (Director of Housing, Genesis) and Jeff Fletcher (Business Manager, Genesis) who introduced the report and gave members a high level oversight of Genesis's service delivery to residents in Brent. Members heard that as one of the leading housing

associations in the UK, Genesis demonstrated a strong presence, with more than 6000 properties in the borough as of March 2017.

The committee heard that Genesis was committed to working and maintaining strong relationship with residents and landlords. As part of this, all tenants had been issued with a handbook, setting out clear expectations and responsibilities. Moreover, clear communication channels existed and residents could contact Genesis through their customer service contact centre and central email address as well as seek information on their website when necessary. Members were also updated that on 1st February 2018 a decision had been made by Genesis to merge with Notting Hill Housing. The merge would happen over a transition period of at least two years, during which IT systems as well as service and management structures would be integrated. As part of the merger process, plans were being put in place to appoint a local contact officer, whose details would be shared upon completion of the process.

Responding to members' enquiries on the relationship between Genesis and residents, officers explained that whilst challenging due to the on street location of most properties, Genesis was committed to address this and engage with residents as much as possible. As part of this, regular site inspections were carried out on a quarterly basis and residents were invited to join. In addition, residents were encouraged to take part in forums and information was shared through the use of noticeboards, newsletters and email updates. Genesis stated a commitment to support setting up of residents groups to set up and there was a designated team to support this process. Finally, members heard that residents were encouraged to engage at various stages of housing management contracts monitoring processes, especially with contractors to scrutinise their work and that this was promoted throughout the entire stock of properties

On the matter of engagement, members noted that significant issues still existed in terms of regular and consistent engagement with local councillors, with little or no follow up given on members' enquiries. Acknowledging the Committee's concerns, Genesis gave assurances that members views would be taken on board and Genesis would seek to address these in order to bring it up to the required standard. In welcoming members recommendations, officers stated that should members have any unresolved queries then these could be send to the designated members enquiries email address for further consideration and response. In addition, Genesis updated that it was in the process of introducing a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which would further improve its ability to process and provide an audit trail of all interactions made.

When asked about the conversion of social tenancies to affordable rents, Genesis explained their long standing conversion policy. The Committee was advised that the overall turnaround of converted tenancies was relatively low, at about 2%, due to the low annual number of voids. Generally, conversion of rents from social to affordable was based on a combination of factors including the housing association's ability to build, grants attached to the property, grants available from central government and the revenue required to be raised, with an affordability assessments carried out on each instance.

With regards to Genesis' Leasing Scheme, members heard that this was a scheme for temporary leasing of homes, which had been operational for a number of years.

The representatives stated that in principal Genesis would seek preliminary agreements with the private landlords and these were available to Brent Council for use as temporary accommodation, thus helping to manage the housing register

Members expressed concerns that over the past several years the number of available temporary accommodation had been gradually decreasing and sought assurances as to whether Genesis was actively pursuing the market. In response, officers explained that the market had proven a difficult one to enter but highlighted that Genesis was committed to address the issue and was working diligently to attract more landlords.

Regarding tenancy tenure, Genesis representatives explained that all new tenants who have joined since April 2012 were only issued a 5 year fixed term tenancy. Their circumstances were regularly re-assessed and tenancies would be extended provided these had remained unchanged. However, Committee was asked to note that changing a tenancy from secure to fixed requires more subsidies and often had to be done in combination with other products such as shared ownership. In the event of the occupiers passing away for example, the leased properties could either be sold on to the free market or, if under a secure tenancy, be transferred on to any heirs/families.

An area for concern was Genesis performance and the lack of Brent specific figures. Instead, members heard that these were combined with Barnet and showed 82% satisfaction levels. Managers assured the committee that performance scores were an accurate reflection of the current situation and were carried out by independent agencies. Managers also pointed out that whilst Brent satisfaction levels were not dissimilar to that of other boroughs, level of complaints remained higher than desired but reassured members that Genesis was working to improve this.

Spotlighting on Genesis property maintenance, the Committee sought further clarification on the current level of repairs investment in Genesis properties in Brent as well as overall standard of properties and plans for stock surveyance. In response, the representatives explained that the overall condition of the properties was considered good, with only 2% of homes in Brent not deemed in decent condition. They briefed members on the current plans in place to conduct a stock conditioning survey, which was expected to provide an overview of current stock and the condition it is in as well as flag up any issues. With regards to repairs, Genesis reps explained that the 2016/17 financial results reaffirmed Genesis's sustained focus on maintenance of existing assets, with ongoing repairs programme in place.

In terms of community funds, a Genesis representative explained that this was a pooled resource which consisted mostly of legacy funds. The funds were used to support a range of activities. The Committee was informed that there was a round of funding ongoing at the moment and residents' opinion had been sought through consultation, with any project that had been approved for funding but not started would have the funds rolled forward.

In light of the forthcoming Universal Credit, members sought further clarification and reassurance on the envisaged impact it may have on tenants, particularly given the high number of tenants' arrears. Genesis representatives acknowledged the

situation but reassured the Committee that a positive trend had been observed, with a growing number of sustained tenancies and a declining number of evictions over the last several years. Representatives explained that the current issues included a slight temporary spike which was expected to stabilise within 3 to 6 months of the full Universal Credit roll out. Furthermore, they reassured the Committee that Genesis was working collaboratively with Brent Council and the DWP in order to provide robust service to residents, with a number of services put in place to provide support to residents and mitigate potential impact of UC.

In terms of fire safety, members queried the current fire safety arrangements in Genesis properties and the level of information given to residents at the start or during tenancies. Genesis representatives explained that residents had been contacted and offered to have smoke alarms installed. They had also been provided with support and information on fire safety. In addition, they explained that an extensive fire risk assessment had recently been commissioned to review the current position in light of the Grenfell Tower fire. This had led to a project group deciding not to allow for any items to be kept in the communal areas in all Genesis properties in order to keep them clear of obstacles, with regular checks conducted every 3 months.

8.25pm – following this item the Committee adjourned for a short break. The meeting resumed at 8.35pm.

RESOLVED that:

- i. Responses to set of questions submitted to Genesis by Scrutiny team to be shared with the Committee
- ii. Code of conduct for residents and female violence policy to be shared with the Committee
- iii. Confirmation on how much is being invested on repairs in Genesis properties in Brent
- iv. Communication channels with Genesis to be improved
- v. Details of local contact person following merge with Notting Hill Housing to be shared with councillors
- vi. Statistics on female violence, anti-social behaviour cases and number of follow ups
- vii. Statistics on number of new tenants given fixed terms tenancy in Brent
- viii. Statistics on financial viability study on Brent House
- ix. Contact information on who residents can contact regarding installation of smoke alarms to be reviewed and updated on website

9. Find your home Programme

Laurence Coaker, Head of Housing Needs, Brent Council introduced the report and outlined the main points. He explained that following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2017 it had become a statutory duty for all local authorities to provide suitable accommodation to all eligible residents. As part of this duty, the Council had initiated the Find Your Home (FYH) scheme, as a vehicle for involvement with and providing tailored approach to homeless families before they get evicted by empowering them in finding alternative accommodation. Members heard that since its launch in 2015, the scheme had helped over 3000 families who have met the statutory eligibility test.

Highlighting upon the financial implications of the Find Your Home scheme, Mr Coaker explained that the Council worked with families and conducted a series of checks to ensure the safety and affordability of the chosen accommodation. In cases where private property tenancies would need to be signed, the Council would also pay an advance incentive to landlords of up to the value of £3300 to secure the tenancy. Responding to members' questions, Mr Coaker explained that incentive payments were required due to the highly competitive nature of the private rental market. The incentives were primarily applied to short term tenancies (up to 12 months) and paid after a tenancy had been signed in order to secure it, with the full property portfolio being regularly monitored by the Council to ensure legality and landlords' compliance with the scheme.

Whilst acknowledging the positive trend in overall reduction in temporary accommodation in Brent compared to other boroughs, members felt that overall focus should nevertheless be on prevention of homelessness and finding suitable offers to applicants. Mr Coaker stated that residents choices were being taken into account when considering location of offered properties, provided they met the eligibility criteria. Alternative options were available for those who didn't meet the criteria but either way all residents were treated equally. The same criteria was applied to ensure no one is disadvantaged, irrespective of their social/economic background. Members were assured of the Council's commitment to maintain a close relationship with families whilst ensuring that the system is tailored to the applicants needs and provides them with adequate and practical support

In welcoming the scheme, members noted that private rented sector accommodation was not a long-term solution and was only effective as a short-term intervention. It was noted that further consideration should be taken not just on the state of properties alone but also on the landlords who manage them. In response, officers explained that the Find Your Home scheme was part of an overall housing strategy and other approaches were also ongoing. Private landlords were welcoming reliable tenants so in this sense private sector was seen as fairly secure. Addressing members concerns about rogue landlords, officers assured that whilst some did still exist, the Council was making sure that they were avoided and checked before any residents could enter into a tenancy with them.

Finally, members were updated that it had been confirmed that temporary accommodation was out of the scope of UC and therefore would not be affected by any changes.

RESOLVED that:

- i. Figures on number of families taken part in the FYH scheme and how many have approached the Council be shared with the committee
- ii. Figures on number of properties which have tenancy agreements extended beyond 12 month period to be shared with the committee.
- iii. Information on outcomes for those ineligible for the FYH scheme be shared with the committee
- iv. Information on Universal Credit be updated on the Find Your Home pages on the Council's website

10. **Brent Housing Management (BHM) Development Plans**

Referencing the information in the report and accompanying appendices, Hakeem Osinaike, Operational Director Housing, Brent Council gave an update on the Council's Housing Development Plans and Infill Programme. He explained that housing demand in Brent was in line with the overall London trend and that the plans, which were part of the Council's Housing Strategy, were aiming at responding to the service needs.

In welcoming the report, members sought further information on some of the financial aspects of the scheme. Responding to members queries on whether retained Right to Buy receipts were utilised, officers explained that receipts could be used to fund up to 30% of the development costs, with the property valued at point of sale and formula applied to calculate any discounts. Officers also informed that as part of the Capital Development Programme, a fire safety scheme was also being carried out as part of ongoing refurbishment works. However, whilst overall financing of the scheme was protected, the Council was capped in terms of how much it could borrow so it was important to ascertain that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) remained balanced in order to ensure that borrowing was affordable and sustainable and could be used to fund other developments in the long term.

In terms of community improvements, officers explained that where needed these would form part of an extensive consultation. Realistic demands could be made by residents provided they were also in the interest of the Council. In cases, where improvements were required as a result of damages or disruption caused, these would be requested directly from the contractors. Members stressed the importance to consult with residents on any incentives available from contractors as well as looking at overall price and quality of service provided.

Referencing paragraph 3.7 from the report, members sought clarification on the affordability of housing units. Mr Osinaike explained that the Council had to make balanced choices and numbers of social housing were dependent on borrowing and repaying money factors. Going forward officers noted that it was unlikely for local authorities to invest in building as much social housing as before, with any social housing commissioned requiring full viability assessment.

9.45pm – Cllr Daly left the meeting

Finally, members touched upon parking arrangements on sites where garages had to be removed. Hakeem Osinaike responded that the current parking arrangements were being reviewed and Council was looking at introducing new parking scheme and any proposed changes would be consulted on. He updated members that there was a growing need for an appropriate enforcement policy to be out in place and that if scheme was to be successful then Council would consider plans to introduce a more efficient system.

RESOLVED that:

- i. The contents of the report be noted
- ii. Progress update on Ainsworth Close be shared with committee
- iii. Confirmation on exact location of Gladstone Park property and whether it sits on a council estate be shared with the committee

11. **Housing Management - Customer Service**

RESOLVED that:

- i. The report on Housing Management – Customer Service, including statistics on call centre performance be deferred until the next meeting on 21 March 2018

12. **Housing Scrutiny Committee 2017-18 Work Programme**

RESOLVED that:

- i. The contents of the updated work programme be noted

13. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 10.00 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG
Chair