



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 21 March 2018 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), Councillor and Councillors S Choudhary, Harrison, Hector, Naheerathan and Jaeger

1. **Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members**

Apologies received from Cllr Kabir, Daly and Hylton and Mrs Michele Lonergan

2. **Declarations of interests**

None declared.

3. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 February 2018 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. **Matters arising (if any)**

RESOLVED that:

- i. Outstanding information requested from Genesis Housing Association and Housing Management Team at previous meeting in February be shared with the committee.

5. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

6. **Petitions (if any)**

None.

7. **Brent based Registered Providers (RP) delivery of social housing**

The meeting was joined by Yvonne Anderson (Head of Housing, Catalyst), Mushtaq Osmani, (Head of Customer Experience, Catalyst), Ian Cann, (Gateway Area Manager, Catalyst), Wayne Davies, (Director of Asset Management, Catalyst) and John Kehoe (resident Forum representative), who jointly presented the item and answered members' questions. Members heard that as one of the leading housing associations in London and the South East, Catalyst managed in excess of 21 000 units, ranging from social rented homes to shared ownership properties. Albeit having relatively small – scale presence its presence within Brent compared to other areas, the housing association had undertaken steps towards expansion, following a merge in 2012.

Referencing the information in the report, members noted the disproportionate split in customer satisfaction between general and shared ownership tenants following the latest Catalyst Survey for Tenants and Residents (STaR). In response, representatives explained that Brent accounted for only 12% of its overall stock thus producing a low random sample rate which was not representative of the overall situation. Members were asked to note that survey results included in the report only covered the period January 2018 to date, and that further information could be provided to cover a longer period if required. Catalyst representatives stressed that customer satisfaction was paramount for them, especially as it was heavily driven by repairs. The housing association was in the process of conducting a procurement exercise to modernise the repairs service across all properties and bring the service charges in line with the rest of the industry, which was expected to be completed in the next 6 to 8 months.

Responding to members enquiries on investment and improvement works, Catalyst representatives explained that grants were allocated based on a two way approach targeting both performance and community needs, with particular onus on community and volunteering projects. With regards to the accumulated surplus of £69.9 million, members heard that any remaining funds after project delivery would be reinvested back into the community mostly through the development of new homes as well as into various regeneration projects. Furthermore, the committee was informed that approximately £35 million a year had already been reinvested in repairs and proactive planned maintenance, with a wider piece of work to revise repairs and maintenance contract to ensure it delivered value for money. Finally, members were also asked to note the Customer Experience Strategy – an ongoing Catalyst community initiative focused on the customer, which included the development of a new app and modernising the Catalyst website making it easier to access services.

When asked about addressing existing issues with resident engagement, Catalyst representatives acknowledged that whilst this was an area that still required improvement, the housing association valued resident involvement and had shown continuous commitment to engage with customers at all levels. Members' attention was drawn to the wide range of residents and tenures as well as high level involvement in order to drive positive change. As part of the wider improvement programme, potential changes to asset management contracts were being reviewed which also included customer engagement and developing a new governance structure. A tier system, using a combination of local forums and senior management was also being used to address any day to day issues. Feeding into the ongoing Customer Experience Strategy, the representatives explained that there was a growing interest from residents who were actively encouraged to take part, with any feedback received being relayed into the main board and used to influence and improve the strategy. This was heavily supported by the resident representative. Various methods and platforms were being used such as workshops on service standards, key performance indicators (KPIs), local neighbourhood plans and resident associations which were all deemed beneficial for developing a stronger and more comprehensive strategy.

Engagement with councillors was also discussed, with the committee seeking more information on ways for councillors to contact Catalyst. In response, representatives stated that whilst contact through the main contact centre was the preferred

communication channel, there was also a designated executive enquiry email in existence since November 2017 which was specifically for councillors and MPs. In addition, members were reassured that a specific communication plan was also being drafted.

In relation to public realm, the committee queried the state of the roads in the Church End Estate and stressed the urgent need for resurfacing. Catalyst explained that they had not been made aware of any issues within that area and asked members to consider overarching issues with road ownership which were often the cause of delays and were a limiting factor in what the housing association could do. As part of alleviating this going forward, Catalyst was reviewing the land titles, which would have important implications for any future development opportunities within Brent.

In terms of fire safety members queried the current smoke alarm availability in tenanted homes in Catalyst properties and the level of information given to residents, about maintaining fully functioning fire alarms. Catalyst representatives explained that smoke alarms and heat detectors were reviewed annually as part of checks. As a standard all properties were fitted with hard wired smoke detectors. Committee was reassured that all stock would be renewed and refreshed over the next three years, as part of an ongoing improvement programme. Furthermore, residents were being encouraged to regularly check their smoke alarms and awareness was kept through information published on website and various other channels such as leaflets and noticeboards, giving residents information on how to test it and where to report any issues. Whilst it was not obligatory for fire drills to be carried out on Catalyst properties, representatives assured the committee of the robustness of their fire evacuation strategy for each building and clear signage, with fire escapes being kept clear of any obstacles. In addition, a designated team of caretakers was in place to carry out regular checks in communal areas and ensure residents adhered to the guidance.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of the report be noted
- ii. copy of customer experience strategy be shared with the committee upon completion
- iii. detailed information on customer satisfaction over a more extensive survey sample be provided by Catalyst Housing Association
- iv. Catalyst Customer Service Strategy be shared with the committee upon completion.
- v. information on methods of reporting parking issues by residents during out of office hours be provided by Catalyst Housing Association

8. Homelessness Reduction Act

Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs, Brent Council) introduced the item and outlined the key points in the report. He explained that the purpose of the report was to provide information about the key changes and implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which was due to take effect from 3rd April 2018 as well as an overview and of the role and performance of the Council's Single Homeless Prevention Scheme (SHPS), including lessons learned to date.

In the discussion which followed members sought further clarification on the number of people who had used the scheme, in particular in relation to the recently reported spike in homelessness. Mr Coaker explained that the spike was mostly due to inappropriate referrals made to the SHPS team which had inflated the numbers. Referencing pt. 3.4 from the report, Mr Coaker said that following introduction of the Act there would be a new statutory duty of public bodies to make referrals to the Council of families under threat of becoming homeless in order to prevent this at an early stage, with the Council committed to early intervention. Spotlighting on members concerns about the spike in homelessness, officers explained that this was largely due to people applying to the programme at a very late stage after they had become homeless, with many using the Council as a last resort as opposed to a prevention service. Whilst acknowledging that community outreach was proving challenging, the Housing Management Team was committed to address the issue and raise awareness of its services through further publicity and marketing.

Members heard that whilst keeping residents in their current accommodation would be the preferred outcome, it was not always possible due to affordability factors, the local housing allowance and high rents imposed by private landlords. As a way of tackling this, the Council's owned company Invest 4 Brent (I4B) was buying properties to try and alleviate the increased demand for housing. Another solution was joined up working with other departments which the new legislation would encourage.

Finally, members enquired about the financial implications of the Act post 3rd April 2018 and how it would compare to other councils. In response, Mr Coaker explained that Brent was well placed in preparation for the new Act but financial predictions were difficult at this stage as spending and demand hadn't yet started. With regards to the SHPS Team, the committee was informed that whilst the Council intended to retain the service as part of its statutory duty to prevent homelessness, this would ultimately depend on funding, stating a report has been commissioned to explore the matter in more detail.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of the report be noted

9. Impact of Landlord Licensing

Spencer Randolph (Head of Private Housing Services, Brent Council) presented the item and outlined the main points in the report. He stated that the report set out the private housing services experience of the impact of property licensing on private rented sector tenants since the introduction of the Brent Selective and Additional Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMO) licensing scheme in January 2015.

Overall, members felt that suitable performance indicators for licensing was challenging and that the current fees charged by Brent were quite low and out of step with those in other boroughs, providing little compliance incentive and often being passed on to tenants as additional charges. Whilst acknowledging members concerns, officers explained that charges were reasonable with the option to be spread over a 5 year period. License maintenance was carried out through a compliance schedule with landlords first being given an opportunity to bring properties up to standard. The committee heard that should a property be deemed

to be in an inadequate state that tenants could be given alternative accommodation and landlord required to make improvements.

Responding to members' concerns about the impact of licensing on fly-tipping, particularly where properties were suspected to be Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs), officers explained that while the Council had acted on a number of reported cases this remained an issue for Brent. Whilst there had been some successes including several enforcement conditions on licensing and issuing of penalty notices no significant improvement had been made. Officers expressed confidence that the situation would change following legislation changes due in October 2018 when specific mandatory licensing requirements for any property would be covered. Whilst a lot of efforts had gone to resolve fly-tipping and arrangements were in place to alleviate the issue such as use of a reporting app, installing bigger bins and easier collection, some issues mostly due to tenants still persisted. Members were encouraged to raise any concerns about illegal rubbish dumping with environmental services as first point of contact or if suspected that a property is a HMO – with the housing management team.

As part of the discussion members enquired about the impact of the licensing scheme on landlords, in particular in cases where a landlord was suspected to be irresponsible or “rogue”. In response, Mr Randolph explained that the term should not be seen as representative of all landlords and its use depended on the circumstances (for instance landlords charged with an offence were often referred to as “criminal landlords”). Members heard that the Council maintained a landlord database where full details were recorded and there was active borough wide engagement with landlords through forums and newsletters. However, the committee noted that given there was no requirement for property owners to be the landlords which could provide difficulties in establishing the person responsible for managing the property. In welcoming the Council's efforts, members agreed that the existing database was not intuitive and needed regular updating. Officers explained that this was largely due to technical issues but assured members that the current system – ACOLAID - was in the process of being re-procured and changed. In addition, to ensure that license guidelines were adhered to, Council would carry out regular spot checks in the form of unannounced visits, without having to pre-warn landlord or tenants. Impact on tenants had been carefully considered, with Brent Council being the only local authority to date which had done research on alternative ways to soften the approach.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of the report be noted
- ii. proposal to Cabinet to have a performance indicator showing if licensing has impacted on illegal dumping following the introduction of landlord licensing.

10. Housing Management - Customer Service

Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing, Brent Council) presented this item and outlined the main points in the report. Members heard that some significant improvements in relation to the performance of the Housing Contact Centre had been made since October 2017 and progress was being made.

Responding to members concerns regarding the current long call waiting times most customers were experiencing, Mr Osinaike explained that one of the key challenges was that calls were not generally received directly into the contact centre – they were often transferred from another number. As a result it was at times difficult to redirect and monitor them. An action plan with proposed improvements was being put together, which would look into the handling and nature of calls. Amongst the key points in the plan was the need to review the waiting times and align it more closely with the service standard. As part of the process the Housing Management team was looking to set up a secondary contact centre, which could direct calls to the right officer. Members were assured that progress was made and that he was confident that the target would soon be reached.

(9.30pm – Cllr Harrison left the meeting)

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of the report be noted

11. Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme 2017-18

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of the updated work programme be noted
- ii. items on I4B and the Council approach to lettings be added to the committee work programme for next municipal year

12. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.35 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG
Chair