



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 6 February 2019 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), Councillor Maurice (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Aden, Ethapemi, Hassan, Johnson and Stephens

Also present: Councillors McLennan (Deputy Leader) and Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform).

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Kennelly and Ms Jaeger (co-opted member).

The Chair informed that Michelle Lonergan had resigned from her post as a co-opted member on the committee. The Chair thanked Ms Lonergan for her work and input on the committee and wished her every success for the future. It was clarified that there were no plans to seek a substitute co-opted member due to the disbandment of the Housing Scrutiny committee post April 2019.

2. Declarations of interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 November 2018 were approved as an accurate record.

4. Matters arising (if any)

The following matters were raised at the meeting:

- i. Council's Housing webpages had been updated, including information on private sector tenants.
- ii. Cllr Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) drew members' attention to the Greater London Authority's (GLA) rules on balloting and explained that all future housing schemes without an already agreed planning permission or funding arrangements would be subject to a ballot. Whilst changes in relation to the South Kilburn Regeneration Scheme were likely to pose a risk on the scheme's viability unless alternative funding arrangements were identified, officers expressed confidence in the success of the ballot, subject to appropriate preparation and communication with residents. Therefore, it was agreed that an update on South Kilburn Regeneration Project be deferred until next meeting on 26 March 2019 to also include indication on schemes which did not have specific funding arrangements.
- iii. Information on backlog of licensing applications be shared with the Committee.

5. **Deputations (if any)**

None received.

6. **Petitions (if any)**

None received.

10. **Housing Complaints**

Following this item the order of the agenda was changed as set out below

At the invitation of the Chair, Cllr McLennan (Deputy Leader, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided Members with an overview of the Annual Complaints Report 2017-18, approved by Cabinet on 10 December 2018. The Report also provided the Committee with an outline of the Housing Directorate complaints performance for 2017-18, a summary of the main cause of complaints and improvement actions set out in detail in Appendices A and B respectively.

Focusing on the Housing Directorate, it was stated that the majority of housing complaints related to customer care, repairs and communications and came from three areas namely Housing Management Services, Housing Needs and Private Housing Services with a negligible number of complaints received in Housing Partnerships. However, Cllr McLennan reported that despite ongoing restructuring and growing pressures on services, data demonstrated the strong improvements made across the Council compared to previous years, including a 4% decrease in Stage 1 complaints, 8% decrease in Stage 2, 5% decrease in level of compensation and nearly 30% decrease in the number of cases awarded compensation. In welcoming the improvements, a member posed a question relating to the reasons for the increase in the number of upheld complaints, despite the reduction in overall case numbers. Irene Bremang (Head of Performance and Improvement) stated that this was a reflection of the Council's willingness to take responsibility, while also challenging the pre-existing culture of defensiveness and hereby trying to improve the service and compensate residents when appropriate.

Discussions moved on with members spotlighting on complaints within the Private Housing Services, in particular the most common type of complaints received and the level of reporting. The Committee's attention was drawn to information in the report which provided a breakdown of root causes of complaints by main service area and demonstrated that the overall number of complaints in that area was low, with the majority of cases relating to either grants and enforcement or, in some cases, due to a discretionary payment challenges. In terms of reporting and follow up action, Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing) confirmed that previously existing backlogs had been cleared and the service was now focusing on current applications. He pointed out that the service was dealing with a range of enquiries, including such on licensing matters which were normally dealt as a service request but also standard complaints on the quality of housing services. Set processing targets were in place and adhered to, with officers agreeing to update on the exact turnaround times at the next committee meeting.

Finally, the Committee briefly spotlighted on the issue of recording residents' compliments received by staff. Irene Bremang advised that compliments had been under-recorded on the Council's complaints system and that staff had been reminded to log their compliments on the system or send them to the Complaints team to do this on their behalf.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Housing Complaints 2017/18 report be noted.
- ii. That the content of the automatic PRS licensing responses be improved to include additional information for residents.
- iii. That response times for the completion of licensing applications is confirmed by the Operational Director for Housing.

8. Welfare Reform and Homelessness (including the Homelessness Reduction Act)

Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs) introduced the report which informed members of the impact of the Welfare Reform on housing services and homelessness in Brent as well as an overview of the challenges and outstanding risk for the borough.

The discussion which followed focused on some of the main changes in the Welfare Reform, namely the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), the introduction of the Overall Benefit Cap (OBC) and the replacement of six benefits with Universal Credit (UC). Firstly, the Committee was informed that introduction of Universal Credit was likely to be the most challenging change. The roll out of Universal Credit was on track as planned but the full migration was not expected to be completed before late 2020. A number of enquiries had been received regarding the impact of the new benefit but it was no specific analysis on its full impact on claimants in Brent could be given at this stage.

A question arose on the impact of the Welfare Reform on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). Officers explained that the allocation for the next financial year is not yet known but assured Members that despite ongoing cuts the DHP budget was not going to disappear. However, Committee's attention was drawn towards growing concerns about the information given to claimants by the Department for Work and Pensions on the impact on other benefits. Subsequently, pressure was put on the Council to ensure claimants were not disadvantaged as part of the roll out process and that the situation was adequately monitored. Concerns were also expressed in terms of the number of private sector tenants, many of who were not known to the Council yet were likely to be worst impacted by UC. A robust service existed for those residents who wanted to change contribution bands, including one to one interviews and the use of a house affordability tool. Residents were given options to choose from, although larger properties were mostly available only outside of Brent. In addition, officers advised that a cooperation with RPs was crucial and assured Members that appropriate communication channels such as the Welfare Reform Forum were in place to bring such matters to their attention.

Members were mindful of the impact on tenants working on zero-hour contracts or those who were self-employed as they were seen as more vulnerable and likely to

fall behind with payments and questioned whether the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) could be used to help them. Laurence Coaker explained that each case was looked on an individual basis but pointed out that this was not the main purpose of the DHP. Instead the DHP was intended as an interim measure, for up to 12 week's period and was not applicable in zero-hour contract circumstances as there was no guarantee when the resident would be back to work. Affected residents were being referred to the Council's employment and skills service in order to seek more income stability.

In terms of the implications of reductions on housing related support, Laurence Coaker stated that the Council was under pressure to make further savings. Reviews however had shown that there was capacity to do that as certain services such as the floating support service were not fully utilised. This was further informed by the recently conducted Housing Related Support Budget Review had shown that cuts would be feasible without further impact.

Answering questions on the Overall Benefit Cap and what mechanism was in place to ensure people get the support they were entitled to, Laurence Coaker explained that the Council was committed to supporting people into work but stated that the service was largely reactive. However, with the homelessness category operating at 98% capacity and lack of voids, officers warned that many capped claimants were under risk of becoming homeless.

Discussion moved on to the issue of rough sleepers and what the council was doing to alleviate their situation. In acknowledging the existing problem, Cllr Southwood stated that the Council worked with a number of charities such as St Mungo's and Crisis on this, with majority of hotspots concentrated in the south of the borough. A regular count of the rough sleepers in the Borough was being commissioned from St Mungo's every two months, with reported figures consistently below 30 (19 according to last count in November 2018). A number of solutions existed in tackling rough sleepers. Firstly, Members' attention was also drawn to the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP), which triggered alerts sent to the Head of housing Needs. As a result an outreach team would go to known sites and collect rough sleepers and put them into shelters. A community based shelter had been set up, floating between different faith organisations and open throughout winter and until mid-April. Only one SWEP centre was available in Brent, near Pound lane in Harlesden, with an overflow facility available if necessary. Housing First Model was another solution to help entrenched rough sleepers, with a clear pathway identified to get them back in check as part of the process.

Success rates in getting people off the street varied depending on the type of rough sleeper so a range of models had to be used accordingly. Mental health and alcohol related issues as well as female and migrant rough sleepers were amongst the most challenging ones. Officers admitted that these posed a significant challenge on service provision, due to the increase vulnerability, lack of funds or reluctance to stay in shelter accommodation of such people. As part of the Council response, the Committee was informed of the existence of the Willesden Green Scheme, several hubs, dormitory style shelters and rapid assessment centre as well as the allocation of a designated resource to try and address at least in part some of these problem.

In terms of the Homeless Reduction Act officers explained that this was a "bolt-on" legislation, which had introduced new duties for prevention and relief of

homelessness. Since the Act was introduced there had been approximately 55% increase in demand in services, with the relief duty of local authorities largely focused on helping rather than accommodating. Under the Act prevention and relief duties were priority blind and required unconditional help regardless of whether the homeless was genuine or intentional. It was reported that the number of single homeless people who had approached the council had increased and there had been an overall increase in vulnerability. Those who were not in priority need could benefit from the Single Homeless Prevention Service (SHPS). The increase in demand was likely due to the fact that people were approaching the Council's services at a much later stage, after they had already become homeless. With only 14% of Council stock intended for single people, the committee discussed other possible solutions to tackle single people homelessness including utilising the Council's privately owned company – invest 4 Brent (i4B) - and considering other affordable housing options such as modular housing. However, the latter brought issues of their own, namely shortage of space and longevity of dwellings, many of which came with only a 60 year guarantee. In conclusion of this point, the Committee noted the importance of a balanced approach – one which addresses both the affordability gap but also which focuses on prevention measures and wider engagement.

Finally, the Committee spotlighted on the Welfare Reform Strategy and role of Credit Unions and questioned whether they were doing enough in Brent. Members welcomed the work that had been done between the Council and CUBE in alleviating debt but stated that further engagement was needed between residents and credit unions. Members were also mindful of the fact that most traditional banks were likely to lend money only to people with good credit history as they were less likely to default. However, officers acknowledged that more work needed to promote the work of credit unions and look at range of options. The Welfare Reform Strategy was also in need of updating and work was already under way on a revised draft. Officers welcomed the possibility of a pre-scrutiny of the draft strategy when it's completed

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Welfare Reform and Homelessness report be noted.
- ii. That the Head of Housing Needs shares with Members data on supported housing.
- iii. That the Head of Housing Needs provides data on domestic violence and its impact on homelessness and shares this information with Members.
- iv. That the draft Tackling Financial Exclusion be shared with the Committee.

9. Performance Update

Jo Walton (Head of Performance Insight and Improvement) introduced the report which briefed Members on the current performance in key Brent Housing Management areas for the period between April and December 2018.

In the discussion which followed Members raised a number of issues. Firstly, the Committee noted the variance in performance figures, with poorer rates observed in the winter months. Officers explained that this was due to the seasonal nature of calls and a combination of factors. Higher number of calls in the summer noted when most staff is on leave.

Referencing information in the report on number of calls answered within 3 minutes in the period from July to December 2018, Members noted that percentage of calls answered in November and December was lower than in previous months and that this did not give the impression of any improvement made. They also stated that it would be helpful to benchmark data against that of previous quarters. Officers stated that the data was recorded only because it was expected from the residents, and this was not the case under BHP. There had also been a change in telephone providers which had had an effect.

The Committee commented on the potential issue of staffing and enquired on the possibility of the Council recruiting more agency staff. In response, officers stated that contact centre resources were being reviewed as part of a wider structure review. New information to be used in order to establish what resource were required and ensure appropriate staffing levels.

Referencing customer satisfaction targets, officers acknowledged that there were areas where the Council was underperforming. Whilst overall call response by the Council's customer services was rated good, the Committee heard that delays in carrying out repairs were more common from a contractor's side. They acknowledged that there was a failure to manage response times appropriately just as much as Wates's own poor performance. It was explained that issues often arose from the type of repairs – minor repairs were resolved quickly whereas more complex ones often required two or more operatives which, if not managed well, led to delays. A series of workshops and meetings had been held with Wates and actions were set for them to work towards.

Discussions moved on, with the Committee referencing information in the report and spotlighting on the downward trend in the percentage of repairs completed within 14 days. Officers stated that residents often come up with false statements to ensure Council attends quickly to their repair, because they don't trust it will be done otherwise. As a result the two week measure had been introduced to ensure repair response are carried out promptly and consistently within specified deadlines. In terms of carrying out repairs below the agreed standard, officers explained that performance on that was measured. It was explained that as part of the contractual agreement with Wates any contractual services were charged at a flat rate, per property. This in turn created an initiative for the contractor to carry out repairs efficiently and to a high standard thus reducing the number of subsequent visits.

Members were mindful that the average case closure time of 58 days was not satisfactory. In response, Hakeem Osinaike explained that Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) issues were not usually resolved quickly and often required further investigation and mediation. He added that it was important to maintain good communication channels with residents. It was explained that many landlords measured satisfaction based on process itself rather than the outcome which created discrepancy in some of the performance figures. Whilst satisfaction figures quoted in the report were based on information obtained from an annual survey, it was anticipated that the roll out of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system would provide better, real-time intelligence on how cases were being handled.

Regarding noise complaints, Members enquired how the Council intended to tackle this and what the impact would be given the cuts planned for the noise team. Hakeem Osinaike acknowledged that this would be a challenge but assured Members that was not expected to have a significant impact as it would fall as part of the main Housing Management Team responsibilities and within core working hours. He explained that a balance had to be achieved between responding to noise complaints outside normal hours and providing a service within normal hours. In addition, an app had been developed which would allow residents to record evidence and report issues directly to the Council. Special equipment could be provided to those residents who could not use the app as an alternative to help them monitor noise. Enforcement would be carried out by the corporate ASB team. In conclusion, Mr Osinaike stated that a consistent and fair approach towards all residents had to be applied.

The Committee enquired about rent collection rates and were mindful of the fact that more than a quarter of the Council stock was in the form of leasehold properties. Officers expressed confidence that leasehold charges were going well with the actual quality performance on or above targets. They continued to say that the Council does not have the right to collect rents at source (under Universal Credit) but explained that a system was in place to identify and target those who might default before they get into serious problems. Officers expressed confidence that residents will continue to pay rent despite introduction of Universal Credit. However, they noted the importance of educating residents of the likely impact and help them limit damage and better manage their finances.

Finally, the Committee sought more information on parking performance which was not included in the report. Officers explained that five estates were visited to find out if there was an appetite for the new parking enforcement proposals. All estates refused so as a result the Housing Team was having to look at alternatives. Officers stated that there was a demand for improved parking controls but residents were not willing to pay the increased charges. Also not everyone used parking. Officers explained that current parking charges on estates were £10 per year but enforcement was very limited. Intention was to increase this in line with CPZ charges but keep it at the lower end. Enforcement measures were seen as compelling by residents but additional charges were not well received. The offer was therefore being reviewed and a paper was being prepared on new proposals which would be presented to the Council's Policy Coordination Group in May 2019.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents and improvements outlined in the Housing Management Performance report for the period April to December 2018 be noted.
- ii. That a performance update be presented on a quarterly basis to include benchmarking with other boroughs.
- iii. That a paper on proposals of reviewed parking arrangements be shared with Members prior to presenting it at the Policy Coordination Group in May 2019.
- iv. That target setting is reviewed to ensure robustness and an update provided to the Committee.
- v. That housing performance figures be uploaded on the Council website.
- vi. That future performance reports include a focus on Registered Providers

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

At the invitation of the Chair, John Magness (Head of Housing Supply and Partnerships) introduced the report which provided Members with an overview of the Registered Providers (RPs) operating in Brent.

The Committee was informed that there were an estimated 55 RPs operating in Brent ranging from small to large size organisations. A designated team had been set up within Housing Services to manage the relations with Registered Providers (RPs) and seek to develop a more consistent way of developing and managing these partnerships. Discussion were under way to develop a shared code of practice between the Council and RPs as a way of streamlining management standards and ultimately ensuring RPs adhere to and work towards Council objectives. No central depository of RP related information existed which created issues in terms of analysing data but also pinpointing exact location of properties. However, basic performance information was available as well as a central government league table developed by central government which provided some benchmarking data. This created issues both in terms of Members acknowledged existing problems but stated that there had been ongoing communication issues with some RPs thereby recommending the setting up of clearer contact routes in order to simplify signposting and dealing with residents' queries.

With regards to resident related performance officers explained that the Council was exerting influence where possible vis a vis section 106 but acknowledged that more work was needed and stated that relations were better with those RPs which tended to share Council's values. A lot of master planning was in place and the aim was to deliver the most affordable housing possible for residents. A key factor in the relationship with RPs was the need to provide more affordable housing for local residents. Some leverage was available in the form of access to land in the borough and Right to Buy Receipts but despite Council's access to land, RPs offers could not be easily turned away due to the wider access to funds available to RPs which in turn contributed towards alleviate at least in part some of the acute housing problems in the borough. The role of smaller RPs were also acknowledged particularly due to their capacity to provide more specialist accommodation. Viability of smaller RPs scheme was generally safeguarded with any struggling providers encouraged to consider a merger with another provider.

Finally, discussion centred on the RP's management of service charges. It was explained that service charges were split into 2 types – provision of services and actual charges for works. Officers stated that specific information on service charges was not available but explained these were defined in legislation and RPs were being regulated in similar ways to other housing providers. Any difference were a result of improper management, with any issues flagged up mostly via the complaints channels. Responding to queries on whether the shared ownership policy would include service charges, it was explained that affected properties were likely to be of leasehold character and for them the rent was calculated through a formula. Members heard that discussions were under way on shared ownership policy but it was likely for the management of that to be taken back in-house.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Brent based Registered Providers (RP) delivery of social housing report be noted

- ii. That a list of Top 20 RPs contact details be compiled and (1) shared with Members and (2) published on the Council's Housing webpages.
- iii. That RP performance is reported to scrutiny on a quarterly basis.

11. **Work Programme 2018/19**

RESOLVED that the contents of the Housing Scrutiny Work Programme 2018/19 be noted

12. **Forward Plan**

RESOLVED that the contents of the latest Forward Plan be noted

13. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.35 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG
Chair