



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Wednesday 27 March 2019 at 6.00 pm

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

Also Present: Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform)

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Johnson

2. Declarations of interests

The follow declarations of interest were made:

- i. Peter Gadsdon (Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships) declared a personal interest in relation to item 9 as a Director on i4B and First Wave Housing
- ii. Karin Jaeger (co-opted member) declared a personal interest in relation to Item 7 due to a possible minor adaptation (stairs) being fitted at her house.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 February 2019 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Matters arising (if any)

The following matters arising were raised at the meeting:

- Housing webpages had been updated as requested by the Committee at the previous meeting. However, issues with a planning applications link (instead of licensing) and insufficient information on tenants still to be addressed and updated accordingly.
- An update on resolved cases to be shared with the Committee
- Automatic response to emails as agreed at the previous Committee meeting had been drafted and request had been sent to the Council's Webteam to implement the changes.
- Role and impact of Credit Unions in Brent to be discussed at the next committee meeting as part of the Financial Inclusion item.
- Report on progress with parking on council estates due to be discussed at the Council's Policy Coordination Group in July 2019

5. Deputations (if any)

None.

6. Petitions (if any)

In accordance with Standing Order 66 from the Council Constitution the committee heard a petition from Ms Suzanne Banton, Brent resident, who objected to the installation of smart meters, lack of proper insulation and major construction work carried out at Landau and Joules Houses. In her presentation, Ms Banton outlined the following key points:

- Lack of consultation prior to commencement of works
- Lack of direct resident engagement
- Lack of adequate information and support
- Lack of consideration of residents' personal/health circumstances

The Chair thanked Ms Banton for her presentation and opened up the debate. The following points were raised by Members:

- Concerns about the methods of consultation
- Need for improved methods of communication and engagement with residents to ensure residents were adequately supported.
- Need for a comprehensive and sufficiently detailed information to be provided to residents.
- Need for consideration of alternative options where appropriate
- Concerns about impact of new heating system with residents being moved from an old to a new billing arrangements following installation of smart meters
- Due regard needs required on residents' needs and the potential impact of any major works.
- Need for a better system for measuring progress of works and utilisation of appropriate safeguarding measures.
- Need for review of the effectiveness of the role of the resident liaison officer.

Officers responded to the points raised above and sought to address the resident and members' concerns. Peter Winchcombe (Compliance Manager, Housing Management Property) stated that the petition related to installation of pipes and smart meters at Landau and Joules Houses, which was meant to be completed 16 weeks ago but had been delayed due to issues with obtaining access some of the residents' homes. A number of meetings had been held with on site to inform residents of the works and the site set up was open to residents to ask questions if necessary. The complexity of the works was offset by the residents' circumstances and a resident liaison officer (RLO) was on site to help with any queries and provide effective support to residents.

Responding to concerns about the new billing system resulting from installation of the smart meters, Mr Winchcombe stated that benefit outweighed the disadvantages, with smart meters expected to provide residents up to date information of usage and allow for a better management of their heating bills.

Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing) added that carrying of major works was a legal requirement for the Council and was being done on a regular

basis. However, he acknowledged the poor level of consultation and added that plans for improvement would be put in place. It was explained that a planned resident consultation meeting would be re-scheduled to a later date to allow for at least 3 weeks' advance notice. Venue and timings of the meeting would also be reconsidered to ensure it is suitable and inclusive of all residents.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the petition presented by Ms Banton be noted
- ii. That concerns raised by the petition be addressed and appropriate action be taken by Housing Management including further consultation, resident engagement and consideration of alternative arrangements where appropriate.
- iii. That adequate measures be put in place to ensure that works are completed within the agreed timescales

9. Invest 4 Brent (i4B) and First Wave Housing (FWH)

Following this item, the order of the agenda was amended as set up below.

Martin Smith (Chair of i4B and First Wave Housing) introduced the item which provided members with an update on i4B Holdings Ltd and First Wave Housing Ltd performance on progress in implementing their respective business plans. He noted that both companies were in good position but stronger focus on variance required to ensure optimization of assets.

Spotlighting firstly on First Wave Housing (FWH), Mr Smith explained that this was a virtual company all of which functions were carried by the Council. As such FWH was a valuable resource in tackling a number of housing issues. The business was mature with stable performance and a current property portfolio of 45 market rent properties. Areas where further work was required included rent rationalisation and better asset management and maintenance schedule. A number of properties were expected to be sold over the next few months.

Invest 4 Brent (i4B) on the other hand was a relatively new creation, operating for approximately 18 months and established specifically to reduce the Council's spending on temporary accommodation. At its heart was the principle of providing good quality accommodation to residents at affordable prices. Whilst also a virtual company, unlike FWH, i4B was limited by shares and borrowed money from the Council in order to acquire properties. To date i4B owned nearly 240 properties, which was a sizable viability given the short period of time the company had been in existence. Future plans for i4B included further focus on growth in order to ensure the financial stability of the company as well as more diversification of properties.

Members welcomed the presentation and in the discussion which followed raised the following main points.

A number of options seeking to explore the potential benefits of aligning the i4B and FWH had been explored. However, following analysis of these options, it had been agreed that merger plans between i4B and FWH be suspended at this stage due to differences in legal entities and lack of a mutually beneficial grounds between the two companies. Members were informed that a merger was also not currently viable

for the Council as doing so would entail transferring of properties and payments of enhanced values. The decision would be kept under continuous review and be revisited again at an appropriate time in the future.

The Committee sought clarification on tenancy types and what information was given to residents. Five different tenancies existed within FWH with no plans to change the rent or agreements at this stage. With regards to i4B, Mr Smith explained that all i4B properties were dedicated to reduction of temporary accommodation and all tenants were informed that they would be considered tenants to a private landlord. Upon taking on the tenancy residents were advised of who their management agent was and provided an information pack. Should they were to become homeless they would have to apply to the Council and go onto the housing register or declare themselves homeless.

Offers of i4B properties to homeless families were made through a discharge of council duties. Some properties were turned away due to type of property or area they were situated in. A number of offers were also turned down due to a preference over social housing accommodation or due to reservations from private tenancies. This was to an extent a common misconception, despite the fact that i4B tenants were considered council tenants. It was intended that overtime the good reputations of companies like i4B would help resolve some of the scepticism tenants may be having.

Long term plans for refurbishment of blocks were factored in the financial plan. Need for refurbishment had also been identified from direct visual evidence during inspections as well as the recently carried stock condition survey. A total of 20 homes, including Granville and Canterbury Houses in South Kilburn, had been identified in need of major works (Section 20 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985).

Responding to a query on roads and pavements near Grunwick Close, part of a private development owned by FWH, a Member enquired about the issues with pavement parking and lack of parking enforcement and whether there was a possibility for the Council to consider adopting these. Whilst a specific response could not be provided at the meeting, officers agreed to investigate the matter further.

Rent collection was fundamental in the running and maintenance of i4B and FWH properties. Addressing the accumulated rent arrears, however, Members heard that, unlike FWH which had a steady and stable rent collection mode, insufficient time had been spent on designing the process of signing up tenants for i4B, thus making the process inefficient and cumbersome. Some improvements through BHM had been made and current rent collection was just under the 90% target.

An area of concern for both officers and committee was the upcoming rollout of Universal Credit (UC) and its potential impact on i4B/FWH rent collection. A high proportion of residents were new tenants who were also in receipt of UC, which in turn was likely to lead to delays in payment processing. Officers advised that in situations where payments could not be obtained, the Council would seek enforcement action in the form of warnings and court orders.

In terms of eviction rates, the Committee that was assured that these were generally low and tended to be in properties outside of Brent. There had been no evictions in FWH properties and only 5 voids in the last two years.

Spotlighting on key workers housing, members sought to ascertain how this was defined in Brent and what arrangements were in place to secure suitable accommodation. Officers advised that Cabinet had given approval for the Council to negotiate the purchase of properties within the Quintain estate portfolio at a discounted rate and this was in progress. The general control of the purchased properties, however, would sit under i4B and since i4B was a private company, exact allocation of properties could not be followed and availability specifically to key workers could not be guaranteed.

The Chair thanked Mr Smith for his presentation to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the i4B Holdings Ltd and First Wave Housing Ltd update report and accompanying presentation be noted.

7. Disabled Facilities and Small Works Grants Distribution

Spencer Randolph (Head of Private Housing Services, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided members with information on the delivery of Disabled Facility Grants (DFG) and Small Work Grants (SWG), performance of the service and any challenges.

Cllr Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) drew the Committee's attention to the approach of the scheme, explaining that majority of issues were based on determining whether an adaptation was major or minor rather than what type of grant was needed. The revised grant allocation approach had built in flexibility and sought to address residents' concerns over means testing by removing it as a requirement in the process, thus leading to a more positive experience. An article on the new approach to adaptation would be included in the summer issue of the Brent magazine to further illustrate the point.

Disabled facilities grants were prescribed by legislation. Aim of the Housing Team was to update model in order to process requests more efficiently and simplify a traditionally very complex and lengthy process.

Grants funding was considered a perplexing process. The funds were allocated by central government to the NHS, before being proportionally ring-fenced to the Council via the Better Care Fund. In an effort to simplify the process, the Council was seeking to make a case to the NHS to demonstrate saving opportunities by making small adaptations.

In terms of private housing services adaptations, Mr Randolph that while historically most referrals came from Adult Social Care, adaptations would be carried out by Private Housing Services irrespective of the type of tenancy they relate to.

A total of 4284 people in Brent were benefitting from small grants. On average the Council was spending approximate £360,000 on small grants, with an average

spent of circa £1,500 per grant, and a variable maximum of up to £7,000 for small works over a 3-year period depending on the type of adaptation required. Mr Randolph advised that despite the £30,000 mandatory limit, there was no fixed threshold for major adaptations, with additional funding possible for anything above the mandatory limit which was deemed practical and reasonable. In terms of cancellation trends, officers advised that this was often due to incomplete means testing or refusal to do so. In such cases a self-fund scheme would be offered would prevent the number of cancellations.

Discussions moved on with members enquiring about the type of adaptations and what happened to them once a property became vacant. In response, it was stated that the common practice was not to keep properties void just because they had major adaptations done. Locata, the system used for bidding on council properties, would be updated to reflect when such property became available and the matter was also picked up by surveyors. However, as most adaptations were specific to the user needs, when a property became void, these had to be removed. To reduce costs and waste, the Council was looking into the overall adaptations programme and considering building “lifetime homes” to ensure that fewer adaptations were needed.

It was noted that provision of adaptations was a “tenure blind” service, irrespective of the type of accommodation and solely focused on the needs of the resident. Small adaptations were also possible for private sector properties, although further work was need to ensure the scheme was adequately promoted within the private rented sector. However, some resistance was possible from landlords in the private sector who had the right to refuse an adaption. This was mainly due to a need of a balance between cost of adaptation vs benefit for the tenant but more cases needed to be looked at before specific actions/decision could be made. In conclusion of this point, the Committee also noted the results of the Private Housing Services customer satisfaction survey for grants completed between 1st January and 20th February 2018 as set out in Appendix 1 of the report. The results showed that although only 10% of the all grants were completed over that period of time, results revealed a consistent level of satisfaction across both DWG and SWGs indicators.

Finally, spotlighting on performance indicators, the Committee queried the targets times as set out in paragraph 6.5 of the report, particularly in terms of the overall processing times for agency SWGs from receiving an enquiry to an inspection, which Members felt needed revising. Whilst officers agreed to review these, they noted that their priority was to involve the client in the process of adaptations, which often took longer than the actual time required for the work to be completed.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Disabled Facilities and Small Works Grant Distribution report be noted.

8. New Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System

Monika Singh (Director of Transformation, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided members with an update on the management and implementation of the Corporate CRM system (Microsoft Dynamics) as part of the ongoing

Transformation programme within the Housing Services department. The project, which began in November 2017, had been seeking to address a number of challenges in the current digital environment and create a more efficient, reliable and transparent system for tracking housing related works and enquiries. As part of the process, significant investment had been made to improve the Council's digital toolkit and in so doing improve the overall customer experience for residents.

The Committee welcomed the report and raised a number of questions on the progress made to date in the subsequent discussion.

Spotlighting on the newly introduced automated Financial Inclusion Casework, members heard that the aim of the casework was to enable tracking of works as well as give opportunity for residents to feedback, with relevant support and training being offered. The casework system was also intended as a vehicle to extract data that was missing the previous environment and quantify financial and social outcomes in order to determine which interventions were of most value to the customers and the Council.

Another improvement which the project was focusing on was the creation of a Customer Portal, providing comprehensive information and self-service tools to residents. Ms Singh stated that the Portal would significantly reduce the number of customers calls to the Council and instead provide them with the necessary online facilities to report problems, share images and make enquiries. The Portal was in advanced stages of the development and was anticipated that alongside the rest of the project, would be completed by July 2019, followed by data integrity checking and events to raise publicity. Official release of the portal to the public was expected between September and December 2019.

Discussions moved on with Members spotlighting on the current issues and inefficiencies around accessing information. Officers advised that a total of 18 systems existed, which were not centrally coordinated. As a result, accessing information had become a time consuming and cumbersome process, affecting handling times and customer experience. The CRM system would seek to address these problems, by collating all relevant data into one central database, creating a single page profile for each customer and therefore leading to greater efficiency and automation.

Addressing members' concerns about the accessibility of the new digital platform to customers who may not be au fait with technology, Ms Singh advised that a number of alternative provisions were being considered, including introduction of local hubs and surgeries where residents could get face to face help and support. In addition, customer would be able to rely on improved call-centre functionality, with the new system allowing the council to better target the needs of the residents, meaning that waiting times would be significantly reduced for those customers identified as vulnerable.

Introduction of the CRM would also result in changes to corporate performance monitoring, with a different set of targets to be determined. Current oversight and management of the CRM sat with the Service Improvement team as part of the transition from Housing Transformation but the functionality was still limited. Ms Singh assured the Committee that the system had the potential to supply management with real time information which in turn would provide better insight

upon which to plan improvement, enhance service monitoring but also replace the need to use external supplies to provide satisfaction data.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System Management and Usage report be noted
- ii. That a report on progress and satisfaction of the CRM be provided at an appropriate committee meeting in autumn of 2019 to ensure targets were being met.
- iii. That a Member Development session be organised upon completion of Customer Portal

10. **Work Programme 2018/19**

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Work Programme 2018/19 including an item on Financial Exclusion added to the agenda for the next Committee meeting, be noted.

11. **Forward Plan**

The Committee was informed that a report on Asset Management Strategy was expected to be presented to Cabinet at its meeting in October 2019.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Forward Plan be noted

12. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG
Chair