



## **MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** **Tuesday 4 February 2020 at 6.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), Councillor and Councillors Afzal, Knight, Shahzad, Stephens, Thakkar and Goulden

Also Present: Councillors McLennan and Hylton

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

Apologies were received from Councillors Colwill, Ethapemi and Hector, and Co-opted member Reverend Helen Askwith.

### **2. Declarations of interests**

The following personal interests were declared with respect to item 7 to be discussed at the meeting:

- Councillor Shahzad – managed a property in Brent

### **3. Deputations (if any)**

The members of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee agreed to hear a deputation from a representative of Harlesden Area Action in relation to item 6 – Council Housing Management Services.

The representative of Harlesden Area Action explained that she was the Chair of Harlesden Area Action, which was a resident association in the Harlesden and Kensal Green ward. Photographs were presented as examples of what the representative felt were evidence of Brent freeholds in a state of disrepair. The representative highlighted that one of the properties had been in a state of disrepair for 4 months, and another property which had been reported for accumulation of waste including rats in August had still not been resolved. She called into question Brent's legal responsibilities noted under paragraph 12 of the Housing report to 'keep in repair and proper working order the structure and exterior of residential properties it owns' and 'to ensure premises are not in a state to be prejudicial to health or nuisance'.

The Chair thanked the representative and invited her to return to her seat.

### **4. Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 11 June 2019 and 26 November 2019 be approved as an accurate record of the meetings.

### **5. Matters arising (if any)**

There were no matters arising.

## **6. Council housing management services**

Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) introduced the Council Housing Management Services Report, providing an overview of Brent Housing Management's operational performance. The report provided data for the period since the service came in-house in October 2017 for comparison.

In outlining the report, Councillor Southwood highlighted the following key points:

- Housing repairs were a difficult area for residents. She hoped the committee could see the concerted effort to improve, such as tackling the misdiagnosis of emergency repairs, which were now being completed on time 100% of the time. The contractor, Wates, handled all repairs.
- The Housing Management Service dealt with considerable scale, and expected to see further improvements. There were issues of estate management for residents, and the cleaning service currently under review had been brought back in-house, with residents part of that review to specify what they would like to see from the service.
- The tenancy sustainment panel had been introduced by the Council to address those residents receiving Universal Credit and who were vulnerable to rent arrears.
- In acknowledging the deputation, Councillor Southwood felt that it was an example where work had not been as joined up as it should have been. Properties in disrepair for some time came to the services attention from councillors flagging them, resident complaints and proactive work where Officers sampled the state of properties. It was expressed that it was important to hear about concerns and issues, and that she expected teams to work jointly to resolve issues, including with Veolia, the waste management provider.

The Chair thanked Councillor Southwood for her introduction, and invited Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director for Housing, Brent Council) to make any additions to the presentation, with the following highlighted:

- Hakeem Osinaike issued a correction to the report, which stated that housing management came in-house in 2016, highlighting that it came in-house in 2017.
- In response to the deputation, Hakeem Osinaike agreed that the service did not always get everything right, and it was always good to receive feedback from residents. He felt that as feedback was received, they could build a programme to ensure needs were met.
- He highlighted that Brent Housing Management were always investing in properties, and this financial year had committed to spending £6.5m

refurbishing all low-rise properties including windows, roofs and heating systems. In total, the Housing Management Team were spending £17m investing in properties.

The Chair thanked both Councillor Southwood and Hakeem Osinaike, and expressed appreciation for the work of the Housing Management Service. He proceeded to invite questions and comments from Committee members, with the following issues raised:

In response to whether the team felt disappointed that some areas had remained unimproved within the new Housing Management Service, Councillor Southwood expressed that it was a wide ranging and complex service. She expressed that lessons had been learnt from the previous service, particularly in relation to outstanding repair issues. It was noted that it was hard to compare the new in-house service to the previous service, as the new service had a much larger remit. Councillor Southwood added that there was ever increasing transparency where things needed improvement. For example, the trial in July 2018 for 'patchless' working was identified by residents as an issue, therefore the service would revert back to a patch-based model from April 2020.

The committee noted paragraph 4.1 of the report that highlighted a steady increase in customer satisfaction, and queried whether there was any qualitative data that could offer better reflections of outcomes and accountability. In response, Councillor Southwood informed the committee of the introduction of a follow-up to repairs where Officers spoke to residents immediately after the repair, asking whether it met their expectations and why. It was more of a quantitative measure of satisfaction. She felt that there was not a correlation between the huge investment in repairs and customer satisfaction, so qualitative data was necessary to underpin why.

Sean Gallagher (Head of Housing Property, Brent Council) added that where dissatisfaction had been reported, the resident was contacted and a report taken. These reports were then taken to a weekly meeting with contractors, the customer experience team and property surveyors to draw out mistakes made and trends. There was also the Customer Experience Panel made up of Brent Council tenants, which was exploring customer satisfaction.

Continuing to discuss customer feedback, Sean Gallagher responded to a question that there were not currently measures for the broad experience of tenants where they had not needed or received a service. The model would be changed in the new financial year with broader questions currently in development with regard to repairs. He was also proposing that the Customer Experience Panel joined the Housing Management Team on the journey of a repair as it happened in real time. Hakeem Osinaike noted the annual housing survey (STAR) as a broad test of how tenants and leaseholders felt about the Council as a landlord. Regarding the use of data from that survey, Hakeem Osinaike explained that the customer insight team gathered all of the information from those surveys and analysed them to inform services of improvements that could be made. Councillor Southwood added that where trends were coming out from the data she was able to act on them as a Cabinet Member.

It was agreed that for future scrutiny meetings Housing Management report could include the voice of the tenants.

The Committee noted the increase in customer satisfaction to 83%. In response to where the service hoped to be next year, Councillor Southwood expressed that she would like to see 90% customer satisfaction. Hakeem Osinaike added that Brent Housing Management were performing at the top quarter in London.

The committee queried what core work would be done to assist the rise in customer satisfaction hoped for. Councillor Southwood responded that they were striving to work with a more joined up approach, as it impacted resident experience if they had to call several times and be passed around to different services. She highlighted voids as an area for improvement and estate management services. They were working with residents to redefine the cleaning service.

Hakeem Osinaike hoped to see an improvement in customer satisfaction as a result of addressing areas identified as needing improvement. For example, to address shortfalls in complex repairs the service would work with Wates through new weekly meetings looking at the way Wates operated. The renewed relationship with Wates allowed constructive working, and Wates had been informed how the housing service would measure them and the frequency issues would be raised. Phil Porter noted that 30% of Wates score on planned works would be tenant and leaseholder satisfaction going forward. Other work included the introduction of an online application to 700 tenants and leaseholders that enabled them to report a repair or book an appointment. If the pilot worked well, they would introduce the application to all tenants to allow them to book repairs 24/7.

Members of the Committee also asked for details on the tangible changes that had been made to make the improvements seen in the report. Councillor Southwood felt that bringing the service in-house had given the Council more agency over what happened and more control on standards. They were working on the attitude and culture of the service. The new record management system would also allow for more joined up working with other services. Hakeem Osinaike noted that the in-house service allowed other services within Community Wellbeing to work together and provide a whole service, as often the teams were providing services for the same residents, for example the single homeless prevention service.

Regarding section 8.9 of the report about keeping residents safe, Committee Members queried why the percentage of properties with a valid gas certificate was at 99.72% and not 100% and how the service planned to reach 100%. Sean Gallagher explained that not every tenant let them in to test and they sometimes would have to use court action. The gas certificates would eventually be obtained, and he was confident that Brent was performing in the top quartile.

The committee requested a report back at the end of the 12-week audit ensuring there were Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) for all residents in high-rise blocks to assure the committee that the work had been completed. It was agreed that this could be reported. To complete the actions required liaison with individual residents. Personal evacuation plans were a sensitive piece of information to obtain, and could worry residents. Regarding the low-rise fire safety work programme, Councillor Southwood expressed there had been an unacceptable delay due to issues with Wates' supply chain. It was in relation to

sourcing correct fire doors, and whilst the service recognised the difficulty sourcing the doors, they did not accept it as a reason for delay. Wates were being closely monitored and Phil Porter had met with Wates that day and been informed that they were on track with their monthly plan.

Specifically regarding the number of calls answered in the table of paragraph 6.1, which was an area for improvement identified in the report, Hakeem Osinaike explained that they were taking on a larger number of calls than the previous service due to the expanded remit of the service and the introduction of new phone and record management systems had impacted the service. Before the introduction of the new phone system and record management system contact centre performance had improved significantly by approximately 10%, so now that the new systems were running smoothly it was hoped that performance could get back to that level by June 2020 and then see a further improvement in the latter part of the year. The introduction of these new technological systems was a part of the wider Council's digital transformation programme.

There was further discussion relating to the central call centre, in which both housing needs and repairs were dealt with. The Committee wanted to know how the service could deal with a vulnerable client over a phone enquiry and whether the workforce were well equipped to deal with those situations. Hakeem Osinaike explained that when dealing with complex matters it was not dealt with in the contact centre, but sent through to a secondary team to take the case forward either by phone or visiting the tenant. The introduction of the record management system meant that contact centre Officers had access to as much case work information as possible to allow them to assist the client more fully. Hakeem Osinaike highlighted the desire to deal with all enquiries in the same contact centre to limit the amount of transference to someone else, and often 80% of calls required straightforward answers. The aim was that when the resident left the call they would know what would happen next. The Committee requested figures in future reports showing how calls were handled and the percentage of people satisfied with call outcomes.

Presenting Officers confirmed that the record management system had robust security, taking into consideration GDPR requirements as it dealt with personal information. The service had staff responsible for ensuring full compliance with data regulations.

The Chair invited Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader, Brent Council) to take the speaker's seat. Councillor McLennan further explained that the digital strategy for 2019-2023 was tied in with the cyber security strategy, and the Council worked closely with other London Councils to ensure ethical data gathering. Security was an essential part of the strategy. The Chair thanked Councillor McLennan for her contribution.

It was confirmed that while all housing management services were now delivered in-house, there were a number of contractors who they still worked with such as Wates. There was a political desire to bring as much as possible in-house. A target was to build 1,000 new homes, a major contract across the council with Councillor Krupa Sheth leading what the options might be politically.

The Chair invited Councillor Hylton to take the speaker's seat. Councillor Hylton expressed uncertainty with the process of how complex repairs were dealt with, and gave personal experiences of needing complex repairs as an example. Sean Gallagher expressed that complex repairs had never been managed well and the process meant there were often delays. The team were working with Wates to begin addressing these issues.

Councillor Hylton also asked about the members of the Customer Experience Panel and how representative the panel was. Hakeem Osinaike responded that the members of the panel had been recruited through advertisements on the internet and through local newspapers. There was a variety of members and it was expressed that the panel was very representative, with a lot of professionals in their own rights who were able to challenge the Officers. The panel had been in existence for 18 months and the plan was to retain the members rather than have a turnover. Recruitment would happen if positions became vacant. Having concluded her questions, Councillor Hylton was invited to retake her seat.

Regarding tackling Anti-Social Behaviour, Hakeem Osinaike explained that the team were working closely with the Council's Community Safety Team on an agreed process. They also worked with police. It was highlighted that there was a combined effort across the council to deal with Anti-Social Behaviour. It was hoped that the new record management system would help improve communication with residents about Anti-Social Behaviour.

Committee members wanted to hear about financial pressures and mitigation for the service. Councillor Southwood explained that there had been a £0.5m overspend in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). This was because the Public Works Loan Board borrowing rate was increased by 1% and cost the Housing Revenue Account around £1m a year. Turnover for the service was around £55m. The service was currently out for consultation on increasing rents in Council Housing, due to close shortly. The government rent freeze represented a financial loss to HRA of around £23m, and the service now had the opportunity to consult with residents about an increase to rent equating to around 55p per week for Social Housing Tenants. The draft budget made assumptions that the rent was increased.

The questions being concluded, the Chair invited the Committee to make any formal recommendations, with the following recommendations resolved:

- (i) That Cabinet reports back to the Committee at the earliest opportunity regarding the completion of outstanding actions relating to Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans and with the results of the 12-week safety programme for high-rise blocks.
- (ii) That Cabinet reports back to the Committee about how they will develop further qualitative measurements of customer satisfaction for council housing management, and with the results of the STAR survey measurement.
- (iii) That Cabinet reports back to the Committee with comparative data and benchmarking data in relation to other similar boroughs' council housing management.

## **7. Selective and Additional Licensing in Private Rented Sector**

Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform, Brent Council) introduced the report, updating the Committee regarding the performance of Additional and Selective Licensing for the Private Rented Sector and the effect of renewing or extending these schemes during 2020. She expressed that the profile around licensing had been high, and in October 2019 Cabinet took the decision to renew the scheme and apply to the Government to add other wards to the scheme. The application was awaiting response. Highlighted in the report was where the Council enforced these licenses. She expressed that the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) was important as they were a key housing option particularly for younger people on lower incomes.

The Chair thanked Councillor Southwood for the update and invited comments from the Committee, with the following raised:

Regarding the proposal to begin ward level analysis of Anti-Social Behaviour in the hope of reducing Anti-Social Behaviour incidences, the Committee asked for further details. Spencer Randolph (Head of Private Housing Services, Brent Council) responded that one of the reasons to grant selective licensing was whether it could be proven that it related to a reduction in Anti-Social Behaviour, which analysis showed a high correlation for. For example, the property team worked closely with the police dealing with responses to Anti-Social Behaviour in properties in the Private Rented Sector, but when selective licensing was introduced in 2015, Anti-Social Behaviour was not able to be linked to the Private Rented Sector. Gathering that evidence enabled the Officers to boost the evidence needed for the government to grant further licensing. Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director for Housing, Brent Council) highlighted that licensing was not the tool to address Anti-Social Behaviour and there were other tools to do so.

Referring to section 4.63 in the report suggesting that the introduction of licensing would improve housing stock, the Committee asked what evidence Officers had. Hakeem Osinaike explained that when a license was issued to a private landlord they were given a list of requirements for the home such as HMO fire risk assessments and gas checks. If the list was not adhered to then they could be prosecuted for defying the license agreement. Spender Randolph continued, highlighting research carried out the previous year with the London Fire Brigade in which random HMOs were selected and inspected to ascertain the condition of properties. There was information available as to what those properties were like before they were licensed, and upon inspection following a licence there was evidence of improvement in condition. This was attributed to the direct impact of issuing a license.

The Committee questioned whether the introduction of fines for those who broke the license agreement was achieving the desired results. Hakeem Osinaike expressed that the team tried to support landlords and encourage them to do the right things, which the majority of landlords did, and there was a landlord forum who ensured tenants were in good homes and listened to tenants issues, but there were some that broke the agreement. When they were given large fines it had the desired impact of discouragement.

The Committee also noted the local Brent newspaper item regarding a landlord who was given a £90,000 fine for defying the licensing agreement, and queried how much had been fined over the last year. Spencer Randolph advised that around 170 landlords had been prosecuted through the courts. He estimated that there had been around £1m worth of fines imposed on landlords. Prosecutions were now done through the court due to civil penalty notice powers, which had generated revenue of around £400,000. When they looked at imposing a fine, the final amount would be dependent on the number of properties the landlord had and the fine adjusted according to the matrix.

Responding to what alternatives the team had considered, Spencer Randolph explained that they had consulted with and looked at different models across the country for how licensing was carried out. They had learned from Newham, Thanet and Oxford, who had different schemes to Brent but who they were able to build the model around. There was no central guidance from the government on how licensing should be carried out, but the way Brent were approaching licensing was described as a good model with some authorities developing similar models.

The model was constantly under review by the team. The inspection regime had been reviewed the previous year and they had looked at alternatives. Now when they conducted reviews they had the advantage of lots of data and knowing where the landlords were. This meant they were better able to design the service. An example of an improvement that was being looked into was the length of license issued, which currently only lasted for the remainder of the 5 year period regardless of when purchased. They were questioning whether instead the license should be valid for 5 years from when the landlord applied.

The Committee asked how many landlords were on the database in comparison to landlords in Brent, and whether landlords were treated differently depending on the number of properties they let. Spencer Randolph estimated that there may be around 12,000 landlords renting out properties, but there was no register of landlords to get the information. He confirmed landlords went through a different process of application and engagement depending on how many properties they let. For example, they were currently in discussions with Tipi who let a large amount of properties in the Borough over whether they dealt with applications in bulk or individually for each of the properties they let. Regarding whether there was any further support for new landlords or landlords with only one property, Spencer Randolph advised that landlords were invited to the landlord forum, and there were accreditation schemes with training for landlords. The licensing agreement set out the conditions and made clear what was expected of landlords, and landlords were dealt with courteously by Officers. Issues of non-compliance would not go to enforcement straight away but through an informal stage with the landlord first. He highlighted that all landlords were approached in the same way with enforcement.

The Committee acknowledged the need for good landlords to stay in the business to contribute to alleviating housing needs, and wanted to ensure Officers were encouraging good landlords to stay in the business. Councillor Southwood acknowledged the role landlords played with regard to housing need, and highlighted that an important balance was needed as if properties were removed from the Private Rented Sector it changed the market.



The Committee asked for the figures on how many properties in selective licensing wards had a license. Spencer Randolph advised that there was good coverage in those wards, and they had done predictive modelling 3 times. In the first 3 wards selective licensing was brought in, there was 136% coverage, and in newer wards there was 96-97% coverage.

Regarding whether the introduction of selective licensing to additional wards would have any impact on resources and whether there was a sufficient Officer core to manage the additional wards, Spencer Randolph reassured the Committee that there would be sufficient resource. He explained the scheme had not cost the Council from the general fund, and was run from the licensing fee, with no profit was made from it. He acknowledged that depending on what the government approve they would know how they need to build the team and recruit more staff to deal with predicted demand.

As no further issues were raised, the Chair thanked the Officers for their time and invited the committee to make recommendations. The following was resolved:

- i. Action Point: For the Housing Team to provide the Committee with information at a later date about the total number of enforcement fines in 2019/20. This information has been sent to James Diamond.
- ii. The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

## **8. Single Homeless Prevention Service**

Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform, Brent Council) introduced the report, updating the Committee about performance and outcomes of the Single Homeless Prevention Service (SHPS) since it came into effect operationally in September 2017. She advised the Committee that when the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was introduced the Council had already started a lot of this work as there was a number of people falling through the cracks who did not meet the Priority Need threshold but still had vulnerabilities. One of the main groups who came to the Council experiencing homelessness were single people, therefore she felt the SHPS was very important. They had focused on investment and applying for any grant they could to provide a service to single homeless people no matter if they met the priority criteria, so that they could receive support to prevent homelessness in the first instance, or support to find accommodation if already homeless. Councillor Southwood identified the particular challenge of demand, with a 52% rise in homeless applications when the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was introduced and an 11% increase in this year.

The Chair thanked Councillor Southwood for the introduction and invited Committee members to ask questions, with the following issues raised:

The Committee asked for assurance that Cabinet had met the objectives set in 2017. Councillor Southwood expressed confidence that the service was meeting the need, but that it was a challenge responding to the increased demand. A homelessness and rough sleeping strategy had been developed as it was felt there was a need to increase the sophistication of understanding of services provided and the needs of individuals who came to the Council.

Whether there was anything Councillor Southwood wished they had been able to do and hoped to do going forward, Councillor Southwood highlighted affordable housing. She expressed that the Council met the needs of people coming to them through the Private Rented Sector and were building their own social housing and felt that the more houses available to the Council through projects like 'Capital Letters' to access more affordable accommodation, the fewer people needed to live in temporary accommodation. Councillor Southwood added that there were ambitious aims to reduce temporary accommodation.

Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs, Brent Council) highlighted that the statistics around homelessness were becoming more robust as information was collected from single homeless people. The government had introduced a new recording system called 'H-CLIC', which the Council was obliged to use, and it provided information on the demographics of homeless people. It showed the demand in each Local Authority. SHPS was working on tracking individuals, and the council is working to track the outcomes for rough sleepers, as there were questions around what had happened to the people who were picked up by the service. He expressed that the drivers for homelessness were affordability and Private Rented Sector contracting introducing benefits caps particularly in areas of high demand like Brent.

Regarding how ideas were shared across homelessness services that did not cover single homelessness, Laurence Coaker explained that single homeless people experience and present different issues such as substance misuse, so there were 2 teams; 1 team to deal with single homelessness and couples without children, and 1 team to deal with families. It was acknowledged that there was common ground, particularly affordability. The Community and Wellbeing department could make links between other services such as mental health services to support single homelessness issues.

It was explained that the homelessness reduction act 2017 introduced 2 new duties; prevention and relief. Each duty allowed a time frame of 56 days to process a case. The SHPS did not close a homelessness case on the 57<sup>th</sup> day but would work with the homeless person as long as was reasonable. It was highlighted that there was high expectations from individuals such as access to social housing, and when it became apparent to the person that it was not possible they sometimes disengaged from the service.

The Committee highlighted that one of the difficulties for single people who were vulnerable to homelessness was the process of applying for benefits, and asked what the service could do to help them access benefits and housing and make the process easier. Laurence Coaker advised that the SHPS did not have control over the benefits application as it was a central government application. He hoped that Brent's homelessness application process was as simple as possible. He recognised that the fact it was online could be a barrier for some, and there was a Council wide policy to help vulnerable people to access services. The SHPS supported vulnerable people where the Council was the landlord with Universal Credit applications to ensure their benefit was up and running and their tenancy could be sustained. It was expressed that a lot was out of the services' control but they did their best to support people getting access to benefits and housing, and

had seen a reduction in the number of rough sleepers in the most recent count the previous week.

Regarding complications of Mental Health issues and how they were managed with the SHPS, Laurence Coaker advised that the figures on mental health were self-reported during the homelessness application stage. The Council was their first point of contact so they would take medical advice to issue a decision on that person. Those with high needs would not be referred to SHPS as that service was designed to tackle those that historically would not have been able to access the service. Laurence Coaker highlighted that sometimes they got it wrong and those cases would be referred back.

The Committee highlighted the possibility of the service getting those on the frontline such as community hubs and the Job Centre to play a role in helping homeless people access the service, which the Officers acknowledged. The Committee heard that Officers had a physical presence at the Job Centre, as there was common ground there with many threatened with homelessness which allowed Officers to access them before they became homeless. The Officers there had now been trained to make direct referrals. Laurence Coaker could see the benefit of hubs with their friendly and warm atmosphere. He would look into training Officers in hubs to make referrals.

Noting the 49% successful intervention rate, Committee members queried what happened with the other half of cases. Laurence Coaker confirmed that one of the main reasons for interventions not being successful was the want for a specific number of bedrooms when the service could often only offer studios or HMOs. He advised that social housing addressed the higher needs group so there was a need to forge a relationship with the Private Rented Sector, such as Capital Letters, for lower vulnerability individuals. There was a desire to obtain better data on where those people went after disengagement.

The Committee noted that the report stated funding was coming to an end in September 2020, and queried what would happen as the service moved forward. Laurence Coaker advised that they were able to use a national pot of money known as the Life Chances Fund when the current funding came to an end which would pay for 30% of the outcomes. The provision was for the next 4 years.

As no further questions were raised the Chair thanked Officers for their contributions and invited the committee to make recommendations, with the following resolved:

- i) That the minutes state that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee is assured that the Single Homeless Prevention Service is performing satisfactorily and that all of the intended outcomes of the service are being delivered.

## **9. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2019/20 Update**

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the Update on the Committee's Work Programme 2017-18 report, b**RESOLVED**: that the contents of the Update on the Committee's Work Programme 2019-20 report, be noted.

RESOLVED: that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee would have an additional meeting to discuss end of life care in Brent once CCG proposals for palliative care were published mid-February.  
e noted.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.40pm

Councillor Ketan Sheth  
Chair