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MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE Thursday 27 July 2017 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Daly, Harrison, Hylton, Kabir and Naheerathan

Also Present: Councillors Farah, Perrin and Thomas

1. **Apologies for absence**

None

2. **Declarations of interests**

Councillor Long declared that she had a sister who lives in a tower block

Councillor Harrison declared that she was a member of the BHP Board and BHP Resident and Member Panel

3. **Fire safety measures for tower blocks across Brent**

At the invitation of the Chair, Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing), provided an update on planned fire safety measures in tower blocks across Brent. As part of the wider programme, Mr Osinaike explained that measures were being taken in relation to assessing potential risks, providing assurances and responding to wider public interest. Members heard that following the Grenfell Tower incident and as part of the fire risk assessment programme all 37 high rise buildings of 6 storeys in Brent were revisited by the Estate Services Team and were having Fire Risk Assessments carried out. The recommendations in those fire risk assessments were currently being implemented and would form the basis of a programme that the Council can take forward. The committee was also informed that following the Grenfell Tower incident the Council had received several Freedom of Information (FoI) requests, all of which had been responded to and information published on the website. Dates for drop in sessions had also been set up at each tower block where residents could get more information on future developments and share any concerns they might have.

In the following discussion, members had an opportunity to ask further questions on the report relating to fire safety assessments, costing, impact on tenants and leaseholders and quality of contractors work.

In relation to fire safety assessments, Mr Osinaike explained that until the end of August 2017 the Council would be carrying out its statutory responsibility for non-intrusive Type 1 visual checks which would cover all communal areas but not individual flats. This would also include electrical testing of all appliances in communal areas as well as advice for residents on avoiding issues in their own homes. In addition he said that the Council had adopted the London Fire Brigade Tool and was using it to check that buildings which had recently undergone major works were fire safe. Mr Osinaike pointed out that depending on

the outcome of the assessments the Council could take a decision to carry out more intrusive Type 4 checks which would involve going into individual homes. Within a wider context, it was stressed the importance of gathering intelligence not just for Council owned buildings but also for any commercial or registered provider buildings in order to get an overview of the fire safety situation in Brent. Members were reassured that the Council seeks collaborative working with other housing associations and as part of this will meet on 16th August to discuss fire safety with more information regarding this meeting to be provided to members at a future date. In terms of registered providers who have ACM cladding, Peter Gadsdon (Director Policy, Performance and Partnerships) explained that a fire management plan had been enhanced in those buildings and the local authority (LA) was in discussion with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the landlords to ensure they were communicating effectively with tenants. In addition he said that a report had recently been published listing all buildings in Brent with such cladding and that this information is available on the Council's website. In addition, the LA had been contacted by the casework team in the DCLG to say that there were a number of secondary failures in those blocks and they were to be written to and informed about that. As a result blocks would have to have their cladding replaced with a non-combustible alternative. He assured the committee that none of the Borough's community schools were above 19m which is the building height at which ACM cladding is being tested.

With regards to costs, members sought reassurance that tenants and leaseholders would not be penalised by any potential fees incurred as part of the fire risk reviews. In response to questions, Mr Osinaike stated that costs would depend on the outcome of the current assessments but specific details could not be confirmed yet. In addition he explained that any potential works identified would both be considered as part of the Council's repairs and maintenance responsibilities and be paid for through the Wates contract or, if major, would be covered as part of the Capital programme. Members heard that the £10m allocated to fire safety measures would need to be split between 2,252 units across 37 tower blocks in Brent. Once all details are confirmed, a detailed programme will be prepared to show works which would need to happen and how much money would be spent and where and presented to Cabinet in October 2017 for approval. Upon the Chair's request it was agreed that the report be presented to the Fire Safety Task Group before Cabinet for further scrutiny and review.

Overall members were reassured that all efforts were made to ensure tenants wellbeing and any potential concerns they might have were discussed. Members heard that although none of the FRAs had identified a potential need to relocate residents, this is still covered by the FRAs and can be implemented if necessary should such risks be identified. The committee were reassured that work was being done to improve communication and raise awareness about fire safety and evacuation. In terms of people with special needs Phil Porter explained that the Council will be using information from BHP and Council and try to relocate the residents if necessary. Phil Porter gave an example with using premises information on estates to help identify people with special needs in case of emergency. Further information on fire safety had already been sent to residents to ensure they do not leave anything in communal areas and information was available on Council's website.

A member asked a question in relation to the number of contractors and sub-contractors and overall quality of contractors' work, as often tenants were charged higher than normal rates for even simple repairs. Members were told that contractors often have to outsource work to sub-contractors due to lack of expertise in a certain area of work overload. However, the committee was reassured that the Council has an overall contract management and spending responsibility scrutiny and that some of the contracts were currently under review. With the transfer of BHP back to the Council the Council will both manage and own those properties, with the direct responsibility for repairs and maintenance sitting within the Housing Operations Team.

A member asked a question on monitoring illegal subletting. Mr Osinaike explained that the Council relies heavily on information supplied by residents as well as on other sources of information such as rent collection data. However, plans were being made to introduce an active programme that seeks to find out whether people are illegally subletting.

A member asked a question on access for emergency vehicles as many places have shortage of parking spaces due to single yellow lines, which makes it difficult for fire engines to access a building. The committee was assured that access is a priority issue for the council but wider changes in legislation may be required to tackle it.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the contents of Fire Safety Measures for Tower Blocks across Brent report, be noted;
- ii. Cabinet should be asked to ensure that tenants and leaseholders are not made to pay for the enhanced fire measures envisaged by the spending of the £10m;
- iii. Task Group on Fire Safety add to its scope working with the Housing Service during development of work programme
- iv. Task Group on Fire Safety to receive new expenditure plans on fire safety for pre-Cabinet scrutiny;
- v. Housing team to share information on unit cost of Fire Risk Assessments;
- vi. Breakdown of the expenditure of £10m received from mobile phone masts on Brent Council housing properties;
- vii. share housing association meeting report (16th August) at scrutiny meeting (14 Sep);
- viii. share report from August meeting of the Borough Resilience Forum.

4. Update on Transition back to the Council and the BHP Transformation programme

Phil Porter (Strategic Director for Community Wellbeing) introduced the report which gave an overview of the transition of the housing management function and the housing operations transformation programme which was required irrespective of the decision to bring BHP back to the Council. In his presentation, Mr Porter focused on two key strands: transition and transformation.

On transition, Mr Porter explained the focus was to bring BHP back within the Council covering the governance arrangements, contracts and staffing. Members also heard that although BHP would remain responsible for the service during the transition period, joint governance arrangements would also be put in place to ensure collaborative working (Housing Operations Transformation Board, Resident and Member panel). As far as transformation was concerned the committee was informed that a broader transformation would also run parallel with the transition, to ensure full optimisation of processes and technologies, resident engagement and tailoring the new service to their needs. The predominant approach would be “lift and shift” (by 2nd October), a restructure was likely to start in January 2018 with full implementation of all changes by June 2018.

Discussion centred around issues related to contracts, staffing, resident engagement, budget, performance and service management. With regard to contracts, a member of the committee enquired about existing issues with multiple contracts across the borough, in particular Veolia, and was told robust contract management and working through individual issues was required and that this approach was led by the Regeneration and Environment Department.

A member also asked a question on land ownership and “un-adopted land” as one of the main source of issues with regard to contracts. Phil Porter explained that such issues had

been avoided for too long and it was only now that they were being brought to attention as part of the current transformation.

In response to members questions on information given to residents and working with housing association to engage as many of them as possible, Phil Porter responded by saying that although the local authority could hold contractors to account and provide support where the necessary, communication with residents was ultimately their responsibility. He acknowledged that the service had to be responsive to resident needs and assured the committee that work with housing associations will continue in order to improve contact opportunities for people. In addition, a member commented on the existing communication gap and how it may affect the welfare of vulnerable groups during the transition period. Phil Porter acknowledged the importance of maintaining strong relationship between BHP and Adult Social Care teams and insisted that the Council is determined to do things differently and focus on joint work and encouraging culture change. He assured that practical changes had been put in place including changes to senior management, improving staff performance and overall department synergy. In addition he explained that a building management database was currently being put together the information from which would go on to the GIS mapping facility and will form a publicly available portfolio of properties.

The committee paid particular attention on the new staffing arrangements as part of the BHP transformation. On the question of how many staff would move from BHP to the Council and how would they be overseen, Phil Porter responded that all staff will transfer across on 2nd October 2017. Although there were high demands and expectations from the BHP transformation, he assured the committee that the project was not driven by the idea of cutting staff and in fact opportunities would be given to staff groups to take up permanent roles.

The committee sought further information on the recent Cabinet's decision to retain BHP in a revised form, as a Registered Provider of housing and in particular who will be responsible for managing Brent Council's funds which would be spent on those properties. In response, Phil Porter explained that BHP would become a company, similar in format to Investing 4 Brent (I4B), where standard governance arrangement and corporation taxes will apply and where BHP will hold all the properties and the Council will provide all the housing management. The model which the Council has created will also support the homelessness reduction plan as many of the properties will be outside of the housing revenue account so intermediate rents could be charged.

Elaborating on the issue of budget and savings, Phil Porter informed the committee that by bringing BHP back in house the Council was expected to be better off as the transition of the service would remove some of the existing governance duplication and will streamline management. Expectation was that transformation would deliver about £1m of reoccurring savings.

Members asked for further clarification on property management, including any empty private housing which had not been seized by the Council and also to purchasing of properties by I4B outside of the borough. Phil Porter explained that on the issue with seizing empty private housing, the Council has target of bringing 100 empty properties back in use each year but currently were slightly behind target. However, this remains a priority as it was another way of securing homes for people and tackling blight and anti-social issues. Cllr Farah (Cabinet Member for Housing) also added that he would be giving a talk on this on Monday 31st August and would be happy to report back to the committee. In terms of property management outside of the borough, Phil Porter informed members that most of the properties were predominantly in the surrounding boroughs or in Home Counties so disruption caused by dislocation was kept to a minimum and long-term interests of families were taken into account.

As far as performance was concerned, members were reassured that resident satisfaction was the main measurement criteria. Particular attention was paid to Veolia's poor performance levels across the borough and significant variance in standards of service between different wards, the committee was informed that officers were closely involved with contract management and the relevant standards would be applied to ensure consistent level of service.

RESOLVED that:

- i. The contents of the report be noted including the current state of transformation plan and impact on shared services for residents.
- ii. Reports on land ownership, performance and resident engagement strategy and information on the total number of BHP properties in each ward be presented at the next meeting.
- iii. A project be set up within the Council to look at the issue of un-adopted land.

5. Co-opted Members

Mark Cairns (Policy and Scrutiny Manager) presented the report which set out a suggested process for appointing co-opted members to the Housing Scrutiny Committee, taking into account evidence from other London Boroughs. He explained that two BHP - resident co-opted members – one tenant and one leaseholder - would be sought to be recruited. The recruitment process would run throughout August with the intention to bring nominated names to the committee in September before final approval at Full Council on 18th September 2017.

Members noted the recommendations in the report and, in the following discussion, further commented on the issue with the large number of registered providers in Brent, and what platforms were available to their residents to voice any concerns they might have. Suggestion was made to set up a forum for registered providers' residents and encourage the formation of more resident associations as a way of empowerment. In response, Cllr Farah (Cabinet Member for Housing) reassured the committee that the Council was committed to having a meaningful dialogue with registered providers in order to ensure that residents have a collective voice. He expressed willingness to collaborate with RPs and Regeneration department to hold further discussions and report back to the Committee on any future developments.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the recommendations in the report be noted and that membership is extended to two non-voting co-opted members following a recruitment process as outlined in the report;
- ii. shortlisted names of applicants be forwarded to the next Full Council meeting on 18th September 2017 for appointments to be formally made;
- iii. a review be conducted of the co-opted member arrangement be brought back to the Committee in February 2018
- iv. a report be presented on engagement with Registered Providers

6. Housing Committee Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

7. Any other urgent business

Lynton Close traveller's site visit on 4 August 2017.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

J LONG
Chair