



**MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**Tuesday 16 January 2018 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), and Councillors S Choudhary, Harrison, Hylton, Kabir and Hector (substituting for Daly)

Apologies were received from: Councillors Daly and Naheerathan

1. **Declarations of interests**

None declared.

2. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 1 November 2017 be approved as an accurate record.

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

Leaseholder Services

Members heard that work on the Resident Engagement Plan was still ongoing, with final draft planned for end of February and implementation as of April 2018.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Resident Engagement Plan be presented to the Committee upon completion by the Housing Team.

4. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

5. **Petitions (if any)**

None.

6. **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) rent setting**

Troy Francis (Head of Housing Management Customer Services) introduced the reports and summed up the main points. He explained that the aim of the report was to set out the proposals for 2018/19 rent and service charges, provide an overview of the Council's capital investment spend for housing as well as an outline of the proposed mitigation strategy prior to full roll out of the Universal Credit (UC), scheduled for November 2018. With regards to the Capital Investment Programme members heard this was dependent upon the completion of the housing asset management strategy which would be taken to Cabinet for approval by Cabinet by December 2018. Similarly, the fire safety programme was due for approval by Cabinet in order to deliver fire safety enhancements for high rise blocks as well as comprehensive fire risk assessments. With regards to changes to the rent charges,

Mr Francis explained that local authorities were required by the government policy to reduce rent by 1% each year up to 2020. Brent was in line with this policy and a further 1% reduction is planned for 2018/19 (this is equivalent to £1.15 less rent payable per week, per dwelling). Members heard that service charges were not covered by the rent reduction policy and therefore an increase of 4% would be proposed for the next financial year.

The Committee also discussed the upcoming full rollout of Universal Credit and the potential implications it could have for residents in Brent. In particular the potential impact of changes to payments – i.e. rents would be paid directly to households and not the council who is the landlord. Members were reassured that housing management services has in place a strategy, to review and manage potential increase in arrears , the service was putting in place a range of mitigation activities to ensure agility of rent collection system and to support residents.

As part of the discussion on Lynton Close members heard that there was commitment from the Council to review the mobile home pitches' rent as well as modernise the site. Officers acknowledged that current rent charges were too high and a proposal would be made to Cabinet to reduce rents levels and make it more affordable for residents. Members were also informed that transition plans were in place with regard to Lynton Close, to transfer site management from Oxford County Council (OCC) back under the control of Brent Council. The planned transfer date is end of April 2018. With regards to potential impact of Universal Credit on Lynton Close residents, members heard that currently no one living on the site was affected. It was anticipated that the impact of the UC would not necessarily be felt until November 2019, as the changes would only apply to residents whose circumstances had changed.

In relation to Lynton Close site repairs and maintenance works, Troy Francis advised that Council was looking to extend investment across the entire site. Planned maintenance repairs were due to be completed by end of 2018, with two pitches requiring more immediate attention. Toilet facilities would be repaired but residents indicated through consultation that there would be no major impact for them , as most mobile homes have their own facilities or they site is home to the same family residents would share facilities with their neighbours. Members were advised the Council was prioritising repairing of the pitches, outer areas, including communal parts would be part of a wider long-term strategy and subject to investigation and assessment before any upgrading works could be commissioned.

Responding to a query from members, officers acknowledged the existing issues in relation to high levels of debt, due predominantly to unpursued arrears but reassured members that plans were in place to modernise the site and review rent levels in order to alleviate this. Bad debt provision was intentionally high to mitigate this as part of the planning process. Currently, nearly 60% of site expenditure is the administrative cost charged by OCC. By bringing the service back in house the Council would no longer be required to pay OCC, making the overall cost of managing the site cheaper. As a result the Council would be in a position to reduce rent charges and lower the debt provision – this would not address any debt on the rent account at present In addition, the Committee heard that most residents lease the mobile homes and by law the mobile home company could only charge up to the maximum amount the Council charges for the pitch. Therefore any reduction of

rent by the Council ought to trigger a reciprocal reduction in rent for the mobile homes.

Focusing on the Capital Programme, members discussed issues around the sum allocated for 'aids and adaptations' and questioned whether the £1m budget set aside was adequate or representative of the current number or requirements of residents. Officers advised that the £1m set aside for such adaptations was in line with the average spend compared to that of other boroughs and sufficient. Further investments such as replacing of central heating systems, ventilation and energy efficiency insulations would be picked up as part of the ongoing stock condition survey. The survey would be based on a 20% sample internal inspections and used to build a financial plan that meets the needs of the residents. The stock conditions survey would help determine the Council's property investment profile. Stock condition surveys would include measuring energy efficiency ratings within the sample and depending on the outcome the Council would explore the possibility of directing investment in this direction.

In response to a member query, officers explained that overall the current cost of service charge was considered reasonable. The committee was informed that Brent Council operates a fixed service charge policy which means that the Council could not increase service charges based on the cost of the actual service. The Council had commissioned a soft market exercise to understand how fixed cost aligns with the cost of service and whether any further changes were required in the future. Referencing paragraph 5.2 from the report officers explained that the list of charges was not exhaustive and if any charges such as security were not mentioned, then they should be assumed to be have been included as part of the general rent.

As part of the wider discussion, member also touched upon the Community Investment Fund and whether it would be continued now the housing service had reintegrated with the council. Officers advised that there were no plans to continue the fund because the Housing Revenue Account could not fund such a scheme as money had to be spent only on properties owned and managed by the Council. However, members heard that the Council would continue to support any programme that had started or for which there had been a commitment in the current financial year as part of the Capital Programme. Any unspent funds would be reviewed and allocated based on outcome of stock survey and subject to consultation with residents. Cllr Long queried status of a specific scheme that was approved and due to start and resident were informed. Officers explained that a structural matter regarding a boundary wall that needed to be resolved before proceeding took longer than anticipated but now a structural engineer and surveyor had been appointed internally to manage the process, the scheme could proceed and associated funds would be available into the next financial year.

In response to a member enquiry, Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing) explained the sinking fund concept as an alternative leaseholder option for saving funds for potential repairs. Where in place it was used to offset the need of unexpectedly high service charge bills but it was not part of the service charge. Sinking funds involved time and administration and were not widely used across the Council although it was an option worth exploring in the long term.

Finally, in response to another member query, the Committee was advised that on the issue of Wettons employees being paid the London Living Wage had been

flagged up by Trade Unions and through the Council. However, officers could not confirm whether or not this was a matter that sits with the Council and there was nothing in the existing contract with Wettons that could be used to hold them into account. However, it was noted that Wettons' contract was up for renewal and this matter could be addressed at the time.

**RESOLVED** that:

- i. the contents of the report on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) rent setting be noted

## **7. Fire Safety Task Group Report**

Members had before them a report from the task group outlining the findings and recommendations on fire safety in low rise domestic properties. The Committee heard that following the Grenfell Tower fire significant attention had focussed on improving fire safety in domestic properties nationwide. The report emphasised the fact that likelihood of fires was not limited to high rise properties alone. In Brent the vast majority of fires occurred in low rise properties, including privately owned ones, highlighting the importance of adopting a proactive approach and providing advice and support to residents. The report recommended that rather than making additional and potentially costly recommendations to the public enquiry that, a more pragmatic approach be adopted, with the Council seeking to resolve certain issues such as blocked fire exits immediately.

In the discussion which followed, the Committee was informed that other fire safety provisions such as smoke alarms and fire doors were already included as part of the contractors' agreement. Nevertheless, despite the £10m government funding package of fire safety enhancements, the local authority had to exert more pressure for extra funding.

**RESOLVED** that:

- i. the recommendations in the Fire Safety Task Group report be noted

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

Jon Maxwell (Director of Local Services) and Morris Durrant (Housing Services Manager) from Metropolitan Housing presented this report, setting out the level and quality of services Metropolitan Housing delivered to local residents. During the discussion members sought further details on a range of issues including repairs services, housing performance, communication with residents and councillors, ground maintenance issues and Universal Credit roll out preparation.

In response to concerns raised about the Chalkhill Estate, Metropolitan Housing explained that they were aware of some of the existing issues of poor contractor service, inefficient communication, and customer service provided to residents living on the Chalkhill Estate as well as response to councillors' requests and were working towards resolving these. Members were advised that as part of the process, the repairs service was being brought back under Metropolitan's control which was expected to result in the provision of a better and more cost effective service to Metropolitan residents. The Committee was reassured that Metropolitan Housing was committed to providing good customer service and welcomes resident feedback to improve it. Whilst information was provided to councillors was available

upon request, Metropolitan Housing acknowledged that councillor communication could be improved and agreed to closer collaboration in the future, including regular meetings with local ward councillors after the elections. Members felt that information on housing performance indicators was either insufficient or not available to residents when viewing Metropolitan Housing's website but felt that this information was essential in measuring overall performance of the different services provided. In the context of performance, members heard that Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system was in progress with plans to use it across the organisation. Metropolitan Housing was in discussion with IT providers but no set live date had been confirmed yet. Metropolitan explained that any performance information would apply to the group as a whole and not focus solely on housing performance in Brent

In respect of the long standing matter of land ownership on Chalkhill and the impact on service provision, Mr Maxwell and Mr Durant informed the Committee that Metropolitan Housing was aware of the issue which was mostly due to split estate grounds. Nevertheless, Metropolitan was liaising with the Council and had already taken measures towards changing the system, whilst ensuring regular officer presence on affected estates to help address any concerns/ queries. In part some issues arise due to difficulty tracking perpetrators, who may have moved to another area. Referencing paragraph 3.8 from the report, the Committee further discussed the terms and conditions on tenants discounts when acquiring properties. Officers explained that the terms were not detailed enough to allow for the current sale of properties to local residents to take place, resulting in the Council requesting that these be revised. Metropolitan Housing representatives advised member of their long standing commitment to allow tenants to buy on estates and as a result were working to ensure clarity in original agreements and deed terms, with progress update expected to be made to the Council by end of February 2018. Finally, responding to queries from members on Metropolitan's mutual transfer policy, officers explained that a policy was in place but void turnover was relatively low, with only 2% of residents using it. However, residents were encouraged to seek mutual transfers.

With regards to recycling and disposal of bulky items on Metropolitan Housing estates, officers informed the Committee that this was promoted on a regular basis through its in-house newsletter. However, members noted that issues with disposal of bulky items persisted, largely due to inconsistent reporting to the Council. In relation to fire safety, members were reassured that regular checks tests and FRAs were carried out on an annual basis as were gas and electricity checks. Furthermore, members were informed that additional signage had been put in each of the blocks with smoke alarms installed in all properties. Metropolitan advised that they had adopted a 'Stay Put' policy in majority of the blocks as the safest approach in the event of a fire and this was communicated to tenants throughout their tenancy.

In light of the forthcoming Universal Credit rollout, the Committee heard that the immediate impact of it was expected to be significant but that Metropolitan had put plans in place to prepare in order to avoid potential negative impact on residents with mitigation strategies including offer of management support to household in arrears and resident surgeries.

Members sought further clarification from the representatives about any future plans for surveying the condition of its housing stock – a common practice used to determine capital works and what was known as the Decent Homes Standard, which included thermal efficiency and noise insulation.

Finally, in the context of resident engagement, members heard that Metropolitan Housing was taking an active role in reviewing performance, contractors and shaping activities and improvements around residents' needs. A number of opportunities were available to residents to raise concerns and hold their landlord to account including a range of boards and Committees, such as customer services and scrutiny, surgeries and tenants associations. Metropolitan also reported a formal training package for residents to allow them participate at the point of joining Metropolitan or at some point in the future.

**RESOLVED** that:

- i. the contents of the report on Brent based Registered Providers (RP) delivery of social housing be noted
- ii. the contact details of designated contact officer be shared with Committee.
- iii. closer engagement between Metropolitan Housing and councillors be sought following the local elections in May 2018.
- iv. further information on right to buy to be circulated to the Committee
- v. councillors be added to Metropolitan Housing's newsletter distribution list
- vi. detailed performance information be provided by Metropolitan Housing in a year's time

**9. Brent's Housing Associations: scrutiny task group report (July 2016)**

Phil Porter (Strategic Director of Community Wellbeing) introduced the report which updated members on changes made to the Council's work with Housing Associations in Brent and related these recommendations to the scrutiny task group report of July 2016.

The report provided a detailed update against a range of recommendations, demonstrating continuing commitment to a more productive and proactive approach and transforming the relationship with Housing Associations in order to achieve the aims as set out in the Housing Strategy - such as increasing supply of affordable housing, improving the standard of social housing and developing resident engagement. Members heard that most actions from the report had been completed or had expired.

In the discussion which followed, members made enquiries about a range of issues in the report. With regards to information given to residents about future service charges in respect of right to buy (RTB) and service charge payment options, Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing) explained that the process was statutory and information on potential charges must be provided to tenants in advance of the purchase. He drew members' attention to the fact that some suspicious RTB cases were referred to the Audit team for further checks and investigation. However, in general if an individual met the requirements under the government's RTB scheme, the Council had no choice but to sell the property.

Referencing recommendation 12 from paragraph 3.3 in the report, a member sought further clarification on how much Council owned land was available that

could be offered up to housing associations or partners for development. Mr Porter explained that a range of objectives had to be considered and that the total amount of land available would depend upon the specific site or other possible uses for the site. Officers assured members that an asset management strategy was being planned that would look into this and other property related matters in more detail.

In the context of Housing Associations, a member also sought more information on Housing Association forums (HAF) as a platform for developing discussion amongst residents but also expressing collective concerns. Officers advised that the aim was to empower residents to take a more pro-active approach with the Council working alongside them and supporting them. Due to the pioneering nature of these forums as well as their increasingly geographical focus it was proving a challenging task. Nevertheless, officers welcomed anyone willing to join the HAFs and expressed commitment to develop a wider forum and build stronger bilateral relations with residents.

Finally, with reference to paragraph 4.3 from the report about right to stay, a member questioned the idea about criteria for fixed term tenancy and requested more information to be shared with the Committee. Members asked if any of the fixed term tenancies had come up for review and if there was a policy in place to handle these requests. Hakeem Osinaike replied that there was no policy as yet but this was being addressed and once available would be brought back to the Committee and would undergo extensive resident consultation.

Responding to members enquiries on whether Brent had adopted the Pay to Stay Policy under the Housing and Planning Act, Mr Osinaike explained that although this policy was expected to be introduced, it was not currently seen as a priority and had no set timescales at this stage.

**RESOLVED** that:

- i. The contents of the Brent's Housing Associations: scrutiny task group report (July 2016) report be noted
- ii. Information on pay to stay be shared with the Committee
- iii. Contact details of designated housing officers be shared with the Committee

**10. Review short-listed candidates as co-opted members for the Committee**

The Chair introduced the report and welcomed the two proposed co-opted members, who were present in the public gallery. Setting out the appointments, the Chair explained that these had followed a selection process as previously agreed by the Committee on 27 July 2017, resulting in a tenant and leaseholder successfully being selected in December 2017 to join the committee as a non-voting co-opted members. The Committee was informed that, subject to formal approval by Full Council on 22 January 2018, official duties of the new members would commence from the next scheduled meeting of the Committee on 22 February 2018.

**RESOLVED** that:

- i) the contents of the report be noted

ii) the proposed appointment of Michele Lonergan and Karin Jaeger as co-opted members to the Housing Scrutiny Committee be approved by the Committee, subject to ratification by Full Council

#### **11. Scaffolding protocol (verbal item)**

The Committee heard a verbal update on a new scaffolding protocol applicable borough wide presented by Sean Gallagher (Head of Housing Management Property Services).

Members were informed that changes to scaffolding protocol had been made with the Council now taking a leading role and being accountable for the work, duration and location of scaffolding. Officers stressed the importance of the need to provide a value for money service to residents and therefore ensure that no scaffolding goes up unless clear the consultation process had been duly completed, but most importantly that a fixed sum was payable by the council and so no additional payments would be made for scaffolding kept longer than instructed by the Council. Officers also assured Councillors that scaffolding would not be erected without first communicating with residents and that the housing management service was taking over ownership of this function moving forward.

The main contractor Wates would be expected to provide residents with detailed letter explaining what works would need to be done before scaffolding went up. As part of the new measures the Committee heard that a scaffolding register would also be kept on each estate and monitored weekly by a housing management service designated officer – a measure that had already been implemented as of 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018. Additionally, new key performance indicators had been set for contractors per block. Finally, plans were in place for the Council to start carrying out pre-inspection works and in order to scope and devise a better understanding of the repairs and potential duration necessary for scaffolding to remain in place. This could then be communicated to residents and expectations better managed. Housing management also mooted the idea of using drones to carry out surveys and plan repairs as a way of help limiting the amount of time to set and keep up scaffolding especially where there was a need to carry out explorative works. Members welcomed the new measures but also noted that health and safety measures were at times over played and often costly to the Council.

It was noted that parking remained an on-going issue, with some vehicles often blocking areas where scaffolding was due to be erected and creating undue delay. Responding to concerns, officers explained that safe working practices remain a priority and inevitably come with a cost. Plans were in place to resolve the ongoing parking issues, with the intention being to use the TMOs (Traffic Management Orders) to help improve the situation in general.

#### **12. Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG  
Chair