



MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday 13 September 2018 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Long (Chair), Councillor Maurice (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Hassan, Hector, Johnson, Stephens, Thakkar and Ms Karin Jaeger (co-opted member)

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aden (substituted by Cllr Hector), Ethapemi (substituted by Cllr Thakkar) and Kennelly and Ms Michelle Lonergan (co-opted member)

2. Declarations of interests

None

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 12 July 2018 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Matters arising (if any)

None

5. Deputations (if any)

None

6. Petitions (if any)

None

7. Allocations Policy

Councillor Eleanor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) introduced the report which outlined the Council's current Allocations Scheme used for allocation of social housing in Brent and its impact in particular on care leavers. The committee heard that the system was relatively new for local authorities in London but if applied correctly had a potential to offer a holistic solution by using a combination of approaches for tackling homelessness. In seeking members views on proposed amendments, Cllr Southwood emphasised the fundamental role the scheme played in providing much needed housing across the borough and the need to address ongoing challenges, including high numbers of temporary accommodations, shortage of suitable accommodation for large families and issues with reasonable rents.

Several key points were raised in the subsequent discussion. Firstly, officers explained that bids on the existing Locata system were limited to the number of available properties. Although the benefits of the system in bringing visibility and transparency to the process of bidding were acknowledged, officers noted existing flaws in the waiting list process. It was stated that the housing register was a “snapshot in time” and a resident’s position would depend on a range of factors. It was also stated that an alternative solution would be to manually list properties and rely on officers to allocate them to residents, with penalties imposed on refusals. Responding to a member’s query on the idea of an “open waiting list”, officers stated that no qualifying criteria would be applied and that the list would not take into account the residential or income circumstances of the residents.

Referencing information in the report, a point was also made on the proposals for introduction of a new nominations agreement with registered providers, which would see the implementation of a policy offering private rented accommodation to homeless households through Registered Providers. The committee heard that the proposals, whose primary aim was to increase the number of private options available to residents and reduce the shortage of available private rented accommodation in the borough, would require an amendment to the Council’s allocations policy. Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs, Brent Council), added that Registered Providers would be able to charge reasonable rents and were likely to maintain long-term leases, subject to receipt of consistent and reliable income. An analysis of the private sector rents was carried out by the Council’s benefits team which established that should the proposals were to go ahead then housing associations could charge up to 80% of current rent, with any additional costs being offset by the housing benefit.

Discussions moved on towards affordability of rents and the potential impact of Universal Credit. Officers acknowledged the linkage between affordability and homelessness and assured the committee that the latter was a priority on both central and local government’s agendas. Within Brent Council, a modelling exercise had been commissioned in order to not only demonstrate best course of action but to also demonstrate the level of viable contributions the Council could afford to make and the level of savings that could be achieved. An overarching point was made that while in most circumstances rents were expected to be covered by the housing benefit, a mitigation measure in the form of an assessment would nevertheless be required to ensure that residents were not offered properties they could not afford and in so doing, prevent homelessness.

A third area discussed by the committee related to the specific impact of the allocations policy on care leavers. The committee questioned what processes were in place to ensure that care leavers were placed in the right housing environment and what checks were being carried out to ensure the suitability of the offered properties. Officers stated that due regard was taken on the suitability of each offer and assured that these were considered on individual basis, depending on the specific circumstances of the care leaver. Members were assured that significant work was being put towards supporting care leavers including carrying out financial assessments and monitoring of any potential issues such as eviction to ensure adequate prevention/support.

Discussions moved on with officers seeking the committees' input on the following specific areas, which were being considered as part of the allocations policy review as were set out in the report:

- i. Income threshold and prioritisation of housing needs - officers sought the committee's advice on whether prioritisation of housing needs should be included in the consultation. Referencing the report, members queried the basis on which income thresholds were found and felt that they should reflect the true deprivation in the borough and thus be increased. While officers acknowledged the need to balance the supply and demand, they stated that the main disadvantage of the thresholds was that they limited the number of eligible families. They stated that the general preference was to keep the quotas and that any changes would be subject to consultation. Strong emphasis were paid on the need to offset the pursuit of a fair system against meeting the needs and priorities of the residents. Therefore, an overarching point was made on the importance of setting clear parameters which included some discretion, coupled with a detailed review.
- ii. allowing households in Band D to retain accrued waiting time if they become homeless or placed in temporary accommodation - responding to members concerns about the approach risking incentivising homelessness even further, officers stated that the solution to homelessness was not social housing per se but better utilising the private sector as an alternative safety net. Officers noted that it was important to move away from temporary accommodation allocations and focus on the residents with the greatest need by bringing the cohort of waiting list residents to a manageable level.
- iii. prioritising households in need of transfer to bid for accommodation that becomes available on current estate – referencing information in the report, it was explained that in principle residents could qualify for a transfer on the basis of reasonable preference. However, shortage of accommodation had led to a backlog of applications, with 281 council tenants awaiting a managed transfers. In order to tackle the existing problems, the Council was reviewing its transfer policies as well as adopting a proactive approach through building new properties on current estates and considering how these should be better prioritised. In welcoming officers recommendation, the committee noted that due regard should be paid on the information available to residents, with further clarification on eligibility criteria on transfers provided.
- iv. review of quotas - officers explained that a range of quotas existed and these were set out in detail in the report. A key issue raised was the fact that many residents were reluctant to consider other options because of their awareness of the quota system and belief that they would be successful, which in turn hindered the access to accommodation available to families in greatest need. In welcoming the proposal, the committee expressed agreement with officers and supported recommendation to reduce quotas.

RESOLVED that:

- i. That the contents of the Allocations Policy report be noted

(Following this item the committee adjourned for a short comfort break. The meeting resumed at 7.25pm)

8. Grounds Maintenance (Estates)

At the invitation of the Chair, Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided the committee with an overview of the grounds maintenance and contract management arrangements across the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) land. He explained that grounds maintenance was on the government strategy for managing grounds maintenance contracts. The current contract was carried out by Veolia and co-managed by Environment and Housing Management Services.

In the subsequent discussion the committee raised several key points. Firstly, members put strong emphasis on the issue with inconsistency of standards and what Council was doing to bring all estates to the same level. Mr Osinaike stated that Housing Management was aware of issues with varying levels of service across the estates and were working towards addressing these and meeting their targets. He stated that a plan was in place which would monitor actions and assured committee that improvements would be made. As part of the planned improvements, he updated members on the recently introduced CRM system. The system which was being piloted across the Housing Department would allow for real time quality assessment of works by estate inspectors, with an intention to expand towards creating an app which residents could use to track progress. Members heard that discussion on the app were in place and the app was due to be released by the end of 2019 year. It would primarily focus on estate cleaning with the potential to expand. Officers confirmed that the new app would not replace the "Cleaner Brent" app and would have a specific purpose of monitoring. The CRM system would also simplify communication and liaison with councillors. Furthermore, Mr Osinaike stated that key performance indicators (KPIs) were available from Veolia, with an intention to move to specified KPIs for each estate going forward. The committee also commented on the effectiveness of the local environment quality checks programme which was introduced in 2007, as a way to incentivise residents to maintain the grounds in their estates by giving them sense of ownership and engagement. Although the programme was not currently operational officers expressed willingness to explore this in more detail.

Discussions moved on with committee members spotlighting on the possibility of merging several contracts into one in order to make efficiencies. In response, Mr Osinaike stated that certain procurement processes were in place. Housing Management was considering taking a report to Cabinet regarding contract options in November. He explained that contracts would need to be re-aligned through procurement in April 2019 or later depending on the expiration date. There was opportunity for tenants to self- manage themselves through the set-up of TMOs. Members expressed concerns in the prospect of Veolia taking over the provision of all contracts and the implications this would have on performance monitoring. Mr Osinaike explained that terms and conditions were set by the Council in order to hold contractors to account. However, he stated that it was important to be flexible and give contractors opportunities to carry out their duties. He stated that the Council would be willing to explore alternative options, subject to demand from residents. Responding to a member's query on whether a single company could provide all services or whether it would end up sub-contracting these to other

providers, it was explained that while the Council had responsibility for overall contract and ensuring that residents get value for money service, the process would be kept transparent and companies would be able to bid for work where possible. Upon concluding the discussion, a point was also made on the importance of also considering community infrastructure levy (CIL) bids for estates with the committee requesting that officers explore this further and seek to raise awareness amongst residents.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Grounds Maintenance (Estates) report be noted
- ii. That Housing Management Team shares data on the consistency of grounds maintenance amongst estates and any planned improvements.
- i. That Housing Management Team considers possibility of extending the Community Infrastructure Levy bid scheme to include estates

9. Landlord Licensing

Spencer Randolph (Head of Private Housing Services, Brent Council) presented the report which outlined the key points on landlord licensing scheme within the context of private housing in Brent, its financing, impact on landlords and tenants as well as challenges. In welcoming the success of the selective licensing scheme, a number of questions were raised in the subsequent discussion, centred mainly on issues with cost, enforcement, standards and liaison with tenants.

Responding to questions on costing, the committee heard that the landlord licensing scheme was bringing in funds sufficient only to cover administrative and staffing costs without generating any profit to the Council. However, officers stated that there was a limit to how much the system could achieve largely due to resource restrictions but also additional costs such as potential enforcement actions on non-licensed properties were not covered by the scheme. Nevertheless, the Council was committed to taking preventative action, work with landlords and avoid the need for enforcement actions. Elaborating on the matter of enforcement, Mr Randolph stated that the Council was able to impose fines and funds were available to support certain enforcement activities. He stated that there was no requirement to inspect properties before a license was granted and other mitigation processes were in place, including significant improvement in carrying out compliance inspections, removal of landlords off the system and imposing GLA database banning orders. Whilst management orders were not the norm, officers noted that periodic inspections were carried out to ensure compliance from landlords.

Discussions moved on with members spotlighting on several operational issues relating to the scheme. Responding to questions on the lack of carrying inspections prior to granting a license, officers stated these were not required and that the Council was reliant on self-declarations made by landlords. However, they stated that health and safety considerations were taken into account with each application, the breach of which could impact on the length of the license. A query also arose with regards to the length of licenses. In response, officers stated that 15% of current applications were processed for 1 year and added that as of 1st October 2018, criteria on the length of licensing was expected to change for mandatory licensing, with any properties housing 5 or more non-related people would require a mandatory license.

Finally, members commented on the Council's liaison with tenants and estate agents. In terms of tenants, the committee noted that the information available on the Council's web pages which they felt was insufficient when compared to that for landlords, with no clear guidance available on complaints procedures. Members also commented on the information available on the website, noting the complexity of existing mechanisms of finding out what properties were registered. Acknowledging the committee's recommendations for review of the contents/accessibility, officers provided assurance that sufficient details were provided, with residents directed to the relevant reporting pages and a "Chatbox" functionality expanded to provide further assistance. Whilst officers admitted that some residents may still be reluctant to engage with the Council, efforts were being put towards involving younger people through community work and liaison with university. Officers admitted that some residents may be reluctant to engage with the Council. In terms of registered properties, officers stated that the list was regularly updated but they would be willing to explore further ways for improvement. In terms of liaison with estate agents and ways to incentivise them to offer more private renting options, the committee heard that the Council was committed to continuously improving the relationship. Assurance was given of the proactive approach which had been adopted by the Housing Management Team, including active liaison and issuing of newsletters to keep estate agents informed of latest developments.

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Landlord Licensing report be noted
- ii. That Housing Management Team reviews content and layout of current landlord licensing webpages, and ensures sufficient level of information and advice is available and accessible to residents

10. Work Programme 2018/19

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Housing Scrutiny Work Programme 2018/19 be noted.

11. Forward Plan

RESOLVED:

- i. That the contents of the Forward Plan be noted
- ii. That the Pan-London Collaboration on the Procurement of Accommodation for Homeless Households report due to be heard at Cabinet on 15 October 2018 be shared with committee members following feedback from the Policy Coordination Group

12. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm

COUNCILLOR JANICE LONG
Chair