

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON MONDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 2017

**C1, 1ST FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE CRESCENT,
LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor Helal Uddin (Chair)
Councillor John Pierce
Councillor Shiria Khatun
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Anne Ambrose	Tenant Representative
Moshin Hamim	Leaseholder Representative

In Attendance

Mark Baigent	Head of Strategy, Regeneration and Sustainability LBTH
Elizabeth Bailey	Senior Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer
John Coker	Strategic Housing Manager LBTH
Paul Davey	Director of Business Transformation THH
Sandra Fawcett	Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum
Afazul Hoque	Interim Service Manager Strategy, Policy & Performance
Councillor Sirajul Islam	Cabinet Member for Housing
Marc Lancaster	Strategy, Regeneration and Sustainability Officer
Rushena Miah	Committee Services Officer
Susmita Sen	Chief Executive Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors: Rajib Ahmed, Gulam Robbani, Rabina Khan, Marc Francis.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

Councillor Shiria Khatun disclosed that her husband manages Air BNB serviced apartments in Tower Hamlets.

Councillor John Pierce declared that he is a Tower Hamlets Homes Board Member.

The Chair declared that his employer works closely with Poplar HARCA and sits on the Tower Hamlets Homes Board.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2017 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

The actions log was noted.

4. APPOINTMENT OF THE VICE CHAIR

The Committee agreed to appoint Councillor John Pierce as Vice-Chair.

5. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION:

6. SPOTLIGHT SESSION: THE IMPACT OF AIRBNB IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Committee received a presentation from Marc Lancaster, Strategy, Regeneration and Sustainability Officer, on the impact of short-term holiday platform letting.

Members asked if there was data available to identify the number of foreign property buyers who let out their homes to holiday platforms. It was confirmed that an in-depth analysis on this had not taken place but there has been some research on larger properties of 1000 square feet or more in the Canary Wharf area.

Some Members expressed concern that communities in constant flux may negatively impact community cohesion, give rise to anti-social behaviour (ASB) and affect the identity of a local area.

Other views highlighted the importance of working in partnership to tackle ASB and suggested the enforcement team be invited to attend this committee. There was a consensus that political will and resources have been supplied to target ASB, therefore Council departments should be working on a shared vision with registered providers.

It was confirmed that short-term lettings fall outside of the Landlord Licensing Scheme.

One Member suggested setting up a working group with other boroughs on the issue of short term holiday letting. Mr Lancaster confirmed he would be happy to look into this.

Referencing page 26 of the pack, which states 35% of properties were let for more than 90 nights, a Member queried where the data came from. Mr Lancaster informed the committee that the data was provided by Air BnB as a

background document; this type of data is not generally available to the wider public but can be made available on request.

It was suggested that a neighbourhood compliance tool should be promoted by housing providers in their newsletters. The Committee decided to put this forward as a recommendation.

In addition to this, Members advised that HMRC should be alerted to this issue as there may be undeclared tax involved in the industry and would add another layer of enforcement.

Councillor Islam said he is due to meet with five neighbouring boroughs also affected by this issue and has begun talks with the Greater London Authority.

The discussion moved on to illegal sub-letting of Council owned and housing association properties. Sandra Fawcett, Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum, said it is the responsibility of the housing provider to take legal action against people who illegally sub-let.

Susmita Sen, Chief Executive of Tower Hamlets Homes, provided a case study of successfully identifying and preventing an illegal sub-let. She said people who illegally sub-let often make changes to their home in order to increase living space. In her example a tenant tried to move a kitchen into the hallway which raised suspicion amongst THH staff.

RESOLVED

1. To note the report.

7. SPOTLIGHT SESSION: CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Councillor Sirajul Islam, Cabinet Member for Housing, presented a report on performance improvement at Tower Hamlets Homes (THH), the arms-length management organisation for Tower Hamlets Council.

Members wanted to know about THH future ambitions. Councillor Islam said that he was pleased with the stability that has ensued further to the improvement measures. He hopes THH will become an organisation that people are proud of.

There was a discussion on the statistical relevancy of the data as percentage figures provided but there were no base figures. Paul Davey, Director of Business Transformation THH, confirmed that the data is compiled by an outsourced company called Quest who survey residents on a long term basis. They get on average two thousand responses a year and this is considered to be a reliable sample size in the industry. Mr Davey said he could get the actual figures included in the next report.

A Member requested to learn more about the performance of other housing providers, particularly from the east side of the borough such as Lansbury Ward. This was noted by officers.

Susmita Sen, Chief Executive THH, informed the committee that the Neighbourhood Housing Officer role at THH has been amended with a greater emphasis on leasehold management duties, as half of THH clients are leaseholders. Back office functions have also been streamlined with clearer lines of accountability.

Members raised concerns around sustainability for some of the funded elements of the improvements such as the increased police presence and park rangers. They wanted to know what would happen once the funding ended.

Ms Sen said that many improvements could be achieved by agile working and were not necessarily about continued funding. Drugs are a known issue across the borough and she said she envisages continued support from the police and Council to drive drug dealing out of the borough.

Members advocated for a cross borough approach in confronting ASB. They were pleased to hear that resources had gone into the issue of tackling drug dealing but they did not want the Council to be perceived as simply pushing the problem out of the borough. It was noted that the ASB sub-group Chaired by Sandra Fawcett, was a useful forum for discussing the issue, sharing information and joint working.

The Chair asked for an update on THH service charges and capital works charges as he recalls there had been confusion over these. It was confirmed that the billing is now itemised and tenants are given several payment options. The issue has been resolved.

Members requested to see a charges comparison between THH and other local providers.

RESOLVED

1. To note the report.

7.1 SPOTLIGHT SESSION: HOUSING PERFORMANCE MONITORING - QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE DATA FOR KEY REGISTERED PROVIDERS

The Committee received an update from Godfrey Heyman, Resident Provider Partnership Officer LBTH, on performance reports from the fourteen social landlords in the borough for quarter two and four 2016/17 and quarter two 2017/18.

The Committee:

- Said that it was difficult to understand the full picture because it was not comparing for same period as data was not available.
- Requested comparable data be presented in the next report.
- Requested that headings are included on every page of the table.
- Requested that future reports include actual sample size of those surveyed as well as percentage figures.
- Suggested that landlords should be invited to take part in these meetings.
- Requested that smaller resident provider organisations are invited to this meeting as an action.

Members thanked Mr Heyman for the update and acknowledge that they were privileged to have access to such data as this is not as readily available in other local authorities.

The Chair asked if providers have a general code of conduct when conducting tenancy audits. Sandra Fawcett, Chair of the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum, confirmed that there is not a consistent code of conduct policy when carrying out tenancy audits and every provider has their own policy.

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7.2 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT: UPDATE ON ACQUIRING PROPERTIES TO MANAGE DEMANDS ON TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Committee heard a presentation from John Cocker, Strategic Housing Manager, on temporary accommodation acquisitions.

Members queried whether the 60 minute maximum journey time with regard to being rehoused was now policy. They provided anecdotal evidence of residents being advised by Council staff that they could be relocated as far as Newcastle or Birmingham and asked officers present at the meeting if the correct advice was being given.

Mark Baigent, Head of Strategy, Regeneration and Sustainability LBTH, clarified that there are two separate issues being discussed. One is the Council buying local property in order to support those requiring emergency accommodation and the other is residents being allocated emergency accommodation in properties that the Council do not own. In these instances residents may need to travel a little further but Mr Baigent assured the Committee that residents would not be moved as far as Newcastle or Birmingham.

It was confirmed Housing Options manages Poplar HARCA properties.

There was a discussion on the transfer of community assets with regard to a property in Turin Street being rented to a mosque. It was argued that the wider community had lost an asset when this transfer occurred as the mosque would be restricted to use by a single community group. Members asked if impact assessments are made and if there is a process for informed decision making. Mr Cocker responded that consideration is given and decisions are made by a corporate wide Asset Management Board.

It was confirmed that the Council cannot make purchases on properties less than ten years old as this is a legal requirement. The Council is largely restricted to using right to buy receipts in order to purchase properties.

The Chair thanked Mr Cocker for presenting on the topic.

RESOLVED

1. To note the report.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Wood stated that his party will likely call in the Mayors Executive Decision taken on 10 November 2017 to spend £19 million on the acquisition of affordable homes, on the grounds that no scrutiny was conducted on the decision.

With regard to the draft scoping paper tabled at the meeting, Members were advised to contact Elizabeth Bailey and Afazul Hoque for comments by the end of next week.

The Chair thanked delegates for attending and brought the meeting to a close.

The meeting ended at 8.57 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Helal Uddin
Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee