

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.45 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2019

C3 - TOWN HALL MULBERRY PLACE

Members Present:

Councillor Dipa Das (Chair)
Councillor Dan Tomlinson (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Shah Ameen
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Anne Ambrose	Tenant Representative
Moshin Hamim	Leaseholder Representative

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Sirajul Islam

Others Present:

Sandra Fawcett	Tower Hamlets Housing Forum
Beverley Greenidge	Head of Neighbourhoods Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)
Pam Bhamra	Tower Hamlets Community Housing
Philip Sullivan	Tower Hamlets Community Housing
Paul Bloss	East End Homes
John Henderson	East End Homes

Officers Present:

Abidah Kamali	Strategy & Policy Manager
Ellie Kershaw	Tackling Poverty Programme Manager, Growth and Economic Development, Place
Kath Dane	Street Population Co-ordinator, Housing Options, Place
Keith Burns	Programme Director Special Projects, Commissioning & Health
Lee Fearon	Benefits Policy and Procedures Manager
Mark Baigent	Interim Divisional Director, Housing and Regeneration
Rafiqul Hoque	Lettings Services Manager, Housing Options Service, Place
Rushena Miah	Committee Officer
Shahnaz Rab	LBTB Commissioning Team Monitoring Officer

Stephanie Graden

Interim Service Manager, Vulnerable Adults
Commissioning Team

Steve Hill

Head of Benefits, LBTH

1. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

Anne Ambrose declared a personal interest. She is a resident of Tower Hamlets Community Housing.

Moshin Hamim declared a personal interest. He is a resident of East End Homes.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2019 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION:

4. SHELTERED HOUSING REPORT

The Committee received the report of Keith Burns, Programme Director, on sheltered housing. Commissioning Officers, Shehnaz Rab and Stephanie Graden summarised the report.

In response to Member questions officers provided the following:

- It was clarified that activities were tenant led in order to encourage ownership and personal development.
- Barriers to participation included people being employed full time or actively involved in other community projects. The scheme was said to be building momentum and early successes with the initial work would be used to encourage other organisations to participate and enable wider engagement.
- It was noted that One Housing, Sanctuary Housing and Southern Housing Group had not engaged in the IHMS scheme, however officers were confident monitoring data from the first phase could be used to encourage participation from providers.
- There were concerns that 27% BME engagement was quite low. Officers expected better engagement in the future after building momentum.
- It was clarified the Tenant Activity Pot (TAP) was separate to overall commissioning for sheltered housing.
- The team was exploring a digital system to capture TAP activity engagement and satisfaction information, as the current system is both resource intensive for both participants and the Council.

- **ACTION: Sandra Fawcett to follow up with the three providers: Southern Housing, One Housing and Sanctuary Housing on reasons for not participating in the TAP.**
- **ACTION: Stephanie Graden to provide data breakdown of attendees at TAP activities by ethnic group and gender.**

RESOLVED:

1. To note the report.

5. PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

The Committee received the report of Rafiqul Hoque, Head of Housing Options, and Ellie Kershaw, Tackling Poverty Programme Manager, on Preventing Homelessness.

In response to Member questions officers provided the following:

- The tenancy sustainment and housing management advice given to households is tailored to the type of problem being experienced.
- The Council was unable to produce figures on how many homeless people were originally from the borough and how many came from outside. The borough turnover was estimated to be approximately 9000 people a year, some of whom were likely to require support. It was noted those who have not lived in the borough for more than three years were in a lower priority band.
- Cabinet agreed a five year Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy in December 2018.
- Interview times had gone up because the new legislation required officers to obtain more detailed information from people and develop a support plan rather than going through a checklist to find out if they met the criteria for support.
- Officers explained that if homelessness became an ASB concern, the police had powers to issue a Community Protection Notice and Injunction. In order to tackle 'intermittent homelessness', where people continually go in and out of homelessness, a multi-agency approach is taken and services such as a street psychologist can be provided to address contributing factors such as drug dependency.
- When the Chair opened up the meeting for comments from the public, there was strong opposition towards the Council working in partnership with the private sector to address homelessness.
- The Chair asked Members to email the speakers if they had further questions due to time constraints.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the report.

6. UNIVERSAL CREDIT & RENT ARREARS

The Committee received a presentation from Beverley Greenidge, Head of Neighbourhoods-Tower Hamlets Homes, on Universal Credit.

In response to Member questions the following points were made:

- Support officers were available to provide advice on maximising benefits or Universal Credit.
- It was noted that the Universal Credit online application was complicated and not user friendly to older people and people who did not speak English as a first language.
- There was a Digital Inclusion work stream at THH that was designed to support and enable older people to fill in the online form. However it was recognised that capacity was an issue and THH would require the support of external agencies such as the Job Centre to also support people with IT.
- **ACTION: for Beverley Greenidge to circulate figures on the actual number of households in rent arrears.**

The Committee received a presentation from Sandra Fawcett Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum on Universal Credit.

In response to Member questions the following points were made:

- Alternative payment arrangements varied depending on the landlord. With regard to discretionary housing payments such as bedroom tax, RPs usually looked to rehouse or pay the shortfall via an alternative arrangement.
- Officers from Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) had established the following support services regarding universal credit:
 - They had recruited a tenancy officer to assist people to make Universal Credit and DHP claims.
 - Worked in partnership with Workpath to deliver advice surgeries.
 - Project Leap with the Bromley by Bow Centre. The projects helped people maximise their income to help pay their rent.
 - 7 community centres to help people get job ready, last year they supported over 1000 people with work advice, though not all were THCH residents.
- There were no plans to cut services due to UC. The main objective for RPs was to mitigate and minimise risk, support residents and collect rent.
- It was noted there would be a vote in parliament before the roll out of UC and this would likely take place after July 2019.

- **ACTION: Ellie Kershaw to provide the Committee with data on evictions.**
- The Committee were assured that residents would not be evicted purely because they had made a UC claim.
- The Chair asked members to email further questions to Sandra Fawcett.

The Committee received the report of Steve Hill – Head of Benefits and Ellie Kershaw –Tackling Poverty Project Manager.

In response to Member questions officers provided the following:

- The Council had created a digital mock-up of the universal credit form to train staff so they could better understand the form and advise people applying for UC.
- Pre-emptive measures - a dashboard was implemented to find people at risk or in crisis.
- The Council had employed a DWP liaison officer who was assisting with complex cases. The officer had participated at a Parliamentary Sub-Committee on impact of UC.
- The Committee recommended that a UC easy guide should be created.

ACTION: Steve Hill to work with the TH communications team to produce an easy read UC guide for residents.

The Chair thanked speakers for their presentations.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the presentations.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Tower Hamlets Homes Strategic Review

In order to fulfil their remit of effective and meaningful scrutiny, Members of the Committee agreed that it was crucial they had opportunity to review the Altair report prior to it being made available in the public domain. Members requested that the report is made available to HSSC members at least a week before its circulation to THH residents.

Members understood the sensitivities of the draft report which contained the business and financial affairs of the local authority. Therefore, HSSC members advised they were happy to review and discuss the report in an exempt setting through a special and confidential meeting comprising of HSSC members, to which the public would not be invited.

The Committee agreed that whilst they would participate in the statutory consultation, however, considering THH managed a significant amount of housing stock in the borough and given the Committee's function, it was imperative that members of the housing scrutiny subcommittee had the opportunity to provide input into any proposals well in advance of a statutory consultation and before any options were communicated to THH residents. This request was in addition to the scrutiny and call in processes by Overview and Scrutiny.

ACTION: The Cabinet Member for Housing and Divisional Director for Housing and Regeneration agreed to discuss the Committee's request and timetabling of this with the Mayor, responding back to the Chair.

The meeting ended at 8.55 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Dipa Das
Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee