

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 3 NOVEMBER 2020**

**ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)**

**Members Present:**

Councillor Ehtasham Haque (Chair)  
Councillor Amina Ali  
Councillor Marc Francis  
Councillor Helal Uddin  
Councillor Andrew Wood

**Co-opted Members Present:**

Anne Ambrose Tenant Representative

**Other Councillors Present:**

Councillor Sirajul Islam

**Others Present:**

Pam Bhamra – Chair of Tower Hamlets Community Housing  
Helen Wilson – Clarion Housing  
Catherine Kyne – Clarion Housing

**Officers Present:**

Karen Swift – (Divisional Director, Housing and  
Regeneration)  
Una Bedford – Strategy and Policy Officer (Place)  
Mark Slowikowski – (Strategy, Policy and Performance Manager)  
Rafiqul Hoque – Head of Housing Options  
Shalim Uddin – (Affordable Housing Providers Co-ordinator)  
Joel West – (Democratic Services Team Leader  
(Committee))

**1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were noted from Councillor Dipa Das.

## **2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR**

Nominated by Councillor Andrew Wood and seconded by Councillor Helal Uddin, it was:

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Mark Francis is appointed vice chair of the sub committee for 2020-21.

## **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests, although Councillor Helal Uddin declared an interest in Item 5.3, Social Landlords' Performance Report, as his employer worked closely with Poplar HARCA which was a housing provider included in the report.

## **4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the sub committee meeting, 13 July 2020, are approved as a correct record of the proceedings.

## **5. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **5.1 Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee Terms of Reference, Quorum, Membership and Dates of Meetings 2020/21**

**RESOLVED** that the sub committee:

1. Note its Terms of Reference, Quorum, Membership, and Dates of future meetings as set out in the appendices and report.

### **5.2 Approval of H&RSSC Work Programme 2020/21**

The sub committee indicated that it would welcome further detail on the specific scope of the fire safety progress report scheduled for the 15th April 2021 meeting.

**RESOLVED** that the sub committee's work programme 2020/21 as set out in the report is approved, subject to a request for officers to explore whether one or more additional meetings could be arranged to ensure ample time is available for discussion of all work plan items.

### **5.3 Social Landlords' Performance Report**

Shalim Uddin, Affordable Housing Coordinator, introduced the report which summarised quarterly performance data for 14 registered providers (RPs) within the borough and an update on the work of the benchmarking group, which was in the process of revising a new set of KPI data. Shalim provided a summary of the key achievements and challenges reflected in the report.

Further to questions from sub committee members, officers:

- Reported that some registered providers have reported difficulties drilling down their performance data to just properties within Tower Hamlets, but officers would request that local performance data is provided wherever possible.
- Advised that future reports would follow a consistent format that would allow members to identify quarter-on-quarter comparisons and trends for each of the providers.
- Provided further detail on the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum Benchmarking sub group's initiative to revise and issue a new set of qualitative and quantitative KPI data, including a KPI handbook.
- Would explore if commentary could be added to explain where performance is below expectation (i.e. those highlighted areas in Appendix 1 where performance is below 85%).

Helen Wilson and Catherine Kyne from Clarion Housing presented a supplementary part of the report, that provided the sub-committee with an overview of Clarion's performance and its plans for the future. Helen and Catherine addressed recent achievements and challenges. They explained that Clarion recognised and accepted the performance issues previously highlighted by the Council and would be producing an action plan to explain how they would be improving in those areas. They agreed to provide the sub committee with a draft of the Annual report that will be produced in September.

Members welcomed the hard work and commitment shown by Helen and Catherine, but indicated frustration at the track record of Clarion Housing and its failure to deliver on similar promises of service improvement that had been made in the past. Members highlighted in particular the feedback from residents who had reported difficulties securing needed repairs and problems with customer service and communication.

The sub committee asked Helen and Catherine if relevant local ward councillors could be engaged in the preparation of the action plan.

The chair noted the frustration expressed by members at the performance of some registered providers and the limited power the council has to hold them to account. He indicated he hoped that the good faith and continued strong partnership arrangements enjoyed between the council and providers in LBTH could result in tangible improvements to the experiences of tenants and leaseholders.

RESOLVED that the sub committee:

1. Noted progress in the performance outturns achieved by individual social landlords and the overall performance trend.
2. Asked officers to:
  - a. explore if a KPI could be introduced to measure effective communication between RPs and residents; and

- b. ensure full consideration was given to the potential equalities impacts of future reports and to ensure that both direct and indirect equalities considerations were highlighted in the relevant report section.

#### **5.4 Homeless Reduction Act (HRA)- One Year On - Report for Approval**

Karen Swift, Divisional Director Housing and Regeneration, introduced the report, that made a series of practical recommendations for the housing options service to improve services for users, following a scrutiny challenge session in March 2020 looking at the impact of the HRA 2017.

The sub committee noted:

- the length of time between the challenge session and the sub committee made it hard to recall the discussion that had taken place; and that draft report had been provided between then and now;
- the proposed recommendations were 'light touch' and members questioned whether they were challenging enough to deliver tangible improvements for service users;
- that some of the report's recommendations were already in progress, as demonstrated in Item 5.5; and
- some of the key personnel of the challenge session (including the chair, Cllr Dipa Das) were not present at this meeting and several of the new (2020-21) sub committee members did not participate in the challenge session.

[Note – at this point in the proceedings the chair chose to defer further consideration of this item pending outcome of discussion of item 5.5, Housing Options Service Delivery Briefing. After consideration of Item 5.5 the sub committee resumed and concluded this item as below].

#### **RESOLVED that:**

1. The draft report 'The Homelessness Reduction Act One Year On' is not approved.
2. The sub committee requests a resumed/additional challenge session be arranged to re-explore the matters raised in the report and draft new recommendations, if appropriate.
3. Any resumed/new challenge session to include consideration of evidence provided by councillors from beyond the sub committee.

#### **5.5 Housing Options Service Delivery**

Karen Swift, Divisional Director Housing & Regeneration, introduced the report, that highlighted what the council is doing to take customer improvement forward in the housing options service and address some of the key recommendations from the previous item (Item 5.4). Karen explained that the service is constantly reviewing the way teams are operating to improve service users' customer experience.

Further to the officer presentation, the sub committee made the following observations.

- Recent feedback from residents to councillors indicated a poor customer experience for those accessing the council's housing options team. Noted that housing options customers comprise some of the most desperate and vulnerable of the borough's residents.
- Improving accessibility, readability and layout of electronic information such as the website, forms etc is critical to enable users to confidently access relevant information and could help to free capacity on telephone helplines. Officers will continue to liaise with digital team colleagues.
- Making it easier for users to contact their housing case worker directly, including a direct dial number, but also alternative contact details such as email.
- The Covid pandemic/lockdown period did have notable disruption to telephone service levels, but remedies were put in place quickly.
- Channel shifting can be a useful tool, but is critical it doesn't lead to a reduction in service for vulnerable service users.
- The Council previously attained external accreditations for its customer services such as Charter Mark. Recommended that past experience and process is revisited to understand how previous high standards might be restored.
- Sub committee members requested data on customer-access related complaints and KPI performance from the housing options service.
- The council should seek to raise awareness of the intermediate housing register and the option of intermediate rent.

The Chair invited Councillor Sirajul Islam, Statutory Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing, to address the meeting. Councillor Islam provided some more detail on recent work to improve the housing options service.

**RESOLVED that:**

1. The briefing on the Housing Options Customer Access Project Recovery and Renewal is noted.

**6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.37 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque  
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee