

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.40 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2021

COMMITTEE ROOM ONE - TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE CRESCENT, LONDON, E14 2BG

Members Present in person:

Councillor Ehtasham Haque
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Victoria Obaze
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present remotely:

Anne Ambrose Tenant Representative

Officers Present in person:

Mark Slowikowski – (Strategy, Policy and Performance Manager)
Joel West – (Democratic Services Team Leader (Committee))

Officers Present remotely:

Una Bedford – Strategy and Policy Officer (Place)
Rafiqul Hoque – (Head of Housing Options)
Shalim Uddin – (Affordable Housing Providers Co-ordinator)

Others present in person

Erin Robinson (Chair of Clare House Residents Association)

Others present remotely

Vatel Ntankeu (Assistant Director Resident Services, East Region, Peabody Homes)
Tracy Packer (Director of Customer Service, Peabody Homes)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

The Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque asked the sub committee to note that his wife is Councillor Sabina Akhtar, Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Sports.

Councillor Marc Francis asked the sub committee to note that his wife is Councillor Rachel Blake, Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the sub committee, 19 October 2021 were approved as a correct record of the proceedings.

Matters arising

Councillor Marc Francis, who chaired the 19 October meeting, asked that it be recorded that some of the residents who had attended this meeting may have incorrectly been introduced as Spitalfields Housing Association tenants, including Ala Uddin, who was previously a member of the housing association and Askar Miah, who was previously a member of SHA's Board.

Further to Minute 3.3, The Chair asked that, if practically possible, the sub committee revisit the review into the Council's regeneration policy at its final meeting of the year in March 2022 in a way that would allow the sub committee the opportunity to make comment/recommendations to the executive about the Council's approach.

3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Social Landlords Performance Report

Focus on Clare House Evacuation

At the request of the chair, Erin Robinson, Chair of Clare House Residents Association addressed the sub committee to provide residents' feedback on the decant of that block earlier in the year. Erin explained that the residents have a number of complaints relating to the decant, including:

- Insufficient notice for the decant. No written letters. Informed of 5 days prior to leave. Lack of information provided at the start and throughout the process.
- Many residents were left in the unsafe block for weeks following the decant. Many residents were fearful and panicked.
- Lack of clarity and much confusion around accommodation plans. Some residents had accommodation offers but later told they were no longer available. Some provided with unsuitable temporary accommodation.
- Difficult for residents to get in touch with Clarion to obtain clarity and raise issues. Residents have received conflicting information.
- Concern over future permanent housing arrangements. Some residents told they needed to sign assured short term tenancy for six months. Residents have sought legal advice on this from no-win-no-fee solicitors. Lack of information over options for refusal.
- Lack of transparency - Clarion have refused to provide safety documents regarding advice to decant. Have refused calls for an independent investigation into the decant.

- Overall, many residents are uncertain of their future. They have faced and continue to face considerable stress. They feel Clarion has not been transparent and has not supported them. They report a lack of trust in the provider.

Further to questions from the sub committee, Erin provided more detail on information provided to residents so far by the housing provider and residents' efforts to secure support, including legal advice from outside agencies and groups.

Further to Erin's presentation, the sub committee expressed sympathy with the provider over the scale and challenge of the decant operation, but also concern at the reports of residents. In particular:

- Failure of Clarion to provide requested documents to residents and noted there are parallels with recent request of results of inspections, which Clarion had refused to provide to residents and the council.
- The traumatic experience faced by residents uprooted from their homes, but being provided with insufficient support and guidance.
- The arrangements for re-homing residents and the uncertainty around direct offers and rights of refusal.
- The timescale for resolving the above issues. They noted the majority will not be into permanent accommodation before Christmas and likely stretching into the New Year 2022.
- Reports of residents being requested to relinquish their existing secure or assured tenancy in return for an assured short hold tenancy. They stressed the importance of independent, personalised, legal advice for residents.
- The apparent lack of advance emergency planning by the provider exacerbating the difficulty of the operation.

The sub committee thanked Erin for her contributions. Erin indicated she would welcome the council's support to put pressure on Clarion to act on residents' concerns. The chair asked that the sub committee write to Clarion (and invite the executive to contribute) citing its concerns and including previous concerns over the lack of transparency over fire safety inspections.

Landlord Performance

Shalim Uddin, Affordable Housing Coordinator, introduced the substantive report which provided performance data for 14 registered providers (RPs) within the borough for quarter 2. Shalim provided an update on the work of the THHF benchmarking sub group and a summary of the key achievements and challenges reflected in the report. Further to questions from the sub committee, explained some of the performance trends.

Further to the social landlords performance report, the sub committee:

- Welcomed the report, which they felt now provided a good reflection of the relative performance of each of the borough's providers.

- Expressed concern at the apparent continuing deterioration in the quality of basic housing management, especially repairs performance.
- Expressed continuing concern with the accuracy of some data provision and asked that steps are taken to ensure data is checked and of good quality.
- Expressed continuing concern with the lack of transparency and resident involvement in governance arrangements at many of the providers. Members felt that increasing this would contribute to the improvement in performance of service delivery.
- Asked what options the council had to apply sanctions against underperforming providers. Some members indicated that they felt the regulator displayed a lack of appetite to hold providers to account.
- Discussed options for the inclusion of an additional KPI on fire safety within the performance report.

The chair noted that the invitation to Spitalfields Housing Association (SHA) to attend this meeting had been declined and that a number of residents had arrived at the Town Hall indicating a wish to speak on SHA matters. The chair and vice chair indicated they had spoken to those residents prior to the meeting and had advised them it was not possible to allow them all into the meeting room due to Covid safety measures. The sub committee stressed it continued to have concerns regarding the issues raised by residents at the previous two meetings and the continued lack of attendance from SHA representatives. The sub committee agreed to formally request the Mayor and the lead member to write to the regulator for social housing, asking for them to undertake an investigation into the provider's performance and the appropriateness of its governance arrangements.

At the request of the chair, Vatel Ntankeu and Tracy Packer addressed the sub committee on behalf of Peabody Homes. Vatel and Tracy provided a brief presentation on the activities and performance of Peabody Homes. Including:

- Arrangements for how Peabody supports its residents – including an explanation of the roles of its local team neighbourhood managers and caretakers and the operation of the provider's 24/7 contact centre.
- A performance overview for Q2 in in the current financial year.
- The provider's development pipeline and planned new homes
- How the provider has supported residents during the Covid period.

Further to questions from sub committee members on the presentation, Tracy and Vatel:

- Explained some of the performance trends and discrepancies in the report relating to Peabody and why performance data was sometimes marked as NA in the landlord report. When the landlord performance report was prepared, not all data was available.
- Noted that some past performance data had been incorrectly provided. Measures are in place to prevent reoccurrence of this.
- Indicated they would provide the sub committee with an update on tenant heating charges.

- Overcrowding approach and support to help wellbeing of overcrowded residents

Following the presentation, sub committee members:

- Welcomed the performance of Peabody which they indicated compared favourably to other RPs in the Borough.
- Suggested the RP could learn from recent experiences, including experiences of the quality of customer service relating to repairs complaints, in order to improve the services it provides to residents.
- Thanked Tracy and Vatel for their contribution.

RESOLVED

1. To note progress in the performance outturns achieved by individual Social Landlords and the overall performance trend.
2. To write to Clarion Housing Association citing its concerns over the experiences reported by residents of their decant from Clare House and over the lack of transparency regarding fire safety inspections.
3. To ask the executive to write to the regulator for social housing, asking for them to undertake an investigation into Spitalfields Housing Association's performance and the appropriateness of its governance arrangements.

3.2 6-Month Review of the use of PRS Allocations

Rafiqul Hoque, Head of Housing Options provided a brief presentation to the sub committee on The Council's Housing Register and Private Rented Sector (PRS) discharge. Rafiqul explained the context to the Council's current practice, including the policy change agreed November 2020 and an overview of the policy's operation to date. He also provided a brief summary of:

- The recommendations arising from the HRA 1 Year On – Action Plan.
- Homelessness Transformation Programme 2021-2024 – progress so far and forthcoming milestones
- Improving Customer Access
- The increase in Temporary accommodation costs, Covid and non-Covid related, in recent years.

Further to questions from sub committee members on the presentation, Rafiqul:

- provided more information on how the policy was applied to newly homeless housing applicants.
- Agreed to feedback to his team sub committee suggestions for how the approach to PRS discharge could be tailored to ensure long-term housing applicants were not unfairly disadvantaged.
- Agreed to follow up separately and directly to relevant members on some of the individual cases referred to.

Further to the presentation, sub committee members made the following comments:

- Expressed concern with the policy agreed in 2020 to enable PRS discharge. Some members highlighted experiences of constituents whom they felt had been disadvantaged by the policy, by being prevented from obtaining good quality, secure, permanent and affordable social rented accommodation.
- Offered thanks to the Housing Options Team on their good customer service and advice.

The chair thanked Rafiqul for his contribution.

RESOLVED

1. That the presentation be noted.

3.3 Tenancy Agreement Review

Mark Slowikowski, Strategy and Policy Manager for Housing provided a brief presentation to the sub committee on consultation feedback for the proposed Tenancy Agreement. Mark asked the sub committee to note his presentation was made in his capacity as Strategy and Policy Manager for Housing. Mark explained:

- The background and context to the consultation.
- The consultation process and channels, including email address, website and webinar sessions.
- A summary of the responses/results, including
 - a total of 130 sets of comments were received equating to an approximate response rate of 1% of the tenant base.
 - the proposed change to succession was the most common area commented upon:
 - In the main: the comments received on this area expressed a desire to ensure succession rights were extended to their children.

Further to questions from sub committee members on the presentation, Mark:

- Explained that the response rate of 1 per cent was disappointing, but the Council had gone beyond its statutory requirements to encourage consultation responses.
- Explained why this change is being progressed now, including the relevance of the regulatory code that binds all social housing providers.
- Reported that the Council had sought counsel advice on this matter. The advice received was to discontinue the succession policy.

Further to the presentation, sub committee members:

- Expressed strong concern and reservations at the 1 per cent response rate. The sub committee felt this was not a sufficient evidence base to inform a significant policy decision. The chair felt that the Council also

needs to learn/understand why such a low response rate was received to a matter which would have a significant effect on residents' lives.

- Expressed concern that whilst letters were sent to inform residents of the consultation, the only options for them to respond/contribute were online.
- Expressed anxiety that the Council's role to provide permanent homes for residents may be eroded as a result of the proposed policy.
- Asked for a note that provided a more detailed explanation of the rationale and drivers for the proposed policy change.

RESOLVED

1. That the presentation be noted.

4. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.45 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee