

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.38 P.M. ON MONDAY, 13 MAY 2024

COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

Members Present:

Councillor Abdul Mannan (Chair)
Councillor Shafi Ahmed
Councillor Musthak Ahmed
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Asma Islam
Councillor James King

Co-opted Members Present:

Mahbub Anam (Tenant representative)
Susanna Kow (Leaseholder representative)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Kabir Ahmed (Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive
Development and Housebuilding)

Officers Present:

Karen Swift – (Director, Housing and Regeneration)
Paul Burgess – (Project Officer, Corporate Strategy and
Equalities)
Justina Bridgeman – (Democratic Services Officer (Committees))

Officers Present Remotely:

Shane Mills – (Programme Analyst)
Daniel Kerr – (Senior Strategy and Policy Officer)

Invited Guests:

Andrea Baker – (Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum
(THHF))
Residents – (Tower Hamlets Community Housing)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests, however, Susanna Kow declared she is a Tower Hamlets Leaseholder, Councillor James King declared he is a Tower Hamlets Leaseholder and Councillor Shafi Ahmed declared he is a Tower Hamlets Homes Leaseholder and Board Member.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

The minutes of the Sub Committee meeting held on 29 February 2024 were approved as a correct record of proceedings.

3. OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, informed Members that no updates have been received for the following actions;

- An Estates ASB Summer Action Plan be submitted to the sub-committee for municipal year 2023/24. 27 April 2023 Meeting.
- THH in-house Arrangements – review resident engagement to give residents more opportunity to contribute and not just putting the emphasis on residents board. 11 October 2023 Meeting.
- Details on the Service Improvement Group will be circulated to Members. 10 October 2023 Meeting.

The comprehensive report on THH Major Works Programme requested at the 27 April 2023 meeting, which should include information on response times and general performance, has now been deferred to the 24 June Meeting. Members expressed concern about the length of time in receiving the information, particularly the update on resident engagement and in-house arrangements.

The Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee **RESOLVED**;

1. That details on the Tower Hamlet Homes (THH) Major Works Programme will be brought to the sub-committee for the 24 June Meeting.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Resident Feedback on Tower Hamlets Community Housing Performance

The Chair invited residents from Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) to discuss their experiences with the housing provider. One online resident, who requested anonymity, described THCH as not fit for purpose, noting the ineffective repairs service, inadequate administration processes, letters addressed to the wrong resident with grammatical errors and the refusal to

refund service charge overpayments. Members were informed that residents have no redress and claimed that, although senior staff and the Board are fully aware, vulnerable residents are left unable to complain.

Gaz Rahman, a leaseholder from Vollasky House Estate, reiterated the repairs concerns and claimed these failures contributed to a death in Vollasky House. At present, there are three properties with 3 inches of stagnant water inside and no remediation has been initiated. A surveying report obtained by an independent company revealed 19 defaults within the estate. A report from the Housing Ombudsman states that THCH are guilty of severe maladministration in relation to service charges and disrepairs over a significant period of time, although nothing has been done to rectify issues and Vollasky House is not a safe place to live. Mr Rahman queried why the Council has not intervened and why staff are still employed, when they do not respond to residents.

Anne Ambrose, a tenant from Minerva Estate, outlined details of the proposed merger with THCH and Poplar Harca and how residents had no redress to voice concerns. Ms Ambrose stated that THCH were not transparent and only informed residents that the merger would no longer occur when it was already common knowledge. Many permanent staff members have left the organisation; however, senior staff and the Board still remain, which only intensifies the situation. Members were asked to confirm if THCH will be brought in-house and if locally based providers can manage the properties going forward. Ms Ambrose who shared photographs of communal disrepair, urged for Council assistance.

Jakia Begum, a resident from Charles Dickens House, then spoke about being misled on bidding for the property as there were hidden heating charges concealed in the rent, for £88.00 per week. Requests for invoices have not been adequately addressed, as they are either corrupted when sent via email or only available through a password that is not provided. Mrs Begum has been charged twice for utilities, once by the landlord and again from energy suppliers since the start of her tenancy and no explanation have been given by THCH. Emails have been ignored, requests for Stage 1 complaint was refused and hot water has not been provided to her residence.

Members were informed that CCTV services have been faulty for nearly 5 years but residents are still being requested to pay despite numerous complaints. Residents are required to pay a fee for services which are not being performed. Cleaning does not occur within the communal areas and complaints are frequently ignored.

Mushin Manir, whose mother lives in Folly House, expressed concerns that she and many other leaseholders have regarding reporting repairs, which have not been rectified, despite THCH's claims that contractors have attended. Requests for invoices or receipts of repairs been made although THCH have stated these details cannot be shared. The electricity is switched on in communal areas only during daylight hours. Concerns have been reported to the landlord since 2008 but have not been addressed.

Mr Manir queried why the Environmental Health team have not visited properties to review concerns which exceeds specific time frames. He then claimed that THCH are using legal jargon in an attempt not to fulfil their landlord obligations. Water leaking from pipes in ceilings has not been rectified, as the provider claims they cannot gain access, although the upstairs resident has, but was informed that the source of the leak cannot be found. Mr Manir requested more transparency regarding the proposed merger take place.

Peter Mengerink, a resident of Painter House, described his experiences, which mirrored the other residents. Cleaning services appears to only take place on the stairwell and THCH do not follow their own timeframe for resolving complaints or repairs. Residents have been informed that they are responsible for repairs that contradict tenancy agreements. Mr Mengerink asserted that the services charges are too high, and contacting the Housing Officer or manager is ineffective, as no details of who they have been given.

Members were told that senior management work from home and do not respond to complaints and staff turnaround for all departments is high. An improvement plan apparently signed off by the regulator has not been sent to residents and many no longer trust the management. Mr Mengerink urged the Council to ask the housing Regulator to intervene. The Board do not appear to have any oversight of major concerns residents have with THCH. Mr Mengerink suggested that an open letter for residents should be published to establish a set of improvements and explain why the merger did not take place. The Council should also consider bringing the service in-house.

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, informed Members that a meeting took place with residents of Charles Dickens House to discuss initial concerns. Mayor Lutfur Rahman also met with residents and THCH management and sent a letter to the Regulator to request residents to be informed of the merger and for the merger to be kept as local as possible. Councillor Ahmed also spoke with Poplar HARCA who were not fully informed of why the merger did not occur. Members were informed that due to the current amount of debt THCH has and other regulatory requirements, it would not be feasible to bring the provider in-house.

Andrea Baker, Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF) and Director of Housing at Poplar Harca, stated that the merger with THCH would be the best for residents, and are still eager to continue and welcome further discussions. Karen Swift, Director of Housing and Regeneration, then confirmed that a meeting was scheduled to take place with THCH management on 16 July prior to the merger not going ahead.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed and Karen Swift;

- Clarified that although THCH concerns have been raised to both Councillors and The Mayor, residents have not received a response. Members were urged to use their voices to speak to the housing regulator as advocates for THCH residents on their concerns.

Members stated that they would like to be informed of any discussions regarding the issue which can be accessed to assist the Mayor in implementing improvements on the residents' behalf. Members then requested that the Mayor meet with the Minister for Housing, the Regulator for Social Housing and MPs to request immediate action on behalf of the residents.

The Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee **RESOLVED**;

1. That a written request be made to the Mayor to initiate a formal request to meet with the Minister for Housing, the Regulator for Social Housing, and MPs to investigate THCH performance concerns on behalf of residents.

4.2 Social Landlords performance report quarter 3 2023/24

Mubin Choudhury, Performance Improvement Analyst, introduced the consultation reports for quarter 3 for Registered Providers (RPs). This included a summary of the key strengths, challenges and general updates reflected in the report.

Mr Choudhury noted that the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) are now in line with the Regulators for Social Housing (RSH) Tenant Satisfaction Measures and the Regulator will publish all submissions from the RP's later this year. It was also noted that Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) have been added to the report under Tower Hamlets Council and will now be included in all future reports.

Further to questions by the sub-committee, Mubin Choudhury, Shalim Uddin, Partnerships Officer, Strategy and Policy and Andrea Baker;

- Confirmed that RP's can make comments or answer specific questions to accompany the data, although the Council does not have any authority to act against any RP, or scrutinise the data provided. Only the RSH has those powers.
- Explained the RP's share best practice with each other but do not have the power to scrutinise, as this is undertaken by the RP's Board.
- Clarified that once KPI's are published in the Autumn by the RSH, these can then be compared with data received by the Council to identify any anomalies.

Further to questions, Members were sceptical of the data presented and suggested that details of Member Enquires (ME's), Mayoral Enquires and

relet properties related to specific providers should be tabled in the report. Andrea Baker confirmed that concerns raised regarding the performance figures and details on relets will be brought to the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF).

Karen Swift suggested that data could be obtained directly from RSH after the quarter 1 reports in the Autumn and that THH will be asked to provide a breakdown on all void properties. The Sub-Committee were encouraged as Ward Members to meet with RP's in their ward to discuss concerns raised by residents. The Chair requested any further questions to be forwarded in writing to Officers.

The Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee **RESOLVED**;

1. That THH provide a breakdown on all void properties for review.
2. That the report be noted.

4.3 The Customer Journey for Housing Needs

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding and Karen Swift, Director of Housing and Regeneration, presented an update of the customer journey for housing needs. Shane Mills, Program Analyst, also answered questions. It was noted that the average days to complete and complete online housing register applications increased due to multiple requests for information from the customer, as well as system issues. The communication timeline has now been extended to 28 days to reply to additional information and the system has now been upgraded.

Members were also informed that more staff are required to clear the backlog of applications, many of which are customers who submitted application forms over a year ago but did not respond to additional requests for details. These applications will now be closed down, although if residents wish to re-apply they will be reopened. The double entry of applications occurred when transferring the same information into another system. This is no longer necessary with the upgraded system and turnaround times have been reduced to 69 days, the target is 56 days.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed and Karen Swift;

- Explained that phase one improvements include an online housing register application process, a streamlined queuing system, more translation services. The service has launched the implementation of online customer signatures, so residents do not have to visit the Town Hall and face to face options for those facing emergency situations.

- Clarified that further staff training and support is necessary to ensure they understand the needs of residents facing complex housing issues.
- Acknowledged that some customers feel more comfortable conversing with Councillors at ward surgeries rather than Officers. Although customer questionnaires are provided to inform staff of their customer experience, consideration will be given to provide surveys specifically for the Residents Hub customers.

The Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee **RESOLVED**;

1. That the presentation be noted.

5. **SCRUTINY CHALLENGE SESSION REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS REVIEW**

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer provided reflections on the scrutiny challenge session, which took place on 26 March 2024 and then requested approval to submit the report to the Mayor, Cabinet and Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF) for executive response to the five recommendations;

Recommendation 1:

RSSC and key stakeholders to ensure Registered Providers (RPs) are invited to attend more committee meetings by conducting regular spotlight session at every Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting and inviting RPs to attend when their RP is being discussed

Recommendation 2:

Build in training provision and develop Committee Members with analysing performance data.

Recommendation 3:

Invite Residents to give evidence at Housing Scrutiny Sub-committee adding value and making committee meetings more robust.

Recommendation 4:

HRSSC to review the management of council's own housing stock and ensure it is being well managed.

Recommendation 5:

HRSSC to work with stakeholders and ensure the council maximises its powers to improve the standards and the services housing providers give to residents.

Both co-opted Members requested minor amendments to the report, as Mahbub Anam was not noted as present and Susanna Kow's sub-committee details were not stated.

The Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee **RESOLVED**;

1. That the report will be submitted to the Mayor, Cabinet and THHF for an executive response to the recommendations.
2. That the presentation be noted and recommendations **APPROVED** subject to minor amendments noted at this meeting.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.53 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Abdul Mannan

Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee