

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

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

**HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON MONDAY, 11 SEPTEMBER 2023**

**COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL**

**Members Present:**

Councillor Abdul Mannan (Chair)

Councillor Musthak Ahmed

Councillor Shafi Ahmed

Councillor Marc Francis

Councillor Asma Islam

Councillor James King

Councillor Bellal Uddin

**Co-opted Members Present:**

Mahbub Anam (Tenant representative)

Susanna Kow (Leaseholder representative)

**Other Councillors Present:**

Councillor Kabir Ahmed

**Officers Present:**

Karen Swift – (Divisional Director, Housing and  
Regeneration)

Una Bedford – Strategy and Policy Officer (Place)

Justina Bridgeman – Democratic Services Officer (Committee)

**Apologies:**

Councillor Saif Uddin Khaled

## 1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

## 2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Chair requested nominations for the position of Vice-Chair of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee for the municipal year 2023/24. Councillor Musthak Ahmed proposed Councillor Shafi Ahmed for the position. This was seconded by Councillor Bellal Uddin.

There were no further nominations received.

The Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. Elect Councillor Shafi Ahmed the Vice-Chair of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee for the municipal year 2023/24.

## 3. HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE, QUORUM, MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING DATES FOR 2023/24

Justina Bridgeman, Democratic Services Officer, requested members to note the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee's terms of reference, membership, quorum and meeting dates for the municipal year 2023/24. The terms of reference were agreed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 May 2023.

The Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. Note it's terms of reference, quorum, membership and meeting dates as set out in appendices 1,2 and 3 of the report.
2. **Agreed** to hold all Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee meetings at 6.30pm in the Council Chamber for the municipal year 2023/24.

Councillor Marc Francis agreed to the terms of reference, membership and start times of sub-committee meetings, but objected to the current number of meetings and requested this be increased to accommodate the performance of Tower Hamlets Homes now back in-house. A request was made to appeal to both Democratic Services and the Chief Executive for an increase.

Daniel Kerr, Strategy and Policy Lead, confirmed that requests of this nature must be considered at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings and this

will be presented at the next meeting, scheduled for Monday 18 September. Sub-committee members were advised that resource implications require consideration, as other committee meetings may be affected. This can then be discussed with the Chief Executive and Democratic Services if agreement is given at the OSC. Daniel also reminded members that scrutiny challenge sessions are also available to examine specific housing issues in more depth.

**RESOLVED** that

1. The request to increase the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee meetings from 5 to 9 to be taken to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 18 September.

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

The minutes of the Sub Committee meeting held on 27 April 2023 were approved as a correct record of proceedings.

##### Matters Arising

Sub-committee members expressed concern that some requests made at the last meeting were not fully relayed as actions. Examples given included the request that an extra column be created within the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) to denote repeat Member Enquiries (ME's) for the same enquiry, to understand the responses given and also to add specific categories that most common ME's fall under, establishing if these queries relate to emergencies.

The Social Landlords Performance report did not have full details for eight registered provider KPI's which were required by the sub-committee. Officers at the last meeting explained that some providers hold stock outside the borough, which means data may be manipulated to produce details for Tower Hamlets. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) now required by the Regulator of Social Housing should create more accurate details.

The sub-committee also took a vote on increasing the meetings from 5 to 9 and requested a formal note be submitted to the Chief Executive for the increase and queried it this was undertaken by the Chair. Daniel Kerr reiterated that this request would have to go to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the first instance. It will be brought to the next OSC meeting on 18.09.23 for discussion and if agreed, a further discussion with the Chief Executive would take place, as per the governance process..

Sub-committee members were also concerned about other actions not on the agenda. See item 5 for further details.

#### **5. OUTSTANDING ACTIONS**

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, updated sub-committee members on the following;

- Local Plan Update – 16 February 2023 meeting. The update from the Planning and Building Control department to be included in the HRSSC work programme for 2023/24. Paul Burgess informed sub-committee members that this will be added to the OSC budget and policy framework.
- Swan Housing Presentation: 360 Report – 16 February 2023 meeting. Swan Housing to submit their 360 Feedback Report, resident's response and KPI's before the 27th July meeting. (Meeting moved to 11.09.23). Details Pending.
- Social Landlords Report – 27 April 2023 meeting. THH to submit a brief outlining contractor response times and general performance to the sub-committee for the first meeting of the municipal year 2023/24. This item has been added to the work programme for the 14th December 2023 meeting.
- Homelessness backlog – 27 April 2023 meeting. To be brought to the sub-committee for municipal year 2023/24. This item has been added to the work programme for the 14th December 2023 meeting.
- THH Major Works Programme – 27 April 2023 meeting. A comprehensive report on THH Major Works Programme (with details on response times and general performance) to be included in the HRSSC work programme for 19th October meeting.
- An Estates ASB Summer Action Plan – 27 April 2023 meeting. Action plan to be brought to the sub-committee for municipal year 2023/24. Details Pending.

Sub-committee members raised concerns around the number of items added to the work programme, as some items are outstanding actions and only require updates. A number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests have been received with regard to Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) and reviewing its performance figures before November would be beneficial to the sub-committee. Members also noted that the Local plan being returned to the sub-committee is valuable for the regeneration aspect of scrutiny, as the initial plan was presented to members in February. See item 7 for further details.

## **6. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **6.1 Cabinet Members Overview of Housing and Regeneration Priorities for 2023/24**

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, provided reflections from last year and outlined the key priorities for municipal year 2023/24.

Councillor Ahmed emphasised the councils commitment to delivering the key priorities to ensure safe and affordable housing for borough residents. This included;

- Housing supply,
- Housing management planning
- Place based regeneration
- Safety and compliance
- Homelessness and rough sleeping

The key priorities incorporated in the OSC forward program, which align with the Local plan to manage borough development were outlined for members. These include a progress review of the affordable homes delivery target, a review of the customer journey for homeless residents or those facing homelessness, continual management of risk as Tower Hamlets Homes move in-house and the response to the Social Housing Regulations Act 2023.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed and Karen Swift, Director of Housing:

- Clarified that the high demand for housing outweighs supply throughout the country.
- Confirmed that sites for modular homes are located on Landon Walk in Poplar. Work has begun in Candy Street. A written brief can be submitted to members for review.
- Noted that private renters issue with a section 21 eviction notice is resulting in more approaches to the homelessness service. Due to the lack of housing stock within the borough, some families are being housed in locations outside Tower Hamlets. Work with landlords takes place to halt notices. The Private Reform Bill will assist as no fault evictions will be banned. For further details see item 6.2.
- Confirmed that the cost of materials and construction is having a detrimental impact on council finances. Homeless households in emergency situations are being housed in commercial hotels.
- Noted that the PRS is vital to managing homelessness within the borough and incentives for Landlords are in place, with an insurance offer. However, there are still challenges as less than 2% of listings are affordable to local housing allowance claimants and buy to let properties are decreasing. Landlords are moving away from providing temporary accommodation, due to increased costs, energy efficiency targets that need to be met and the removal of tax breaks.

- Confirmed that a review of the Homelessness Strategy has been completed which evaluates the last five years. Consideration of where to house homeless households may be included in a future strategy and the placement policy will also be reviewed. 52% of temporary accommodation is within the borough and the remaining outside. Of those outside, 85% they are in neighbouring boroughs
- Clarified that there are currently 249 families in bed and breakfast hotels in the borough, with 168 placed longer than six weeks.
- Noted that direct delivery of housing stock and buy backs are being considered, as well as section 106 agreements with developers to further invest in affordable housing.
- Confirmed that a budget of £1.8 million has been agreed for an extra 22 staff members, the council will contact all leaseholders to encourage those considering letting properties to work directly with Tower Hamlets. Publicity on this is taking place now.
- Confirmed that an open day took place on 11.09.23 for developers and social housing partners.

Following comments from Councillor Kabir Ahmed and Karen Swift, the sub committee;

- Requested details of properties bought by the council on the open market for use as temporary accommodation.
- Requested homelessness referral figures, temporary accommodation and placement details in and out of the borough to be brought to the sub-committee for review.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. Details of properties bought by the council on the open market for use as temporary accommodation to be brought back to the sub-committee for review.
2. A written brief of modular homes located in the borough to be brought back to the sub-committee for review.
3. A written update on the homelessness referral figures, temporary accommodation and placement details in and out of the borough and improvement measures to be brought to the sub-committee for review.
4. The presentation be noted.

## 6.2 Renters Reform Bill

Una Bedford, Senior Strategy and Policy Officer, gave an overview of the Renters Reform Bill, introduced on 17 May 2023, following the government white papers housing reform strategy. It is believed that a second reading of the bill will be heard sometime in October. The Reform Bill includes a number of measures such as:

- The end of the Section 21 notice of no-fault evictions from landlords.
- Civil penalties of up to £30,000 for unlawful evictions can be imposed by local authorities.
- The abolition of assured and shorthold tenancies and the introduction of periodic assured tenancies.
- Mandatory written statements from registered providers and private sector landlords to tenants, outlining terms and conditions to recover possession of the property, as well as the rights and obligations of all parties.
- The amendment of notice periods from 2 weeks to 4 weeks for private landlords, and in instances of anti-social behaviour, reversing the timescale from 4 weeks to 2 weeks to claim earlier possession.
- The introduction of a private renters ombudsman service to tackle indefensible rent increases.
- A new digital property portal to fully understand property details and agreements.
- Tenants can challenge above market rent increases, through the first-tier tribunals to the Property Chamber.

Further legislation is likely to include a ban on landlords excluding renting to housing allowance claimants. The sub-committee were then informed of details missing from the bill which includes:

- How the Decent Homes Standard for PRS will be managed.
- Further details in regard to a Housing Court, although the government is in talks with the Ministry of Justice, HM Courts and the Tribunal Service to use a modern digital service, details have not been released.
- Concerns around Affordable Homes.
- Details on rent control have not been considered.

Una Bedford informed sub-committee members of the risks associated with a decrease in PRS properties, due to the abolition of Section 21 notices. There are also potential issues with some landlords unfairly issuing a Section 8 notice to evict tenants, on the grounds of breaching tenancy agreements with anti-social behaviour as justification.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Una Bedford and Karen Swift:

- Conceded that further details on the reform have not yet been released by the government but will be brought back to the sub-committee once published.
- Confirmed that shared owners are currently considered shorthold tenants. If arrears are accrued or anti-social behaviour takes place, a possession order would be sought. Once this legislation comes into effect, a shared owner would be viewed as a long leaseholder.
- Noted that a Private Renters Reform Working Group will be formed to establish the potential impacts, resources and services best placed to mitigate. Growth fund bids and additional 'New Burdens' government funding will be a consideration. However, due to a national shortage there are challenges with recruiting Enforcement Officers.
- Conceded that as landlords are already moving out of the market, consideration should be given to purchase properties from those wishing to sell in order to keep tenants in accommodation
- Confirmed that the working group will consider all potential impacts the reform will have to the housing advice service, including supporting tenants challenging rent increases with first-tier tribunals and working with other advice organisations. Updates to be brought back to members within the next four months.
- Explained civil penalties of up to £30,000 for unlawful evictions can be imposed by local authorities. If an eviction takes place due to the owner wishing to move family into the home but this does not happen after a specific time period, further penalties of up to £5,000 can be issued. Full details on this and other enforcement measures are pending.

[Clerk's Note – the white paper referenced is available here: [A fairer private rented sector – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-fairer-private-rented-sector)]

**RESOLVED** that:

1. Further details on the Renters Reform Bill to be brought back to the sub-committee once government updates are released.
2. Updates on the Renters Reform Working Group to be brought back to the sub-committee within four months.



3. The presentation be noted.

### 6.3 Housing Options

Karen Swift, Director of Housing, informed the sub-committee that due to an ongoing external grievance investigation, which garnered newspaper coverage, details cannot be disclosed at this meeting. A written response will be brought to sub-committee members once the investigation has concluded outside of the meeting. The main premise of the complaint was outlined to members. A collective grievance was made by members of the homelessness service, and an external investigator commissioned by HR was appointed. The deciding manager will be a Corporate Director outside of Housing.

Sub-committee members requested updates on the second issue regarding 40 Somali families who have approached councillors around homelessness, poor service quality and structural discrimination. Karen Swift informed the sub-committee that a meeting was held with the families and Usman Zia, Head of Housing Complaints was present and is handling individual complaints.

Many of the women at the meeting had received automated text messages stating there were no properties to bid for that week. This caused confusion as this text relates to available properties listed on a given week. The text was misleading.

Karen Swift informed members that a second article concerning vulnerable residents asked to pay for council accommodation are unsubstantiated claims and publicity around scams has been posted in 'Our East End' magazine. The council will never request money in exchange for council property and if instances do occur, this is a scam which needs to be reported to the police and the council for investigation. The council has an active fraud team and all housing allocations are fully documented for audit purposes.

Concerns were raised that performance issues were not discussed and that Members should have had sight of the investigation in a restricted format, as this has an impact on performance. Daniel Kerr reiterated that the investigation is ongoing and details cannot be disclosed as this stage.

[Clerk's Note –scam warning details available here: [Our East End - September 2023 \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/our-east-end-september-2023)]

**RESOLVED** that:

1. A written response to be brought to sub-committee members after the Housing Options grievance investigation has concluded outside of this meeting.
2. A written update on the Somali families housing issue and expected conclusion date to be sent to the Chair outside of this meeting.

## **7. HRSSC DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023/24**

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, proposed topics to discuss at the remaining meetings for the 2023/24 municipal year. The details will be submitted to the OSC next week. Sub-committee members were reminded that Scrutiny reviews are available to look at topics in more depth if required. The following topics were suggested:

- The Chair requested the Social Landlords Report be added to the next meeting scheduled for 19 October, and as a standing agenda item going forward. There should be a breakdown of affordable homes and social rented properties.
- Registered Providers should be invited to discuss performance issues with the sub-committee.
- Local residents should be invited to discuss lived experience of housing issues in the borough to the sub-committee. This should include existing stock and older buildings as well as new builds.
- A spotlight on THH Major Works Programme and other registered providers on the agenda or as a deep dive discussion..
- THH should be added to the agenda as a standing item.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. The presentation be noted.

## **8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.43 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Abdul Mannan

Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee