

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.35 P.M. ON MONDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2024

COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

Members Present:

Councillor Bodrul Choudhury (Chair)

Councillor Amin Rahman

Councillor Ahmodul Kabir

Councillor James King

Councillor Asma Islam

Councillor Amina Ali

Co-opted Members Present:

Mahbub Anam (Tenant representative)

Susanna Kow (Leaseholder representative)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Kabir Ahmed

Officers Present:

Paul Patterson – (Interim Corporate Director Housing And
Regeneration)

Leah Sykes – (Head of Customer Services)

Darren Reynolds – (Interim Director of Neighbourhoods)

Usman Zia – Head of Information Governance

Justina Bridgeman – Democratic Services Officer (Committee)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests, however for transparency, Councillor Amin Rahman declared that he sits on the Tower Hamlets Community Housing Board. Councillor James King declared he is a Tower Hamlets Leaseholder and Susanna Kow declared she is a Tower Hamlets Leaseholder.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

The minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee meeting held on 24 June 2024 were signed and approved as a correct record of proceedings.

3. OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, informed Members that the actions log was circulated and that there were no further updates. In relation to the action from 13 May 2024; “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” The Chair agreed to sign a letter requesting to Mayor Lutfur Rahman initiate the formal request.

Members were informed that the updates on breakdown for all void properties and the written brief detailing the breakdown of the 459 Affordable units completed in 2023-24, will be received by the end of this week.

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

1. That the Chair will sign a letter requesting to Mayor Rahman initiate the 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. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 HRSSC Draft Work Programme 2024-25

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, informed Members that the draft work programme was amended following submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC). This was due to the requirement for the Ombudsman's report to be included for this meeting and also item 4.3. The Social Landlords Performance report has been moved to the meeting scheduled for 12 December 2024.

Mr. Burgess also noted that there is scope for the Homeless Strategy to be included in the work plan and requested the Chair to consider adding this in. Members then discussed the Homelessness Accommodation Placement Policy, which was submitted to the OSC on 02 September. At that meeting the

policy was suspended by the Mayor pending a review. The sub-committee requested the OSC provide information on the outcome once finalised.

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

1. That the Chair will consider adding the Homelessness Strategy to the work programme for municipal year 2024/25.
2. That details of the Homelessness Accommodation Placement Policy review be brought to the sub-committee once finalised.

4.2 THCH Spotlight: Response to Residents Spotlight from May 2024 Meeting

Following the meeting on 16 May when residents discussed concerns with Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH), the Chair introduced Mandeep Bhogil, Director of Operations for THCH to respond. Ms Bhogil refuted the claim that a resident's death was caused by repair issues not adequately addressed. There were underlying health concerns which led to this and not outstanding repair issues.

Members were informed that roof remediation work at Vollasky House was completed approximately 10 days ago, at no additional cost to leaseholders and that investigations into the pipework and the water supply were conducted prior to completion. Ms Bhogil acknowledged that there are general concerns regarding performance that are currently being addressed and improvements are ongoing.

Ms Bhogil then clarified that due to THCH's limited financial capacity to deliver improvements, a merger is being sought. The housing provider's right to buy portfolio has been sold off and rental income has reduced. This has impacted fire remediation works, which are approximately £50 million and currently THCH is not able to provide adequate service repairs without a merger partner.

Following questions by the sub-committee, Mandeep Bhogil;

- Confirmed that overpayment and invoice issues a resident discussed at the May meeting have been resolved and they now have access to all invoices sent. A review of service charges at Charles Dickens House was also undertaken. The outcome revealed that residents had paid less than the cost to provide the service charges. A summary of all service charge payments can be submitted to the sub-committee for review.
- Explained that two senior independent directors and three new Board members have been appointed, to increase and enhance the skill set.

- Clarified that discussions with Hyde Housing Association are ongoing and they are committed to keep the THCH office locally based and to invest in the community. Hyde have invested in service improvements for lift upgrades at Luke House and repairs at seven community centres.
- Clarified that improvement plans include kitchen, bathroom and roof upgrades to improve the quality of housing stock for residents. The main aim is to increase tenant satisfaction measures and THCH will continue to engage with residents positively via the Resident Voice Panel and two resident Board Members.
- Acknowledged residents' concerns regarding the lack of engagement and ongoing Resident Voice Panel meetings are held to resolve any issues. There are also community based meetings held in community centres and open surgeries.
- Noted improvements include an open office drop in, where residents can discuss concerns in the office. Residents also expressed concern about the lack of staff within the estates, which is now being addressed with more Housing Officers, Fire Risk Support Officers and Estate Officers on site to improve resident engagement. A digital noticeboard and a text messaging service are also available for residents to receive immediate feedback on queries. which will assist in learning from complaints and improving resident satisfaction.
- Confirmed that all complaints received are now responded to within time scales.
- Acknowledged that THCH are experiencing difficulties in delivering core services, which will only worsen in 18 months if the organisation does not acquire a merger partner to assist in remediation programmes.
- Confirmed that the relationship with the Council is a positive one. Quarterly meetings take place with Mayor Lutfur Rahman and there are regular discussions with Councillor Amin Rahman, Councillor Kabir Hussain and Councillor Musthak Ahmed respectively.
- Noted that consideration has been given to selling off land and potential asset disposal, however, a bid for a merger partner takes precedence.
- Clarified that quarterly meetings are held with leaseholders and general needs residents, to discuss improvements and determine the areas that require remediation.
- Confirmed that THCH has a customer consultation communication plan, where residents can discuss any issues regarding the merger.

This includes a survey, an online resident form, a text message consultation process, and the 'Here To Hear' campaign to encourage individuals to engage with THCH. Housing Officers are also contacting residents directly through door knocking to receive feedback.

The Chair thanked Ms Bhogil for attending and stated that the Council will work to resolve long-standing residents' concerns.

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

1. That a summary of service charge payments be submitted to the sub-committee for review.

4.3 Update on Tenants Voice Panel

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, introduced the process for forming the panel, since Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) was insourced back into the Council in November 2023.

Paul Patterson, Interim Corporate Director of Housing and Regeneration, then gave an overview of the recent changes, including the introduction of the new consumer standards and regulations. The priorities for housing management and investments with those properties were briefly outlined. It was noted that the tenant voice panel is a way to engage with residents, so they have a voice and to ensure improvement strategies are implemented.

Mr Patterson noted that this will be an evolving process and the sub-committee will be given regular updates.

Following questions by the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Paul Patterson and Darren Reynolds, Interim Director of Neighbourhoods;

- Clarified that the Residents Voice Panel will focus on Tower Hamlets council's housing stock. The upcoming forward plan will examine and agree the key performance measures and resolve specific concerns.
- Confirmed that research on equivalent panel make-up was conducted to ensure that the panel members have the right amount of leaseholders, stakeholders, and tenants. All residents were informed regarding the panel selection process to maximise the number of representatives selected. Preferred candidates will not be members of other Tenant Resident Associations (TRA) or forums in Chairperson or Member positions.
- Explained that the Mayor and Cllr Kabir Ahmed will receive twice yearly reports and the panel will meet on a quarterly basis to monitor housing delivery within the Council. Details on these meetings will be brought back to the sub-committee.

- Noted that residents are permitted to observe these meetings by contacting the Housing management Director in advance for available spaces.
- Clarified that a more robust and direct monitoring process will be implemented where Officers can fully examine resident observations and assess how contractors will be held accountable. If necessary, some may have their contracts terminated if their performance is deemed inadequate.
- Explained that the housing association sector has moved from having residents within the Board, in part due to the complex nature of the new regulations and the financial viability of those associations. The Boards require more expertise in retrofitting, investments and housing development. It is anticipated that the Regulator will increase the number of resident panels, to collaborate with residents in implementing service improvements.

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

1. That details of the Housing Management structure be submitted to the sub-committee for review.

4.4 Lead Member Housing and Regeneration Priorities for 2024-25

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, outlined the five main key priorities for this municipal year. These include:

- Housing Management
- Regulation and Compliance
- Housing Supply
- Planning / Place Based Regeneration
- Homelessness

Councillor Kabir Ahmed presented a brief overview of the priorities and stated that in regards to Housing Management, the process of interfacing services directly into the Council is ongoing. Some departments were relocated and shifted into existing Council departments and a restructure is underway. Consultations will also be conducted with Union representatives and staff and this should be completed in the next few months.

Members were informed that Randall House has ACM cladding that requires removal. Residents have been informed and a 'waking watch' has been posted on the site to prepare for remediation. Residents are being provided with weekly progress updates. Other priorities include Latham House and Johnston House respectively, as waking watch services have also been posted at these buildings. Cllr Kabir Ahmed informed the sub-committee that

at the last Cabinet meeting approximately £160 million will be allocated for improvements.

Sub-committee Members were informed that consideration is being given to buy-backs and CHAPS funding, further collaboration with developers and a robust monitoring of plans is ongoing. The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) transferred powers back to the Council on 01 September and by December 2024 all planning powers will revert to Tower Hamlets Council.

Following questions by the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed;

- Confirmed that the Homelessness Accommodation Placement Policy is currently being reviewed and consideration will be given to procuring more properties in and around the borough. All efforts are made to locate residents within borough if possible. Once the review has concluded sub-committee Members will be notified.
- Clarified that as part of the Council's capital programme one of the objectives is ensuring sufficient housing stock is available for residents. This encompasses direct deliveries, site identifications and capital budgets.
- Noted that in regards to affordable homes, the aim is to have 40%. Social housing and an 85/15 split between intermediate and affordable homes. Under the restructuring, Capital delivery, housing supply and housing delivery will all work together and the Council applications process will be fast tracked.
- Reaffirmed that in relation to the Homelessness Accommodation Policy, a review is currently underway to determine if Zone D is required and the financial viability of incorporating it. Officers are still receiving live weekly updates from Power BI. Once full details are known, sub-committee Members will be informed.

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

1. That details of the delivery plan including the programme, targets and budget to be forwarded to the sub-committee for review.

4.5 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Report & Action Plan Responses

Councillor Kabir Ahmed introduced the last item the Local Governance and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) reports and recommendations. The body who investigates individual complaints about councils, Adult Social Care providers and other public service organisations states in Section 31(2) of the 1974 Act, that 'your Council must formally consider our report.'

Members were asked for the report to be considered at full Council, Cabinet or another Committee with delegated authority. Usman Zia, Head of Information Governance, and Leah Sykes, Director, Customer Services, gave an overview of both reports and recommendations.

Ms Sykes informed Members that the last public interest report was received was in October 2020. Its purpose is to raise awareness of significant issues and encourage scrutiny.

Following questions by the sub-committee, Usman Zia, Leah Sykes and Councillor Kabir Ahmed:

- Confirmed that all recommendations outlined in the Ombudsman report have been completed, including all individual reports, which were sent back to the Ombudsman with evidence in June 2024.
- Clarified that one of the areas identified in the recommendations was learning and the mechanisms around this. All Officers were given training and reminded of the Housing Code, which was delivered at a service meeting. The Ombudsman were provided with the minutes of that meeting and were satisfied.
- Explained that staff levels within the Housing Management Complaints team has increased and they are working through the backlog of cases. Other improvement plans include swifter responses to complaints, ensuring learning is embedded into the service, improving the online journeys for residents and streamlining operating systems within departments, so data is not duplicated and caseloads are reduced.
- Confirmed that discussions are ongoing with specialist training providers to ensure staff are aware of the homelessness legislation, allocation and HRSRS inspection training for Officers procuring properties. This is scheduled to commence in January 2025 for a three to four month period.

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

1. That the reports and recommendations be noted.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None.

The meeting ended at 8.38 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Bodrul Choudhury

Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee

