

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.33 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2018

C3 - TOWN HALL MULBERRY PLACE

Members Present:

Councillor Dan Tomlinson (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Shah Ameen
Councillor Shad Chowdhury
Councillor Muhammad Harun

Co-opted Members Present:

Anne Ambrose Tenant Representative

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Sirajul Islam

Officers Present:

Abidah Kamali – Strategy and Policy Manager
Ann Otesanya – Director of Neighbourhoods
David Knight – Principle Committee Officer
John Harkin – Assistant Lettings Manager
John McGeary – Head of Building Control
Mark Baigent – Interim Divisional Director Housing and Regeneration
Rafiquel Hoque – Head of Housing Options
Rushena Miah – Committee Services
Sandra Fawcett – Swan/THHF
Steve Tinkler – Head of Audit and Risk

Apologies

Councillor Dipa Das (Chair)

Councillor Andrew Wood

1. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

The Vice-Chair Councillor Dan Tomlinson Chaired the meeting due to the Chair's apologies for absence.

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 September 2018 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

3. ACTION LOG & WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the action log and work programme tabled at the meeting.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the Work Programme and Action Log.

4. UNDER OCCUPATION SCRUTINY REVIEW (TRACKING RECOMMENDATIONS)

The Committee received a report from Rafiqul Hoque, Head of Housing Options, and John Harkin, Assistant Lettings Manager on progress made in implementing recommendations from the under occupation scrutiny review which looked at Under Occupation in social housing: promoting housing moves. .

In response to Member questions officers provided the following:

- The methods used to ascertain under occupation include visits by housing officer, care workers, tenancy audits and data sharing. It was acknowledged that if a tenant is paying rent on time and is not on any benefits and therefore has limited interaction with the Council, then it would be difficult to determine whether a property was under occupied.
- The Housing Options Team has worked to encourage moves by providing advice on their webpage , mailshots to all tenants and open days.
- Incentives for tenants to move out included up to £2,000 in cash or help with removals.
- There are approximately 1,000 under occupiers on the housing waiting list. 41 under occupiers have been rehoused this financial year and this is up from last year.
- Evidence suggests that tenants would rather pay the bedroom tax than downsize.

The Chair thanked the officers for their report.

ACTION:

1. Historical data, for at least the previous 3 years, on the number of under occupiers rehoused to be forwarded to the committee.

RESOLVED:

- To note the report.
- To recommend that social housing landlords strengthen activities to encourage moves in order to free up homes for those in housing need.

5. SOCIAL HOUSING FRAUD - ILLEGAL SUB-LETTING

The Committee received a presentation from Steve Tinkler, Head of Audit and Risk, and Ann Otesanya, Head of Neighbourhood Tower Hamlets Homes, on social housing fraud.

In response to questions from Members, officers provided the following:

- With regard to point 3.5 of the report, the potential savings that could be recovered in Tower Hamlets was estimated at £93,000 per property, and c. £12m has been secured in savings across the borough through social housing fraud.
- Right to Buy applications are assessed according to anti-money laundering policy and on financial assurances. The up to £108k discount is only applied to the tenant who holds the title deed. Children are permitted to assist with the deposit and securing a mortgage. Typically right to buy fraud involves tenants not living in the property, sub-letting or other illegal activities.
- Tower Hamlets Homes and RPs have their own initiatives to tackle fraud which on the whole are effective. The figures in the report relate to instances where court action involving the support of the Council was required.

The Chair thanked the officers for their report.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the report.

6. FIRE SAFETY AND BUILDING REGULATIONS

The Committee received a report from Mark Baigent, Interim Divisional Director of Housing and Regeneration, and John McGeary, Head of Building Control, on fire safety and building regulations.

In response to questions from Members, Officers provided the following:

- There are no council properties that use Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) M cladding, however several private sector blocks have been identified that use full or partial cladding. The RP blocks affected have wardens and evacuation plans in place. On the advice of the MHCLG, the Council will not be publishing the names of the blocks due to security concerns.
- GLA funding to improve the fire safety of buildings was sourced from the national 'Affordable Housing Fund'. The council was not seeking to apply to the fund.
- The Housing Act 2004 enables councils to serve an improvement notice if they believe a building to be a hazard. The Council has not taken action on any properties but there may be a potential for this if building owners do not seek to remediate.
- The Government's expectation is for building owners to pay for AMC cladding removal and replacement, although this has not been confirmed in legislation.
- Developers could claim for costs via insurance. The government has asked RPs to exhaust this option before applying for a portion of the £400m government grant.

- Members were reassured that the government grant was not competitive and enough resource had been allocated to remedy the situation. There would likely be funds left over.
- Tower Hamlets Homes publish their fire risk assessments as part of their policy regulations. RPs were not bound by any regulations to publish theirs, though it was feedback that improvement plans were in place.
- Social housing providers will continue to comply with the London Fire Brigade guidance of 'staying put'. THH and RPs keep records to identify vulnerable residents.
- Tower Hamlets Council is working with the Local Government Association and London Councils in creating a Joint Inspection Team. The inspection team will support environmental health officers to survey risks prior to serving improvement notices.
- The Council has not seen an increase in people wanting to move out of high rise blocks.

The Chair thanked officers for their report.

ACTIONS:

- For a briefing note to be sent to the Committee on the 9 RP blocks with ACM cladding and the progress made on remedial action. Mark Baigent and Sandra Fawcett.
- For the fire safety item to be discussed at the committee in six months' time.

RESOLVED:

- To note the action plan in appendix 2 which sets out the Council's response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review.
- To note the fire safety update of residential stock in the borough (Council Registered Provider and Private).
- To note the Council's responses in implementing recommendations from Hackitt Review of Building Regulations and the Governments proposals to amend Approved Document Part B.

7. STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Committee received a presentation from Councillor Sirajul Islam, Cabinet Member for Housing, on the Council's strategic priorities for 2018/19, progress made, challenges and risks.

In response to Member questions Councillor Islam and housing Officers provided the following:

- The rough sleeper count for November and December is 21. Counting was conducted by the Housing Options Rough Sleeper Team. In the past year there were approximately 500 rough sleepers counted, this included those who had slept at least one night on the street. The Housing Options team had partnered with St Mungo's to do outreach work.

- Closure orders have been useful in tackling anti-social behaviour. The Council also utilises its park guards and 14 additional police officers. This is within resource and will not incur additional costs.
- The Mayors manifesto commitment was to deliver 1,000 new homes and a further 1,000 in the pipeline. These 2,000 properties will be classified as 'affordable'. Half of these will be 'social rent'. These targets are monitored separately; the Committee will receive an update on them in April next year.
- The decision on Landlord Licensing has passed through Cabinet and will be rolled out next year.

The Chair thanked Councillor Islam for his presentation.

ACTION:

- Update against the manifesto commitments to be included in the next performance update in April 2018.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the presentation.

8. SOCIAL HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT Q2

The Committee discussed the report of Ann Sutcliffe - Interim Corporate Director of Place and Tracey St Hill – RP Partnership & Development Officer.

- Some Members raised concerns regarding underperforming RPs, namely Clarion. It was suggested underperformance figures may have been skewed by different definitions and methodologies in measuring satisfaction.
- It was highlighted that smaller RPs should be given the opportunity to attend the Housing Scrutiny Committee to discuss the performance issues and challenges they face.
- There was a discussion on the Housing Green Paper and the introduction of performance based league tables.

ACTION: Performance matters to be discussed at the THHF benchmarking sub-group. Chair of the sub-group to be invited to attend Housing Scrutiny Committee to discuss the group's work. Evictions due to universal credit and % increase in rents arrears since roll out of UC performance indicators and provide data for the next quarter report.

RESOLVED:

1. To review and note progress in the performance outturns achieved by individual social landlords and the overall performance trend.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.25 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Dipa Das
Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee