

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2021

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

Members Present in person:

Councillor Ehtasham Haque (Chair)
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Amina Ali
Councillor Andrew Wood

Officers Present in person:

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

Members Present remotely:

Councillor Helal Uddin

Co-optees Present remotely:

Anne Ambrose (tenant representative)

Officers Present remotely:

Karen Swift (Divisional Director, Housing and Regeneration)
Rafiqul Hoque (Lettings Manager, Housing Options)

Rupert Brandon (Head of Housing Supply)

John Harkin (Lettings Manager)
Una Bedford (Strategy and Policy Officer)
Shalim Uddin (Affordable Housing Providers Coordinator)

INTRODUCTION

The chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and invited members and officers to introduce themselves. The Chair gave a brief statement on the role of the sub committee. He indicated that the sub committee's name had been mentioned in recent controversies around a trial and wished to correct what he believed were misconceptions on the scope of the sub committee. He

stressed that the sub committee is a scrutiny body and has no executive authority.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

Councillor Helal Uddin declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 3.1, Social Landlords' Performance Report, as his employer worked closely with Poplar HARCA which was a housing provider included in the report.

Councillor Amina Ali declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 3.1, Social Landlords' Performance Report, as she is a Tower Hamlets Homes tenant.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the sub committee, 22 June 2021 were approved as a correct record of the proceedings, subject to:

- Inclusion of wording to reflect the sub committee's recommendation that the council should always provide fire risk assessments to residents in its own stock on request, and should encourage other providers to adhere to the same level of transparency.
- Inclusion of Pam Bhamra, Chair of THHP, in the list of remote attendees.

3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Social Landlords Performance Report

Shalim Uddin, Affordable Housing Coordinator, introduced the report which provided cumulative performance data for 14 registered providers (RPs) within the borough for quarters 1-4. Shalim provided a summary of the key achievements and challenges reflected in the report and, further to questions from the sub committee, explained some of the performance trends.

At the invitation of the chair, A number of residents addressed the sub committee to highlight concerns they had with their housing provider, Spitalfields Housing Association (SHA). One of the residents addressed the meeting in Bengali with assistance from another resident to translate into English. The concerns reported included:

- Absence of fire access in some buildings. Fire exits being locked.
- No response from SHA to complaints regarding fire safety; leaks and repairs; and broken locks. SHA do not follow their own complaints procedure.
- No non-email option to submit issues in writing
- Lack of engagement with residents and no local presence of SHA; very difficult to speak to a representative face-to-face; the former local office

has closed with no explanation and moved to Canada Square, but residents cannot access it.

- Refusal of SHA to engage with ASB reports and complaints, despite police telling residents it is a landlord issue;
- Ineffective cleaning
- No maintenance and repair service.
- Residents being refused opportunity to participate in governance arrangements: AGM, shareholder and tenant meetings. SHA closed the TRA.
- Refuse not being collected.

Further to the comments of residents, The sub committee

- expressed concern and alarm at the seriousness, range and volume of issues raised and the apparent failure of the provider to respond adequately to them.
- expressed concern that the performance data included in the report may not be giving a reliable picture of performance across the sector. They noted that the performance report indicated a high level of performance of SHA in several areas, but the experience of residents as reported at this meeting (and outside the meeting directly to councillors) suggested a very different picture. Members similarly expressed concern at the comment from SHA in Appendix 2 to the report, that they had no maintenance team in place currently.
- asked that the council take direct action to intervene to address SHA's underperformance. They referred to a legal agreement ensuring former Council tenants and leaseholders that were transferred are entitled to a certain level of service. The Council should explore how it can use this legal agreement to leverage improvements in the service provided by SHA to its residents.

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

- Indicated that reports from residents heard at the meeting supported the view of widespread underperformance by social landlords across the sector, which they believed was a result of the loosening of the regulatory framework within which RSLs work in the past 10 years. The Council should welcome improvement in performance where evidenced, but should also challenge and address decline in performance.
- Expressed and reiterated its dissatisfaction with the KPIs and data sets in the report, which they felt did not allow the council to conduct meaningful analysis of performance. For example, the data reports performance against targets, but not the actual target used by the different providers. The sub committee noted the proposed new suite of KPIs as set out in the report proposed to record the number, but not

percentage of appointments kept against appointments made and indicated this was not useful or acceptable.

- Asked that Southern Housing Group be considered to be invited to a future meeting to give an account of its performance.

RESOLVED that the sub committee

1. Noted progress in the performance outturns achieved by individual Social Landlords and the overall performance trend.
2. Formally requested that the executive set out in writing, in advance of the 19 October Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee meeting, what it is doing to resolve the issue of SHA's underperformance and to confirm if it is willing to consider making a referral to the social housing regulator.

3.2 Fire Safety Scrutiny Report

The Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque introduced the report that set out the outcome of the review and proposed a number of actions in response to residents' concerns following the scoping session on fire safety held at our meeting on 22nd June 2021. The Chair invited members to discuss the report and appendices and agree any amendments to be made to the proposed recommendations to the executive, as set out in the report.

The sub committee heard that, further to the session on 22 June, some of the proposals had been refined and supplemented from contributions from sub committee members via email.

Following the Chair's introduction, members of the sub committee made the following observations on the proposals:

- The Council should commit to commonhold tenure of any new properties it builds for sale.
- The Council should commission an independent report – separate to that of the London Fire Brigade - into the New Providence Wharf fire on a similar basis as the report that Barking Dagenham Council commissioned into the fire at Samuel Garside House. Such a report could provide a strong evidence base on which lobby government for changes to legislation as well as provide lessons. It is understood that NPW residents may also be commissioning their own report into the fire.
- Evidence of social media posts directly related to recent fires/evacuations in the borough indicated a lack of clarity/confusion amongst residents as to correct procedure in the event of a fire. The Council should commit to work with the London Fire Brigade to educate residents about what they should do in response to a fire.

- Regarding the proposals listed under (1) 'Stop approving developments where developers have not yet remediated existing buildings', indicated disappointment that the conclusion that no action was possible. Members felt the Council can use its influence and other mechanisms to put pressure on developers that fail to prioritise fire safety.
- Further to comments from members, the sub committee agreed to amend proposal 10 from Appendix 2 to: "Review the findings of the final LFB report into the fire at NPW with our PRP partners, building owners and developers and consider commissioning our own independent research."

RESOLVED that the sub committee:

1. Approved the outcome of the fire safety review and recommend to the Mayor the proposals set out in Appendix 2 to the report, subject to amending proposal 10 to 'Review the findings of the final LFB report into the fire at NPW with our PRP partners, building owners and developers and consider commissioning our own independent research.'

3.3 Housing Allocations Audit Report and Intermediate Housing

Rafiqul Hoque -Head of Housing Options and John Harkin -Team Manager provided a brief presentation to the sub committee on the Housing Allocations Audit Report. The report outlined the major findings from the Council's internal audit report into the systems and controls in place for assessing, approving and prioritising applications to the Housing Register, and resulting lettings, published in March 2021. The presentation outlined the findings from the report: examples of good practice; the key risks identified; and measures proposed to address each of the key risks.

Further to questions from sub committee members on the presentation, Rafiqul, John and Karen Swift, Divisional Director Housing, provided more information on the following:

- how the council carried out checks to ensure the information held on applicants was up to date;
- on the practice of other boroughs to conduct a 'weed' of the housing register to remove non-active applicants and how the council was learning from this and exploring ways to bring the LBTH register into better health;
- the Council's automated bidding system and how this assisted applicants without access to technology;
- why applicants with high priority may not be engaging and bidding; and
- the challenges facing Band 3 bidders and how the Intermediate Housing Register might help these applicants.

Further to the officer presentation, the sub committee offered the following comments:

- Further to Risk 5 – ‘Failure to review non bidding applicants – some members expressed concern at the proposal to review after 5 years of non-bidding, which they felt was too long.
- The sub committee expressed disappointment that the presentation had not been made available to in advance and asked that a copy of future presentations is included in the meeting agenda reports pack.

Rupert Brandon, Head of Housing supply, provided a brief presentation on the Intermediate Housing Register. The presentation summarized the rationale for the Intermediate Housing Register; how eligible persons will be prioritised; the benefits of the register; and proposed next steps.

Further to questions from sub committee members on the presentation, Rupert and Karen provided more information on:

- affordability tests – providers will carry out their own financial checks to ensure applicants can afford the housing; these requirements are reflected in the register; and
- eligibility of existing council tenants – it will not be possible for tenants to transfer long term secure tenancies for intermediate housing.

Further to the officer presentation, the sub committee asked officers to check the armed forces section of the priority matrix, as felt this perhaps should allow for eligibility up to 5 years (not 2 as state in the presentation).

RESOLVED that the sub committee:

1. Noted the presentations on the Allocations Audit Report and Intermediate Housing.

4. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The sub committee asked if a report on the likely impact of the governments ‘First Homes’ initiative could be added to the sub committee’s work plan.

Further to a question from the sub committee, officers provided further information on a recent letter sent to THH residents on the Tenancy Agreement Review. Webinar information sessions had been arranged for any tenants who might have questions or concerns on 16 and 28 September.

The meeting ended at 8.41 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee