

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS
MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE
HELD AT 5.30 P.M. ON MONDAY, 13 JULY 2020
ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-
I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)**

Members Present:

Councillor Dipa Das (Chair)
Councillor Shah Ameen
Councillor Andrew Wood
Councillor Shad Chowdhury

Co-opted Members Present:

Anne Ambrose

Others Present:

Pam Bhamra	– Pam Bhamra Director of Operations Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH)
Rafiqul Hoque	– Head of Housing Options
Mark Slowikowski	– Senior Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer
Karen Swift	– Divisional Director, Housing
David Knight	– Senior Democratic Services Officer
Joel West	– Senior Democratic Services Officer
Farhana Zia	– Senior Democratic Services Officer

Good evening and welcome to the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee my name is Councillor Dipa Das and I will be Chairing this meeting. Please note that this meeting is being recorded and will be available to view via the Council's website by tomorrow morning. Thank you all for participating in this meeting under these new circumstances. It is important that these formal scrutiny meetings resume as the Council must continue to demonstrate transparency and openness in its decision-making and include scrutiny as part and parcel of the Council's operations for and on behalf of the residents of Tower Hamlets. Following Government advice to avoid all but essential travel and to practice social distancing, this will be a virtual meeting. If during the meeting a technical error occurs with the transmission which cannot be resolved within a reasonable period of time, then the meeting will be closed and the remaining business will be deferred to a subsequent meeting of the Committee on a date to be determined, and notified by way of the publication of the agenda on the Council's web site. Everyone (whether participating or listening-in) including Committee Members and the Officers are accessing this meeting from remote locations.

Please could everybody ensure that mobile phones are switched off or on 'silent mode'. Members and Officers will be speaking at various points during the meeting and those speaking may switch their cameras on at that point, but

I would ask that with the exception of myself as Chair, at all other times you keep your microphones switched off as this will help to minimise any background noise and interference and to ensure the connection remains as stable as possible. If any Members and officers wish to raise a point or question, they should use the 'Meeting Chat' facility accessed via the teams toolbar signified by the conversation icon, and simply type "Speak?" and I will come to you in the order I receive requests. Please do not use your microphone until I invite you to do so. Can I please ask the Members and guests to introduce themselves when they speak for the first time at the meeting.

We will now go through the agenda.

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

No declarations were received at this meeting.

2. **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

That the unrestricted minutes of the last meeting held on 21st were approved as a correct record of the proceedings. Copy to sign.

Subject to the following amendment:

- i. **Delete** from list of attendees Sandra Fawcett Chair of the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF); and
- ii. **Insert** in the list of attendees Pam Bhamra Director of Operations Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH)

3. **REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION - OSC COVID-19**

3.1 **Presentation and Discussion - Housing and Regeneration - Moving Forward on Covid-19**

The Committee received a report that provided an update on the Councils response to rough sleeping during the corona virus and the impact of Covid-19 Private Rented Sector. The main points of the discussion may be summarised as follows:

The Committee noted that:

Responding to rough sleeping during the corona virus

- Since mid-March – following a directive from government all rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping had to be accommodated to facilitate social distancing/self-isolation, regardless of priority need, local connection, or recourse to public funds.
- Over 200 individuals either rough sleeping on the streets or at imminent risk of rough sleeping where been found emergency

accommodation by the Council. Most being from Tower Hamlets with over 40 have no recourse to public funds.

- Rough sleeping in the Tower Hamlets had reduced dramatically during the lockdown. Entrenched rough sleepers being accommodated in commercial hotels. Ad hoc bookings in the portfolio of emergency Bed and Breakfast accommodation was increased to provide accommodation to those judged to be at risk of rough sleeping or who claim to be rough sleeping.
- A large supply of hotel accommodation was also procured for rough sleepers by the GLA at the start of the pandemic. There are 350 rough sleepers in GLA hotels in Tower Hamlets. Individuals have been accommodated under Housing Act 1996 s.188(1) duty and Housing Act 1996 s.205(3) statutory powers, and Localism Act 2011.

Responding to rough sleeping during Covid-19 – Health and Welfare

- The Council had commissioned 24/7 on-site support and floating support at the commercial hotels as most rough sleepers brought in directly off the streets have complex needs.
- The value of these arrangements has been shown by the relatively low number of evictions and abandonments from the hotels and the low rough sleeping numbers during the 3 months of the lockdown. Public Health have led on implementing an operational plan to minimise the risk of an outbreak and spread of infection.
- To date there have been no reported outbreaks in any of the hotels used by the Council or in the Council's commissioned hostel sector. Given the high levels of substance misuse among the rough sleepers in commercial hotels a priority has been to assess individuals and help them access substance dependence treatment. .
- The physical health of most rough sleepers in the commercial hotels had been assessed by a nurse. Most have been assessed as having a 'mental health' support need, and a number have been referred to mental health services.
- Full board has been included in the block-booking contract with several hotels and a meal delivery of 3 meals per day has been provided to complex needs rough sleepers at other hotels. Within the wider range of emergency accommodation used by the Council, fridges and microwaves have been provided for people in their rooms to enable social distancing and support with self-isolation.
- The majority of the Borough's homeless are in accommodation and the Council are working with its partners to arrange safe housing options for the limited number of people still sleeping rough during this crisis. As mentioned, the Council have secured hotel space which, in addition to the hostel network and other temporary accommodation sites, means there is more options at the Council's disposal.

Improving the Customer Journey to prevent and relieve homelessness in the light of Covid-19

- The public and staff need to be kept safe during the period of the corona virus and beyond
- The Housing Options service has historically managed demand reactively through the crisis-oriented daily drop-in at Albert Jacobs House.
- Recovery of the service post Covid-19 will provide the opportunity for a different customer experience ready to relocate to the new Town Hall.
- The service wants to achieve a higher rate of prevention and reduce temporary accommodation placements and associated costs. To do this the Housing Options service will now need to intervene earlier and in a more planned and proactive way with those at risk of homelessness.
- Those seeking help should be able to understand the help on offer and access help through a range of channels, including to self-help, whether on the web or over the phone or from alternative service settings, e.g. Job Centre Plus reducing the need to visit busy offices.
- An improved telephone service with enough staff with the right skills set coupled with automated call distribution will enable more people to get assistance over the phone (for Lettings and Homelessness enquiries) and avoid people needing to visit the office because they cannot get through on the telephone.
- The Council has a legal duty towards homeless people, and this accommodation should be “suitable” and it is unlawful for Tower Hamlets to keep homeless families in Bed and Breakfast for more than six weeks.
- There were concerns that temporary housing can be unsuitable and can affect the physical health of families e.g. Living in cramped conditions and with on-going insecurity and uncertainty can be damaging to the health of families.

Scoping out areas for change

- Steps to developing a staff engagement strategy using (i) Inform (Updates on progress); (ii) Involve (Consulting experts); and (iii) Listen (Avenues for concerns and fears to be raised)
- Content on the Council’s website must be relevant and easy to navigate to allow residents to find the content they are looking for much faster.
- It is important to keep in mind the ever-growing usage of smartphones and tablets so the web design of the Council’s site be effective for various screens.
- Interactive sections on the website can filter the customers enquiry, directing customers to web resources where relevant and directing others who are homeless or threatened with homelessness to book appointments with the service online. This provides customers with flexibility.

- Triaging those into the service who need casework through an online appointment booking system would enable the demand to be dealt with in a more planned way and for customers to pre-book an appointment that suits them. Prompts and alerts on what documents to bring will aid the interview process.
- Minimising unplanned office presentations and undertaking appointments either virtually or in person upstream in partner service settings will entail more efficient use of casework time and increase time that can be spent to successfully prevent and relieve homelessness.
- There will continue to be those for whom an emergency office presentation will continue to be appropriate, e.g. DV. These groups will need a safe welcoming environment with appropriate social distancing.
- Those with language needs will also need to be considered in any new arrangements.
- There is growing interest the 'Housing First' approach to help people with complex needs to secure a tenancy first along with a long term and flexible package of support around them.

Private Rented Sector – impact of Covid-19

- The Councils private housing advice team have seen a significant increase in private tenants approaching them for advice and mediation: from 25th March to 24th April the team had over 100 new approaches. A similar increase has been seen in subsequent months.
- Key issues presented by private tenants approaching our service include:
 - (i) Private tenants unable to pay rent due to loss of income
 - (ii) A marked increase in queries linked to security of tenure including around 30 cases where tenants have experienced harassment or threats of eviction, sometimes in response to a request for a rent deferment.
 - (iii) There are two known cases of unlawful eviction which the team are moving to prosecution.
 - (iv) Our Private Renters Charter' partners have seen a significant increase in queries from private tenants related to security of tenure and loss of income, including many requests from migrant renters unsure of their rights. Partners working on the rogue landlord market say they have seen no let-up in cases of unlawful eviction and harassment.
 - (v) The market has seen a drop in tenant demand due to lack of home moves, students moving home, loss of jobs. Private rents have gone down but still unclear what the long-term impact on the market might be.

Key Issues for Recovery Phase

- **Evictions** (i) The financial impact of the crisis on could see a surge in evictions and homelessness once emergency protections come to an end.(ii) Court proceedings for possession cases under s21 and s8 resume (remotely) on August 23rd. Unclear how quickly cases will move - may create a bottle neck that will take the next year to untangle.(iii) Delays in court proceedings could lead to an increase in unlawful evictions. Prosecuting for unlawful evictions could act as a deterrent. The borough has limited capacity to support injunctions (to reinstate a tenant subject to unlawful eviction) or offer legal services, but we can refer tenants eligible for legal aid to appropriate solicitors and/or pursue rent repayment orders.(iv) Rising evictions in the private rented sector could lead to increased demand on homelessness services.
- **Rent arrears** (i) The shortfall between median rents and average incomes alongside rising unemployment means many private tenants are unable to afford their rent leading to increased demand for financial support. (ii) Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) may help. Where tenancies remain, unaffordable tenants will need to move.
- **Private tenants do not know their rights** Our partners say that many renters are unclear of their rights and the support available to them, particularly migrant renters, and those for whom English is not their first language.
- **Private rental market** Drop in tenant demand and collapse of short lets industry appears to have led to short-term drop in rents. However, over the long-term house sales are likely to slow, potentially increasing demand for private rented housing.

4. APOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Sub-Committee that Councillor Marc Francis be appointed as the Vice-Chair for the remainder of the current Municipal Year.

The meeting ended at 7.16 p.m.

**Chair, Councillor Dipa Das
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee**