

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2021

ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)

Members Present:

Councillor Ehtasham Haque (Chair)
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Helal Uddin
Councillor Andrew Wood
Councillor Shad Chowdhury

Co-opted Members Present:

Anne Ambrose Tenant Representative

Other Councillors Present:

Mayor John Biggs
Councillor Danny Hassell

Others Present:

Pam Bhamra	– Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum
Richard Hards	– Leasehold Manager Tower Hamlets Homes
Sandra Fawcett	– One Housing Group
Sue Hanlon	– One Housing Group

Officers Present:

Karen Swift	– (Divisional Director, Housing and Regeneration)
Shalim Uddin	– (Affordable Housing Providers Co-ordinator)
Nicola Klinger	– (Housing Companies Manager)
Sripriya Sudhakar	– (Place Shaping Team Leader, Place)
Keiko Okawa	– (Senior Strategy & Policy Manager)
Joel West	– (Democratic Services Team Leader (Committee))

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 Shad Chowdhury declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 3.1 - Social Landlord Performance Report - as a Board Member of Tower Hamlets Community Housing.

Councillor Marc Francis declared the following for transparency:

- Item 4.2 - Leaseholder Service Improvement Plan (THH) - he is a former Board member of Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)
- Item 4.3 - Housing Companies Update - his wife, Councillor Rachel Blake, was the Lead Member when the council's housing companies were established.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the sub committee meeting, 13 July 2020, are approved as a correct record of the proceedings, subject to the following amendments.

- Pam Bhamra's title to be corrected to 'Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum'
- Additional text on the Clarion Housing Item to capture the strength of feeling among some members regarding the prolonged and persistent failings on repairs of that housing provider and how serious the impact is on affected residents.

3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Social Landlord Performance Report

Shalim Uddin, Affordable Housing Coordinator, introduced the report which summarised quarterly performance data for 14 registered providers (RPs) within the borough and an update on the work of the THHF benchmarking group, which was in the process of revising a new set of KPI data, which is on target to be in place from quarter 1, 2021/22. Shalim provided a summary of the key achievements and challenges reflected in the report.

Pam Bhamra, chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum, provided further detail on the ongoing work of the THHF KPI sub group. Pam explained there is work in progress to address the comments made by the sub committee at the November meeting, including reviewing/agreeing KPIs; addition of narrative to explain exceptions and clear and unambiguous definitions of metrics to facilitate comparisons.

Further to the officer introduction, the sub committee made the following observations.

The sub committee:

- indicated continuing concerns with The format/presentation of the performance data which they felt:
 - did not make it easy enough to identify quarter-on-quarter comparisons and trends for each of the providers,
 - did not allow members to make fair comparisons of performance between providers
 - did not include sufficient narrative enable any meaningful conclusions to be drawn from the data
 - did not explain why there were exceptions/gaps in the data for some providers (the 'N/A' comments).
 - was not reader-friendly.

Officers advised they would provide sub committee members with additional explanatory information that would help to interpret the performance data.

- noted the ongoing work of the THHF KPI sub group and that the final version of the THHF KPI handbook was yet to be published, but indicated they felt it was not necessary to wait until the sub group had concluded its work to make improvements to the presentation of the performance data.
- expressed dissatisfaction with the suggestion that the Covid19 impact was largely to blame for poor performance, as their experience suggested performance was inadequate in many areas prior to the pandemic.
- asked officers to explore if any registered providers with stock in LBTH that are not part of Tower Hamlets housing forum and, if so, how we could connect them to it.
- indicated the sub committee would write to the Mayor and Lead Member to highlight their concerns with the reporting quality of RP KPI data and ask them to obtain further clarification from the RPs on what exactly is recorded in the submitted performance information. Members felt this would help them to better fulfil their role of holding RPs to account.

Sue Hanlon and Sandra Fawcett from One Housing Group presented a supplementary part of the report, that provided the sub-committee with an overview of One Housing's recent performance and its plans for the future. The presentation included an explanation of how One Housing has aimed to deliver its services during the lockdown period; the impact lockdown has had on its operations, and how it has affected One Housing Group's KPIs.

Further to questions from members of the sub committee, Ms Hanlon and Ms Fawcett:

- Provided further detail on the recording and monitoring methods for Customer satisfaction data
- Explained how One Housing Group's approach to mask-wearing. Residents and staff are encouraged to wear masks in communal areas.
- Confirmed that currently One Housing Group does not have a backlog of repairs, despite the impact of lockdown.
- Provided further detail on how One Housing Groups is responding and adapting to the challenges raised by the governance downgrade by the social housing regulator.
- Provided further detail on OHGs Customer first approach, which directs the way in which it engages with and involves residents, and a summary its plans to deliver this further

Further to the presentation and questions, the sub committee:

- Indicated concern with what they felt was very limited involvement of residents in One Housing Group's decision making, governance and oversight. Members strongly encouraged the organisation to think about the benefits that greater involvement of residents in the Board's governance structure might bring.
- Indicated dissatisfaction with the condition of some One Housing Group stock. Examples were provided of prolonged waits for repairs to roofing, heating systems and leaks.

RESOLVED that the sub committee:

1. Noted progress in the performance outturns achieved by individual social landlords and the overall performance trend.
2. Agreed to write to the Mayor and the cabinet member for housing to highlight its concerns with the performance data available to it on registered providers and recommend that the council should proactively engage with the RPs to ensure they record crucial PI data on their respective stock in Tower Hamlets.

3.2 Homelessness Reduction Act One Year on - revised report for approval

The sub committee:

- Welcomed the amendments that had been made to the report since its previous submission in November 2020, to strengthen and add rigour to some of the key recommendations.

- Advised there were several formatting issues with the report as submitted and requested these be rectified before its submission to the executive.

RESOLVED that:

1. The draft report 'The Homelessness Reduction Act One Year On' is approved for submission to the executive.

4. PRESENTATIONS

4.1 Comprehensive Regeneration Update

Sripriya Sudhakar, Head of Regeneration, provided a brief presentation on the council's approach to regeneration. The presentation explained how the council is embedding its approach to regeneration into different workstreams; how it is improving its communication on the benefits of regeneration and compared the size and approach of the council's regeneration team to other London boroughs. Sripriya was joined by Mayor John Biggs.

Further to questions from members of the sub committee, Sripriya and Mayor Biggs:

- Explained how the council's governance framework provides for community engagement and clarifies the role and expectations of external providers. The council's consultation hub is used by the council to engage with residents for projects it leads on.
- Provided details on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the outcome-based approach to regeneration and what the council can do to monitor the outcomes of regeneration. The Mayor explained that overall quality of life was the single most important outcome for him of regeneration. There are challenges for the council to effectively monitor the medium and long term impacts of individual regeneration schemes, for example, the transitory nature of the boroughs population making long term comparisons difficult.
- The Mayor explained that in his view, ideal regeneration would be facilitated by sufficient central government funding that could allow for 100% affordable housing. Such an approach was not possible in the current environment and therefore a partnership approach with private developers was the only way to make schemes viable. Such an approach inevitably resulted in private properties that are often out of the reach of ordinary people and this is common across much of London. To avoid undesirable gentrification, the council must be proactive, as development in this mode is effectively private sector led.

Further to the presentation and questions, the sub committee

- Indicated concern that the deprivation map, as provided in the papers for the meeting, may be misleading as it may conceal deprivation in areas of high-rise development.
- Indicated it would welcome a clearer view on whether physical redevelopment and population changes represented the norm for the borough, or if there was a desired 'destination' in terms of redevelopment and, if so, how we can shape and visualise that destination and measure our achievements towards it? The turmoil of continued regeneration had a dramatic effect on wellbeing of residents and can this be balanced against a future that offers more certainty and prospects for greater wellbeing overall.
- Expressed concern that the council sometimes fails to counter divisive effects of regeneration such as the communication campaign referring to creating 'a new community' in the Blackwall Reach regen scheme.
- Indicated it would welcome a challenge session on regeneration, which could perhaps explore the economics of regeneration schemes and potentially support the case for greater central government funding.

4.2 Leaseholder Service Improvement Plan (THH)

Richard Hards, Head of Leasehold Services at Tower Hamlets Homes presented a brief presentation on THH's Leasehold Improvement Plan. The presentation provided updated context on the LBTH leasehold portfolio and on the progress of the leasehold service improvement plan and supporting communications strategy.

Further to questions from members of the sub committee, Mr Hards:

- Explained how THH engages tenants in the leaseholder improvement work. All residents, both tenants and leaseholders are engaged/consulted when any new major works project is started and then again in the major defects work stage.
- Explained that THH encourages the establishment of statutory leaseholder associations, and there are currently four such associations in LBTH.
- Provided detail on how THH bills and charges leaseholders for major works. THH has changed its process: it ceased estimating major works billing in April 2020 so now only bill on actual work, meaning leaseholders will only get a bill if the money was actually spent in that financial year. Any money that was held by THH has been credited back with interest.

4.3 Housing Companies Update

Nicola Klinger, Housing Companies Manager and Karen Swift, Divisional Director for Housing and Regeneration, presented a brief presentation on the housing companies: Mulberry Housing Society and Seahorse Homes Limited. The presentation provided background to the establishment of the companies; summarised the key differences between them; explained the opportunities and risks presented by changes in the national and local context; and the proposed future activities of the companies.

Further to questions from members of the sub committee, Nicola and Karen:

- Provided a summary of the decision taken by cabinet in September 2020 regarding an increase in working capital facility provided to Seahorse Homes by LBTH. Karen asked the sub committee to note that the company is currently not able to generate working capital through its business activities, and is reliant on the council for loans to facilitate purchases. The council could also, for example, grant Right to Buy receipts to Mulberry Housing Society to fund the acquisition of affordable homes in the borough. Any such loan or grant proposal would be assessed through the council's normal governance processes, including assessment of relevant risks.
- Clarified that Seahorse homes has not been allocated any land or council housing stock. Its anticipated operations concern purchasing assets, possibly off the open market. It would repay any council loan and potentially generate a profit for the council as its shareholder or possibly cross-subsidise affordable housing or regeneration schemes.
- Stressed that the council is a minority shareholder in Mulberry Housing Society, which as a company makes its own decisions about what direction of travel is right for it. Their current strategy is to focus on intermediate housing which they have informed the council that they feel that is something that sets them aside from other housing operators it puts them in a unique position.
- Indicated that comparisons between the housing companies and the 'Brick by Brick' company of Croydon Council may be premature, as the full experience of that company was yet to be fully understood. However, it is reasonable to state that LBTH is currently pursuing a more conservative strategy, with Mulberry Housing Society examining its unique selling point.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 9.00 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee