

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 22 JUNE 2021

COMMITTEE ROOM ONE - TOWN HALL MULBERRY PLACE

Members Present in person:

Councillor Ehtasham Haque (Chair)
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Victoria Obaze
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
Mayor John Biggs
Councillor Eve McQuillan

Co-optees Present remotely:

Anne Ambrose (tenant representative)

Officers Present remotely:

Jennifer Peters – (Divisional Director, Planning and Building
Control, Place)
Mark Slowikowski – (Strategy, Policy and Performance Manager)
Karen Swift – (Divisional Director, Housing and
Regeneration)

Others Present remotely:

Ruth Bravery Lead volunteer of Friends in High Places
residents group
Yasmin Naqushbandi Chair of the resident associations at New
Providence Wharf

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

2. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR OF THE SUB COMMITTEE FOR 2021-22

Nominated by Councillor Victoria Obaze and seconded by Councillor Andrew Wood, it was:

RESOLVED that Councillor Marc Francis is appointed vice chair of the sub committee for 2021-22.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the sub committee, 15 April 2021 were approved as a correct record of the proceedings.

Matter arising

3.1 - Social Landlords Performance Report – Councillor Marc Francis asked if the new performance targets be made available to the sub committee once agreed by the THHF sub group.

3.2 - Fire Safety progress report – Councillor Marc Francis emphasised that the council must be willing to exercise the leverage it has over RPs that fail to meet its expectations.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee Terms of Reference, Quorum, Membership and Dates of Meetings 2021/22

RESOLVED that the sub committee:

1. Noted its terms of reference, membership and quorum, and rules of procedure (including dates of 2021/22 meetings) as set out in appendices 1, 2 and 3 of the report.

4.2 The sub committee's draft work plan 2021-22

Some members of the sub committee indicated they would welcome additional items on (1) social housing white paper and (2) housing ombudsman changes. The chair welcomed the suggestions, but stressed that the scope/remit of the sub committee is very broad and it should strive to focus on those areas where it can add value.

RESOLVED that the sub committee's draft work programme 2021/22 as set out in the report is noted, subject to the following minor additions:

- Social Landlord Report September 2021, Spitalfields Hosing Trust to be invited.
- Exploring whether a challenge session or similar could be arranged between the December 2021 and March 2022 meeting.

5. FIRE SAFETY SCOPING SESSION

The chair introduced the Fire Safety Scoping Session. He explained that today's session was prepared in response to the fire in May 2021 at New Providence Wharf (NPW) and would seek to identify the lessons that need to be learnt on improving fire safety in tall buildings across the borough. The Chair explained that today's session would be an evidence gathering exercise, primarily looking at the residents' perspective and the evidence collected at this meeting would help to inform a 'deep dive' into fire safety at the September sub committee meeting.

At the request of the chair, Mayor John Biggs addressed the sub committee. Mayor Biggs set the context of future fire safety work by the council, particularly regarding private buildings. Mayor Biggs provided information on:

- Where responsibility lies for remedial works to buildings to improve fire safety. In short, the owner of the building bears ultimate responsibility.
- The Councils role and powers in promoting fire safety in private buildings. The council has constrained ability to intervene directly in most cases but has a lobbying/brokering and community leadership role. The Mayor explained how the council has been performing this role to date.
- Partnership work and initiatives the council has undertaken, including with the government, building owners and managers, and residents groups.
- The scale of fire safety and cladding risks in LBTH. The borough has more at-risk buildings than anywhere else in the country.
- Work undertaken to date by council to build and maintain a database on fire safety data and challenges around this, including financial challenges.

In response to questions from the sub committee, Mayor Biggs summarised the outcome from meetings and correspondence between the council and the NPW developer (Ballymore) and government representatives.

At the request of the chair, Ruth Bravery, lead volunteer of Friends in High Places residents group, addressed the sub committee. Ruth provided more context on the issue of fire safety from resident' perspective, including:

- The difficulty in calculating the scale of fire safety risk in high rises in LBTH.
- Impact of government guidance and unfair allocation of resources.
- The various practical and financial obstacles to building owners and leaseholders getting fire safety surveys and remedial works initiated.

- Difficulties leaseholders face when applying for national grants funding.
- Limited options and risks of homelessness, health and relationship breakdown for those faced with high repair bills.

Ruth then explained what residents in her organisation would like the council to do to address the situation. The initiatives proposed included:

- stop approving developments where developers haven't remediated existing buildings
- continue to meet and communicate with leaseholders; provide services to signpost affected residents to help and support, perhaps funding an advice service
- create a multi agency task force involving the Fire Brigade, managing agents and leaseholders
- gather economic evidence that might be used to lobby the government into more supportive action
- work with other London boroughs in the GLA to enable a louder London voice on this issue nationally
- stop approving HMO licences where they are in breach of the lease
- allocate section 106 or CIL for specialist fire equipment such as tall ladders or large fire engines.
- Push for commonhold or Resident Management Committees to be part of new developments so leaseholders can better manage such problems in future.

At the request of the chair, Yasmin Naqushbandi, chair of the resident associations at New Providence Wharf, addressed the sub committee. Yasmin described the experience of New Providence Wharf residents during and following the fire and outlined some lessons and requests for action from the council and building managers arising from them. They included:

- Evacuation procedures must be reviewed and this review must involve residents, because they will tell you how residents behave in an evacuation.
- Simple procedures must be put in all buildings in a form that all residents can understand, including those for whom English is not their first language.
- Fire alarm systems to be installed in all buildings. Waking watch initiative does not work in tall buildings and is not understood by all residents.
- The council should seek and consider views of residents in a developer's existing buildings as part of the consideration of further applications from that developer.
- The council should take the lead investigating the fire and learning to be drawn from it.

In response to questions from the sub committee, Ruth provided more details on the fire safety initiatives and procedures in the four buildings covered by her residents group. Evacuation procedures are different between the four buildings and not well understood by residents.

At the request of the chair, Councillor Eve McQuillan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Social Inclusion (Job Share) - Lead on Planning – addressed the sub committee. Councillor McQuillan provided an initial view from the executive on the initiatives that it had been suggested the council could pursue. Councillor McQuillan welcomed the suggestions and briefly summarised the council's powers with regard to fire safety in buildings it doesn't own. She also explained that, regrettably, some of the suggestions (including the suggestion regarding refusing planning applications) could not be progressed due to legal constraints on the council.

Further to the presentation and questions, the sub committee:

- Noted that fire safety risks are also applicable to low-rise housing blocks. Whilst tall buildings should be a priority, residents views on evacuation procedures should be sought for all buildings.
- Welcomed the contributions from all participants and in particular, the calls for greater resident involvement in fire safety, which it felt could add great value.
- Asked that the sub committee's final report include a focus on how the council can apply pressure to encourage action by developers and building managers in areas of fire safety over which it has no direct authority.

The chair stressed that the sub committee wishes to hear from all residents of all tenure types as part of its review into fire safety and encouraged registered providers and THHF to promote the review amongst their residents to encourage as wide a response as possible. The sub committee would aim to provide an email address where residents could direct their feedback.

6. PLANNING WHITE PAPER BRIEFING

Jennifer Peters, Divisional Director of Planning and Building Control, provided a brief presentation on the 'Planning for the Future' white paper. Jennifer explained that the document, which was released in August 2020, proposed a large scale reform of the English planning system and current methods of calculating housing need. Jennifer then outlined each of the three 'pillars' of the white paper: Pillar One – Planning for development; Pillar Two – Planning for beautiful and sustainable places; and Pillar Three – Planning for infrastructure and connected places. Finally, Jennifer outlined the likely impact of the paper's proposals on Tower Hamlets, as:

- Infrastructure Levy – a new national levy may impact on income raised compared with the current system
- Engagement of residents and councillors – anticipate reduced opportunities for engagement at application stage
- Cost of delivery – more costly to produce a local plan related to a reduced timescale to do so.

Further to questions from the sub committee, Jennifer:

- Provided details of the council's response to the initial consultation. It was agreed a copy of the council's response would be sent to the members of the sub committee.
- Provided details of work being done in advance/anticipation of the new requirements.
- Explained that to date no resident engagement had been undertaken by the council on the white paper, but early engagement would be undertaken on preparation of any local plan.

Further to the presentation and questions, the sub committee:

Expressed concern that the proposals formed a 'developers charter': a permissive approach which would reduce involvement of local people and elected members and would allow inappropriate and over-development in the borough. The council should be vocal in its rejection of the proposed policies and join with the various groups opposing these proposals.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting ended at 8.05 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Ehtasham Haque
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee