

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING & REGENERATION SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.40 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 14 DECEMBER 2023

COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

Members Present:

Councillor Abdul Mannan -(Chair)

Councillor Shafi Ahmed

Councillor Saif Uddin Khaled

Councillor Marc Francis

Councillor Asma Islam

Councillor James King

Co-opted Members Present:

Mahbub Anam - (Tenant representative)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Kabir Ahmed - (Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive
Development and Housebuilding)

Officers Present:

Karen Swift – (Divisional Director, Housing and
Regeneration)

Mubin Choudhury – (Performance Improvement Analyst)

Justina Bridgeman – (Democratic Services Officer (Committee))

Invited Guests:

Andrea Baker - (Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum
(THHF))

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests, however, Councillor James King declared he is a Tower Hamlets Homes Leaseholder and Councillor Abdul Mannan declared he is a Poplar Harca leaseholder.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)

The minutes of the Sub Committee meeting held on 19 October 2023 were approved and signed as a correct record of proceedings.

3. OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Paul Burgess, Strategy and Policy Officer, updated sub-committee members on the following;

- Swan Housing Presentation: 360 Report – 16 February 2023 meeting. Swan Housing to submit their 360 Feedback Report. This report will now be submitted for the 29th February meeting.
- THH Major Works Programme – 27 April 2023 meeting. A comprehensive report on THH Major Works Programme (with details on response times and general performance) This report will now be submitted for the 1st May meeting.

Members raised concerns around an automated email which requested 2,200 residents change their login details within a limited timeframe. This was deemed unreasonable as repairs or rent concerns could not be raised by residents who missed the deadline. Consideration for residents to change login details should be given. Details will be forwarded to Karen Swift and the Chair outside of this meeting.

- Estates ASB Report — 27 April 2023 meeting. Details still pending.
- Social Landlords Report – 27 April 2023 meeting. See item 4.1 for details on individual registered providers.
- Request to increase Housing and Regenerations Scrutiny Sub-Committee meetings from 5 to 9. –11 September meeting. The Monitoring Officer circulated a briefing note to members which confirmed that due to resource issues the number of meetings could not be increased. However, Stephen Halsey, Chief Executive Officer, informed members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the last meeting that this would be reviewed. Details are pending.
- Fire Safety Database Update – 19 October meeting. Karen Swift, Director of Housing, circulated details to sub-committee members outside of that meeting.

- Poplar Harca and THCH Potential Merger – 19 October meeting. Andrea Baker, Chair of Tower Hamlet Housing Forum (THHF) informed members that both Poplar Harca and Tower Hamlets Community Homes (THCH) have met, consulted with respective residents, received feedback and at present a merger is likely to take place. If it does, the aim for legal completion will be for April 2024. Further details cannot be disclosed at this time due to ongoing discussions.

Members initially requested a vote to bring the discussion to the next meeting scheduled for 29 February. Ms Baker informed them that any agreed merger would not be held in this financial year. Therefore, on a vote of 4 to 3, Members approved to bring the discussion back to the sub-committee for the 1st May meeting.

RESOLVED that;

1. Details on the THH automated email will be forwarded by members to Karen Swift and the Chair outside of this meeting.
2. Members to discuss the potential merger of Poplar Harca and THCH for 1st May 2024 meeting.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Social Housing Landlords Performance Report Q2

Shalim Uddin, Partnerships Officer, Strategy and Policy, introduced the performance report for quarters 1 and 2 for Registered Providers (RPs). This included a summary of the key strengths, challenges and general updates reflected in the report.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Shalim Uddin, Karen Swift, Councillor Kabir Ahmed and Andrea Baker;

- Clarified that the council does not regulate the RP's, although they are all now required to generate tenant satisfaction data to the Regulator of Social Housing in the same manner. Any concerns raised by Members in regard to KPI's will be circulated back to the RP's.
- Confirmed that the number of vacant units in Bentworth Court, are due to a fire which took place in June. Asbestos was also found in some units following the incident, which has now been rectified. There are five flats currently vacant.
- Clarified that there are currently 11,000 vacant units in stock throughout the borough. Malting House and Brewster House are still voided properties. Further details will be brought back to the sub-committee.

- Explained that the Lead Member is expected to attend scrutiny meetings rather than the Mayor, although he has attended both sub-committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings in the past. Members can contact Cllr Kabir Ahmed outside of this meeting if they require further details.

Sub-committee members were extremely sceptical of the performance data received from all but one RP, Peabody, and voiced major concerns that representatives have not attended sub-committee meetings to discuss performance issues raised by residents. Details on individual response times and actual tenant satisfaction are missing, which are required for scrutiny.

Paul Burgess informed Members that the remit of the sub-committee does allow for an additional challenge session, which could be utilised to invite RP's to discuss issues raised at this meeting. The Chair approved and Shalim Uddin will invite RP's once a date is confirmed in spring 2024.

RESOLVED that;

1. Additional information on Malting House and Brewster House's properties to be provided for circulation to members.
2. The report be noted.

4.2 Homelessness Strategy

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, presented the council's review of homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough following the Homelessness Act 2002.

Details of the strategy to combat homelessness, the boroughs homelessness levels, prevention measures and support and allocated resources were outlined. The review findings, support needs and legislation to give assistance to those at risk were noted, as were details of the operational challenges, housing stock shortages and lack of affordable properties in the borough.

Sub-committee members were reminded of the Renters Reform Bill 2023, which terminates the section 21 'no fault' eviction, and concerns made as proposed court reforms are yet to be addressed by the government. Approval was sought from Mayor Rahman at MAB on 06 December on recommended priorities, and a consultation with residents and stakeholders is scheduled for February 2024. The feedback obtained will develop the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for Tower Hamlets.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Karen Swift and Riad Akbur, Service Manager, Homelessness;

- Clarified that the priorities include preventing homelessness through early detection and reducing the need for temporary accommodation with quality housing options. Other priorities include improving the customer journey and supporting staff's wellbeing.
- Conceded that housing appointments can take time which can be disheartening to those facing eviction. Residents are assured that in most cases they may not have to vacate on the date specified by the landlord and are always notified of their tenant rights, All efforts are made to keep them in the property and they are encouraged to contact the housing team if they require further reassurance.
- Confirmed that there are two modular home sites for temporary accommodation in the borough, Landon Walk and Candy Street. Due to minor faults with some of the units whilst in transit, repairs are currently being rectified. Once completed the units will be ready for residents.
- Clarified that a number of residents recently moved into a property in Lewisham which will house approximately 120 families.
- Explained that a review of the placement policy, which outlines how temporary and private rented accommodation is allocated, is being conducted and will emphasise geographical areas rather than distance. All efforts are made to keep residents within the borough and around 50% do. The remainder are placed in neighbouring areas where possible.
- Confirmed that caseworkers are allocated to residents in temporary accommodation to advise them with rent, repair or GP registration assistance. Consideration will be given to ensure caseworkers are more proactive with residents in terms of home visits.
- Clarified that under the 'Accelerated Possession Procedure', whereby a landlord requests a possession order without a hearing, housing officers will assist in completing tenants defence forms and submit applications to rent tribunals on their behalf. In some cases, they will undertake criminal investigations on landlords for rent increases above market levels.
- Noted that landlord harassment is a criminal offence and if locks are altered without notice and the tenancy not reinstated, landlords are informed that an investigation will be conducted. Details on the number of investigations conducted on landlord harassment and breached tenancies will be brought back to the sub-committee for review.
- Explained that all applications are dealt with on an individual basis and priority is placed on educational, medical or support needs. Different approaches are taken dependant on specific circumstances. Some

residents require emergency accommodation the same day and will receive a full assessment, whilst others may have only been given a notice of eviction or friends and family have requested they leave. A discussion with landlords or family and friends can be conducted with officers for possible resolutions.

- Clarified that service improvements are ongoing and include staff training, swifter telephone and email response times, more robust technology and a better customer journey. A service improvement group takes place every Wednesday to review communication techniques.

Sub-committee members were concerned that key data was not available for scrutiny and suggested a service improvement report be brought back for review, including an action log with response time outcomes and a delivery plan.

Members also requested data on family and friends no longer willing to accommodate be more clearly specified, as these are often multi-generational families in one household.

RESOLVED that;

1. Details on the number of investigations conducted on landlord harassment and breached tenancies to be provided for circulation to members.
2. Details on the Housing Emergency Taskforce to be brought back to the sub-committee for review.
3. The presentation be noted.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair reminded the sub-committee of the Member Relations Protocol and Councillor expectations at meetings. Individual party rhetoric must not be included and instructions were made to adhere to the code at all times when addressing fellow Councillors.

The meeting ended at 8.50 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Abdul Mannan

Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee