

steMinutes

ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND REGENERATION SELECT COMMITTEE

14 September 2021

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge



	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chairman) Alan Chapman (Vice-Chairman) Alan Deville Scott Farley (Opposition Lead) Janet Gardner Carol Melvin (In place of Allan Kauffman) Teji Barnes (In place of Nicola Brightman)</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Neil Fraser, Democratic Services Officer Marion Finney, Customer Engagement Officer Ian Anderson, Business Manager, Complaints and Enquiries Mark Billings, Housing Manager Gary Penticost Debby Weller, Residents Services - Housing Strategy Manager Rod Smith, Residents Services - Tenancy Services</p>
24.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillors Brightman and Kauffman. Councillors Barnes and Melvin were present as their respective substitutes.</p>
25.	<p>DECLARATION OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
26.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT ALL ITEMS MARKED PART 1 WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT ANY ITEMS MARKED PART 2 WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items would be considered in public.</p>
27.	<p>TO AGREE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>Consideration was given to the minutes of the previous meeting. It was agreed that the previously suggested additions to the Work Programme would be discussed during agenda item 9.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2021 be approved</p>

as a correct record.

28. **HOUSING STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND CONSULTATION** (*Agenda Item 5*)

Debby Weller - Housing Policy and Strategy Manager, introduced a report as part of the consultation process for the draft Housing Strategy 2021/22 to 2025/26. Mark Billings - Head of Housing Options, Homelessness & Standards, and Gary Penticost - Head of Repairs, Engineering, Planned Works & Facilities Management, were also in attendance.

The Committee was informed that the wide consultation process had included an online questionnaire which had resulted in, to date, 75 responses. It was felt that, while this figure was accepted as somewhat low, this still constituted a positive level of response that had provided meaningful feedback, as had a number of meetings and workshops with a wide range of service users and other stakeholders. Themes from the responses received included concerns regarding:

- measurable targets;
- local strategic approaches;
- communication with community groups;
- sustainability and infrastructure to accompany development (e.g. provision of schools, GPs, etc);
- affordable housing;
- time on the housing register before rehousing;
- prices of houses versus flats;
- overcrowding;
- communication with tenants prior to their moving in;
- the Council's role as leader and its responsibility to support landlords and tenants;
- unsustainable debt and concerns regarding Universal Credit;
- support for independent living, with a focus on differently abled or older residents; and
- support for mental health, debt, and drug and alcohol dependency
- work towards DAHA accreditation is seen as positive.

It was confirmed that officers would consider the above when drafting the final report for determination by Cabinet. The Committee was requested to provide further comments for inclusion in that report.

In response to questions from the Committee, officers confirmed that the consultation had included various posts and advertisements on social media, together with an online questionnaire. Online questions had been bolstered by supporting information (e.g. summary detail on affordable housing), and a link to the full strategy had also been provided.

Regarding the strategy's target of ensuring all homes had at least a Band C energy rating, it was acknowledged that ideally all homes would be at Band A. However, many homes were currently substantially lower than Band C, and so the strategy was focussed on addressing the most problematic areas first.

On the matter of tenant/leaseholder workshops and meetings, these had been held in person prior to the pandemic but had since been put on hold. Officers were looking to start these again, with attendees based on a list of residents who had indicated their

willingness to participate in such events.

Regarding meeting the Borough's need for more 3 and 4 bed homes, officers advised that they worked closely with planning officers, developers and housing associations to promote housing that would meet such needs as identified by strategic market assessments. Implementation of the strategy would include continuing to explore further innovation in this area.

On the matter of moving tenants into smaller homes, the Committee was advised that the incentive scheme for downsizers had been reviewed, and a new package of financial support had been signed off by the Cabinet Member. This included, but was not limited to, a £2k payment for each bedroom released. It was confirmed that the Council ensured that homes were never statutorily overcrowded.

Homelessness presentations resulting from evictions in the private rented sector had been difficult to accurately forecast, as a result of the pandemic. Following the reopening of the Courts, presentations due to evictions in July had increased, with a slight reduction in August, though numbers remained higher than pre-pandemic. However, some areas of homelessness presentations had declined, e.g. the number of rough sleepers or asylum seeker clients. Other areas had increased, e.g. domestic abuse clients. It was suggested that the Committee could receive a larger report on the topic of homelessness at a future meeting.

Regarding hospital discharges and referrals to the Council, it was confirmed that officers were in regular communication with hospitals to upskill staff to identify patients in need of referral.

It was confirmed that officers were in discussion with the GLA regarding grant funding for addressing Traveller sites, though this was at an exploratory stage.

The Committee thanked officers for their work on the strategy and was pleased to see that the wide consultation had resulted in meaningful responses. The Committee requested that the report to Cabinet include a key focus on bringing empty homes back into use, potentially linked with the Council's Buy Back scheme, building relationships with key stakeholders such as housing associations, and downsizing/upsizing tenancies where required. The Committee also supported the suggestion that a further report on homelessness be considered at a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

- 1. that the report be noted;**
- 2. that the comments of the Committee be included in the forthcoming report to Cabinet; and**
- 3. that a further report on homelessness be added to the Work Programme for consideration at a future meeting.**

29. ANNUAL COMPLAINT & SERVICE MONITORING REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2020 TO 31 MARCH 2021 (*Agenda Item 6*)

Ian Anderson - Business Manager, Complaints and Enquiries, introduced the annual complaints report which covered the period 01 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

Key headlines from the report included:

- Informal complaints had risen significantly;
- Formal stage 1 and stage 2 complaints had reduced;
- The Ombudsman had chosen to investigate 34 complaints, a low number that would likely increase next year as things returned to normalcy following the pandemic;
- Compliments had significantly increased, with many received regarding the Borough's planting of wildflowers;
- Member's Enquiries (MEs) had reduced, likely due to the pandemic.

Regarding MEs, the Committee was advised that the monthly data received via the Group Offices showed different numbers to that of the report, due to the manner in which MEs without an address were allocated to Wards. The Committee was advised that the move to a new recording system would resolve this discrepancy for future reports. Work also remained to ensure readiness for the forthcoming changes to Ward boundaries in 2022. It was confirmed that any interested Members could arrange a visit to see the current ME recording system through the officer.

Two key themes from complaints had been identified as communication, and delays (often linked to repairs, social housing waiting lists, etc). Calls into the Call Centre had significantly increased, which had resulted in some residents being unable to be connected. It was expected that the number of callers would likely reduce following the pandemic.

Regarding Ombudsman's ruling of 'did not investigate', it was confirmed that this was misleading as often the Ombudsman did investigate, with all complainants receiving a detailed summary of the Ombudsman actions in plain English.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the report be noted;**
- 2. That the officer confirm the % number of compliments relating to wildflowers.**

30. FIRST WITNESS SESSION FOR REVIEW - ENGAGEMENT WITH TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS (*Agenda Item 7*)

Rod Smith – Service Manager, Tenancy Services, and Marion Finney – Regulation and Engagement Manager, addressed the Committee to provide information to aid the Committee's review.

The purpose of the review was summarised. The Committee was informed that the Council's landlord service was entering a new period of Regulatory scrutiny as set out in the 'Charter for Social Housing Residents; Social Housing White Paper', published in November 2020. The White Paper set out the government's intention to make effective use of the Regulator of Social Housing to ensure that residents in social housing were safe, were listened to, lived in good quality homes, and had access to redress when things went wrong.

Ensuring that residents in social housing had a 'voice' and were listened to was seen as key, with the government setting out clear expectations regarding a step change in approach which would see engagement and involvement as a 'golden thread' running through services delivered by social housing providers. To align itself with these expectations, the Council was now developing a 'Tenant & Leaseholder Engagement and Involvement Strategy' with the review providing the Committee with the

opportunity to shape the development of the Strategy at an early stage.

The 'Hierarchy of Involvement' was presented as set out within the report, covering 5 distinct layers governing how the service recommended interaction with residents, before the Committee was provided a summary of current engagement actions (Appendix A) and potential options for future engagement (Appendix B).

It was recognised that the service should avoid a 'one size fits all' approach but instead should tailor its strategy to resident needs, together with their willingness or availability to become involved. Key interaction methods identified included various assemblies and group meetings (currently on hold due to the pandemic) direct contact via 'Meet The Manager' sessions, increased digital engagement include revisions to the Council website to ensure accessibility, and collaboration on the service's annual report.

It was accepted that many of the residents willing to engage with the Council were retirees, who had more free time. The Strategy would therefore carefully consider how to engage with people with more limited time, tailoring engagement actions to fit with their own availability.

The Committee recommended that any engagement strategy should make provision for inclusion of people with limited English. Officers advised that overcoming barriers to engagement was of key importance to the strategy. Where required, members of the team often acted as interpreters, alongside the Council's external interpreting service. In addition, residents often brought friends or family that could interpret for them. Access to IT was also being reviewed, alongside traditional methods of communication such as telephone calls.

Members recommended that officers consider how to reach residents who were unwilling to engage with the Council. Officers advised that methods of structured communication were being considered as part of the strategy. Statutory communications, such as letters setting out service fees or fees for works to be carried out were already in place, thought it was accepted that more could be done to ensure residents were presented with enough data to allow them to feel that they were receiving value for money.

To receive greater feedback, the service was considering setting up 'Estate Marshalls' to act as points of contact for the Council to collaborate with. The Committee expanded on this, suggesting greater collaboration via 'Street Searches', attendance at street parties or fetes, youth councils, or through pairing up with partners such as the Police, with the target of being 'seen' within the various communities. In addition, it was suggested that increased use of social media and messaging services, such as WhatsApp, should be considered.

The Committee moved to consider the witness session to be held at the next meeting. Regarding potential witnesses, the Committee was reminded that the service was Housing Revenue Account funded and it was therefore necessary to ensure that approaches were targeted at the Council's tenants and leaseholders only.

Members requested that the session should focus on tenants and leaseholders who had valuable feedback to share. It was also requested that the Association of Council Leaseholders should be invited to participate.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

31.	<p>CABINET FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Forward Plan be noted.</p>
32.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>The clerk provided a summary of email communication regarding the previously requested additions to the Work Programme (WP), with items confirmed as follows:</p> <p>Items added to Work Programme:</p> <p>Recycling - added for October 2021 Climate Change – added for January 2022 (interim report) and March 2022</p> <p>Items not within the SC’s remit:</p> <p>Pest Control – under the remit of the Public Safety SC Alley gating – under the remit of the Corporate Services SC (an information item was considered at the previous Corporate Services POC in January 2021) The Hillingdon First card – under the remit of the Corporate Services SC</p> <p>Items to be on hold for now:</p> <p>Street Champions - the scheme is currently under review internally.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.06 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Neil Fraser on 01895 250692. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.