

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 19 June 2013 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Carl Handley (Chair), Vincent Davis (Vice-Chair), Paul Bell, Liam Curran, Amanda De Ryk, Patsy Foreman, Vicky Foxcroft, Darren Johnson and Sam Owolabi-Oluyole

ALSO PRESENT: Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager), Hilary Barber (Director of Corporate Services) (Lewisham Homes), Mark Humphreys (Group Finance Manager, Customer Services), Madeleine Jeffery (Private Sector Housing Agency Manager), Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Roger Raymond (Scrutiny Officer), Clare Ryan (Partnerships & Service Improvement Manager), Kevin Sheehan (Executive Director for Customer Services) and Louise Spires (Strategy, Policy & Development Manager)

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2013

Resolved: to accept the minutes of the meeting held on 16 May as an accurate record.

2. Declarations of interest

Councillor Bell declared a non-prejudicial interest as board member of Lewisham Homes.

3. Emergency services review

3.1 Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the report. The key points to note were:

- The Committee had looked at the issue of fire safety and the recommendations of the Lakanal House inquest as well as the ongoing work with housing providers in the borough at its last meeting.

For this meeting, the Committee received information on:

- Progress on considering the installation of sprinklers in Lewisham Homes' buildings
- The response to proposals by the Fire Service to reduce the number of fire fighters based in the borough by one quarter, in particular how residents are being involved and informed about fire safety.
- 'Targeting those most those most at risk', from the Fifth London Safety Plan Supporting document No.5 Consultation draft, March 2013

3.2 Hilary Barber (Director of Corporate Services, Lewisham Homes), introduced the report. The key points to note were:

- There had been a feasibility study carried out to fit sprinklers in a Lewisham Homes property, to see if it was practicable to do so.

- Fire surveys had been carried out for properties, including high-rise blocks: in line with legislative requirements, Lewisham Homes had adopted a risk-based approach to managing fire safety. A fire risk assessment had been completed for each building and there was an on-going programme to regularly review these assessments, and make any reasonable improvements to fire safety in each block.
- Sheltered accommodation was identified as a higher priority due a combination of fire risk assessments and the vulnerability of tenants living in those schemes. Therefore, Lewisham Homes completed a programme of intrusive fire risk assessments, to ensure that the strategy for managing fire risk in sheltered housing was effective.
- Feasibility studies were now programmed for 2013-14 to assess the viability of installing sprinklers in these properties.
- Residents were encouraged to be involved in fire safety in a number of ways, such as leafleting accommodation, the provision of fire safety information, the involvement of residents associations.

3.3 In response to questions from the Committee, the following was noted:

- Members congratulated Lewisham Homes on its innovative plans to fit sprinklers into its properties.
- There were some issues in respect of sheltered accommodation and the fitting of sprinklers that Lewisham Homes was considering in more detail.
- It is difficult to estimate the future costs of fitting sprinkler systems, as each block is different. However, an indication can be given from the cost of the Somerville sheltered accommodation pilot - this was £41,800 and covered all communal areas, 2 offices and 26 flats, making a unit cost of £1500.
- Councillor Johnson would look into the risk factor of certain groups, such as those in the private rented sector who house/flat-share, and homes in multiple occupation, through his role as a member of the London Fire Authority

Resolved: That the Committee's views be referred to Mayor and Cabinet:

The Committee wishes to take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of sprinkler systems in containing fires and preventing loss of life. The Committee believes that this is particularly important because of the changes being proposed in the draft fifth London safety plan, which could result in the closure of two of Lewisham's fire stations.

The Committee supports the work undertaken by Lewisham Homes and recommends that the Council urges other housing providers to adopt a similar risk based approach.

4. Preparation for the housing benefit cap in Lewisham

4.1 Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing, Customer Services), introduced the report. The key points to note were:

- From August 2013, a cap will be applied to the total out of work benefits a household can receive. The cap of £350 for singles and £500 for families

will affect over 478 households in Lewisham. Losses range from under £1 to over £300 a week.

- It is expected that there will be close to 150 households in Lewisham that will lose over £100 a week in benefits unless they become exempt, by finding work or claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA).
- All households affected by the benefit cap have been contacted via letter and subsequent calls to offer a face to face support planning appointment. Officers have made successful contact with 418 families.
- The most affected households tend to be lone parents with more than 3 children, who are on income support and in the private rented sector.
- These residents are being assisted by officers in the following ways:
 - everyone contacted is offered a holistic appointment covering their digital, financial, housing and employment needs.
 - fast track referrals to employment support (particularly referrals to family budgets),
 - referral to the Credit Union for budgeting accounts and to a range of other local providers.
- The next steps will be to develop a complex needs support model for people who fail to find solutions to the benefit cap by August 2013. Officers will be testing this model from July to October 2013.

- The Under-Occupation Charge, commonly known as the 'Bedroom Tax' was introduced in April 2013. A reduction was applied to housing benefit for people who were judged to be under-occupying properties in the social rented sector.
- The combined loss from the introduction of the bedroom tax in Lewisham is approximately £1.5m and there are approximately 3,023 households affected.
- Of the 2,355 subject to a 14% reduction in rent, 65% are single people. Of the 668 subject to a 25% reduction in rent, 74% are single people.
- Lewisham Homes has the most occupants affected by the Bedroom Tax.
- Lewisham's Housing Benefit service has been working closely with Lewisham Homes, Regenter B3 and the Housing Associations to share information on benefit payments and household size in order to identify properties which are under-occupied. Lewisham Homes, Regenter B3 and the Housing Associations have taken the lead on discussions with affected households.
- Some of the approaches used to address the introduction of the Bedroom Tax are:
 - Giving families access to additional properties as a short-term measure to kick-start the move-on process.
 - Promoting other housing initiatives, such as FreshStart, Seaside & Country Homes and mutual exchanges
 - Review housing allocations scheme to continue to prioritise under occupiers and enable them to move quickly
 - Using Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to temporarily meet rent shortfalls where tenants have expressed an intention to downsize by joining the housing register and actively bidding. Currently 132 tenants have been supported using DHP to manage under occupancy.
 - Using financial assistance to encourage under occupation moves, pay for removals or clear arrears

- The Council is looking to develop its policy so occupants are not directly penalised due to the introduction of the Bedroom Tax.

4.2 In response to questions from the Committee, the following was noted:

- Council officers assured the Committee that they could not foresee the circumstances in which the Council would look to evict residents, as long as all reasonable steps had been taken, with help from the Council, to meet the gap caused by the Bedroom Tax. Officers reiterated the importance of the Council's responsibility to balance rent collection with a fair enforcement policy.
- The Council continues to support residents to secure employment. Employed households should be exempt from the reforms, as long as they continue to work enough hours.
- Most occupants affected by the Bedroom Tax do not want to move; however those that do will be prioritised for support and help to move.
- There are no easy 'loopholes' to avoid paying the Bedroom Tax. Any perceived loopholes would have a knock-on effect in other areas.
- There are online budgetary tools that can aid residents in respect of the Benefit changes.
- There is still a lot of work that needs to be done by central government to ensure that the Universal Credit would operate efficiently and effectively.
- There will be continuous evaluation to assess the impact of the benefit changes on residents' behaviour. There will also be assessment of the effectiveness of the training and employment initiatives being used to help residents secure employment.
- The Executive Director for Customer Services chairs the 'Welfare Reform Board' which looks to provide a holistic approach across the council and partner agencies in respect of the Welfare Reform agenda.
- The Council has the resources in place to respond quickly to any changes that may come due to a change in policy over the coming two years, or after the General Election scheduled for 2015.
- The Council's policy on DHP will be evaluated at the appropriate time, to see if the six months limit is reasonable.
- There are a number of benefit recipients who are exempted from the Benefits Cap: Disability Living Allowance; Personal Independence Payment; Attendance Allowance; Industrial Injuries Benefit; Employment Support Allowance, if paid with the support component; Armed Forces Compensation Scheme payment; War Pension Scheme payments (including War Widow's/Widower's Pension; and War disablement Pension). Also, that people who qualify for Working Tax Credit will also be exempt. This means that lone parents will need to work 16 hours a week and couples 24 hours a week to be exempt from the cap.
- Modelling is being carried out on the circumstances of residents in temporary accommodation who are in need because of homeless.
- The likelihood is that it will take up to four years for the Housing Benefit functions from local authorities to be transferred to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) for the implementation of Universal Credit.
- It is not conceivable for any local authority in an urban area be able to cover the full cost of the Bedroom Tax so that it does not affect its residents.

- Seaside & Country Homes encourages older residents to trade their property for a property in the country or seaside. The properties they would be moving to are usually held by a Trust.
- It is still possible to use the mutual exchange initiative if there is damp and mould in a property. Problems of this kind can be more easily dealt with once the occupants are out of the property.

4.3 Some questions for follow-up from officers are as follows:

- Of the households affected by bedroom tax who are willing to move (144 identified in the report), how many have children?
- How do the impacts of the bedroom tax and benefit cap in Lewisham compare with neighbouring boroughs?
- How do the bedroom tax rules apply to families with students in higher education living away during term time?
- Are families claiming DLA for their children exempt from the bedroom tax?
- In instances in which relatives or friends are willing to make up the shortfall in rents caused by the Bedroom Tax, is this contribution considered as rental income? If so, would it affect the recipient's benefits?

Resolved: That the Committee's views be referred to Mayor and Cabinet-

The Committee wishes to commend officers for the work they have carried out in preparation for the implementation of the government's changes to housing welfare. The Committee also commends the work that has been done with the Council's partners, including the voluntary sector, to mitigate the most damaging impacts of the changes on Lewisham's citizens.

5. Housing matters

5.1 Jeff Endean (Housing Programmes and Strategy Team Manager), introduced the report. The key points to note were:

- The full findings of the Phase 1 consultation is scheduled for presentation at Housing Select Committee meeting in September, alongside full details of the proposed approach to the second stage of conversation with residents.
- 'Door-knocking' to speak to residents ended on 31 May 2013. The target of 2,000 surveys was achieved, and contact was made with over 4,000 residents.
- Solon, the Independent Tenant Advisor, will be conducting a small door-knocking exercise of 50 households to benchmark the consultation that has been carried out, and the questionnaire and methodology for undertaking this is currently in development.
- In February 2013, Lewisham Homes commissioned Ridge to carry out a 10 per cent sample stock condition survey of the housing stock in order to prepare a whole stock 30 year expenditure profile and report.
- The previous meeting of Housing Select Committee received a draft of the report on the Council's New Build Programme proposed for consideration by Mayor and Cabinet on 22 May.
- On the proposed community self build scheme at Church Grove, the media coverage of the proposal has generated 18 expressions of interested parties.

- The event planned for prospective interested parties, noted to Housing Select Committee last month as planned for July, will now take place in September. This additional time will allow for officers to fully explore the ways in which residents might be supported to be part of the programme, and not be at a disadvantage in relation to more established groups.
- The Council submitted a bid for £4.5m to the Mayor of London's Care and Support Specialised Housing Fund to support the delivery of two new specialised schemes for older people in the borough. The announcement on the bids is expected in late June 2013.

5.2 In response to questions the Committee, the following was noted:

- Of the 18 expression of interest in the Church Grove site, only a few of the proposals are well-developed. This is why officers put back the information event to September. They would like to work with residents on their proposals to develop them further, and make them more viable.
- Officers will evaluate the plans for Church Grove after the event planned for prospective interested parties in September; some of the proposals may not be applicable for the Church Grove site, but might be applicable to other sites.
- There will be no 'gifting' of land for the Self-Build projects.
- Officers have attempted to contact Lewisham Parochial Charities on its proposals for a new build, but have been unsuccessful thus far.
- Developments such as Tanners Hill would not be held up due to the Housing Matters consultation.
- Officers have spoken to voluntary organisations about helping young people getting involved in the construction industry
- There should be announcement on the Coalition Government's proposals for the Public Spending Borrowing Cap next week.
- The total expenditure on Housing Matters thus far is approximately £310,000, which includes all of the initial feasibility work as well as the engagement and consultation with residents.

5.3 Some questions for follow-up from officers are as follows:

- an update on the transfer of 82 Tanners Hill.
- a breakdown of the £53k being paid to Solon for the Housing Matters consultation

Resolved: that the report be noted.

6. Select Committee work programme

6.1 Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the report. The key points to note were:

- The items scheduled for the September meeting are as follows:
 - Update on the implementation of the PRS review recommendations: Love Lewisham Lets
 - Heathside and Lethbridge
 - Housing supply and demand

- Emergency services review (recommendations)

6.2 In response to questions the Committee were advised:

- That it would be prudent to defer the item on 'Heathside and Lethbridge' until later in the municipal year.
- That an update on Housing Matters could be provided at the September meeting to update Members on a number of issues.

Resolved: that the Heathside and Lethbridge item be deferred until next year. An item on Housing Matters be added to the agenda for the September meeting.

7. Items to be referred to Mayor and Cabinet

Resolved: to refer the Committee's views on items three and four to Mayor and Cabinet.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

Chair: -----

Date: -----