

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 9 March 2023 at 7.00 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Stephen Penfold (Chair), Will Cooper (Vice-Chair), Natasha Burgess, Suzannah Clarke, Billy Harding, Rosie Parry, Sakina Sheikh and Ese Erheriene.

ALSO PRESENT: Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Services), Councillor Sophie Davis (Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Homelessness), Councillor Brenda Dacres (Cabinet Member for Housing Development & Planning), Susan Clinton (Clarion Housing Group), Steve Austin (Hyde Housing), Wells Chomutare (Peabody), Shane Sorour (Peabody), Carl Dewey (Southern Housing), Jackie Pauley (Southern Housing), David Lewis (L&Q), Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes), Sarah Willcox-Jones (Director of Repairs, Lewisham Homes) and Nidhi Patil (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Louise Phillips (Service Improvement and Change Manager), Jacob Foreman (Housing Services Policy & Strategy Officer), Councillor Sian Eiles and Erica Turner (Housing Partnership and Partnership Manager)

NB: Those Councillors listed as joining virtually were not in attendance for the purposes of the meeting being quorate, any decisions taken or to satisfy the requirements of s85 Local Government Act 1972

1 Minutes of the meeting held on 5 January 2023

1.1. RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting be agreed as a true record.

2 Declarations of interest

- 2.1. Councillor Cooper declared an interest as a service manager for Community Advice Works- which provides advice and advocacy for people regarding housing matters in Lewisham.
- 2.2. Councillor Harding declared an interest as a private tenant in a L&Q managed block in Lewisham.
- 2.3. Councillor Penfold declared an interest as an employee of the Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network- which provides advice to refugees and migrants in Lewisham.

3 Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

The Committee expressed their disappointment with the response from Mayor & Cabinet regarding the Committee's comments on the retrofitting work done by Social Housing Providers in Lewisham, mainly Regenter B3.

The Committee understood that Regenter B3 wasn't obligated to do any retrofitting work as part of its current contract with the Council. However, it was responsible for ensuring that all properties had an EPC rating of C. The Committee wanted to ensure that this goal was achieved so that when the contract ended in 2027, the housing stock would be in the best possible state.

RESOLVED:

- That the Chair of the Committee would discuss this response further with the Cabinet Member for Housing Management & Homelessness and report back to the Committee.

4 Repairs Update from Housing Providers

The Committee had invited 5 housing providers to provide an update on their repairs service. These 5 housing providers were Clarion Housing Group, Hyde Housing, L&Q, Peabody and Southern Housing.

Susan Clinton (Head of Operations) presented the update from Clarion Housing Group, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 4.1. An incident such as an uncontrollable flood in a property or anything that impacts immediately on the health and safety of the residents was classed as an emergency repair. Emergency repairs were completed within 24 hours. The target to complete routine repairs was 28 days but appointments could usually be made within 5-10 working days.
- 4.2. Condensation, damp and mould cases had been challenging to resolve not just due to in-house resources but also due to supply chain issues in obtaining materials and support from external contractors. A central team had now been set-up that was dedicated to looking at condensation, damp and mould cases.
- 4.3. Clarion had good levels of staff retention but did experience significant challenges in recruiting surveyors.
- 4.4. Clarion currently had 160 active disrepair cases in South London. Information would be sent to the Committee members around how many of those cases were in Lewisham and also around Clarion's disrepair budget.
- 4.5. Customer Satisfaction for repairs was generally high based on the sample survey that was conducted quarterly. The target for overall customer satisfaction was 85% and was generally met or exceeded. Both transactional and perception surveys were used.
- 4.6. According to the officer from Clarion, most of the condensation, damp and mould cases had an element of lifestyle causes. Overcrowding was also a huge factor in these cases. The Council had 100% nomination rights to properties managed by Clarion in the borough so there was very little Clarion could do when it came to rehousing but they recognised that supply of accommodation was a big issue in the housing sector.
- 4.7. A member of the Committee mentioned that it was important to have pictures of female surveyors in the report along with male surveyors to ensure both were equally represented.
- 4.8. The Committee enquired about how Clarion was preparing to manage the cost implications of the amendment to the Social Housing Regulation bill and was informed that Clarion would be reducing its Planned Maintenance Program and may need to reassess its New Build Programme.
- 4.9. From March 2022 to October 2022, Clarion had 40 cases before the Housing Ombudsman. After every Ombudsman determination, the relevant Heads of Service were tasked with completing a lessons learnt template to ensure that learning from those determinations informed how resources were allocated and how their processes could be improved.
- 4.10. On being asked about what lessons had been learnt by Clarion so far from the Ombudsman cases and other complaints, the officer from Clarion stated that one of the lessons had been around operatives struggling to gain access to a property to complete the repairs work after a schedule of works had been agreed and that this may be driven by residents wanting to maximise compensation or their chaotic lifestyles. Members of the Committee criticised these comments and stated that they sounded like Clarion was blaming residents and trying to absolve itself of any responsibility. Members requested further information on lessons that had been learnt from these cases and the corrective actions that had been taken to ensure mistakes were not repeated.

- 4.11. It was suggested that as part of proactive staff training, there should be a focus on promoting equitable treatment of all residents.

Steve Austin (Head of Maintenance) presented the update from Hyde Housing, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 4.12. Hyde Housing had just completed a business case for investing in their disrepair budget and managed to add another £1million to it.
- 4.13. The repairs team was nearly fully staffed but Hyde Housing was looking at establishing a separate team for damp and mould. One challenge in recruitment was the difficulty in recruiting multi-trade operatives.
- 4.14. Customer satisfaction with repairs was around 75% but officers recognised that it could be better. An external company was being used to call residents and collect feedback after the repair work had been completed.
- 4.15. Hyde had just set up a dedicated team with a centralised mail box for all damp and mould cases. Any resident who called about a damp and mould case would be signposted to this mailbox. All cases from this mailbox went to the surveying team that called the resident to gather more information. If the surveying team received enough information on the call, they would raise a call for the resident and if they didn't receive enough information, they would go to the property to inspect, take pictures and decide the course of action.
- 4.16. It was agreed that doing a mould wash was just a temporary fix, but it was still necessary in some cases until long-term next steps were decided.
- 4.17. Hyde was still recruiting operatives. They were mainly looking for multi-trade finishers and expected to be fully staffed within the next 2-3 months. In the meantime, external contractors were assisting with the caseload but were predominantly focused on the disrepair cases.
- 4.18. Hyde had just over 400 disrepair across the organisation and spent around £10K-£15K on a case. Including the costs for the repair works, each disrepair case cost ~£20K which equates to £8million a year. However, Hyde's disrepair budget was ~£2.7million a year.

David Lewis (Executive Group Director of Property Services) presented the update from L&Q, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 4.19. L&Q completed around 250,000 repairs a year. They had partnered with Plentific which functioned as a contractor marketplace to increase capacity and ensure turnaround times on repairs were met. Contractors from Plentific were being utilised for completing smaller repairs where demand had spiked. L&Q were also trying to recruit more sub-contractors.
- 4.20. Ease of dealing with L&Q was one parameter that was being used to measure customer satisfaction and the target score for this was set at 65%. Performance in this area had historically been lower. Therefore, even though a target of 65% seemed low, it was still an improving position.
- 4.21. L&Q did not close emergency repair jobs immediately after the initial make safe. They kept the job open until a follow-up was done confirming that the job had satisfactorily been completed.
- 4.22. 80% of L&Q's disrepair cases stemmed from situations where either the issue hadn't been correctly diagnosed or it wasn't correctly dealt with in the first instance. Therefore, L&Q ensured that all of its surveyors received training around building pathology, leak prevention, damp and mould, to ensure proper diagnosis. Contact centre staff and housing officers were also being trained on the same.

- 4.23. Along with a transactional customer satisfaction survey, L&Q also conducted an annual perception survey. This survey highlighted that the most important factor influencing residents' satisfaction was the condition of their home. L&Q recognised this and was determined to invest in their stock.
- 4.24. An analysis of last 5 years of complaints had shown that the number of complaints always increased in autumn and winter with 75% of them involving damp and mould.
- 4.25. A very active Resident Services Board sat within L&Q's tenant engagement structure, along with various regional committees to ensure residents always had the opportunity to engage with the organisation.
- 4.26. L&Q had 39 complaints before the Housing Ombudsman which was a significant number of cases considering the size of its housing stock. These cases highlighted that L&Q needed to invest in its stock and improve the conditions of its buildings. There was a need to reduce reactive spending and increase planned spending.
- 4.27. L&Q had a specialist internal team for managing damp & mould cases and were also working with specialist contractor Zap Carbon. They also had a ring-fenced budget for damp & mould which was £6million per year.

Shane Sorour (Director of Repairs) presented the update from Peabody, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 4.28. It was discussed that 70-75% of all disrepair cases for Peabody had damp and mould as a contributing factor. Therefore, they had enhanced their damp and mould response. If a resident contacted Peabody with this issue, they would receive a call back within 24 hours and have a condition survey within 48 hours.
- 4.29. 60-65% of damp and mould cases encountered by Peabody were due to structural issues or water penetration which was then exasperated by overcrowding and environmental factors in the property.
- 4.30. In April 2022, the customer satisfaction for Peabody was 83% and last month it was recorded as 85%. There had been ups and downs, but their lowest satisfaction score had been 77% whereas highest was 85%.
- 4.31. 94% of emergency repairs were generally completed within 4 hours and depending on vulnerability of the residents in the property, they could be completed within as quick as 2 hours. Routine repairs were completed within 13 days and Peabody kept 91.9% of their appointments.
- 4.32. Peabody's average spend on remediating disrepair claims was £5000 per case. Their disrepair budget including legal fees and compensation was £3million a year.
- 4.33. Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis presented a lot of challenges for the housing industry and affected the repairs service as well. There was a reduction in skilled operatives to be able to deliver repairs and maintenance service because of Brexit. Obtaining materials was also a challenge along with supply chains delays and rising cost of materials.

Carl Dewey (Director of Repair and Estate Transformation) and Jackie Pauley (Head of Region- London) presented the update from Southern Housing, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 4.34. Repair services in Lewisham were predominantly delivered by the in-house team. Transaction surveys indicated that customer satisfaction with repairs was ~97-98% and based on perception surveys customer satisfaction was 70-75%. A 5-point descriptive Likert scale was used for the surveys so that they aligned with the tenant satisfaction measures.
- 4.35. The average end-to-end time for repairs was 16 days for residents in Lewisham.

- 4.36. As part of the merger of Optivo with Southern Housing, both legacy organisations had committed to levelling up their standard Terms & Conditions.
- 4.37. A member of the Committee praised the support services that Southern Housing was offering its residents through their specialist financial inclusion team, specialist tenancy sustainment team, various support grants and local initiatives.
- 4.38. Southern Housing had 466 disrepair cases. On average each case cost them ~£7000. A major portion of legal services was provided in-house, leading to lower legal costs.

RESOLVED:

- That the updates provided by Clarion Housing Group, Hyde Housing, L&Q, Peabody and Southern Housing be noted; and that Clarion Housing Group provide further information on the lessons that had been learnt from recent Ombudsman cases, including the corrective actions that had been taken to ensure mistakes were not repeated.

The Committee voted to suspend standing orders.

5 Lewisham Homes Repairs Service Update

Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes) and Sarah Willcox-Jones (Director of Repairs, Lewisham Homes) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- 5.1. In September 2022, Lewisham Homes identified the need for specialist support in helping them improve the performance of their repairs service. This led to the appointment of an experienced Interim Repairs Improvement Lead in October 2022 and the development of a Repairs Improvement Plan in November 2022.
- 5.2. Due to staff shortages around Christmas, the Repairs Improvement Plan was paused for 2 months and recommenced in February 2023.
- 5.3. Lewisham Homes had launched a recruitment campaign for 41 new repairs staff including 25 operatives. 16 operative jobs had been filled.
- 5.4. Along with increasing the number of operatives, support contractors were being onboarded to assist with reducing the aged work in progress. This support would go-live in early April 2023 for approximately 10 weeks.
- 5.5. Lewisham Homes launched the Localz app on 23rd of February which was being used to request satisfaction feedback and identify when work was not completed satisfactorily.
- 5.6. Repair calls regarding an existing repair were going down. They were now at 30% compared to 50% in October 2022.
- 5.7. In 2022, on some days the average time to answer calls was around 25 to 30 minutes but now it was going down and was as low as 5 minutes on some days.
- 5.8. Lewisham Homes advised that they were still having IT issues and had several system outages or issues with internet access in Laurence House. Their current telephony system was dated and based on Skype. An early move to the Council's telephony system was being discussed and would hopefully resolve these IT issue to some extent.

The Committee members were invited to ask questions. The following key points were noted:

- 5.9. Lewisham Homes had a major works contract with United Living that focused on the properties in the South of the borough. United Living would now be assisting Lewisham Homes with their aged work in progress. This would be covered under the current contract but with a letter of intent so there would be a slight variation to

- the initial contract. They would start by assisting with work in the South of the borough whilst options were explored for the North of the borough. The work would be around damp and mould as well as other specialised areas such as glazing.
- 5.10. In the meeting of the Committee in November 2022, officers from Lewisham Homes stated that they were approximately 1000 repair jobs over where they needed to be. This figure was currently at 750.
- 5.11. Officers stated that the outstanding recruitment of 10 operatives should hopefully conclude by end of April 2023/ early May 2023. They hoped to be fully staffed by summer of 2023. Biggest challenge in recruitment was recruiting surveyors.
- 5.12. There was a ring-fenced team that looked after leaks, damp and mould cases. Early intervention visits were also being undertaken by Lewisham Homes officers so that proactive action could be take on damp and mould cases. Extended appointments for repairs were also still being offered.
- 5.13. In November 2022, Lewisham Homes had 267 active disrepair cases. There had been a targeted campaign on some of their estates in January 2023 & February 2023 as reported by residents, staff and councillors which led to a spike in disrepair cases being lodged with 52 new cases just from January 2023 to mid-February 2023. Their total active disrepair cases were currently around 320. Appointing a paralegal had been helpful as some cases were successfully resolved through the alternative dispute resolution process.
- 5.14. Lewisham Homes' disrepair budget had two different components- part of it came directly out of the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) through the Council and part of it was funded by Lewisham Homes. Around £17million was received by Lewisham Homes for compliance and repairs and they then decided how to allocate those £17million.

RESOLVED:

- That the committee noted and was pleased with the progress that had been made since this report last came to the Committee in November 2022.

6 Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

Fenella Beckman (Director for Housing Services) introduced the report, followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 6.1. The current Homelessness & Rough Sleeping strategy was agreed in 2020 and ended in 2022. Since then, there had been a significant change in demand with an increase in the number of people approaching the Council as homeless.
- 6.2. The new Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy was a continuation of existing practice but also reflected on the latest challenges in Lewisham and London more widely. It focused on the fact that there had been an increase in demand and a decline in the supply of accommodation amidst ongoing overall pressure on the Council's budget.
- 6.3. A reduced supply of accommodation meant there were significant challenges in moving people out of temporary accommodation (TA). This had caused an increase in the numbers of households in TA which was now just under 2800.
- 6.4. Spending a prolonged period of time in TA had a detrimental impact on people and therefore reducing the number of households in TA was a priority. This required a focus on increasing the supply of affordable accommodation. The Council had recently agreed an Accommodation Procurement strategy which set out the action plan for ensuring a sufficient supply of accommodation for homeless households.
- 6.5. New data demonstrated an upward trend in the number of people sleeping rough across London, including Lewisham.
- 6.6. This new strategy had 4 main priorities and officers had developed a series of actions, initiatives and KPIs for each priority which would form the Action Plan.

Officers would be developing specific and measurable targets against each action. These targets would be monitored regularly throughout the life of the strategy and would be used to assess the impact of the Action Plan. It was proposed that a note/report would be circulated to the Committee members updating them on the targets being proposed for the strategy's Action Plan before the strategy was presented to Mayor and Cabinet for approval.

6.7. In 2022-23 YTD, 2412 households approached the Council for homelessness assistance and 569 main duty acceptances were made. Officers would confirm the number of households that were owed a prevention duty and a relief duty in 2022-23 YTD.

6.8. One of the priorities of the strategy was to increase access to information and advice about homelessness prevention including more face-to-face contact with households at risk of homelessness. Officers informed the Committee that plans were being developed to reopen Laurence House for face-to-face interviews with clients who request an appointment for a detailed homelessness assessment. This reopening was planned for May 2023.

RESOLVED:

- That the report be noted, and information circulated to the Committee on the targets being proposed for the strategy's Action Plan, before the strategy is presented to Mayor and Cabinet for approval.

7 **Select Committee work programme**

The Committee discussed suggestions for the 23-24 work programme and the following key points were noted:

7.1. Since the ALMO coming back in-house would be a major focus this year, it was suggested that the Committee hear from Lewisham Homes about the challenges they have faced and discuss how the Council plans to tackle those challenges.

7.2. It was suggested that Clarion Housing Group be invited to provide a further update to the Committee in 23-24.

7.3. The following topics were also suggested for the 23-24 work programme:

- Advice and guidance to private renters in the deepening Private Rented Sector
- Impact of homelessness and housing on different groups of people in Lewisham
- Choice based lettings

RESOLVED:

- That the completed work programme for 22-23 and the Committee's suggestions for the 23-24 Work Programme be noted.

The meeting ended at 10.35pm.

Chair:

Date:
