

# MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 1 October 2014 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Carl Handley (Chair), Peter Bernards (Vice-Chair), John Coughlin, Amanda De Ryk, Maja Hilton, Simon Hooks, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa and Jonathan Slater

APOLOGIES: Councillors Paul Bell and Susan Wise

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor David Michael, Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager), David Austin (Head of Corporate Resources), Jeff Endean (Housing Programmes and Strategy Team Manager), Rachel George (Housing Regeneration & Projects Manager), Mark Humphreys (Group Finance Manager, Customer Services), Mick Lear (Service Manager, Benefits), James Lee (Service Manager, Inclusion and Prevention), Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Martin O'Brien (Sustainable Resources Group Manager) and Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney (Head of Crime Reduction and Supporting People)

## 1. Minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2014

- 1.1 The Committee discussed the minutes of the meeting held on 2 September and agreed that a note should be included about the management of alleyways adjacent to social housing. The Committee highlighted the concerns raised about the use of some alleyways for anti-social behaviour. It was requested that officers seek to ensure that Council owned alleyways were being managed appropriately.

Resolved: that, subject to a minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on 2 September be agreed as an accurate record.

## 2. Declarations of interest

- 2.1 None

## 3. Response from Mayor & Cabinet

- 3.1 The Committee considered the response from Mayor and Cabinet to the referral on the New Homes Better Places programme. The following key point was noted:

- The Committee recognised the standing of the Council's constitutional provisions relating to procurement decisions.

Resolved: to ensure that the Committee's future referrals more accurately reflect the views of the entire Committee; and to note the response from Mayor and Cabinet.

## 4. Lewisham Future Programme

- 4.1 David Austin (Head of Corporate Resources) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The Council had to make significant savings to its budget.

- The Lewisham Future Programme proposals provided opportunities as well as risks.
- Officers welcomed the approach to scrutiny that had been set out by the Overview and Scrutiny committee at its meeting on 29 September.

4.2 Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney (Head of Crime Reduction and Supporting People) introduced savings proposal B1: reduction and remodelling of Supporting People housing & floating support services, the following key points were noted:

- Funding for supporting people had previously been ring fenced grant
- The budget had been used over a number of years to develop services for a broad client group.
- Since 2012, the budget was no longer ring-fenced.
- The majority of services were provided through contracts with providers in the community and voluntary sector.
- There would be a reduction in the preventative elements of the programme.
- In future, services would be focused on those most in need, in order to achieve the greatest impact.
- A number of risks had been identified, which were set out in the report.
- Changes were taking place to a range of services, including mental health and social care. Officers would work with colleagues in health and social care services to ensure effective pathways were in place to support people in crisis.

4.3 Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney (Head of Crime Reduction and Supporting People) and James Lee (Service Manager – prevention and inclusion) responded to questions from the Committee; the following key points were noted:

- It was recognised that there might be a cumulative effect of the changes being proposed to services across the Council.
- Further work would be carried out after decisions on the savings proposals had been taken by Mayor and Cabinet.
- Government grants might become available to continue some services. However, in the past these tended to be time limited and of a smaller scale than the funding managed through the Council.
- Some former service users would eventually reach the threshold for social care; but it was difficult to predict how the changes would impact on individual cases.
- This saving proposal might result in increased costs in other areas.
- The number of people accessing floating support services each year changed. However, approximately 2000 people would be affected by the proposed changes.

4.4 The Committee discussed the proposal and agreed to refer their views to Public Accounts Select Committee as follows:

4.5 The Committee recommends that the Council should work in a joined up way to mitigate the impacts of this proposal. The Committee believes that available resources should be focused on preventative services, where this is feasible.

4.6 Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) introduced the savings proposal M1: transfer of non housing stock from the HRA to the general fund. The following key points were noted:

- Housing had taken £2.2m from its £5.5m budget in the years since 2010.

- This had been achieved through reorganisation of staff and services as well as changes to leasing and procurement.
- The further savings of £1m identified through the Lewisham Future Programme should be viewed in the context of the savings already delivered.
- An accounting adjustment would be carried out to move a number of non-residential properties from the Housing Revenue Account to the General Fund.
- Approximately £4.41m worth of garages and £5.6m of commercial property would move across.
- Income from these assets was approximately £2m a year.
- These properties would generate income for the General Fund and remove debts from the Housing Revenue Account.
- There would be no impact on service delivery.
- It was intended that more income would be generated in future years.

Resolved: to refer the Committee's views to the Public Accounts Select Committee.

## **5. Welfare reform update**

5.1 Mick Lear (Service Manager – benefits) introduced the report and a presentation, which covered the following issues:

- universal credit
- the benefit cap
- bedroom tax & under occupation
- discretionary housing payment
- council tax reduction scheme

5.2 In response to questions from the Committee, Mick Lear (Service Manager – Benefits) and Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) provided the following information:

- There hadn't been any evictions as a result of the bedroom tax.
- The level of rent arrears outlined in the report (61% of Lewisham Homes residents) was not a direct result by the bedroom tax. A number of these households had been in arrears before the changes.
- The Council was working with Lewisham Homes to support households as much as possible and would explore all options before considering any decision to evict.
- Discretionary housing payments had been used effectively to deal with some of the rental shortfall.
- Many of the households affected by the bedroom tax had chosen to make up the shortfall themselves.
- 120 households had indicated interest in downsizing, 170 visits had been carried out and there had been 138 referrals to downsize.
- Officers were working with these households to help them explore their options.
- There were some savings from the joint work being carried out with Lambeth and Southwark but the numbers were not significant.
- It was recognised that the roll out of personal independence payments (PIPs) could be stressful for some disabled people. This was not a benefit administered by the Council; nonetheless officers were aware of concerns and worked with partners wherever possible to alleviate problems.

- The Council had a policy to charge owners of empty homes 150% of council tax.

Resolved: to note the report and to receive additional information about income generated from increased Council tax on empty homes.

## **6. Lewisham housing strategy (2015-20)**

6.1 Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) and Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The housing strategy was part of the Council's formal policy framework. It would put forward for consultation before consideration by Mayor and Cabinet and submission to Council.
- The report set out a framework with the essential elements of the proposed strategy.
- Officers would ensure that the new strategy built on the successes of the previous housing strategy whilst recognising that the approach was driven by different demographics and choices of tenure.
- There were increasing strains on housing across all tenures.
- The strategy had four key objectives: helping residents at times of housing need; building the homes residents need; improving resident's homes; security and quality for private renters.

6.2 In response to questions from the Committee, Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) and Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) the following key points were noted:

- Research was carried out on a regular basis to assess the numbers of people who were sleeping rough. The methodology for the research followed a standard pattern across London and involved a number of different agencies.
- Providing support to people with no recourse to public funds was putting pressure on services, there were a range of strategies in place to deal with this, including supporting people to return to their country of origin.
- The homelessness assessment process was rigorous and was only disregarded in exceptional circumstances.
- It was recognised that there were some limitations to the research carried out by the South East London Housing partnership about the quality of homes in the PRS.
- Whilst it was the case that many people were happy with their rented homes, it was also clear that there were people who were not.
- There were approximately 3700 private landlords in Lewisham
- Further information about the practicability of setting up a compulsory licensing scheme would be brought forward later in the year.
- Further information would be included in the strategy which set out information about the range of sustainable housing options available.
- Officers were considering mechanisms for the ownership of the new homes being built under the New Homes Better Places programme. The Council could not take any action as a sole means of avoiding right to buy.
- Other options for building and managing homes would be considered as the details of approaches in other boroughs were made available.
- Officers recognised that there were examples of poor practice by letting and selling agents.

- Estate agencies were unregulated businesses and the Council only had limited powers to deal with them under trading standards.
- There were very few long term void properties in the borough, on the whole, Lewisham Homes was good at returning void properties to use in a short amount of time.
- Where long term voids required extensive works to bring them back into use, there was an upper limit on what was considered reasonable expenditure.
- Where it was considered reasonable, Lewisham Homes would sell properties that were uneconomic to bring back into use, in the same way as other landlords.

Resolved: that officers be asked to include additional context about the research into resident satisfaction with homes in the private rented sector, which acknowledges the limitations of the evidence base for the research.

## **7. Select Committee work programme**

7.1 Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the work programme report. The Committee then discussed the items for the next meeting and the Communal Heating Systems review scoping report. The following key points were noted:

- L&Q had experience of commissioning and delivering communal heating systems and might be able to provide evidence for the review.
- It would be important to hear from residents about their experiences of overheating in properties with communal heating.
- The review should gather evidence about how problems with communal heating systems had been resolved.
- The Committee should determine whether or not there were effective communal heating systems in operation; and, if so, the Committee should explore the costs to residents of operating these systems.

Resolved: that the work programme for the Committee's November meeting; and to agree the scoping report for the communal heating systems review be agreed.

## **8. Referrals to Mayor and Cabinet**

The Committee resolved to refer its views under item four to the Public Accounts Select Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.32 pm

Chair:

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Date:

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