

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 25 May 2016, 7.30pm

Present: Councillors Carl Handley (Chair), Peter Bernards (Vice Chair), John Coughlin, Maja Hilton, Simon Hooks, Liz Johnston-Franklin, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa, John Paschoud, Joan Reid and Jonathan Slater.

Also present: Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager), Lee Georgiou (Housing Advice & Housing Options Service Manager), Mark Humphreys (Group Finance Manager, Customer Services), Madeleine Jeffery (Private Sector Housing Agency Manager), Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Kevin Sheehan (Executive Director for Customer Services), John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 12 April 2016

- Cllr Slater noted that he is a member of the board of Phoenix Community Housing, not Lewisham Homes.

Resolved: the Committee agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting held on 12 April 2016.

2. Declarations of interest

The following non-prejudicial interests were declared:

- Councillor Slater is a member of the board of Phoenix Community Housing.
- Councillor Reid is a member of the board of Lewisham Homes.

3. Discharge into the PRS policy

Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The proposal to allow the Council to discharge its homeless duty with an offer of suitable accommodation in the private rented sector (PRS) was approved by Mayor and Cabinet in March 2015.
- Council officers have now developed the draft policy on how this might work. It is due to be considered by Mayor and Cabinet on 29 June 2016. Subject to approval, there will be a consultation and a final policy will be brought back to the Committee in September.
- There are significant housing problems in Lewisham and across London – from the mismatch between supply and demand, the availability of affordable housing, and the rising number of people in need of temporary accommodation.

- The Council's proposed policy on discharging its homeless duty with an offer of accommodation in the private rented sector is just one way the Council are trying to manage the difficult housing situation.
- Lewisham has exceeded its target of building new homes, and around a third of these are affordable. But house prices in Lewisham are still among the fastest growing in London – up by around 20% last year.
- It's more difficult for people to get mortgages nowadays, so the private rented sector is growing. But rent levels often make it difficult to save for a deposit – particularly those on low incomes.
- The large majority of people who are in need of temporary accommodation have come from the private rented sector or from living with family and friends. 75% of the UK's homeless are in London.
- It's getting more difficult for the Council to find homes at the local housing allowance rate and the use and cost of nightly paid accommodation is increasing. The Council spent over £3m on nightly paid accommodation in 2014/15.
- The Council are trying to prevent homelessness in the first place. They're restructuring teams, introducing a new culture and giving staff the tools to negotiate with landlords before eviction happens. Homeless preventions increased by 40% in the last year.
- The Council are also increasing the supply of temporary accommodation – buying new properties and converting existing ones. They've also come to a London-wide agreement on maximum prices to be paid for nightly paid accommodation. But there is still a need for longer-term solutions.
- The Council have only placed a small number of people outside of the borough so far – but may need to do more in the future. Many people in temporary accommodation will be used to the private rented sector.
- The Council is looking at what's in the best interests of people in the long-term. Temporary accommodation is uncertain and disruptive – and families may have to wait several years for social housing.
- The Council will still be required to find accommodation as close to the borough as possible. But it will only be in exceptional circumstances that someone will be considered to have a high-priority to stay in the borough.

Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) answered questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- The exemptions in the draft policy narrow down the range of people considered to have a high-priority need to stay in the borough. For example, not all children in school are considered to be at a critical point in their education.
- If someone refuses an offer, the council will no longer have a duty towards them. People will be able to appeal decision, and there is always the safety net of social services. But the Council are working closely with social care so that people don't think this is a next step.
- The 90 minutes travelling distance as part of the close-to-borough priority will depend on the particular public transport links. The affordability of any extra transport costs will be taken into account as part of any offer.
- Officers pointed out that the 90 minutes maximum travelling distance only applies to those considered to have a need to be close to the borough. Some people may be considered to have no need and be offered properties further away.
- People found to have no priority to be close to the borough will be given initial resettlement advice – but not long-term help. The Council are creating new officer roles for this, but may also link up with other services available locally. The Council has found substantial availability of housing outside of London.
- The Council's homelessness prevention work starts when someone comes in with an eviction notice. An officer will then look into what the issue is. Any mental health issues can be picked up at this point as well.
- Officers recognise that the Council's homeless prevention support may not be being communicated clearly sometimes. They are working on the messages and doing more staff training.
- Officers said it's important that offers work for people – or they'll simply end up homeless again. If someone is placed out of the borough, the Council will have a duty to consider a re-application if they become homeless again within two years. After two years, they would have to apply in their new area.
- The consultation on the draft policy will involve, among others, homeless forum representatives and households currently in temporary accommodation.

The Committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- The Committee noted that the Council's target of 50% of new homes to be affordable is a target, not a minimum.
- The Committee said that some of the people they'd spoken to through casework hadn't been offered homeless prevention help by the Council.

- The Committee expressed concern that two of the exceptions in the draft policy were too narrow. They said the exception relating to children subject to Child Protection Plan should apply if there was *any* detriment to a child's welfare – not just *serious* detriment. They also noted, in relation to the exception about carers in receipt of carer's allowance, that many family members who provide care do not actually qualify for carer's allowance.
- The Committee stressed that the equalities impact assessment for the policy needs to be very thorough.
- The Committee also noted that the Council had previously held events to show people on the housing waiting list available housing and jobs in other parts of the country. The Committee asked in there had been any assessment of how these "homes fairs" had worked.

Resolved: the Committee noted the draft policy. Officers also agreed to look again at the exceptions to the draft policy and to get back to the Committee with any information they have about "homes fairs".

4. Lewisham Housing Strategy (2015-2020)

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The Council is making good progress against the four parts of strategy. To help residents in urgent housing need, they've taken action to increasing the supply of temporary accommodation. As part of building the homes our resident needs, they're on track to meet the target for new homes, including new council homes. In the private rented sector, they've taken action on rogue landlords and are proposing a pilot "build to rent" project. And, as part of improving housing conditions, they're on track to achieve the decent homes standard in 100% of council housing stock.

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) answered questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- The partners for the Beeson Street "build to rent" pilot will hopefully be decided by the autumn. Priority for housing on the project will be given to people with a connection to Lewisham.
- The design process for the project at Eliot Bank is ongoing, but officers are aiming to hold event by July this year.
- Officers accepted that the PLACE/Ladywell project has taken slightly longer than anticipated when it started, but stressed that is was a completely new project and that future projects should be quicker. The development is due to be completed and handed over by June.

Resolved: the Committee noted the update.

5. Key Housing Issues

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- A deal on the Church Grove self-build project was signed with Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS) last month. 100% of properties will be affordable, including five for social rent. Priority will be given to people with a connection to Lewisham.

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) answered questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- The full impact of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 can't be assessed until the regulations are published, but the Council will do all it can to mitigate the impact and support people.
- Officers are looking at impact of *Jones v London Borough of Southwark* for Lewisham. There are potentially big implications across London
- Officers accepted that the Church Grove self-build project only includes a small number of homes for social rent, but stressed that this was a new project and it is something they will look to increase in the future.

The Committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- The Committee said it would be good to know how many people in Lewisham have made use of the government's Help to Buy scheme

Resolved: the Committee noted the update. Officers also agreed to provide figures on Help to Buy in Lewisham.

6. Select Committee work programme

John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The Committee agreed to move the item on housing action zones to the September meeting.
- The Committee agreed to hold an in-depth review into mental health and housing. The Committee consequently agreed to change to housing and health item in the work programme to an item on housing and older people.
- The Committee also agreed to keep the Committee start time at 7.30pm.

Resolved: the Committee agreed the changes to the work programme.

7. Referrals

There were none.

The meeting ended at 9.45pm

Chair:

Date:
