

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 September 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, and Jonathan Slater.

Apologies: Councillor Joan Reid

Also present: David Austin (Head of Corporate Finance), Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager), Mark Humphreys (Group Finance Manager, Customer Services), Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Michael Westbrook (Housing Policy and Partnerships Manager), John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager), Tracy Jones (Operations Manager, RB3), Adis Pajic (Deputy Contract Manager, Pinnacle), Sandra Simpson (Leasehold Manager, Pinnacle), Andrew Spearman (Operations Manager, Rydon), Adam Barrett (Director of Resources, Lewisham Homes), Andrew Potter (CEO, Lewisham Homes).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2016

Resolved: the Committee agreed the minutes of the last meeting as true record.

2. Declarations of interest

The following non-prejudicial interests were declared:

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

3. Brockley PFI annual report and business plan

Tracy Jones (Operations Manager, RB3), and colleagues, introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- Customer satisfaction rates have continued to exceed the 70% contractual target – achieving 88% in the last year.
- RB3 has been working closely with the Council to fix the IT problems they have experienced over the last year.
- RB3 continue to work with residents affected by welfare reforms. Free debt and welfare advice is available to residents the first three Fridays of each month. RB3 staff have also recently attended training to prepare for the introduction of universal credit.

Tracy Jones (Operations Manager, RB3), and colleagues, answered questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- Around 600 people responded to the customer satisfaction survey – about a third of residents.

- The IT issues over the last year, due to Council IT changes, are mostly resolved.
- There are various ways RB3 work to sustain tenancies and prevent evictions. Focusing on rent arrears is one of main ways and residents now have access to free debt and welfare advice every Friday. This has helped some people get backdated benefits, for example. RB3 will continue to provide this service.
- Around four to six new, more energy-efficient (A-rated) boilers are being fitted each month. Some lofts and cavities have also been insulated.
- To try to increase opportunities for resident participation, RB3 have sent a questionnaire to ask people what people would like. They received lots of ideas and are going to be organising a public meeting to find out more.
- All 10 of the properties found to be unlawfully sub-let resulted in evictions.
- RB3 have close ties with social services and mental health teams and understand the referral process better than they did before. Once a referral has been made RB3 will also continue to work with the mental health teams. RB3 also maintain a register of vulnerable residents.
- Maintenance and some other frontline staff already receive safeguarding training. RB3 are looking to arrange further mental health training in the future.
- Most of the impact of the bedroom tax has now been resolved. Around 75 people were affected. Some have since downsized, others have received help from friends and family to pay the extra.
- Small maintenance jobs like painting doors or fence posts would usually have to wait to be done as part of larger maintenance programmes – although tenants are free to do any small jobs themselves if they don't want to wait. If, however, they're unable to do the job themselves, because they are elderly or vulnerable for example, RB3 would look into this on a case-by-case basis.

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

- The Committee noted that RB3 should consider raising the customer satisfaction target, given that they have consistently beaten it by a significant margin.
- The Committee also asked if councillors could be made aware of future resident meetings in their wards

The Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

4. Lewisham Homes annual report and business plan

Adam Barrett (Director of Resources, Lewisham Homes) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- Lewisham Homes is committed to supporting the Council in meeting its housing objectives. Over the last year Lewisham Homes has focused on increasing supply of new housing and reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation.
- Lewisham Homes have also focused on improving resident satisfaction – carrying out an independent resident survey and finding ways for staff of all levels to engage with residents. Customer satisfaction rates increased to 77% in 2016.
- The number of homes meeting the decent homes standard increased to over 90% in 2016 and is expected to increase to 100% by 2018.
- Lewisham Homes achieved the *Investors in People* gold accreditation standard

Adam Barrett (Director of Resources, Lewisham Homes) answered questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- Satisfaction levels for complaint handling reduced as a result of a new approach to handling anti-social behaviour complaints that didn't work as hoped – officers are in the process of changing things back.
- Lewisham Homes try to make sure that the dedicated anti-social behaviour team focuses on the more serious issues – those where people are most likely to be in breach on their tenancy.
- Leaseholder satisfaction is usually lower, but officers are still looking to improve this. This year there has been lots of feedback from leaseholders about the impact of the decent homes work.
- Lewisham Homes have reviewed the way they handle complaints to try to resolve more problems early on, at first point of contact – before it escalates to a formal complaint.
- Although the anti-social behaviour team does some responsive work, it is intended to be more of a planned service, focusing on key issues and hotspots. The team maintains close links with the safer neighbourhood teams.
- Although Lewisham Homes has been more successful over the last year in detecting tenancy fraud, officers believe that there are still plenty more cases out there.

- Lewisham Homes rely from staff knowledge and past experience to detect tenancy fraud. They've also been working with a credit search company to find tenants who have other social tenancies.
- Lewisham homes have been getting largely positive feedback since taking back responsibility for grounds maintenance.
- Staff have had some mental health related training, including safeguarding training. There are also referral arrangements in place, but they have to be careful about data protection.
- There's also anecdotal evidence of resourcing issues with mental health teams, affecting what they can help with. Lewisham Homes keeps a record of tenants with known vulnerabilities.
- Small maintenance jobs like painting doors or fence posts would usually have to wait to be done as part of a larger maintenance programme. If a tenant prefers not to wait however, they are free to do jobs like this themselves. If someone is not physically able, because they're elderly or vulnerable for example, Lewisham Homes will decide how to deal with this on a case-by-case basis.

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

- The Committee said it was good idea for the anti-social behaviour team to provide live updates on Twitter when they are on patrol
- The Committee also congratulated Lewisham Homes for achieving the Investors in People gold accreditation

Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

5. Key Housing Issues

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) introduced the report and the Committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- A Private Member's Bill on homelessness is due receive its second reading next month. The Bill hasn't yet been published, but it is expected that it would introduce a duty to prevent homelessness – as opposed to the current duty to respond to homelessness. Council officers said it is crucial that the Government provides the necessary funding if the Bill does become law.
- The PLACE/Ladywell development has won two architecture awards. All 24 residential units will be occupied within the next few weeks. The commercial units will also start opening from the end of this month.

Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

6. Lewisham Future Programme

Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) and David Austin (Head of Corporate Finance) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- Specialist Saving proposal M4 (PLACE/Ladywell) will come from the surplus the Council will make from leasing the PLACE/Ladywell development to Lewisham Homes.
- Saving proposal M5 (hostel acquisition) will similarly come from the surplus the Council will make from the rents collected from newly acquired hostel rooms.
- Saving proposal M6 (handyperson service) is intended to come from finding an alternative way to provide the existing handyperson service. Officers will be carrying out a consultation over the coming months. The likely options are that the service will either be transferred to the voluntary sector or that people will be asked to pay.
- Saving proposal M7 (no recourse to public funds (NRPF) costs) will come from working closely with the Home Office to get decisions on applications for leave to remain from people currently relying on NRPF provision from the Council. If someone is granted leave to remain they are then usually able to work and claim benefits. It will also allow the Council to move people to cheaper accommodation, outside of Lewisham. Most of those relying on NRPF provision are in expensive temporary accommodation.

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

- In relation to saving proposal M5 (hostel acquisition), people are due to start moving into the new hostel rooms in the next few weeks.
- In relation to saving proposal M6 (handyperson service), officers have been looking at how other boroughs provide similar handyperson services. Some boroughs charge by job and some are cheaper than the proposed £45 per hour – but some are also more expensive. Different boroughs have also set things up in different ways – Bromley's service, for example, is provided free on a voluntary basis, whereas Southwark's is charge for and provided in collaboration with age concern. Lewisham have not yet had any preliminary talks with any potential provider organisations.
- Officers have proposed per-hour charging to keep things simple – a job-by-job way of charging would likely be too complicated to consult on and more costly to put in place.

- The handyperson service is largely used by elderly owner-occupiers – people with disabilities are usually covered by the Disabled Facilities Grant.
- The handyperson service consultation will go out to everyone who has used the service in the last year, age concern and other local voluntary groups, such as the pensioners' forum. It will also be available online.
- In relation to saving proposal M7 (No Recourse to Public Funds costs), there are currently around 180 families in Lewisham who rely of NRPF provision from the Council. The Council is also talking to the Home Office about having a dedicated immigration officer in Lewisham again.

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

- In relation to the draft consultation for saving M6 (handyperson service), the Committee said officers need to be bold and make it clear that the choice is to either pay for the services or risk losing it altogether. The Committee said officers also need to be clear that the service does not apply to social housing.
- The Committee commented that the handyperson services could be defined better than £45 per hour – the service covers a wide variety of jobs involving varying amounts of time and effort. The Committee also said that £45 per hour for the service seemed expensive, particularly for those earning minimum wage.
- The Committee said that the Council has a responsibility to make sure that any future provider of the handyperson service pays the living wage to its workers.
- The Committee noted that most of the current users of the handyperson service are likely to be vulnerable.
- In relation to saving proposal M7 (NRPF costs), the Committee noted that there are risks when moving potentially long-established families out of the borough.

Resolved: to refer the Committee's views on saving proposal M6 (handypersons service) to the Public Accounts Select Committee:

The Committee welcomed officers' plans to consult on the proposed savings to the handypersons service with service users and other stakeholders, but asked to be provided with more information about the final questions being asked, in particular those about the possible charging structure for the service. The Committee also welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the proposals again in November, in light of the results of the consultation, before any decision is made about the future of the service.

7. Select Committee work programme

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

- The next meeting has been moved to the 25th October – the same evening as the Sustainable Development Committee. This means that the item on housing zones on the agenda for October could involve one of the Committee's joining the other to look at the item together.
- The first evidence session of the in-depth review of mental health and housing is also scheduled for the 25th October. The Scrutiny Manager will talk to officers and housing providers to confirm who will be giving evidence.

Resolved: the Committee agreed the work programme.

8. Referrals

Resolved: to refer the Committee's views on saving proposal M6 (handypersons service) to the Public Accounts Select Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.45pm

Chair:

Date:
