

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 20 January 2022 at 7.30 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Peter Bernards (Chair), Stephen Penfold (Vice-Chair), Silvana Kelleher, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa and Tauseef Anwar

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Cllr Gallagher

APOLOGIES:

ALSO PRESENT: Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing), Jennifer Daothong (Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration and Public Realm), Karen Barke (Head of Strategic Development), Ellie Eghtedar (ISGM Housing Needs and Refugee Services), Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes), Mark Newstead (Director of Property Services and Safety, Lewisham Homes) John Bardens (Scrutiny 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 091221

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

2. Declarations of interest

The following interests were declared:

Cllr Olurotimi Ogunbadewa is a board member of Phoenix Housing

Cllr Silvana Kelleher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.

Cllr Aisling Gallagher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

There were no responses.

4. Lewisham Home repairs

Jennifer Daothong, Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration & Public Realm, introduced the report noting that significant foundations have been put in place to improve the quality and timeliness of the Lewisham Homes repairs service, including significant investment from the council.

Fenella Beckman, Director of Housing Services, provided an overview of the report and the following key points were noted:

- 1.1 An action plan to improve the handling of disrepair cases has now been agreed. This included the use of property MOTs for 2,000 properties at risk of damp and addressing 224 disrepair cases.

- 1.2 This is being monitored by the Lewisham Homes Board and the council's clienting team. The council has also reviewed its clienting arrangements to ensure more stringent monitoring of Lewisham Homes in these key areas.
- 1.3 The council allocated an additional £30m last year to enable Lewisham Homes to accelerate the programme of capital works to improve its stock.
- 1.4 The council and Lewisham Homes are working together on a joint asset-management strategy which will set out to achieve 100% decency by September this year.

Mark Newstead, Director of Property Services and Safety, Lewisham Homes, provided more detail on the repairs service and the challenges it is facing. The following key points were noted:

- 1.5 There is a sector-wide increase in demand for repairs.
- 1.6 The most significant improvement that could be made would be to improve call handling and access to repairs. People are currently waiting on the phone for too long. Staffing levels are being increased, more staff are being brought back into the office, more channels are being opened up to give residents more alternatives to calling; and some contractor staff are being collocated.
- 1.7 Complex repairs are also a challenge and Lewisham Homes is recruiting more surveyors to provide a more professional service.

The committee asked a number of questions and the following key points were noted:

- 1.8 Many of the actions in the action plan will be complete by March this year. A process has already been put in place for inter-flat water leaks. Lewisham Homes aims for the improvements to start to become apparent to residents in the coming months, from April/May.
- 1.9 Lewisham Homes' is currently exploring the possibility of a compensation policy for missed appointments.
- 1.10 The repairs service doesn't always respond to emails and online repairs as quickly as residents expect. Residents need to receive same-day responses to start to build confidence in the online process.
- 1.11 Lewisham Homes' current IT systems can be a barrier to internal communications between teams. Modernisation and replacement will commence in Spring 2023.
- 1.12 The average time to do a repair is currently around 18/19 days and Lewisham Homes is looking at a more ambitious KPI on this for next year, around 10/12 days.
- 1.13 Recruiting for staff is proving difficult in a challenging job market with a lot of job vacancies at the same salary.
- 1.14 The current repairs system can only track individual pieces of work related to a single repairs case so doesn't always accurately reflect when there is an ongoing case involving multiple aspects. Lewisham Homes are trying a different approach with damp/mould cases but there is more to be done. Part of the action plan for repairs is to identify the complex cases and do more follow up with residents.
- 1.15 There are rising amounts of disrepair cases across the sector. There is also a lot of aggressive marketing about legal claims for disrepair. But the condition of Lewisham Homes' properties is lending itself towards people making claims. This is why proactive repairs will reduce some of these claims.

- 1.16 A significant proportion of the cost of disrepair cases is legal fees. Residents usually have no-win no-fee arrangements in place and the solicitor claims their fees back from the landlord. Cases that have gone on for longer can lead to greater compensation.
- 1.17 Uncontrolled leaks should be addressed quickly, but minor, slower leaks won't be addressed within two hours. All leaks should be investigated thoroughly, but a lot of Lewisham Homes' buildings are getting old and leaks are becoming more common.
- 1.18 Property MOTs should help leaks to be dealt with more proactively. There is also a leaks protocol in place and specialist leaks detection company that is now being used.
- 1.19 In response to questions about property MOTs, Lewisham Homes noted that making appointments and gaining access hasn't been as easy as hoped, but that the highest risk properties have been targeted. The target is to complete 100 MOTs a week, and 2,000 in total by the end of March.
- 1.20 Staff have discretion to decide what issues to prioritise as an emergency. Lift contract response time is specified as 4 hours. However, many lifts are very old and many are damaged by vandalism. Communication around lift repairs needs to improve, with text messages etc.
- 1.21 Average call waiting time for repairs is currently around 39 minutes. It used to be around 7 minutes and the aim is bring it below that. The ease of access to reporting issues is the single biggest issue for residents.
- 1.22 The committee voted in favour of referring its views on the Lewisham Homes repairs service to Mayor and Cabinet. Committee members voted as follows:
- Cllr Stephen Penfold – in favour
 - Cllr Silvana Kelleher – in favour
 - Cllr Olurotimi Ogunbadewa – in favour
 - Cllr Tauseef Anwar – abstained
 - Cllr Bernards – abstained
 - Cllr Aisling Gallagher – unable to vote due to remote attendance

RESOLVED: that the report be noted; that the committee receives a further update later in the year; and that the committee refers its views to Mayor & Cabinet in the following terms:

The committee expresses considerable concern about the current high level of demand on the Lewisham Homes repairs service and the challenges that the service continues to face to meet this demand. The committee requests that the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning investigates the issue and reports back to the committee about what needs to be done to address these challenges and meet demand.

5. Shared Ownership Update

Jennifer Daothong, Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration & Public Realm, briefly introduced the item and the following key points were noted:

- 1.23 In response to questions regarding the legal status of shared owners of council-sold shared ownership properties, it was noted that when a local authority sells shared ownership the lease counts as a long lease. This is

different to the situation with housing associations. Officers agreed to provide more detailed information in writing.

RESOLVED: that the update be noted and that further information on the points raised in the minutes is shared with members of the committee.

6. Location Priority Policy

Jennifer Daothong, Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration & Public Realm, and Fenella Beckman, Director of Housing Services, introduced the item. There were questions and the following key points were noted:

- 1.24 In response to questions about the eligibility for in-borough priority for carers who may not receive carers allowance, officers agreed to look into this point and respond to the committee.
- 1.25 In response to questions about families who are prioritised for housing within Greater London, it was noted that if there are more suitable placements available outside of London, in north Kent for example, then this option will be made clear to the family.
- 1.26 It was also noted that there is flexibility in the policy to allow the council to support families to move outside of London if they want to and affordable options are available.
- 1.27 The committee voted unanimously in favour of supporting the approval of the proposed policy by Mayor and Cabinet.
 - Cllr Stephen Penfold – in favour
 - Cllr Silvana Kelleher – in favour
 - Cllr Olurotimi Ogunbadewa – in favour
 - Cllr Tauseef Anwar – in favour
 - Cllr Bernards – in favour
 - Cllr Aisling Gallagher – unable to vote due to remote attendance

RESOLVED: that that report be noted and that the committee supports the approval of the proposed policy by Mayor & Cabinet.

7. Select Committee work programme

RESOLVED: that the work programme be noted and that Cllr Stephen Penfold is appointed as the committee's Climate Change Champion.

The meeting ended at 9.45 pm

Chair:

Date:
