

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 12 September 2023 at 7.00 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Stephen Penfold (Chair), Will Cooper (Vice-Chair), Rosie Parry and Ese Erheriene.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Natasha Burgess, Suzannah Clarke and Sakina Sheikh

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Councillors Bill Brown

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Sophie Davis (Cabinet Member for Housing Management, Homelessness and Community Safety), Councillor Brenda Dacres (Cabinet Member for Housing Development & Planning), Councillor Louise Krupski (Cabinet Member for Environment), Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy), Lynne Sacale (Housing Transformation Programme Lead), Helen Clarke (Director of Communications and Engagement) and Nidhi Patil (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Jeremy Chambers (Director of Law and Corporate Governance), Councillor Liz-Johnston-Franklin, Kate Watson (Consultant, Turner and Townsend), Billy Clifflen (Consultant, Turner and Townsend) and Louise Trenchard (Consultant, Turner and Townsend).

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 6 June 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 Penfold declared an interest as an employee of the Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network- which provides advice to refugees and migrants in Lewisham.

The Chair informed the committee that the items on the agenda would be considered in the following order- Co-optee proposals; Lewisham Homes Annual Performance Out-turn Report; Housing Retrofit Strategy; Brockley PFI- Annual Review Report; Update on Housing Futures Programme.

3. Co-optee proposals

Charlotte Dale (Head of Scrutiny and Policy) introduced the report, accompanied by Jeremy Chambers (Director of Law and Corporate Governance). The following key points were noted:

- 3.1. It was noted that the Committee's intention was to ensure that the views and needs of social housing tenants informed the recommendations that the Committee made on policies and decisions that affect them.
- 3.2. Two primary approaches were discussed for achieving this goal.
 - 3.2.1 The first approach emphasised enhanced tenant engagement, which included inviting tenants to participate as expert witnesses in formal meetings, attending more informal sessions or focus groups, and conducting site visits to social housing estates or participating in TRA (Tenant and Residents' Associations) or similar meetings.
 - 3.2.1 The second approach involved the establishment of one or more co-optee positions, wherein tenants/leaseholders would assume the role of additional formal committee members, aiding in the evaluation of evidence and actively contributing to the discussion and subsequent recommendations.
- 3.3. The report comprehensively outlined the considerations associated with each option. Regarding the formal co-optee option, it also delineated the relevant constitutional processes that would need to be followed.

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

- 3.4. The discussion highlighted the importance of formal co-optees having to declare conflicts of interests. The Committee Chair stated that in the past, some councillors sitting on the committee had also been Lewisham Homes tenants and since this Committee wasn't a decision-making body, the conflict of interest didn't disqualify them from contributing to the discussion. The Director of Law and Corporate Governance emphasised that declaring interests was required in formal council meeting regardless of whether decisions were going to be made or not; and that had the councillors who had also been Lewisham Homes tenants had a direct pecuniary interest in the item under discussion, they would have needed to have declared a prejudicial interest and left the meeting room.
- 3.5. Formal co-optees would have to adhere to the same code of conduct as councillors, including declaring interests. However, declaring an interest did not automatically disqualify someone from the discussion, this was only the case where the interest was deemed prejudicial, such as a direct financial interest. Informal attendees and expert witnesses would not be bound by this code of conduct.
- 3.6. The discussion emphasised that while it was important for the Committee to hear from residents, it was also important to understand the optimal method for soliciting their input and determining the most effective approach to resident engagement.

- 3.7. It was discussed that while considering a formal co-option scheme, factors such as the selection process for co-optees (appointment or election) and associated costs, also needed to be considered.
- 3.8. The Committee acknowledged that formal co-optees from specific organisations might have a narrow focus and could lack interest in all items on the Committee's agenda, rendering their full meeting attendance inefficient.
- 3.9. It was noted that no other local authority with co-optees on their Housing Select Committee or its equivalent, granted voting rights to them.
- 3.10. If the formal co-option route was chosen, it was recognised that implementing constitutional amendments would take time and aligning them with the Council's AGM might be advisable.
- 3.11. It was discussed that the report raised good points and clearly outlined all available options. However, at that time, the Committee was unable to reach a decision regarding the most effective co-option strategy. As a result, it was agreed that the Committee would temporarily implement the informal attendee approach to gauge its uptake and effectiveness. The Committee Chair would discuss next steps with the Head of Scrutiny and Policy to determine the subsequent course of action.
- 3.12. The resident engagement plans for Lewisham Homes would be considered when discussing next steps for this co-option scheme to ensure alignment.
- 3.13. It was suggested that Committee members could meet with other local authorities such as Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Croydon to gather insights on their experiences with the co-option scheme.

RESOLVED:

- that the Chair of the Committee, in collaboration with the Head of Scrutiny and Policy, would formulate a plan for advancing the co-optee proposal and its implementation, to be presented at the next Committee meeting.

4. Housing Retrofit Strategy

Martin O'Brien (Head of Climate Resilience) introduced the report, followed by a presentation by Kate Watson, Billy Clifflen and Louise Trenchard from Turner and Townsend. The following key points were noted:

- 4.1. The Housing Retrofit Task and Finish Group (TFG) had reported its findings to the Mayor and Cabinet last year, highlighting that housing accounted for half of the Council's local carbon emissions. Housing retrofit therefore played a crucial role in the pursuit of achieving net zero emissions. A central recommendation from the TFG was for the Council to formulate and publish a Housing Retrofit Strategy, complete with clear and measurable targets.
- 4.2. Turner and Townsend had been appointed as consultants to oversee this project, which was anticipated to span the next 5 months.

4.3. Kate Watson, Louise Trenchard and Billy Cliften from Turner and Townsend highlighted the key points from their PowerPoint presentation to the Committee.

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

- 4.4. The notion of achieving net zero carbon by 2030 was widely acknowledged as an exceptionally ambitious goal. Recently, the government faced a legal challenge in a judicial review, following allegations that its plans did not align with the legally binding commitment established in UK law to reach net zero emissions. It became apparent that the necessary scale of investment and delivery programs required for housing retrofit by the desired 2030 target were currently non-existent. What was imperative was the development of a Housing Retrofit Strategy that not only reflected Lewisham's ambition by declaring a climate emergency but also recognised the need for pragmatic actions within our control and resource constraints. This strategy aimed to facilitate the creation of costed projects and programs that could be implemented when government policy and funding allowed.
- 4.5. Councillor Louise Krupski (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate) thanked the representatives from Turner and Townsend for the presentation, adding that she looked forward to engaging with them on this project. Turner and Townsend had previously worked with Haringey Council on a similar project, exploring how to activate council finances for successful programme advancement. It was noted that undertaking retrofitting work was an expensive exercise, made more challenging by the old housing stock in Lewisham.
- 4.6. The Committee Chair enquired about the distinctions between retrofitting street properties and blocks of flats. Turner and Townsend consultants explained that they would be undertaking work to identify different property archetypes, as each type would require a unique approach to retrofitting. Street properties, often Victorian-era, had limited retrofitting options as some changes couldn't be made due to planning restrictions. In contrast, blocks of flats offered more retrofitting options and scalable fabric solutions.

RESOLVED:

- that the report be noted.
- that officers be invited back to present the Housing Retrofit Strategy to the Committee in 6 months' time.

5. Brockley PFI- Annual Review Report

Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy) introduced the report, and was accompanied by John Pedretti (General Manager, RB3), Kenneth Gill (Area Manager, Pinnacle) and Hugo Marais (Head of Operations, Rydon). This was followed by questions from the Committee members. The following key points were noted:

- 5.1. Regenter B3 (RB3) hosted highly attended monthly open surgeries for residents, typically drawing a crowd of 30-35 residents. Additionally, they organised welfare advice surgeries twice a week, which also enjoyed substantial attendance.
- 5.2. In the contract, there were detailed provisions regarding the required 'handback' standard for the properties. This included the Council conducting surveys before the properties were handed back to assess the necessary work required to achieve the handback criteria.
- 5.3. Resident satisfaction with resident engagement had declined, based on the annual KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Therefore, officers were looking for different ways to engage with the residents. Due to leaseholder questions taking up more time in the tenant and leaseholder forums in the past, a decision was made to hold separate sessions for each group. 4 annual sessions were held for the tenants and leaseholders where they could share their views on service delivery, community projects and initiatives such as wildflower meadows or community gardens. Officers anticipated having more data by the next quarter, allowing them to discern trends and determine whether residents favoured the new engagement approach.
- 5.4. The report noted that 58 complaints were not upheld. This was often due to it being the first time RB3 had been notified of a service failure, and a case was only classified as a complaint when a service failure was reported but not satisfactorily resolved. Stage 1 complaints were managed by the service managers, Stage 2 complaints were managed by the area manager and Stage 3 complaints went to the independent adjudicator. The lessons learnt from these complaints were communicated to the staff in weekly team meetings and officers were happy to collate some of those lessons learnt and share it with the Committee.
- 5.5. It was noted that Brockley PFI had housing stock beyond the Brockley ward, and clarity around that was deemed essential. Officers concurred on the importance of clarity, stating that their website already conveyed this information. They also mentioned that the upcoming quarterly magazine, scheduled for release in the next 3-4 weeks, could serve as a means to communicate this further.
- 5.6. Officers agreed to share with the Committee the procedure they followed for addressing antisocial behaviour and noise complaints.
- 5.7. It was discussed that some of the positive information in the report didn't align with councillors' direct experiences. For instance, while the report praised the Ermine Road community garden initiative, councillors learned it had been a challenging process. Officers explained that certain projects were initiated by a small group of residents, but broader engagement was necessary to ensure majority support, leading to longer timelines. Nevertheless, officers had recently opted for a shorter consultation period of 7-10 days.
- 5.8. Officers had faced challenges in recruiting for permanent positions in housing services, but they had recently offered and filled a permanent role, hopefully ensuring a full staff complement moving forward.

- 5.9. The Committee Chair enquired about the progress with setting-up a tenant and residents' association (TRA) for Alder and Lilac House on Wickham Road. Officers reported that a TRA meeting was arranged and held on 12 September 2023, attended by only one resident but RB3 officers were committed to increasing engagement. The Committee requested further details about the 2 TRAs being planned, and officers confirmed that the community engagement officer from RB3 would share that with the Committee.
- 5.10. Monthly rent collections were generally strong, with the exception of significant Universal Credit arrears, which accounted for 54% of the total arrears. Income and welfare officers actively supported residents in arrears to maximise their income and access additional benefits.
- 5.11. The Committee Chair noted that given the housing stock's size, RB3 should have fewer cases reaching the Housing Ombudsman. Officers reported that two cases were referred to the Housing Ombudsman last year. The Chair cited a June 2023 Ombudsman case against RB3, which had found severe maladministration by the landlord in handling a resident's damp and mould complaint, as well as record-keeping. Officers acknowledged that there had been service failure and communication issues in this case but also that they felt some of the points raised by them were overlooked in the report. Nevertheless, they assured the Committee that lessons had been learnt.
- 5.12. RB3 had a detailed, regularly reviewed damp and mould policy that would be shared with the Committee.
- 5.13. The report stated that in 2010, RB3 conducted refurbishment works, which included ensuring all properties achieved the required SAP rating. RB3 provided EPC certificates, where necessary, for void properties as this was a statutory requirement. The Chair enquired about the number of leaseholder properties and those in the conservation areas with an EPC rating of C. Officers did not have this information at the meeting but assured the Committee that it would be investigated and shared after the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- that the report be noted and the requested information from officers of RB3 be provided as discussed during the meeting.
- that officers be invited to a future Committee meeting to present a detailed report on the PFI contract expiration preparations.

The Committee voted to suspend standing orders.

6. Lewisham Homes Annual Performance Out-turn Report

Ainsley Forbes (Chair of the Board, Lewisham Homes), Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes) and Sarah Willcox-Jones (Director of Repairs, Lewisham Homes) presented this item. The following key points were noted:

- 6.1. Lewisham Homes had been shortlisted for two awards at the 2023 Affordable Housing Awards, in the 'Contractor of the year' and the 'Recruitment or retention campaign of the year' categories.
- 6.2. 83% of Lewisham Homes properties met the decent homes standard. Emphasis was placed on the upcoming government consultation for a higher decent homes standard.
- 6.3. On a previous occasion when RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) was in the news, Lewisham Homes officers had conducted an investigation, concluding that there was no RAAC within their housing stock in Lewisham. However, they did have some unremediated LPS (large panel system) blocks that they had been discussing extensively with the Council (5 high rise blocks and 44 medium to low rise).
- 6.4. Officers reported that budget constraints for repairs and maintenance in 2023-24, were resulting in longer repair waiting times. Lewisham Homes remained committed to working with residents to encourage them to seek resolution through the organisation rather than pursuing legal disrepair routes.
- 6.5. Ainsley Forbes, Chair of the Board, expressed gratitude to the members of the Council for their integral roles in Lewisham Homes' operation over the years. Specifically, he thanked Councillors Susan Wise, Paul Bell and Sophie Davis for bridging the connection between Lewisham Homes and the Council. He also thanked Jennifer Daothong and Fenella Beckman for their challenging but co-operative working relationship with the Lewisham Homes Board and Executive.
- 6.6. Ainsley Forbes addressed the group, reflecting on the challenging past 2 years, marked by rising service demand and reducing resources. However, he indicated a positive shift in the current direction. He outlined his key requests to the Committee, and asked the Committee to-
 - 6.6.1. take the time to develop a comprehensive understanding of the service;
 - 6.6.2. understand what residents wanted, acknowledging that the previous discussion by the Committee on co-opting tenants/ leaseholders seemed very proactive;
 - 6.6.3. review and maintain good practices while identifying areas for improvement;
 - 6.6.4. ensure the implementation of an appropriate IT system to meet the new regulatory requirements.
- 6.7. Finally, Ainsley Forbes extended his appreciation to Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes), the Senior Leadership Team and all Lewisham Homes staff for their dedication and hard work.

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

- 6.8. The Committee thanked Sarah Willcox-Jones, Margaret Dodwell and Ainsley Forbes for their hard work and dedication during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and the supply-chain

issues. They recognised that Lewisham Homes had made improvements and applauded the officers' efforts.

- 6.9. The Lewisham Homes contact centre was now fully staffed, showing a significant improvement compared to a 75% turnover in that service area last year. Over the past couple weeks, the phone wait times had been slightly longer than expected due to summer holidays and staff annual leave, with an average wait time of around 7 minutes, falling short of summer expectations. However, email and portal communication remained responsive, often responding to residents on the same day. Implementation of the Localz app had also reduced the burden on the contact centre.
- 6.10. In-house repairs averaged 6000 per month, but only around 50-60 residents were using Localz app to provide feedback. While app uptake was low, it was capturing feedback from highly satisfied and dissatisfied residents, providing a valuable range of information. Officers were promoting app usage through resident magazines and social media channels.
- 6.11. Lewisham Homes had planned to replace their outdated housing IT system before the pandemic, but Covid-19 caused a 2-year delay. Following the delay, the new housing system was due to go live in April 2023, but now it was expected to launch on the 4th of December 2023, or early in the new year if necessary. Choosing the right housing IT system was a collaborative effort between Lewisham Homes and the Council. Officers believed that they had chosen a modern, configurable IT system that had proven successful with Peabody and other social landlords. However, delays in acquiring the system had raised concerns. Currently, Lewisham Homes could not produce all of their Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) as they only had a one-way interface with their contractors but reporting TSM around repairs was now a mandatory requirement. The current IT system also had inadequate record-keeping capabilities and it was essential to replace the system to provide a better service to the residents.
- 6.12. In 2019-2020, Lewisham Homes conducted a property condition survey. However, a system was needed to integrate data from that survey with new data generated from the annual 20% resurveys. This would enable automatic updates of property conditions in the stock survey data whenever repairs were performed on a property.
- 6.13. In Lewisham Homes' 2022/23 Annual Report to Residents, on page 11 it stated that there were 120 new disrepair cases being opened each month along with 334 new damp and mould cases. However, in Appendix 1, the data suggested that 48 new disrepair cases were opened in March 2023. Officers stated that they would check this discrepancy and update the report with the correct information. Currently, Lewisham Homes had 450 live disrepair cases.
- 6.14. The in-house paralegal in Lewisham Homes would be working closely with the Council's legal team after the transition of services in October 2023. The in-house paralegal managed a small caseload of less

complicated legal disrepair cases, and the HALA (Housing Associations' Legal Alliance) was used for the other cases.

- 6.15. In order to effectively encourage residents to opt for alternative dispute resolution, it was emphasised that building trust with them was essential. This required officers to increase their community presence and organise additional estate days.
- 6.16. There were concerns about agents for solicitors deceiving residents by posing as a social work repair team, offering free repairs for council-neglected issues and misleading them into pursuing disrepair cases. There were also safeguarding concerns about residents letting these agents into their homes without realising the potential consequences. It was suggested that a comprehensive communication campaign be launched to clarify that these agents were not Council employees and were misleading residents. Officers agreed to look into this and explore an effective communication campaign.
- 6.17. The Committee Chair enquired if retrofitting opportunities were being utilised when dealing with void properties. Officers reported that due to the restrictions of the financial envelope they were working in, undertaking retrofitting work on void properties without any further funding was difficult. However, they had been working closely with the Council to apply for grants and secure match-funding opportunities.
- 6.18. The report included information on Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints but not on Stage 3. Lewisham Homes officers informed the Committee that Stage 3 complaints were handled by the independent adjudicator which was in the Council's remit and hence data for Stage 3 complaints was not in the report. It was discussed that the Housing Ombudsman was actively encouraging the Council to move away from the 3-stage process.
- 6.19. Residents could now directly go to the Housing Ombudsman with complaints and were no longer required to exhaust the internal complaint processes beforehand. In 2022-23, the Housing Ombudsman received 6 cases from Lewisham, but it didn't specify who managed the properties. Lewisham Homes reported that 4 out of those 6 cases were theirs.
- 6.20. The report indicated that 101 new homes were scheduled for completion in 2023-24. The Committee Chair enquired about the progress of these homes and sought updates on the challenges faced with Algernon Road, Edward Street and Home Park. Lewisham Homes' development services transferred over to the Council in February 2023, as a result Lewisham Homes officers were unable to provide a current status update on this matter.
- 6.21. Tenant Satisfaction Measures regarding anti-social behaviour (ASB) had shown a low level of satisfaction, with no ASB evictions in the past year. A Committee member questioned if there was any correlation between these two factors. Officers explained that they primarily relied on injunctions instead of evictions but were encountering difficulties recruiting and retaining ASB staff despite a rise in ASB cases.

RESOLVED:

- that the report be noted.

- that the Committee thanked Ainsley Forbes, Margaret Dodwell and Sarah Willcox-Jones for their hard work at and dedication towards Lewisham Homes over the years.

7. Update on Housing Futures Programme

Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy) and Lynne Sacale (Housing Transformation Programme Lead) introduced this item, accompanied by Helen Clarke (Director of Communications and Engagement). They highlighted the key points from their PowerPoint presentation to the Committee. This was followed by questions from the Committee members and the following key points were noted from the discussion:

- 7.1. Resident engagement played a crucial role in establishing trust among residents and assessing their satisfaction with the service. The Committee was pleased to see the plans for continuation of resident panels after the transition of services back in-house. Following the service transfer, Lewisham Homes' community engagement team would sit within the housing directorate, distinct from the Council's corporate community engagement team, to maintain a dedicated focus on engaging with residents to meet their housing needs.
- 7.2. The Chairs of the tenant and residents' associations (TRAs) were very happy with the new resident engagement arrangements, as they felt it would bring them closer to senior housing officers and councillors, allowing them to better escalate issues.
- 7.3. Officers reported that they were keeping a close watch on staff turnover and vacancies. Currently, the percentage of vacancies was reported to be very low.

RESOLVED:

- that the report be noted, with the added notation that the Committee was pleased with the progress being made.

8. Select Committee Work Programme

8.1. The Committee members discussed the work programme – noting that the agenda item regarding budget cuts that was originally scheduled for the November 2023 committee meeting had been withdrawn.

RESOLVED:

- that a follow-up agenda item on the co-optee proposal, stemming from the discussion at this meeting, be added to the Committee's November 2023 meeting.
- that an update on Lewisham Homes' transition back in-house be scheduled for the Committee's November 2023 meeting.
- that the agenda for the next meeting on the 28th of November 2023 be agreed after making the suggested changes.

The meeting ended at 9.55 pm

Chair:

Date:
