

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 6 June 2023 at 7.00pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Stephen Penfold (Chair), Will Cooper (Vice-Chair), Bill Brown, Natasha Burgess, Suzannah Clarke, Rosie Parry and Sakina Sheikh.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Sophie Davis (Cabinet Member for Housing Management, Homelessness and Community Safety), Councillor Brenda Dacres (Cabinet Member for Housing Development & Planning), Nazeya Hussain (Interim Executive Director for Place), Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy), David Austin (Director of Finance), Rhona Brown (Head of Private Sector Licensing and Home Improvements), Lynne Sacale (Housing Transformation Programme Lead), Ellie Eghtedar (Head of Housing Needs and Refugee Services), Koye Edrah (Homelessness Prevention and Assessments Service Manager) and Nidhi Patil (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Louise Phillips (Service Improvement and Change 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. Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

1.1. RESOLVED: that Cllr Stephen Penfold be elected as Chair of the Committee and Cllr Will Cooper be elected as Vice-Chair.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2023

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

3. Declarations of interest

3.1. 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.

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

4. Housing Assistance Policy

Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy) and Rhona Brown (Head of Private Sector Licensing and Home Improvements) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

4.1. The Council was refreshing its Private Sector Housing Policy and this refresh was being carried out for three main reasons:

- to make the policy shorter, clearer and user-friendly;
- to increase the grant, loan and fee amounts to take into account the present-day cost of materials and works; and
- to introduce two new discretionary grants- Energy Efficiency Grant and Hospital Discharge and Prevention Grant.

- 4.2. The purpose of the new Hospital Discharge and Prevention Grant was to support low level interventions that would help hospital discharges such as mowing overgrown gardens, clearing a room to make it safe or moving necessary furniture. This grant was for up to £3000.
- 4.3. The purpose of the new Energy Efficiency Grant was to support low level energy efficiency improvements such as installing energy efficient windows or draught proofing. This grant was for up to £1000.
- 4.4. The Private Sector Licensing and Home Improvements team was working with the Climate Resilience team to explore options for improved joint-working around larger scale energy efficiency improvements to vulnerable households around the borough.

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

- 4.5. Officers were looking to improve and increase the number of grants. They reported that the Council doesn't receive many applications from private rented sector tenants as there is not enough awareness about these grants.
- 4.6. If there was a situation in the private rented sector where the tenant wanted the grant improvements, but the landlord was not in agreement, then the Council would mediate with the landlord.
- 4.7. Officers were making efforts for the Private Sector Housing team to work more closely with the Grants and Loans team to encourage the take-up of these loans/ grants by landlords in the private rented sector.
- 4.8. The grants and loans available to tenants and landlords were not being publicised very well. To combat this, the Head of Private Sector Licensing and Home Improvements was undertaking an end-to-end process review of the service. This review also focused on engaging more with the front-end services such as Adult Social Care, who had face-to-face contact with residents who could be eligible for grants and loans.
- 4.9. For accessing the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant, the resident needed to be referred to the Council's Occupational Therapy team within the Adult Social Care division. Therefore, it was difficult to openly publicise this grant as residents couldn't make an application by themselves but rather needed to be referred to the Council. However, Officers agreed that more awareness about this grant would benefit residents in being more proactive about these referrals. The Committee asked for more information on the process of how residents were referred to the Occupational Therapy Team.
- 4.10. A member of the Committee suggested that the police was also an important stakeholder to be engaged with and kept informed of certain grants and loans such as the ones that are provided to residents for security works due to them being burgled whilst living at the property or being a victim of hate crime whilst living at the property.
- 4.11. The Chair of the Committee suggested that including information on these grants in the Lewisham Life magazine would be a good way of publicising them.
- 4.12. The Equality Analysis Assessment (EAA) of the policy stated that there was no data for carers within the housing assistance, housing register or homelessness applications and that there was no evidence to suggest any impact on this group. Similarly, the EAA noted that there was no evidence to suggest any impact of this policy on gender even though the majority of carers are women. A member of the Committee requested that these sections in the EAA be revisited and updated if possible.
- 4.13. Officers agreed to provide information to the Committee around the number of applications made for grants/loans that were unsuccessful or withdrawn.
- 4.14. There was an underspend in this service area, but officers informed the Committee that the underspend could roll-over into the next year and didn't impact the future budget allocation to the service.

RESOLVED: That

- the report be noted;
- the Committee receive another update on the Housing Assistance Policy towards the end of this municipal year;
- the Committee be provided with further information on how residents were referred to the Occupational Therapy Team and the number of unsuccessful or withdrawn applications that were made for grants/loans;
- the Equalities Analysis Assessment for the Policy be revisited to update the carers and gender impact sections if possible.

5. Housing Futures Progress Report

Nazeya Hussain (Interim Executive Director for Place), Lynne Sacale (Housing Transformation Programme Lead) and David Austin (Director of Finance) presented this item to the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- 5.1. The presentation provided the Committee with an update on the transition of Lewisham Homes into the Council as well as an update on the recommendations that officers were taking to the Mayor and Cabinet on the 21st of June.
- 5.2. 12 staff members from Lewisham Homes' Development team transitioned to the Council in February 2023. A further 44 staff members from IT, Finance, Technology, Data and Digital, TMOs and Temporary Accommodation teams, transitioned to the Council in May 2023. 600 more staff members were due to transition in October 2023.
- 5.3. The Council took a phased approach to this transition of services from Lewisham Homes. One of the reasons for this was that the transition required the Council to rebuild IT platforms, re-network the building and adapt to different accounting systems.
- 5.4. Through different workstreams, the Council was trying to determine how different services would be governed once they were transferred to the Council and how residents would be enabled to have a meaningful voice in the management of their services.
- 5.5. After transferring some services into the Council in advance of the October 2023 transfer date, lessons had been learnt and additional one-off costs had been revealed mainly relating to IT and redundancies. In a best-case scenario, these additional cost were said to be £3.3 million. In a worst-case scenario these costs were estimated to be £3.9 million.
- 5.6. Funding for these one-off transition costs had been identified both through the General Fund and the HRA (Housing Revenue Account). However, identified funding wasn't enough to cover the entirety of the costs leaving a gap of £1.4 million in the best-case scenario and a gap of £2.6 million in the worst-case scenario.

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

- 5.7. An update on this transition was provided to residents between January 2023 and March 2023 through a newsletter. Since then, Council officers had been working with Lewisham Homes officers to understand how residents could be engaged with. In early Summer, a joint-newsletter from the Council and Lewisham Homes would be distributed to the residents. There was a dedicated communications officer for the transition and a resident engagement plan was just being finalised now.
- 5.8. The resident newsletter that went out earlier this year was circulated both digitally and through letter drop. The upcoming newsletter that was due to be circulated in Summer would follow the same approach.
- 5.9. It was discussed that Councillors could play an instrumental role in identifying gaps in resident awareness. Making sure that Councillors had up-to-date information about the transition was vital as they could pass that on to residents when contacted by them.
- 5.10. The Committee asked for the one-off transition costs provided in the presentation to be broken down further and was informed that in the ~£3 million costs that were projected-

costs were almost evenly distributed between IT, corporate PMO (project management) and redundancy costs (meaning just over a million for each area).

- 5.11. During the first phase of staff transition, a few IT issues were identified such as payroll having to enter employee data manually. However, lessons had been learnt from the first phase and the Council has invested in tools and resources that would help in migrating data. It was important to ensure that staff members did not lose business continuity.
- 5.12. The costs related to redundancy were estimated costs that were calculated based on the Council's redundancy policy. Redundancy was only being considered in cases where there was no matching job available within the Council and the staff member did not want to apply for an alternative job within the Council.
- 5.13. A member of the Committee mentioned that in previous presentations on the issue of Lewisham Homes coming in-house, it was mentioned that staff morale had been low. Officers informed the Committee that this was mostly due to the anxiety around the transition process and business continuity, so staff members were more assured now.
- 5.14. A new Housing Directorate was being established in the Council. An Executive Director for Housing would soon be appointed and would have a detailed handover to ensure there was no loss of knowledge when the transition was completed.
- 5.15. The Committee noted that receiving presentations on the day of the meeting instead of receiving them in advance, hindered their ability to scrutinise the issue effectively.

RESOLVED:

- That the report be noted.

6. Emergency Housing

Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Strategy), Ellie Eghtedar (Head of Housing Needs and Refugee Services) and Koye Edrah (Homelessness Prevention and Assessments Service Manager) presented this item to the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- 6.1. In 2022-23, the Council received 3,554 homeless applications in total. Eviction from Assured Shorthold Tenancy was the 2nd leading cause of homelessness in Lewisham.
- 6.2. 710 applicants approached the Council due to the end of their Assured Shorthold Tenancy in 2022-23 compared to 315 in 2020-21. These figures demonstrated the effect of the government ban on evictions during pandemic and the effect of the subsequent lifting of that ban.
- 6.3. Out of the 710 applicants that approached the Council, 155 were owed relied duty. Out of those 155, 138 applicants were owed main housing duty.
- 6.4. It was noted that the presentation mentioned that the court judge could make a suspended possession order but that was not relevant to the Section 21 hearings.
- 6.5. Since April 2020, 237 households who were homeless due to the end of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy had been moved to a temporary accommodation. On average, households were moved to temporary accommodation 107 days after approaching the Council for support.
- 6.6. Officers conducted a spot check for 30 households with longer waiting times to be placed in temporary accommodation and found evidence that some households were being placed into temporary accommodation on the date of the bailiffs warrant. 17 out of these 30 households were placed into temporary accommodation on the date of their eviction.
- 6.7. Finding temporary accommodation across London had become increasingly challenging and was having a detrimental impact on the Council's ability to rehouse households.
- 6.8. The Council had to regularly report on the number of families it had in shared accommodation for longer than six weeks and these numbers had been increasing.

Previously, Housing Select Committee and Children & Young People Select Committee had undertaken joint-scrutiny work on this matter as this was an area of joint concern.

- 6.9. 188 applicants who were threatened with eviction from an Assured Shorthold Tenancy were prevented from becoming homeless through either securing existing or alternative accommodation.
- 6.10. It was noted that if the Renters Reform Bill passed through parliament, Section 21 would be abolished as there would be no such thing as an Assured Shorthold Tenancy.
- 6.11. If a homeless application was made by an applicant who was a victim of domestic abuse, the Council would usually not offer accommodation in Lewisham if the area was assessed as unsafe. Officers would advise the applicant regarding a homeless application to a safe borough of client's choice, along with trying to assist the applicant through various schemes such as Homefinders UK, Safer London scheme or Find Your Home support scheme.
- 6.12. The Domestic Abuse Act did not guarantee that a social housing tenant fleeing abuse would be provided another social housing tenancy. Therefore, they could be offered properties in the private rented sector. However, if a new social housing tenancy was granted, the Act required that it be for lifetime instead of being a flexible tenancy.

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

- 6.13. A member of the Committee reported that supervisors at Advice Lewisham had expressed their concern over the delay experienced by residents with Section 21 notices in receiving an acknowledgement upon initial contact with the Housing Options team.
- 6.14. Officers assured the Committee that they were working on improving this communication with residents and had introduced weekly case reviews for caseworkers. They added that residents should receive Personalised Housing Plans (PHP) when they contact the Housing Options team and that more work will be done to ensure this happens. The Council was also opening its front door again for face-to-face appointments.
- 6.15. If the Renters Reform Bill abolished Section 21 notices, it may have some unintended negative consequences such as growth in illegal evictions or alternative grounds for eviction open to abuse. Campaigners had made some suggestions to mitigate these negative consequences such as the notice period for tenants being made longer (4-month minimum) and landlords having to pay tenant relocation payments.
- 6.16. A member of the Committee expressed concern over the fact that the Domestic Abuse Act does not guarantee that a social housing tenant fleeing abuse would be provided another social housing tenancy. Members also questioned whether this could be changed through an amendment to the upcoming Renters Reform Bill. Council officers assured the Committee that they explored all possible safe accommodation options, in social housing and private rented sector before offering alternative accommodation to the victim.
- 6.17. Lewisham Council had helped over 110 to 120 households through the Homefinders UK scheme so far.
- 6.18. The Council's new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping strategy committed to developing a Sanctuary scheme for victims in Lewisham, providing security measures to help victims remain safe in their current home.
- 6.19. An officer suggested that this Committee along with the Safer Stronger Select Committee could jointly look-into the Sanctuary scheme.
- 6.20. A member of the Committee asked to receive information about how many applications the Council received from victims fleeing domestic abuse and how many victims who were social housing tenants had to be moved to the private rented sector.
- 6.21. During the discussion, emphasis was placed on the importance of ensuring that everyone attending the MARAC meetings (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) was aware of the feasible options for assisting the victims. If it was suggested to the victim that they

should move out of the borough and there weren't any reciprocal arrangements in place to make that happen, it was distressing for the victim.

6.22. The Director of Housing Strategy stated that it was one of her service plan ambitions for the Council to get DAHA (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance) accreditation which is the UK benchmark for how housing providers should respond to domestic abuse in the UK.

6.23. The Committee appreciated the officers' candour on the issue of housing tenants with a Section 21 notice, however, it also voiced concerns regarding last-minute rehousing of residents. While, the Committee understood the importance of preventative work, it also emphasised the need for officers to transition to rehousing efforts at a certain point.

The Committee voted to suspend standing orders.

6.24. Officers informed the Committee that in instances of illegal eviction, the tenants could approach the Council for assistance.

RESOLVED: That

- the report be noted;
- the Committee receive another update on Emergency Housing towards the end of this municipal year.

7. Select Committee Work Programme

7.1. The Chair asked the members of the Committee to stay back for an informal discussion after the end of the formal meeting.

RESOLVED:

- That the Committee's work programme for 2023-24 be agreed.

The meeting ended at 9.32pm.

Chair:

Date:
