

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 30 January 2020 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Bernards (Chair), Stephen Penfold (Vice-Chair), Aisling Gallagher, Sue Hordijkeno, Silvana Kelleher and Susan Wise.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Tom Copley, Leo Gibbons, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa and Paul Bell.

ALSO PRESENT: Kate Donovan (Area Manager, Pinnacle, RB3), Rachel Dunn (Housing Partnerships and Service Improvement Manager), Lee Georgiou (SGM Housing Needs and Refugee Services), Madeleine Jeffery (Director of Housing), Jon Kanareck (Lewisham Homes), Kevin Sheehan (Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration & Environment) and Sandra Simpson (Leasehold Manager, Pinnacle).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2019

Resolved: the minutes of the last meeting were agreed as a correct record of proceedings.

2. Declarations of interest

The following interests were declared:

- Cllr Silvana Kelleher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.
- Cllr Aisling Gallagher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.
- Cllr Susan Wise is a Lewisham Homes Director.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

There were none.

4. Resident engagement in housing development - recommendations

John Bardens, Scrutiny Manager, introduced the report to the Committee. The following key points were noted during the discussion.

- 4.1 The Chair tabled a list of draft comments and recommendations. This will be included in the agenda documentation pack.
- 4.2 The committee noted that it can make recommendations to the Council and Lewisham Homes but that its influence over other housing developers in the borough is unfortunately more limited.
- 4.3 The committee agreed to give preference in the report and recommendations to the term “seldom heard”, rather than “hard to reach”, to be more in-line with current terminology.

- 4.4 The committee noted that while Lewisham Homes appear to be doing well, there is always room for improvement, and stressed the importance of being flexible.
- 4.5 One committee member noted that if residents have had a bad experience with one part of the council they are less likely to engage positively with another part and queried whether general training on resident engagement for other departments could be worthwhile in order to better understand what experiences lead people to becoming “hard to reach” or “seldom heard”.
- 4.6 The committee expressed an interest in carrying out further work on how other housing associations in the borough carry out resident engagement.
- 4.7 The committee agreed to invite other key housing associations in the borough, and their local resident groups, to a future meeting to discuss their approach to resident engagement on development.
- 4.8 The committee noted the key role of the Housing Officer in resident engagement and the importance of housing officers having the time to build stronger relationships and understand their residents.

Resolved:

- 4.9 That the tabled recommendations as discussed and amended be agreed and referred to Mayor and Cabinet.
- 4.10 That the committee writes to the relevant housing associations in the borough to invite them to discuss their approach to resident engagement in housing development.

5. Overcrowding

Lee Georgiou (SGM Housing Needs and Refugee Services) introduced the report. There was a discussion and the following key points were noted:

- 5.1 The officer report set out the extent of overcrowding in London and Lewisham; the difference definitions of overcrowding; and the action taken in Lewisham to address overcrowding.
- 5.2 London has the highest rate of overcrowding in the country – around one in ten of all households. There are more than 9,300 households on the housing register in Lewisham. 4,500 of these are overcrowded by 1 bedroom – the single largest reason for households on the register. More than 500 are overcrowded by two bedrooms or more.
- 5.3 Accessing private rented accommodation for larger households who rely on benefits is extremely challenging because local housing allowance can only be claimed for a maximum of a four bedroom property.
- 5.4 Lewisham’s allocations scheme gives reasonable preference to households living in overcrowded conditions. Households lacking two bedrooms or more are placed in band 1. Those lacking one bedroom are placed in band 2.

Lewisham uses the bedroom standard for assessing overcrowding, which is more generous than the statutory definition.

- 5.5 One committee member noted that every London local authority uses the bedroom standard for assessing overcrowding, but that around half also use statutory overcrowding as an additional measure because they recognise it as a potential public health issue.
- 5.6 It was noted that some of the local authorities that use a combination of the statutory definition and the bedroom standard have removed the category of overcrowded by one bedroom and focussed on the most extreme cases.
- 5.7 It was noted that there are a large number of overcrowded households on the housing register that have not recently bid for a property and may need some extra support. The committee suggested that a time limit should be set to raise a concern and provide support for those that have not bid.
- 5.8 The committee advised against asking people to re-register for the new allocations IT system if they have been inactive for a long time, and expressed concern for those on the list who do not use computers, for whom English isn't their first language, and those who can't read or write.
- 5.9 The committee acknowledged that one of the most significant issues with severe overcrowding is the lack of larger, 4/5 bedroom homes, but noted the importance of having statutory overcrowding as an extra measure given the potential impact on public health.
- 5.10 The committee noted that home swaps and similar alternative options for households on the housing register were not featured on the council's choice-based-letting's portal, Lewisham Homesearch.
- 5.11 The committee noted that the Homesearch portal was the main place that households on the housing register would visit to find housing and suggested that it would be a good place to make people aware of all their options, including the possibility of home swaps and similar.
- 5.12 The committee noted the suggestion to carry out a review of Lewisham Homesearch as part of the committee's work programme for the next municipal year.

Resolved: that the committee refer its views to Mayor and Cabinet in the following terms:

Given the additional pressures on households of living in statutorily overcrowded conditions, the committee recommends that Mayor and Cabinet agrees, in principle, to the Council adopting the statutory definition of overcrowding as an additional measure of overcrowding within its Housing Allocation Scheme, subject to an assessment of the potential costs, procedural issues and impact on other priority groups on the housing list. The committee asks Mayor and Cabinet to assess the impact of such a change and report back to the Housing Select Committee in 6 months' time.

6. Rent and service charge increases

Rachel Dunn (Housing Partnerships and Service Improvement Manager) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- 6.1 Rent increases will be covered by housing benefit and universal credit.
- 6.2 The committee noted that there was a significant difference between heating and hot water charges for Lewisham Homes and RB3. Officers noted that Lewisham Homes has higher overheads and a different range and slightly older stock of buildings with different consumption rates.
- 6.3 The committee the concerns of RB3 residents about the lack of attendance by council officers at resident meetings. Council officers do not regularly attend RB3 resident meetings as these are a forum between residents and RB3 as the provider of landlord services.
- 6.4 Officers from Pinnacle (RB3) explained that universal credit is a significant issue for them, representing 39% of arrears cases, and that it is having difficulty attaining “trusted partner” status to access a universal credit portal.
- 6.5 There is a repairs modernisation process soon to launch at Lewisham Homes to provide greater efficiency for the council and better transparency for residents. Improvements are expected over the next 12 to 18 months. The committee asked to see the satisfaction results when they are available.

Resolved: the committee noted the report.

7. New homes programme (information only)

Resolved: the committee noted the report.

8. Select Committee work programme

Resolved: the committee agreed the work programme.

9. Referrals to Mayor and Cabinet

Resolved: the committee agreed to refer its views on items 4 and 5 to Mayor and Cabinet as detailed in the minutes above.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____