

# MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16 September 2021 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Bernards (Chair), Stephen Penfold (Vice-Chair), Silvana Kelleher, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa and Tauseef Anwar (all present in person)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Aisling Gallagher

ALSO PRESENT: Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing), Councillor Paul Bell (Cabinet Member for Housing & Planning), Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive) (Lewisham Homes), Rachel Dunn (Service Group Manager - Partnerships and Service Improvement) (London Borough of Lewisham), Ainsley Forbes (Chair of the Board) (Lewisham Homes), Mark Newstead (Director of Property Services and Safety) (Lewisham Homes) and Lis Rodrigues (Director of Development) (Lewisham Homes)

## 1. Minutes of the meeting held on 070621

Resolved: the minutes of the last meeting were agreed as an accurate 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.

## 3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

Resolved: the committee noted the M&C response to the recommendations of its in-depth review of resident engagement in housing development and agreed to receive an update in six months.

The committee also noted that resident engagement in development had improved and praised the efforts of council and Lewisham Homes officers for keeping engagement going during the pandemic.

## 4. Lewisham Homes annual report and business plan

Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes) introduced the annual report, noting that it had been a challenging year for Lewisham Homes in regards to voids and repairs in particular. There was then a discussion on the annual report and a recent repairs case that had been in the news.

Mark Newstead (Director of Property Services and Safety, Lewisham Homes) and Ainsley Forbes (Chair of the Board, Lewisham Homes) were also involved in discussions and addressed many of the points made.

- 4.1 In response to questions about the resident dissatisfaction with repairs, Lewisham Homes noted that they were aware that there have been significant issues with the contact centre, with people having to wait a long time to get through on the phone. Lewisham Homes also noted that they have struggled to recruit to this team.
- 4.2 It was noted that the efficiency of call-handling in the contact centre has reduced with remote working due to lack of access to colleagues and the right tech, but that the situation has improved as more people have returned to the office in person. Lewisham Homes are also looking into introducing live online chat as another possible way for residents to report repairs.
- 4.3 It was noted that it has been more difficult than expected to clear the backlog that has built up during the pandemic as there has been a general increase in the volume of repairs.
- 4.4 A stock condition survey carried out in 2019/20 did identify a significant number of properties that needed investment to bring them up to the decent homes standard. Lewisham Homes were also aware of issues with damp and mould in some properties. Significant capital investment was made available by the council in response. It was noted that a lot of this will be used to address issues with roofs, windows and other external works.
- 4.5 In response to questions regarding the recent new story, Lewisham Homes accepted that they had let down the resident; did not act quickly enough when they became aware; and didn't use a specialist water company quick enough to identify the leaks. The case in the news involved at least 11 leaks from a flat above.
- 4.6 The committee noted that it had previously been reassured by Lewisham Homes that it was able to deal with the backlog of repairs created by Covid.
- 4.7 It was noted that Lewisham Homes now has a comprehensive action plan in place to address the 2,400 properties with potential damp and mould issues identified in the stock condition survey. Priority will be given to the 1,200 deemed more severe. This includes piloting 'property MOTs' and being more proactive with maintenance as well the planned repairs programme.
- 4.8 It was noted that the resident involved in the case in the news has been unable to return to the property because his medical needs have changed.
- 4.9 It was also noted that Lewisham Homes has a significant number of disrepair cases which are costing around £1m a year, including the cost of the works and both sides' legal fees.
- 4.10 In response to concerns about how long it took for the case in the news to be addressed, it was noted that there are a number of internal programmes and training in place in Lewisham Homes to improve customer service. It was also noted that a new process has been put in place to speed up the process of moving a resident out of their home temporarily when a property is found to be unfit.
- 4.11 The committee also queried Lewisham Homes' ambitious plans to improve the EPC rating of the majority of its homes to level B.
- 4.12 Lewisham Homes reported that they will soon be publishing their draft sustainability strategy and looking for sufficient funding from the government to

bring properties up to the standard they need to be - £96m over the first 5 years.

4.13 In response to questions on improving void turnaround time, it was noted that Lewisham Homes has reviewed its process on voids and has managed to reduce turnaround times.

RESOLVED: that the committee notes the difficulties Lewisham Homes is facing recovering from the problems associated with the pandemic but also expresses concerns about the contact centre's telephone system and the number of damp properties. The committee stresses the importance of closely monitoring progress with these issues and requests an update at its January meeting.

The committee voted unanimously in favour of the resolution.

## **5. Allocations policy**

Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing) introduced the item, thanked the committee for its close scrutiny of the policy, and noted that the policy is due to be considered by Mayor & Cabinet in October.

1.1 Rachel Dunn (Service Group Manager, Partnerships and Service Improvement) summarised the major changes, including the banding changes; introducing a new overcrowded by 3 bed rehousing reason; introducing a new band 4; creating a new homeless with additional need rehousing reason; changing the 'three offer rule' to a 'two offer rule', and introducing 'smart lettings'.

1.2 There are also two major changes that are not being including in the final policy. The first is the exclusion of non-dependents over 21 from the overcrowded by 3 bed reason. The second is the proposal to introduce multiple bids.

1.3 Officers also noted an amendment to the final proposed policy in relation to the way overcrowding is measured. Whilst the primary measure is the bedroom standard – the proposal is to introduce the use of statutory overcrowding with the effect of adding in an additional nuance to our overcrowding measure.

1.4 The committee expressed its thanks to officers for the work that they had put into the policy and for listening to this committee and applauded officers for coming up with the best scheme they possibly could.

1.5 In response to queries about the practicalities of introducing statutory overcrowding, it was noted that applicants would be asked to measure their own rooms in the first instance, which would then be verified by a visit.

1.6 The committee voted unanimously in favour of supporting the proposed policy and recommending it to Mayor & Cabinet.

RESOLVED: that the committee support the proposed policy and recommend it to Mayor & Cabinet.

## **6. Select Committee work programme**

RESOLVED: that the following items be added to the work programme: Resident engagement in housing development update (6 months); and Lewisham Homes repairs update (20 January).

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

Chair: -----

Date: -----