

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 9 December 2021 at 7.30 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Peter Bernards (Chair), Silvana Kelleher, Olurotimi Ogunbadewa and Tauseef Anwar.

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Cllr Aisling Gallagher.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Stephen Penfold

ALSO PRESENT: Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing), Jennifer Daothong (Executive Director for Housing, Regeneration and Public Realm), Dawn Eckersley (Head of Housing Partnerships and Service Improvement), Ellie Eghtedar (Interim SMG Housing Needs and Refugee Services), Councillor Colin Elliott, Councillor Liz Johnston-Franklin, Councillor Caroline Kalu, Jon Kanareck (Lewisham Homes), David Lee (Estates Manager) (London Borough of Lewisham), Ella McCarthy (Housing Partnership and Insight Manager), Councillor Hilary Moore, Tony Riordan (Principle accountant) (London Borough of Lewisham), Angela Scattergood (Director of Education Services, Education Standards and Inclusion), Councillor Luke Sorba, Monsignor N Rothon (Roman Catholic Church), Kenneth Gill (Area Manager) (Pinnacle) and Erica Turner (Housing Partnership & Contracts 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 16 September 2021

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. Rent and service charge increases

Fenella Beckman, Director of Housing, introduced the report and the following key points were noted:

4.1 Rents are increased according to the government's rent formula of inflation (CPI measure) plus 1%. September's CPI rate of inflation was 3.1% so rents

will increase by 4.1%. This means average rent will rise from £99.19 p/w to £103.26 p/w.

- 4.2 The service charge increase is 5.9% for RB3 residents and 4.9% for Lewisham Homes residents.
- 4.3 Consultation with residents highlighted four main areas of concerns: affordability at a time of increased living costs; service charges not reflecting service received; garage repairs; and the resident engagement process itself.
- 4.4 Officers have agreed to respond to additional points raised by RB3 residents and this information will also be circulated to committee members.

Following the officer introduction, the committee asked a number of questions. The following key points were noted:

- 4.5 It was confirmed that benefit levels are set at the same rate as rents so will also increase.
- 4.6 A member of the public, a leaseholder from RB3, expressed concerns about the consultation process. It was felt that the process should have been more transparent, more extensive and more widely advertised. Concerns were also expressed about the proposed increases at a time of living cost rises. It was queried whether there is any discretion in how the RB3 service charge increase is calculated.
- 4.7 RB3 officers confirmed that in the future the consultation process for proposed increase will be more extensive and feature a resident focus group.
- 4.8 It was confirmed that the RB3 contract sets out the service charge increase as inflation (RPI) plus 1%. Officers were not aware of a way to depart from that.
- 4.9 In response to questions about the low number of Lewisham Homes residents who responded to the consultation, Lewisham Homes officers explained that 3,000 residents were asked and that the consultation was extended. More people used to get involved when the consultation was in-person, but the numbers have always been relatively low.
- 4.10 Lewisham Homes officers also acknowledge that it has taken time for services to recover from the time lost through sickness and self-isolation during the pandemic. The team are in the process of looking very closely at how to improve.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted and that the committee receives a copy of the officer response to the additional points raised by RB3 residents.

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5. Support for families following the end of the eviction moratorium

Fenella Beckman, Director of Housing, introduced the report and the following key points were noted:

- 5.1 The council has been preparing for the end of the eviction ban as an increase in demand for services is anticipated.
- 5.2 The council's homelessness service is configured with a focus on early intervention and works closely with internal and external partners, including the homelessness forum and schools.
- 5.3 The service includes resettlement officers to support families placed out of borough. The Access and Inclusion Team in the Children and Young People Directorate also supports children to carry on attending school in Lewisham.

5.4 The council has recently received from the government an ‘exceptional homeless prevention grant’ of just over £1m to help prevent homelessness linked to rent arrears. The council are in the process of identifying eligible households.

Following the officer introduction, the committee, and invited members of the Children and Young People Select Committee, asked a number of questions. The following key points were noted:

5.5 The officer report shows that the homelessness service it is a caring and sensible department of the borough, looking after people in sometimes distressing circumstances.

5.6 In response to questions about families found to be intentionally homeless, it was noted that the council has a joint post between housing and children’s social services to support those at risk of being intentionally homeless. The post has already prevented a number of households from refusing suitable accommodation where they’ve needed some reassurance.

5.7 It was noted that taking children into care is always a last resort and working closely with families, and internal and external partners, is key.

5.8 In terms of working with schools, a partnership between housing officers and the admissions and attendance team has been built up over the last 18 months in order to share information as early as possible.

5.9 In terms of the number of households in temporary accommodation, 64% are in Lewisham, 22% are within southeast London and 14% are placed further away, mostly in other London boroughs and north Kent.

5.10 All households are placed according to the council’s Location Priority Policy, which takes into account a number of complexities that may be involved.

5.11 Decisions about whether or not a household is considered to be intentionally homeless are only made after extensive enquiries into the situation. The main focus is prevention.

5.12 The additional £1m of grant funding from the government will go a long way to helping households in the private rented sector at risk of homelessness. The council is reaching out to make people aware.

5.13 It was noted that homelessness and being placed in housing out of the borough do have an impact academically and socially. This is why it is important to share information between the housing department, the CYP directorate, and schools so plans can be put in place to preserve education, particularly for those with special education and other needs.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted and that the committee considers further joint working with the CYP Select Committee on this issue at a future date.

6. Select Committee work programme

The Scrutiny Manager introduced the work programme and the following points were discussed:

6.1 It was proposed that the March meeting of the committee is expanded to cover a number of issues relating to homelessness in addition to the scheduled updates on the housing and homelessness strategies. The committee

suggested drawing up some focused questions and inviting relevant witnesses.

RESOLVED: that the work programme be agreed with the changes agreed so that the March meeting is focussed on homelessness.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm

Chair:

Date:
