

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 10 March 2022 at 7.30 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Peter Bernards (Chair), Stephen Penfold (Vice-Chair), Silvana Kelleher and Olurotimi Ogunbadewa.

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Councillors Aisling Gallagher and Tauseef Anwar, and Paul Bell (Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning)

APOLOGIES: Cllr Olurotimi Ogunbadewa, Margaret Dodwell (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes)

ALSO PRESENT: John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Fenella Beckman (Director of Housing Service), Karen Barke (Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration), Ellie Eghtedar (Head of Housing Needs & Refugee Services), Rachel Jackson (Lettings Manager, Home Makers, Phoenix Community Housing) and Sean Longley (Licensing & Housing Enforcement 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 20 January 2022

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

2. Declarations of interest

The following interests were declared:

- Cllr Stephen Penfold is an employee of the Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network (in relation to item 4)
- Cllr Silvana Kelleher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.
- Cllr Aisling Gallagher is a Lewisham Homes tenant.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

Cllr Bernards invited the committee to note the Mayor & Cabinet response to the committee's referral on the Lewisham Homes repairs service noting that the committee has already requested a progress update later in the year.

1.1 The committee asked a number of questions about the response, in relation to, among other things, repairs operatives' terms of employment; call centre staffing levels; live disrepair cases; and property MOTs.

1.2 The Cabinet Member for Housing responded to the questions from the committee, noting that, among other things, repairs operatives terms of employment will not be changing; working from home has affected call centre response times; there are too many disrepair cases and this issue will be

reported back to the committee; and that the 2,000 property MOTs for the most immediate and urgent problems are running behind schedule.

1.3 The committee also noted it's disappointment that officers from Lewisham Homes were unable to attend the meeting.

RESOLVED: that the Mayor & Cabinet response to the committee's referral on Lewisham Homes' Repairs Service be noted and that the committee receives a progress update in six months.

4. Progress update on housing and homelessness strategies

Fenella Beckman, Director of Housing, introduced the item, noting that the two strategies were originally considered by the committee in September 2020, and proceeded to deliver a presentation providing an update against the actions of each. The committee considered the information, asked a number of questions and the following key points were noted:

1.4 There are around 1,000 vacant properties in the borough. The council works to trace landlords and homeowners in order to encourage them to bring houses back into use. This included offering empty homes grants in return for use of the property as temporary accommodation for a fixed period.

1.5 The committee queried the number of Lewisham Homes void properties and officers agreed to respond with the information.

1.6 The council's homelessness service is currently working with local homelessness partners to explore opportunities for collocation in order to allow face-to-face contact for the most vulnerable residents. An initial trial with the council's main partners will be set up in the coming months.

1.7 The homelessness service is also carrying out some fact-to-face assessments on an appointment basis as part of a joint working initiative with children's social care.

1.8 The homeless service also still has access to language line in order to engage interpreters for those with English as an additional language.

1.9 The council's rogue landlord team helped to prevent around 170 tenants from being evicted during the pandemic. This work was initially grant funded but has now been mainstreamed so that it can continue. Demand is still high with more than 80 cases in the last year.

1.10 In response to a question at committee about the size of the new temporary accommodation homes being delivered, the table below was provided following the meeting. This shows the number of bedrooms for the 188 temporary accommodation homes that have either been completed or have/are forecast to start on site between April 2018 and the end of March 22. This includes acquisitions as well as new builds.

| 1beds | 2beds | 3beds | 4beds | 5beds+ | Totals |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------|
| | 16 | 22 | | | 38 |
| 23 | 58 | 34 | 1 | 1 | 117 |
| 33 | | | | | 33 |
| 56 | 74 | 56 | 1 | 1 | 188 |

- 1.11 Some homelessness families do still need to be accommodated on the day of their eviction. The aim of the Homelessness Reduction Act was to stop families being turned away and told to come back when they are evicted. In all instances however the council will look to negotiate with landlords before providing temporary accommodation.
- 1.12 Homeless families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) will usually be referred by children's social care. The service will try to keep them in the same accommodation and work with them to regularise their status and access benefits.
- 1.13 All homelessness approaches will be needs assessed on the day and any applicants that may be affected by domestic abuse will be identified.
- 1.14 The council is unable to generate an income for HMO licensing, the fee must can only be used to pay for the service itself.
- 1.15 The committee queried the levels of fraud to gain council homes and officer agreed to respond with the information.
- 1.16 The council will be working on improving the energy efficiency of housing managed by Lewisham Homes and RB3 and will also be working closely with other local social landlords.
- 1.17 The council hasn't seen a sudden increase in homelessness applications since the restrictions on evictions during the pandemic have come to an end. There has, however, been a gradual increase, which is also in part due to the coming into force of the Domestic Abuse Act.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted and that the committee receives the data requested above on the number empty properties among Lewisham Homes stock and the number of cases of housing fraud.

5. Ethical lettings

Before inviting the guest to speak, the Chair noted that this item was being considered in response to a suggestion from Cllr Hall to consider how the council can increase support for ethical lettings.

Rachel Jackson, Lettings Manager, Home Makers, delivered a presentation on Home Makers, Phoenix Community Housing's ethically-minded lettings agency, established in 2018. Following the presentation, the committee asked a number of questions and the following key points were noted:

- 1.18 Home Makers provides both a lettings-only and fully managed service and works with a number of private landlords. It doesn't charge a finding fee, but does require prospective residents to pay for their referencing, provide a deposit and pay one week's rent in advance.
- 1.19 The main difference between Home Makers and a high street letting agent is that Home Makers has 'heart', Phoenix is a resident-led organisation, and new residents are invited to join that community.
- 1.20 Home Makers currently has 28 managed properties and one on the market. The main challenges are low stock levels and high levels of maintenance due to wear and tear of appliances.
- 1.21 In the last six months there have been 5 evictions. This is an increase on previous years as lots of people have lost their jobs and fallen behind on rent. Housing benefit payment delays are also putting some households at risk of eviction.

1.22 Those who have fallen behind with rent are provided with support and benefits advice from the Phoenix income team.

1.23 In Home Makers' experience, Landlords are usually happy to agree to long-term tenancies (2-3 years) providing there is a break clause after 12 months.

RESOLVED: that the information on ethical lettings be noted and the presenting officer from Phoenix Community Housing be thanked for sharing her knowledge and insight.

6. **Select Committee work programme**

The scrutiny manager introduced the work programme and the following suggestions were noted:

1.24 It was noted that Lewisham Homes is looking into installing solar PV and suggested that the committee look into the merits of established a utilities co-op that is resident owned and led.

1.25 It was also noted that the committee should carry out more regular scrutiny of Lewisham Homes in general, given the issues with repairs that have been identified over the last year.

1.26 In terms of bringing more attention to the climate change considerations of items considered at future committees it was suggested that the incoming committee requests to have climate change considerations brought to the front of reports.

RESOLVED: that the completed work programme for 2021/22 and the committee's suggested topics for the 2022/23 work programme be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

Chair:

Date:
