

## Housing Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on Monday 9 March 2020 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)  
Councillor Hamish McCallum  
Councillor Dora Dixon-Fyle MBE  
Councillor Bill Williams  
Cris Claridge

**OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:** Councillor Paul Fleming  
Councillor Eleanor Kerslake  
Councillor Lorraine Lauder  
Councillor Martin Seaton  
Councillor Kieron Williams

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Everton Roberts, Head of Overview and Scrutiny (Acting)

### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jack Buck and Ina Negoita (co-opted member).

### 2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no late items of business.

### 3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

### 4. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Note: The chair varied the order of business and considered item 6 first.

## **5. COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO DISTRICT HEATING FAILURES**

The commission heard from Aylesbury Estate residents (Stephen Davis, Donna Grant, Harry Matthews, Keith Bent) on their experience of district heating on the estate. The commission also heard from local ward councillors, Councillor Paul Fleming and Councillor Lorraine Lauder, Faraday Ward.

The following issues of concern were raised by the residents and local ward councillors:

Problem with heating system and lack of hot water has been on going, year after year and never properly fixed.

Planned shutdowns always in the winter.

When boiler breaks down council issues tenants with a heater which results in residents having to pay extra money for energy used for electric fan heaters. Residents paying a lot more for electricity than the council gives back. Having to boil kettles to have hot water for which one resident who is registered blind needs to carry up two flights of stairs to the bathroom which is a health and safety issue. If having to keep doing this why can't the council install electric showers.

Particular problem for people who have to go work or children going to school. Having to boil water and share bathrooms, impacts on children's time when they are supposed to be in school.

Have scheduled outages, but are now seeing outages between scheduled outages.

Temporary boilers installed but there are still issues with these.

Perception of poor maintenance.

Young Aylesbury Estate resident with nieces and nephews and friends who do not have heating and hot water as well – this is a shared experience amongst them and he questions the mental health affects this may be having on residents in the area.

If having to travel a distance to work, having to heat hot water impacts on the day.

This time round heating has not worked properly since December, including the Christmas holiday period which had a significant impact on Christmas.

OCO contractors not having key to cupboards to carry out work.

Lack of heating and hot water has knock on effects on the daily lives of the people that live in the area, this needs to be considered.

Contempt tenants are treated with by engineers, being told anything just so engineer can get in and out of the property as quickly as possible. Unclear whether engineers get paid per visit [incentivising them not to complete work first time round].

Workmen not completing jobs as they are being called to other jobs.

The breaking of access points by workmen creates a point of entry for mice which are a problem on the estate.

The commission heard from local ward councillors, Councillor Paul Fleming and Councillor Lorraine Lauder.

Councillor Fleming reported that the issue of heating in particular has been largest area of casework since he became a councillor in 2014. A lot of money had been spent during that time fixing or mitigating problems with the system. Residents recognised that there is

a systemic problem with the district heating system due to its size and being encased in concrete with pipes that cannot be accessed. The question was why this had been done in the first place. Significant investment made in 2015, residents told that the level of reliability would leap but this did not happen.

Councillor Fleming reported that one of the suggested ways to reasonably mitigate the effects would be through the provision of electric showers to homes. A number of explanations had been given by the council as to why this was not feasible ranging from expense, water pressure to electric load on the system. He pointed out that showers were much cheaper than the price quoted, leaseholders had installed their own electric showers with permission from the council and with respect to the electric load, residents were being issued with electric heaters which did not seem to be causing a problem.

Councillor Lauder stressed that what residents have had to go through has been abominable.

The Commission heard from Councillor Kieron Williams, Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation. Councillor Williams apologised to residents for still having to experience this problem and acknowledged that it had been going on for a very long time. He shared the frustration that a large amount of investment had been put into the boilers and they were still not working as well as expected.

Councillor Williams reported that what he has now asked for following a meeting with ward councillors and TRA chairs was for a full review of all of the options to provide heat going forward. The review would look at whether the current system was renewed, whether the current boilers remain or whether the council would provide electric heat to the blocks. This review was underway and was expected to be finished by the end of March. The council would also be looking at all the blocks on the estate, to get an understanding of how long their life span, noting that the regeneration has taken longer than planned. This would feed into questions about the heating. The council would not want to spend lots of money on a block that wasn't going to be there for many years. A proportionate approach would be taken – in some blocks it was anticipated that residents would be moving out after a few years, a temporary heating solution would therefore be sought, whilst other blocks based on the regeneration timetable were anticipated to be there for another 10 years or more therefore requiring a longer term heating solution.

The commission heard from Councillor Martin Seaton, North Walworth ward councillor, who also lives on the Aylesbury Estate.

The issue of compensation was raised. It was agreed that this be reported back to the next meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the report on District Heating outages be noted.
2. That an update report be submitted to the next meeting in respect of the heating issues on the Aylesbury Estate (including the issue of compensation).

## **6. THE COUNCIL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS IN THE BOROUGH**

The commission heard from Ms Emily Wilson and Mr Ben Pygall, residents of Clarson House. The commission also heard from Councillor Eleanor Kerslake, local ward councillor.

The residents addressed the commission and highlighted concerns in the following areas:

Experience with Wandle consistently negative and was getting markedly worse. Issues around service charges, poor standard of customer service and lack of responsiveness. Independent survey commissioned by Wandle found low satisfaction levels. Long running issues – seen little in the way of effort from Wandle to try and make any improvements. Tenant meetings organised by Wandle, sporadic and short lived. Meetings replaced by email newsletters – this only last for about a month.

High service charges, going up year on year. Slow response to service charge disputes.

Concerns were also raised around fire safety throughout the building and red rated defects, along with uncertainty on whether they have been addressed. Poor upkeep of the building, external windows not cleaned in eight years. Action plan relating to schedule of works provided to residents not adhered to or changed without consultation. Action plan was not issued on a regular basis and housing association eventually stopped providing. Resident meetings held at times not convenient to residents and held away from the premises. Meetings also convened at short notice and often in school holiday period.

Poor building upkeep, weeds growing out of foundations, main access door not closing properly since November and as a consequence is allowing rough sleeping in the building and drug taking problems in stairwells. Leak in reception area in November not properly fixed resulting in damage to the building. Concerns about wooden cladding on the building in relation to fire safety – awaiting response from Wandle on whether the building is safe. Hatch which allows smoke to egress from the building, damaged during high winds and subsequently forced shut due to water penetration causing damaged to the building. Given it has been forced shut it can no longer open in the event of a fire. Independent fire safety assessment was due to be carried out – residents have not heard anything back.

Ongoing issue with mice in the building which haven't been addressed over a four-year period.

Maintenance of the heating system – poor maintenance resulted in both boilers needing to be replaced within two years of the building opening. There have been ongoing leaks and corrosion issues throughout the system as a whole, including damaging to the HRU units within flats. No reassurance has been given that a proper survey has been undertaken to fix these issues. Costs now being passed on to residents through service charges or as urgent charge of £240 which is just under the requirement for section 20 notice, thus avoiding the need for requirements of a Section 20 notice being undertaken. Further surveys are being carried out in connection with the heating system which are likely to incur further costs.

Standing charges high – approximately three times the standing charge of British Gas. Energy usage consumption prices were also high. Resident uncertainty and concern over whether the building is fitted with a fire alarm

system.

Councillor Eleanor Kerslake provided further information to the commission.

Councillor Kerslake informed the commission that these kind of stories had been heard from other housing association residents as well – many of whom were previous council tenants and first time buyers/homeowners and have become disappointed and regret leaving the council and their council properties. Despite high profile interventions from local MPs and ward councillors on some other Wandle properties, [Solomon's Passage and Camberwell Station Road, given as examples] the customer care didn't appear to be getting any better and she couldn't see Wandle being held to account.

Councillor Kerslake informed the commission that there were similar stories with other housing associations in term of poor repairs and not engaging well with residents.

She called on the commission to consider:

- how the council could be more muscular in how it was dealing with housing associations and how it was demanding standards for them that the council would expect for its own council tenants and that the council would expect from private renters as well.
- What the council was demanding at the planning permission stage with housing associations when they are acting as developers
- Whether the council should be supporting residents in putting 'class action' complaints to the Housing Ombudsman

The commission then heard from representatives of Wandle Housing. Ms Maria Gillies, Head of Customer Service Delivery and Ola Akentelure, Head of Assets and Portfolio.

Ms Gillies explained that she had joined Wandle in January 2020 and one of the reasons Wandle appointed a head of customer service delivery, which was a new post, was because of the disappointing customer satisfaction results over the last few years. Ms Gillies stressed that Wandle do deliver a very good service to a lot of the properties they manage but was aware of the issues at Clarson House. Having spoken to staff and reviewed a number of documents in relation to Clarson House she felt that a significant difference could be made by communicating more and following up on issues. She was keen to meet with residents outside of the meeting to work with them.

Ms Gillies noted the comments on fire safety and considered this as one of the first issues that needed to be tackled. She acknowledged that the length of time it took for calls to be answered [44 minutes cited] was not acceptable and would look at call volumes to see how resident could get through. She would make sure residents had the contact details for her and the managers within her team in order to escalate issues when necessary. She would also endeavour to arrange that residents could communicate issues by email, along with a Wandle response within a reasonable period of time. She was aware that there was a desire for some form of residents' association and she was happy to encourage that or just to hold regular meetings.

Mr Akentelure reported that there had been a lot of work on the HR system and the general system that serves Clarson House. The letter received by residents in the last two weeks related to works to further improve the efficiency of the system and ensure that it didn't fail. Mr Akentelure explained that Wandle was aware of the unreliable heating

system as reported by residents. A recent report he had run showed that for this year there were currently 20 breakdowns a month, down from 40 breakdowns a month previously. The improvements were therefore having an effect but it was acknowledged there was still more work to be done. Wandle was also looking at the procurement of a new service for the maintenance of the system as well. Wandle were also seeking to have a more proactive service in place so that they were able to identify problems before they started to affect properties.

The commission asked questions of Ms Gillies and Mr Akentelure around the submission from residents and local ward councillor.

The commission heard from Council officers, Paul Langford, Director of Resident Services and Perry Singh, Strategy and Business Support Manager on the detail contained in the officer report.

In addition to what was contained in the officer report, Paul Langford explained that the council was trying to influence as much as they could and that officers were more than willing to healthily challenge bad practice. He reported that he personally met with the chief executives or senior management of the top 10 registered social landlords (RSLs) in the borough at least a couple of times a year. These were not formal monitoring meetings but discussions did take place around strategic matters and concerns around operational matters. There would be a number of issues he would wish to discuss with the chief executive of Wandle the next time they met.

In terms of fire safety Paul Langford reported that there is a commitment for the council to work with other local authorities across the capital as there were a number of common issues across the 32 London boroughs that they were trying to respond to in terms of Grenfell one and the inquiry surrounding the fire. In relation to the fire safety issues raised at this meeting Paul Langford acknowledged these were concerning and the council would be talking to Wandle about the issues raised.

#### **RESOLVED:**

1. That the housing scrutiny commission ask representatives from Wandle to return to the next meeting in order to discuss follow up actions on the issues raised by residents of Clarson House.
2. That cabinet be asked to develop clear policy/review existing policy on prioritising issues such as fire safety compliance, residents satisfaction and other key performance indicators at the point of initiating partnership working with housing associations with a view to possibly developing a service level agreement.
3. That cabinet be asked to investigate the possibility of creating an arbitration panel to deal with serious complaints of service failure within housing associations.
4. That recommendations 2 and 3 above be considered in consultation with the Housing Regulator.

**7. THE HOUSING REPAIRS SERVICE - REPORT FROM THE SOUTHWARK HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION**

**RESOLVED:**

That the scrutiny commission report on the Housing Repairs Service be agreed for referral to cabinet for consideration.

The meeting ended at 9.45pm

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**