



HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Tuesday 12 July 2011 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02B - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Linda Manchester
Councillor Michael Bukola
Councillor Rowenna Davis
Councillor Tim McNally
Councillor Martin Seaton
Councillor Darren Merill

OTHERS PRESENT: Councillor Ian Wingfield
Barry Duckett
Michael Robertson
Renie Anjen

OFFICER SUPPORT: Gerri Scott, Director of Housing
David Lewis, Head of Asset Management and Investment Planning
Tony Hunter, Health and Safety Manager
Louise Turff, - Service Charge Construction Manager
Karen Harris, Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Michael Situ, Councillor Darren Merill attended as substitute; Jon Nosworthy, Jane Salmon, Mariam Facey and Lesley Wertheimer.

1.2 Councillor Edwards welcomed everyone to the meeting, and introduced Renie Anjen, who was workshadowing Councillor Rowenna Davis. He gave a brief overview of the role and work of the sub-committee.

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

2.1 There were none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

3.1 Councillor Seaton declared that he was a Southwark council property tenant.

4. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 4 APRIL 2011

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 April 2011 be agreed as an accurate record.

5. CANADA WATER FIRE SAFETY WORKS

- 5.1 Councillor Edwards introduced this item by explaining that concerns about the fire safety work at Canada Water estate had been brought to the attention of himself and the vice-chair, who had agreed to undertake a short scrutiny of the issue, and that the purpose of this agenda item was to understand the issues fully, from the perspective of the residents and the council, and to draw up a report making recommendations for the future
- 5.2 He welcomed Barry Duckett and Michael Robertson from the TRA, and residents from the estate, to the meeting and invited them to introduce issues from their perspective.
- 5.3 Barry Duckett explained that he was concerned when the contract was awarded to Standage that the TRA was not informed, and that meetings with residents for updates on the contract were not offered at times that suited residents on the estate.
- 5.4 He went on to explain that he had been asked to act as a conduit for complaints from residents, but did not have good communications with the staff from the council overseeing the contract.
- 5.5 He further explained that the contract was not fulfilled in an acceptable way, and that Councillors Ian Wingfield and Richard Livingstone had both visited the site to see the problems for themselves.
- 5.6 Michael Robertson explained that as a result of the incident at Lakanal in July 2009, Southwark Council had commissioned the consultants Tuner Townsend to undertake a fire risk assessment at Columbia Point on the Canada Estate. Several of the repairs highlighted in the report had been a result of previous poor repair standards at the estate. There was photographic evidence of some of these in the "Turner Townsend" report.
- 5.7 In February 2010 the Fire Brigade issued Southwark Council with a formal notification of fire safety deficiencies on the estate with a deadline for remedial

work to be undertaken.

- 5.8 The fire safety notification brought added urgency to the work required on the estate, and resulted in the contractors Standage being used to undertake the work as they already operated for the council as “voids” contractors, rather than going through the usual procurement procedures.
- 5.9 There was a feeling that, as some of the work now required was as a direct result of previous poor work standards and ineffective contract management on works done on the estate, residents at Canada Water estate were now effectively being required to pay twice for work to be undertaken to an acceptable standard.
- 5.10 Michael Robertson summarised that the core issues for residents on the estate were poor management and communication around the work undertaken on the estate, poor repairs standards, and issues in respect of work specification and procurement which had led to high unit costs and high overall costs for work undertaken.
- 5.11 Councillors then asked some questions.
- 5.12 In response to a question about who had undertaken the work, it was confirmed that instead of going out to tender for this work, Standage, the voids contractor had been appointed due to the urgent timescales.
- 5.13 It was confirmed that the work had been commissioned over 8-9 calendar months from May 2009.
- 5.14 Councillors made reference to paragraph 22 of the report circulated to the sub-committee, which suggested a small number of residents’ queries and complaints, when in fact there were many complaints and concerns about the poor standard of the work. It was confirmed that in fact some 72 e-mailed concerns had been raised.
- 5.15 A further issue discussed was that of clarity and openness with residents and leaseholders about work being undertaken and the release of information about contract costings.
- 5.16 Councillor Edwards invited officers from the Housing Department to explain the situation from their perspective.
- 5.17 Gerri Scott, strategic director of housing services, made some introductory comments, highlighting that some analysis had been done of how this work had been handled.
- 5.18 She confirmed that fire safety issues at that time had resulted in an exceptional situation at the estate in terms of the procurement of works, and that formal requirements on consultation (S20) had been complied with but that there had been a lack of effective communication with residents.
- 5.19 In addition to meeting the fire safety standards, there was a further variation to the contract to install suitable venting. This was not communicated to or discussed

with residents.

- 5.20 The strategic director also confirmed that the work required by London Fire Brigade was completed to the required timescale, but that the quality of the work was of considerable concern.
- 5.21 There were no financial penalties to the contractor, but the contractors were not paid until the work was done to a completely satisfactory standard.
- 5.22 The director informed the sub-committee that a residents' satisfaction survey has since been undertaken, and the outcomes of this would be made available to the sub-committee.
- 5.23 Members of the sub-committee queried the involvement of building standards around the issue of ventilation.
- 5.24 It was confirmed that the need to vary the contract was unexpected but that building control were involved in the usual way.
- 5.25 David Lewis, head of asset management, confirmed that although FRA works were done to a very good standard, the work around finishing and painting was sub-standard.
- 5.26 Members of the sub-committee asked whether it was usual for contractors to do such poor quality work, what monitoring had been done throughout the process, and why the work had been considered to be good enough.
- 5.27 David Lewis informed the sub-committee that there was no expectation that the work would go wrong and that the monitoring arrangements reflected that.
- 5.28 He went on to confirm that the contractor had performed well in the past, and that some of the issues on this job might have arisen due to lack of capacity.
- 5.29 Sub-committee members raised questions about value for money, and officers confirmed that unit costs were similar to the same items in other blocks. Officers agreed to share this information with the sub-committee.
- 5.30 Following further questions from the sub-committee, officers confirmed that under section 20, leaseholders had a right to see costing for work undertaken. It was agreed that this information should also be available to other residents.
- 5.31 Councillor Wingfield accepted that the concerns raised in relation to this work were valid.
- 5.32 He highlighted in particular a need to address contract management issues and the need to include and inform residents.
- 5.33 Councillor Wingfield confirmed that recent changes in the Housing Department around the performance management of staff overseeing contracts, and a focus on major works as a separate entity would result in improvement, but that it was too early to see the results of this yet.

5.34 Councillor Edwards thanked everyone for their input and confirmed that he would produce a draft report with some recommendations for change.

6. CABINET MEMBER DISCUSSION - COUNCILLOR IAN WINGFIELD

6.1 Councillor Edwards thanked Councillor Wingfield for joining the sub-committee for a discussion on housing priorities for the year.

6.2 Councillor Wingfield talked about the importance of the clean, dry and safe information and the need to be clear about how and why the places on the list had been picked. He explained that there was a need to get the information out quickly and that it would be important to go through it with a fine-toothed comb to remove any inaccuracies on the list.

6.3 Members of the sub-committee commented on how useful it was to have this information, and asked whether it could be broken down by ward and the inaccuracies removed. It was agreed that this information would be made available to councillors by ward.

6.4 Councillor Wingfield talked about Leaseholder Charging and his view that there was a need to look into how the charging process worked and what could be done better to ensure fairness to leaseholders. He suggested that it would be useful for the sub-committee to investigate the systems in place and make recommendations on areas that need improving.

6.5 He explained to the sub-committee that he had asked all councillors to pass him information about concerns raised by local residents about leaseholder charging. He explained that he was concerned that the examples brought to his attention were only the "tip of the iceberg".

Councillor Wingfield went on to explain that from his perspective, although the council did comply to the letter of the law on leaseholder charging issues, this was not always the same as treating leaseholders in the best way it could. He was concerned that on some occasions leaseholders were having to sign away equity because of the costs associated with being a leaseholder.

6.6 A discussion took place about housing repairs and the issue of rewarding and incentivising tenants to look after their property. The way the system worked, property that was not looked after by tenants became a higher priority on the list for repairs. Members of the sub-committee felt it would be useful to have some form of incentive scheme for people who looked after their property. In the longer term this would save money for the repairs service.

6.7 The issue of the call centre was discussed, in the context of response times and the quality of service received. It was explained to the sub-committee that a new Head of Customer Experience was now in place with experience of managing a call centre in a local authority environment.

6.8 A query was raised about housing consultation structures and whether any

discussions were taking place about the realignment of Area Housing Forums. Councillor Wingfield responded that residents like the area-based forums and that there was no intention to make any changes at this point in time.

- 6.9 The sub-committee discussed the issue of black pin mould in properties and whether a booklet for residents about managing condensation and mould could be prepared and distributed pro-actively. Councillor Wingfield explained that this particular issue seemed to arise in property inherited from the former GLC. The Housing Investment Programme recognised this issue and included work to install venting to reduce mould. A very useful leaflet existed and it was agreed that it would be possible to send this to all residents, as to some extent the mould was caused by resident activity.
- 6.10 A discussion took place on local estate management and empowerment and whether the council could look into larger estates having their own repairs teams and whether this would lead to a more cost-effective and higher quality solution to housing repairs.
- 6.11 Councillor Wingfield agreed that empowering people to take responsibility for managing their estate lead to more sustainable communities and an increased level of pride in the estate. In places with a TMO, localisation of services resulted in higher satisfaction levels, however not all residents were in favour of TMOs and a solution was needed for those estates that did not want a TMO, or where the TMO was not operating effectively. In addition, moving to this local model could result in a huge variation in the quality of work.
- 6.12 On the issues of delegation of repairs and smaller contracts, Councillor Wingfield expressed sympathy with this model but explained that before introducing more changes, the current priority was to make sure that the contracts that were in place operated effectively. Within the next 12 months the council should start to see results.
- 6.13 Councillor Wingfield invited sub-committee members to make suggestions on how things could be done differently to achieve a healthy balance between central and local management.
- 6.14 The issue of communal repairs and the call-centre was discussed and whether there was an adequate system in place to ensure that the person taking the call had a sufficient level of knowledge to deal with it effectively and ensure that communal repairs were followed up and handled effectively. Councillor Wingfield responded that the call centre working party had picked this issue up.
- 6.15 A query was raised over TRA halls and whether there were any plans to tackle the number and use of TRA halls. Councillor Wingfield responded that this was a politically sensitive issue but that there was a need to be mindful of the best use of public money and agreed that TRA halls should be looked at in terms of value for money. A look into this by the sub-committee could be useful.
- 6.16 Members expressed concern that the current high level of resource needed to ensure warm, dry and safe homes had arisen because of insufficient preventative property maintenance work in the past. This meant that the 5 year investment plan

would get to decent homes standard but no further, leaving a gap in planned property maintenance. There was a shared concern that the council did not have a robust planned maintenance programme. Councillor Wingfield suggested that it would be helpful to have an open discussion with leaseholders on this issue.

6.17 The sub-committee discussed the priority given to ex-armed service personnel on council housing waiting lists, and the fact that the housing minister was supportive of what the council was trying to do. Councillor Wingfield confirmed that the council did want to make the change to give a higher priority to disabled ex-army personnel, and that the option to extend this to all ex-service personnel was currently being consulted on. This was being pursued through a national process and it was hoped that local MPs will support the change of law nationally.

6.18 Councillor Edwards thanked Councillor Wingfield for an open, useful and wide ranging discussion.

7. WRITTEN UPDATE ON CCTV

7.1 This was noted.

8. MEETING DATES AND WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE YEAR

8.1 The following suggestions for the work programme were made and discussed,

- Leaseholder charging
- The Community safety aspect of cleaner/greener/safer
- Domestic violence and how it is dealt with
- Anti-social behaviour and whether this is caused by housing issues not being dealt with effectively
- Low-level anti-social behaviour and how we respond to it

8.2 It was agreed that the following issues would form the work programme

1. Leaseholder Charging
2. Domestic Violence and how it is dealt with
3. Low level anti-social behaviour on estates.

8.3 Councillor Davis offered to make a contribution to the work on domestic violence.

8.4 Councillor McNally suggested that it would be useful for the sub-committee to receive the quarterly housing waiting list as an information report, to help inform discussions.

The meeting closed at 9.20pm.

