

Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 24 March 2022 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Damian O'Brien (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Renata Hamvas
Councillor Jon Hartley
Councillor Sunny Lambe
Councillor Richard Livingstone
Basseyy Basseyy (Co-opted member)
Cris Claridge (Co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Council Homes and Homelessness

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jane Salmon, and Ina Negoita (Co-opted member).

Apologies for lateness from Councillor Richard Livingstone who joined the commission meeting for Agenda item 7 onwards.

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

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 December 2021 and 7 February 2022 are to follow.

5. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Chair explained to the commission that he was unaware that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also agreed to look into Temporary Accommodation as part of the previous Budget Scrutiny hence the commission would not be discussing this Agenda item to avoid duplicating work. The Chair will pass on the message to incoming Chair and commission members to consider this topic in the next municipal year if membership to the commission changes.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET ON NEW COUNCIL HOMES ON EXISTING ESTATES

The Chair took the commission through a PowerPoint presentation on the draft recommendations that were emailed across to the commission members prior to the meeting on new council homes on existing estates.

On recommendation 1 below, the Chair explained to the commission that it's important that Scrutiny is seen as a means to ensure there is an outlined robust process followed to achieve the objectives of projects such as Brenchley Gardens and that the report submitted in October 2021 did not reflect the issues faced, mistakes made and lessons learned for the future.

Recommendation 1: Given the issues with the written report provided to the Housing Scrutiny Commission in October 2021, the Cabinet member takes steps to ensure all officers in housing to understand the function of scrutiny and the importance of providing a full and accurate assessment of where things may have gone wrong, for lessons to be learned for the future.

On recommendation 2 below, the commission discussed the need for better visibility on new projects being launched, better communication and consultation

processes especially with key local stake holders such as residents. The commission agreed that it is important that such communications, consultations and discussions are carried out early in the project to ensure perspectives of ward councillors, Tenancy Management organisations (TMOs') and Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs') are considered. The below recommendation 2 is to be amended to reflect the discussion later in the meeting.

Recommendation 2: Cabinet member asks officers to arrange a webinar where ward councillors, TMOs and TRAs can explain their perspective on new housing projects, and how councillors seek to input into these.

On recommendation 3 and 4 below, the commission agreed that due consideration should be given to incorporate all the principles of the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation (SGTO) Consultation Charter into the Council's own consultation protocols. The Cabinet might not agree on all aspects such as ballots on planning applications of the SGTO charter but should take account of the recommendations in the charter.

Recommendation 3: The Cabinet should give due consideration to incorporating the principles of the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation (SGTO) consultation charter into its own consultation protocols.

Recommendation 4: The Cabinet member asks officers to implement a consultation protocol which prioritises clear, consistent and timely communications for all development projects where the council is building on existing estates. This protocol should take account of recommendations made in the SGTO consultation Charter.

On recommendation 5 and 6 below, the commission discussed the need for robust protocols on the consultation process, Council's project team should not consider TMOs and TRAs as a replacement for all residents. The Cabinet should also review consultation practices with a view to cover all residents through non-digital alternative routes (amended in recommendation 6 below) instead of just a single route of communication to obtain consultation feedback given the issues faced with effectiveness of the Commonplace website as a tool for engagement.

Recommendation 5: The Cabinet member should ensure that the protocol on consultation makes clear that it is the council's project team who is responsible for consultation with all residents and that TMOs and TRAs are important bodies to consult, but they are not a replacement or proxy for all residents.

Recommendation 6: The Cabinet member should review consultation practice to ensure there is always an easily available non-digital alternative routes for residents to find out about proposals and contribute their views. The Cabinet member should also review the effectiveness and reliability of Commonplace as a tool for engagement.

The commission then considered and agreed the amendment to recommendation 2 below from earlier discussions above.

Recommendation 2 (revised): Cabinet member asks officers to build early discussions with key local stakeholders into the new homes process including arranging webinars or online meetings where ward councillors, TMOs and TRAs can explain their perspective on new housing projects, and how councillors seek to input into these.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET ON THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Chair then took the commission through recommendations on the private rented sector emailed across to commission members prior to the meeting.

On recommendation 1 below, the commission heard that the a large number of private renters who were covered under the original scheme between 2016 and 2020 would now fall out of regulation under the new scheme and could suddenly be at a detriment by seeing a dramatic drop in the standards of housing or protections that they would have otherwise fallen under. The commission agreed that it was important an impact assessment is carried out by officers.

Recommendation 1: The Cabinet Member asks officers to carry out an assessment of the impact on the private rented sector which once fell under regulation (between 2016 and 2020) but is now outside of regulation. Have housing conditions for these tenants got worse as a result?

On recommendation 2 below, the commission heard that currently the landlords that apply for “gold standard” license receive a reduction in their license fee as an incentive for providing higher standards of housing maintenance and facilities. The commission agreed that in light of the influx of refugees from Ukraine and other parts of the world trying to escape war and terror from oppressive and fascist regimes, landlords that offer affordable housing to refugees should also receive this incentive.

Recommendation 2: Landlords who apply for the current “gold standard” license receive a reduction in their fee as an incentive. The Cabinet Member should extend this incentive to landlords who offer affordable housing to refugees arriving in the borough. This recommendation is clearly of a more urgent nature because of recent tragic developments in Ukraine.

On recommendation 3 below the commission discussed that the parameters and reasons for a home to be classed as empty need to be defined such as length of time it's been empty and reasons for it being empty such as passing away of occupant to make it financially viable for Council to chase those landlords. The commission also considered whether including energy efficiency of the property in the licensing scheme might be beneficial in the wake of the climate emergency.

The commission agreed to revise recommendation 3 to reflect this discussion. The commission also agreed to formulate another recommendation 5 to link energy efficiency of properties into the licensing fees.

Recommendation 3: The Cabinet Member considers extending landlord licensing to cover those who own empty homes. Some elements will not be relevant to them but extension of those elements which could help tackle negative environmental impacts and discourage landlords from leaving homes empty.

Recommendation 3 (revised): The Cabinet Member considers extending landlord licensing to cover inhabitable homes that have been empty for more than three months. Some elements will not be relevant to them but extension of those elements which could help tackle negative environmental impacts and discourage landlords from leaving homes empty.

The commission considered and agreed recommendation 4.

Recommendation 4: During our scrutiny of this issue, it became clear that shortages of, and difficulties recruiting, environmental health officers in housing enforcement was a risk to Southwark's plans for extending licensing. The Cabinet Member should work with the Leader and Cabinet colleagues to investigate what steps could be taken via the council's HR processes to strengthen Southwark's recruitment in this area.

The commission then revisited recommendation 1 and heard that the under the original 2016 scheme places that seem to be particularly vulnerable to historically having bad housing conditions such as block of flats above shops or main roads due to poor maintenance by landlords were covered. The commission agreed that it was important to ask the Cabinet to look at what steps could be taken and develop a road map to bring these properties back in scope under the new scheme. The commission agreed to revised recommendation 1 below.

Recommendation 1 (revised): The Cabinet Member asks officers to carry out an assessment of the impact on the private rented sector which once fell under regulation (between 2016 and 2020) but is now outside of regulation. The Cabinet should also review whether housing conditions have deteriorated as a result of this and also develop a roadmap to bring further wards within the scope of the new Private Rented Sector (PRS) scheme, particularly those areas covered by the 2016-2020 regulations.

The commission also agreed to a new recommendation 5.

Recommendation 5: The Cabinet member considers that the rental properties having a higher ranking on their energy performance certificate receive a reduction in their licensing fees to encourage landlords to improve energy efficiencies of their properties.

8. OVERALL PERFORMANCE STATISTICS OF SOUTHWARK REPAIRS SERVICE INCLUDING IN HOUSE AND HEATING CONTRACTOR SERVICES

The report was noted by the commission.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The commission noted the work programme for 2021-22.

The Chair then thanked the commission members for their contributions over the past year and the Scrutiny team for their support.

Meeting ended at 8:09 pm.

CHAIR:

DATED: