

## Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission held on Monday 21 November 2022 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Ellie Cumbo (Chair)  
Councillor Jane Salmon (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Sam Foster  
Councillor Esme Hicks  
Councillor Emily Tester  
Bassey Bassey (Co-opted member)  
Cris Claridge (Co-opted member)  
Ina Negoita (Co-opted member)

**OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:** Councillor Darren Merrill

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Portia Mwangangye and Councillor Barrie Hargrove.

### 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.

Councillor Esme Hicks, Councillor Jane Salmon and Ina Negoita (Co-opted member) disclosed that they are Council Leaseholders.

#### 4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 October 2022 was approved as a correct record.

#### 5. FIRE COMMANDER INTERVIEW- LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK

The commission first received a report from Verona Clark, Borough Commander for the London Fire Brigade in Southwark on the following points.

- Risk areas such as high rises and commercial buildings.
- Key fire safety issues and fire safety work undertaken by engaging with the community
  - Poor loading and overcharging of e-bikes in residential properties especially communal areas in high rise buildings.
  - Fire safety team enforcing legislation in shops where counterfeit chargers that are the main cause of fires.
  - Encouraging business to do fire risk assessments online with the support of the Local Authorities.
  - Home fire safety visits and Public Relations to encourage people to resolve issues with their recalled white goods such as tumble dryers and washing machines that pose a fire risk.
  - Poor ventilations in shops where people are sleeping due to tough economic times, this is being handled by the fire brigade enforcement teams, fire safety inspections team and also liaising with the councils fire safety teams.
- Scrutiny commission members and ward councillors to encourage and promote home fire safety visits which constituents and residents can book through telephone, text messages, online through [londonfire.gov.uk](http://londonfire.gov.uk) or visiting the local fire station thus providing residents with bespoke fire safety advice.
- Drying of clothes on electric heaters rather than using gas for heating, increasing the fire risk due to exposed elements such as filament tubes.
- Safe smoking outdoors and discouraging charging e-vapes overnight.
- Encouraging use of branded mobile phone, e-scooter and e-bike chargers.
- 95 buildings in Southwark with cladding related fire safety issues Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) there are 9 buildings that fall under simultaneous evacuation but are not cladded but do undergo regular checks.

- Minimum of 12 visits a week to high rise commercial buildings.
- Quarterly meetings and joint visits with fire safety department, brigade fire safety teams and council fire safety teams to identify issues and data being fed back to the head office and fire safety teams.
- 240 high rise buildings and new developments undergo inspections at every building stage.
- Soutwark Fire Brigade has the best response time with targets of 6 minutes for the first instance and 8 minutes for the second instance.
- Backlog of fire safety visits during Covid recovering.
- No existing issues with empty homes with regards to fire safety, alarms triggered would come through directly to fire brigade or reported by public. No life risk thus different approach to empty homes. Arson incidents due to anti-social behaviour are very low.
- Fire stations organising physio sessions for elderly, counselling sessions, community spaces, food banks, clothes and toys for children and coffee mornings.
- Increase in arson proof letter boxes and fire retardant bedding across the borough for vulnerable people and victims in court cases referred by social services.
- No reported increase in fires on bonfire nights due to anti-social behaviour but reporting of potential fireworks issues reported to the police by the fire brigade.

The commission then asked questions around the following themes.

- Perennial issue of fire risk assessments of businesses.
- Fire safety issues with compartmentation within buildings in Soutwark built in the 1800's.
- Enforcements in shops with dwellings and issues with lifts, comparison of enforcements between council and private properties.
- Number of home visits requested and response times.
- Fire Safety Issues identified by the fire brigade and monitoring progress of such matters.
- Efforts made to inform residents of action to be taken during a fire such as staying put or leaving the premises.

The commission learned from Verona that fire risk assessments have been a concern for a while and it would be best resolved by further checks and publicising the need for fire risk assessments. Compartmentation within buildings and fire

spread issues are relayed to fire safety departments. Shops with dwellings are shops with flats above and if there is no adequate ventilation between the two, mitigation measures are put in place for fats and oils to escape. The turnaround time for homes visits depends on resident availability and booking through telephone calls has a response time of 24-48 hrs. Good amount of requests are received for home visits.

A good partnership exists between the council and the fire brigade to address fire safety issues but are resolved by the council once identified by the fire brigade. High rise buildings are regularly risk assessed and residents are advised accordingly, home safety visits includes any bespoke fire safety advice that are down to differing factors among buildings. General advice is to exit the building if possible, however if residents are not in the place of origin of the fire and can't leave, the compartmentalisations should safely hold in the event of a fire.

The commission then asked further questions on the following points

- Advice on electric heaters.
- Relationship with the council on fire safety issues with contractor work and repairs service.

The commission heard that general fire safety advice should be followed and heaters only be used when present in the property and in open spaces and also avoiding contact with anything other materials. The fire brigade conducts joint visits with the council when fire safety issues with contractor work is reported and if the work is not remedied up to the standards, the fire enforcement team issues a notice. Only repeat fire incidents that flag issues with repairs are further investigated.

## **6. CABINET MEMBER INTERVIEW - COUNCILLOR DARREN MERRILL, CABINET MEMBER FOR COUNCIL HOMES AND HOMELESSNESS**

The commission heard from Councillor Merrill on the following points

- Inflation rise of 30% on costs of materials for new builds.
- Rising rate of borrowing affecting the housing market.
- Ensuring that costs of repairs for leaseholders are accurately calculated and repairs completed in a timely manner.
- Improvements in the repairs service involves setup of repairs resident group, repairs hub, hiring of multi trade services that could complete the entire repair work and improving the call centre effectiveness by using video calls.

The commission then asked questions around the following points of discussion

- Only 50% of stage one complaints being upheld.
- Council communication with leaseholders and estate agents on channelling repair complaints to the correct team within the council.
- Repairs resident group.
- Real time updates for residents on repairs through telematics systems.
- Prevention of minor repairs turning into major repairs.
- Differing repair needs of buildings built decades apart.
- Apprenticeships for trade services.

Councillor Merrill explained to the commission that repairs resident group would include Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation (SGTO) Chair, Local Housing Forum Chairs and members of the public and it due to be setup by December 2022.

The commission then heard from Christine Bramman, Head of Repair and Maintenance that the council do not directly contact letting agents, repairs are managed holistically by trained staff at the repairs contact centre and a repairs improvement program is underway. On only 50 % of complaints being upheld, the commission learned that more than 40% of stage one complaints are a result of residents not reporting the issue on the first occurrence this then gradually leads to major issues later which take longer to resolve, multi skilled operatives have been hired and tasked with resolving stage one complaints and process failures.

The commission learned that the proposed telematics system is being negotiated and is to be launched soon. Text messages are currently being used to communicate with residents. Some minor repairs have turned to major repairs due to Covid and not being able to access the property and also staff being redirected to delivering food, supplies in the community and only essential repairs being carried out. The backlog of repairs has now recovered. A cohort of 11 apprenticeships have started in September 2022, 5 electricians, 4 plumbers and two multi-skilled traders undergoing training courses.

The commission then discussed the following points

- Major works prevention in asset management strategy and restrictions in budget.
- Terms of reference of Repairs Residents Group to be discussed at its first meeting as its resident led and reconvening of Local Area Forums to meet.
- Call backs for inadvertently disconnected customers getting through to the

call centre after long waiting times this is to be fed back to the contact centre as a customer service improvement measure.

- Customer service training for internal repairs service and contractor code of conduct to be enforced during their interactions with residents.
- Leaseholder charges are to be fair, value for money, calculated accurately and scrutinised rigorously by the major works team.
- Transparency of leaseholder's charges from inception to completion of work; extensive market research and benchmarking with other London councils on costs before contracts are out for tender; value for money to be attained by looking at specific elements within improvements in the homeowners' improvement plan.
- Transparency that has been built in with the help of Strategic Core Group where consultants and contractors are discussing market fluctuations; the rise in inflation causing the feasibility to not reflect the final accounts.

The commission then asked questions around the following themes

- Unclear breakdown of leaseholder charges and reasons for repair leading to leaseholders questioning the value for money.
- Involving leaseholders in conversations with major works contractors and councils to build trust in the community.
- Responsibilities of leaseholders and freeholders with regards to charges.
- Several tiers of contractors and sub-contractors leading to spiralling costs.

The commission then learned from Councillor Merrill that there is a need to involve leaseholders when major works contracts are being procured to ensure they are well informed of the works needed on their estates. In addition there is substantial amount of work being undertaken to be able to explain to leaseholders as to why certain small works are being included in the major works contracts. For example a cost effective measure would be to replace windows that are nearing their end of life whilst scaffolding has been setup for other major works. Leaseholder charges only include costs which the leaseholder is legally required to pay, additional costs are paid from the council's budget, for e.g. when external insulation is required as per the council's climate emergency strategy.

The commission then heard from Desmond Vincent, Asst. Director of Building Safety, Housing and Modernisation that the council's homeownership team is legally required to send leaseholders specific component breakdowns of charges which includes a contingency sum for unknown risks, works and related costs. Leaseholders can contact the homeownership team for further explanation on certain service charges that might be a result of a response to preventive repairs to avoid major works in the future.

The commission also learned that the partnering framework between consultants and contractors has mechanisms to look at fluctuating costs in different supply chains and the council as the contract administrator looks at unit cost prices being reflective of the contracts that have been agreed. The council with the help of the homeowners' improvement plan is looking at challenging the consultants on feasibility.

On empty homes the commission heard that private sector empty homes are decreasing and that two contractors have been hired to bring the council back on target to reduce minor council voids by the end of 2022.

The commission then discussed the following points

- Empty homes to be included on the agenda in the council meetings with large housing associations of more than 1000 units.
- Property visits and checks by special investigation teams on council tenants illegally sub-letting in high rental cost properties.
- Update on housing allocation strategy and its consultation by end of financial year.
- Under occupying residents registering interests in downsize has increased due to economic crisis and rise in energy bills, although it is not substantial enough yet to address overcrowding, efforts are being made to reach out to people through advertising and individually answering residents' concerns with downsizing.
- Response to recommendation 4 from the previous year's commission *'that 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.'* The commission heard that the housing consultation processes have improved and mistakes made during the Covid lockdown period of online consultations have been addressed; and that the commission would be kept updated on progress.

## **7. HOUSING ALLOCATION STATISTICS AND OVERCROWDING REPORT**

The report was noted by the commission.

## **8. WORK PROGRAMME 2022-2023**

The Work Programme 2022-2023 was noted by the commission along with questions to be prepared for the upcoming meeting.

Meeting ended at Time 9:18 pm

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**