

Housing, Community Safety and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing, Community Safety and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission held on Tuesday 6 February 2024 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Sam Foster (Chair)
Councillor Emily Tester (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Ellie Cumbo
Councillor Jane Salmon
Councillor Barrie Hargrove
Councillor Esme Hicks
Councillor Victoria Mills
Ina Negoita (Co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillor Sarah King

OFFICER SUPPORT:

Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Cris Claridge (co-opted member).
Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Ellie Cumbo.

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

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

The Chair informed the commission that Councillor Darren Merrill had stepped down as Cabinet Member for Council Homes and as of 3 February 2024 Councillor Sarah King had taken up the role, Councillor King will be interviewed at today's meeting as Cabinet Member for Council Homes.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

Councillor Jane Salmon declared that she was a council leaseholder at an estate with district heating.

Ina Negoita (co-opted member) declared that she was a leaseholder at Devonshire mansions.

4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2023 were approved as a correct record.

5. HEATING AND HOT WATER OUTAGES

The commission then heard from ward councillors, Councillor Cassandra Brown and Councillor Leo Pollak on heating and hot water outages at Rouel Road

- Severe heating and hot water outages especially during winter at Rouel Road estate, residents have been let down by the council
- Community meetings held with Council officers and previous Cabinet Member for Council Homes, actions from that meeting not implemented and has led to current issues
- Figures provided in the report for Rouel Road not an accurate reflection of residents facing issues and the recorded casework. Surveys and door to door feedback from 15 residents on heating and hot water outages in last week alone.
- Issues with communications in general and also with customers contacting the call centre, repeated calls and no previous records of calls; contractors not in attendance at this scrutiny meeting and blame culture between contractors and the council; maintenance of plant rooms and pipework's at this estate.
- Performance and repairs data collection for contract management; external stakeholders such as Thame Water especially with regards to hardness of the water.

The commission then asked questions on the following points

- Action plans implemented and resident experiences; major improvement works planned for heating and hot water at Rouel road.

Councillor Pollak explained to the commission that periodic actions taken to repair, clean and fix plant room and pipe work don't prevent the outages over the winter, a more holistic assessment of Rouel Road estate heating and hot water needs to be undertaken. Furthermore, resident complaints are seemingly treated as overemphasized, which is not the case and he is unaware of any major improvement works planned for Rouel road; officers from asset management are not present at this meeting to answer these questions pertaining to Rouel road.

The commission also noted that in previous years there have been scrutiny recommendations made to Cabinet on heating and hot water outages, and a review of the progress on those recommendations could be considered.

The commission then heard from residents of Rouel road estate Robert Randles, Wendy, Karen Gregory and Jerry Flynn on the following themes

- Heating and hot water outages at Rouel increased since the upgrade and in 2020 (April to October) during Covid, there were issues with heating; repairs carried out caused issues of water leakage, out of hours service did not treat it as an emergency; residents often advise to use fan heaters during heating outages which are a safety hazard for children with special needs.
- During summer, legally temperature settings for heating to turn off is 17C and 15C during the night which is not warm enough; Issues with accountability of OCO and BSW service providers as their responsible for Plant room and pipework issues respectively.
- Heating distributed at Rouel road is not meeting resident expectations as they operate at legal minimal levels; weekend outages are common at Rouel road and after hours escalations are never fixed overnight and/or over the weekend.
- Repairs contact centre waiting times of 20- 40 minutes are not acceptable; service charges in excess of £2k of which 60% are heating and hot water charges, residents charged call out charges for every visit however residents are still without heating and hot water; residents need compensation for outages
- Even after repeated calls elderly residents have suffered due to heating outages for days and have had to use blankets to keep themselves warm in extreme temperatures -1C; residents usage of fan heaters have increased energy bills on an average of £2/day to 10£/day for many days and compensation given was £3.80.
- Proper maintenance and service plans essential, repairs service need revamping and compensation for hardship suffered by residents; heating issues at Rouel Road in report by officers suggest October 2020 to March 2021, however residents' have reported issues much earlier.
- Residents' record of outages from 2016 submitted to council as a complaint; officer report suggests that outages are not widespread, however most properties have experienced outages at one time or another; Compensation in officer reports does not indicate the amount paid to residents.

- Since March 2021 multiple properties have experienced heating outages including hot water, multiple calls have been made over days for the same outages, repair jobs are routinely closed daily without confirming with residents that issue has been resolved, on one occasion a repair issue had to be reported every day for 9 days before the repair was finally completed. Resident informed by OCO contractors that descaling required for their property which has led to long outages.
- Online reviews and ratings of BSW contractor are quite bad and low respectively; emergency contact numbers for residents to contact call centre and estates not functional; 50% turnover of staff at repairs call centre; incorrect information given to contractors regarding the heating and hot water setup at different properties.

The commission noted that heating and hot water outages is a borough wide issue affecting multiple estates.

The commission then heard from Interim Strategic Director for Housing, David Quirke-Thornton that due to some miscommunication amongst officers, the Asset Management team officers are not present at this commission meeting to present the submitted report and address the commission with regards to questions on Rouel Road estate. However, David also informed the commission that he himself had been briefed on the report and would be happy to answer questions. In addition, David also agreed that there might be a need for Asset Management team officers to attend a future commission meeting.

The commission then heard from David on the following topics

- Acknowledgement of disappointing and frustrating resident experiences since 2016 and the impact that the heating and hot water outages has had on residents and families; Significant investment has been made in upgrades to the heating network, however resident experiences raises questions of sustainability of the district heating service.
- Current issues with district heating service with regards to pipework, plant rooms and maintenance indicate short term fixes are leading to recurring issues and further assessment on the long term sustainability of district heating service is needed which has already seen major investments by the council.
- Challenges around bringing all stakeholders together like contractors, Thames Water and the Council; revisiting and auditing previous recommendations to Cabinet and making new recommendations could result in the same results for residents; existential question on running the district heating in the modern world and making it reliable.

The commission then agreed that Rouel Road Estate will be on the agenda for the next commission meeting ensuring officer attendance to answer the questions put forth by residents at this commission meeting.

The commission then heard from the newly appointed Cabinet Member for Council Homes, Councillor Sarah King that the questions and feedback from residents on heating and hot water outages at Rouel road will be discussed with ward councillors, officers and Councillor King herself, including existing and future action plans, in the interest of bringing back tangible updates to the commission.

The commission then asked further questions on the following themes (heating & hot water outages)

- Mechanisms for contractor monitoring and accountability; addressing systemic failures on the inception of the contract work carried out and assessment of viability of upgrades across the borough.
- Incongruence between resident feedback and report submitted by officers; repeat callers, reporting issues, Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and performance data over a longer period across the borough; repeated compensations for the same resident calls; Compensation processes for private tenants (refund of service charges going to landlords)
- Extension of current contracts according to the forward plan and carrying over current terms and conditions.
- Existential question of the sustainability of district heating and its impact on the Council's aim to be carbon-neutral; attendance of contractors at the next Cabinet meeting in March 2024 where decision on extension of contracts would be taken.

David informed the commission that current contracts don't have strict and robust enough mechanisms for monitoring and accountability and also to recover some of the monies as compensation for residents, there is on-going work in developing frameworks and procuring new contracts with stricter mechanisms for monitoring, accountability and compensations.

David explained to the commission that there have been areas where upgrades and routine maintenance have worked successfully and areas where it hasn't, causing long outages. Furthermore, there are have been survey, work plans, strategy and significant funding allocated to these projects. However, there needs to be proper consideration of options to provide adequate heating and hot water to residents.

David agreed that officers would provide a further report taking into account questions raised by this commission and request for data.

The commission heard from David that there are some benefits from extending current contracts with regards to costs and standards, however it is acknowledged that stricter control mechanisms and levers need to be in place and will be considered in discussions with other officers.

David informed the commission that across the work programme, eco-friendly boilers have been successfully installed in many areas. In district heating the

challenges lie in providing adequate heat to residents with varying needs of heating temperatures such as elderly residents, families and individuals with special needs in a reliable, cost effective and eco-friendly way. There are questions whether the district heating model can be made to work for individual needs. Currently compensations, complaints and statutory processes cause a lot of hassle for residents and take up officer time, it could be more pragmatic to spend those resources on solutions that work for residents. On attendance of contractors at the next Cabinet meeting in March, this will be discussed with Cabinet Member for Council Homes.

The commission agreed to follow up on possible recommendations arising from the last commission meeting on 6 February 2024.

6. INTERVIEW WITH CABINET MEMBER FOR COUNCIL HOMES

The commission then heard from Councillor Sarah King and David on the following points

- Recent appointment to role of Cabinet for Council Homes; keen to hear this commission's priorities and expectations; volumes of housing repairs casework for councillors have increased; Statistical improvements in areas of resident satisfaction and first attempt resolution of repairs, further work needed in interrogating data of repairs.
- Meetings planned with Resident Improvement Board on their experiences of repairs and will be fed back into repairs process work carried out by Council; priority is communal repairs and how it affects estates.
- Performance in repairs has improved in in-home repairs, higher resident satisfaction in in-house repairs and variable satisfaction levels with contractors; residents' elected Co-Chair for the Resident Improvement Board to decide on priorities for the board and its agenda being set by the Co-Chair and the Cabinet Member for Council Homes.
- Resident feedback that improvements have been made in the call centre, however lessons to be learned for monitoring performance of contractors, engaging residents in the strategy for repairs important; data on first time repairs against repeated visits have improved running at 85% from 50% less than a year ago, 15% remaining still a challenge and needs attention

The commission then asked questions on the following topics

- Timeline for recovering from repairs backlog during Covid, non-emergency communal repairs and procurement of new contracts for repairs; update on long term Council delivery plans on repairs, further details on Resident led Repairs Improvement Board- structure and processes in the future, plans post April 2024 for repairs.

- Commitment to transparency and accountability and to minimise the gap in repairs between tenants' & leaseholders' perception of issues and council officer perceptions in reports; taking into account £3.3m paid in disrepairs (no win no fee cases) by Southwark Council over the past years and Social Housing Regulations.
- Scrutiny's role and input in development of policies and strategies in Housing; Changing the residents' perception of the council with regards to ease of communication; Call Centre and Contact Centre improvements; Repairs Liaison officer on estates for minor repairs.

Councillor King explained to the commission that Covid backlog has not been a part of the reasoning given by officers during briefings on repairs, however it exists as a part of a broader narrative. It is essential that the Council presents to this commission and its residents a clear path of travel with regards to reducing the backlog in repairs.

David agreed with the commission that milestones and target dates need to be set to meet resident expectations on repairs. Meetings between officers and trade unions provides oversight into the in-house services and have had some positive feedback. It is hoped that this will help build a fair and reasonable repairs service. Further plans for discussions with Resident Improvement Boards (RIBs) on the future workings of the boards. Tenants and Resident Associations (TRAs) and Tenancy Management Organisations (TMOs) should be encouraged by support from the council to carry out essential work especially on communal spaces. The Forward plan for council delivery will involve frameworks and procurement of contracts.

Councillor King informed the commission that looking at compensation pay outs considering statutory cases lodged by no win no fee lawyers is important. The statistics used to show Housing Regulations compliance are important factors when presenting data to residents, councillors and scrutiny commissions; and will be considered in discussions of reporting with officers. Priority will be given to interrogation and deeper delve into data reporting and statistics.

Councillor King explained to the commission that it would too early in her role as Cabinet Member for Council Homes to suggest any specific policies and strategies for scrutiny to consider which could benefit residents and improve satisfaction. Scrutiny is an important tool in developing framework and policies for residents' benefit, however it is important that learnings from resident feedback are considered in putting forth the right policies. It is also important that scrutiny be involved in discussions around looking at policies in development, through discussions with the Chair of this commission.

The commission learned from Councillor King that further discussions with officers on Repair Liaisons on estates is needed. There is also some work needed to empower residents, councillors and officers to regularly report on issues, ensuring that repairs are fixed quickly.

The commission then asked further questions around the following themes

- Pre-scrutiny on personalisation of repairs, mediation with leaseholders and support for TRAs and TMOs to carry out communal repairs; plans for TRAs and TMOs in wards.
- Budgetary issues within housing department with regards to over spend of £6m in two estates with issues; possibility of 6 more estates amounting £20m approx.; plans to ensure new contracts are procured and existing contracts managed going forward - rolled over heating contracts and multi million pound major works programmes
- Approach to challenges in balancing the budget, considering the major expenditure in the Asset Management Programme for Fire Safety works

On pre-scrutiny, Councillor King explained that scrutiny will be informed of the policies in development on the Cabinet Member's work programme.

Councillor King informed the commission that the plans for TRAs and TMOs is a priority and briefings are scheduled for next week. It is important to provide clarity to residents on resources and support that will be provided by the council. There are very successful works that have been carried out by residents within estates in her own ward. Investment in TRAs and TMOs should ensure longevity and continued support from the council.

The Chair explained to the commission it's important that TRAs and TMOs are not seen as outsourced job to few highly invested residents who are volunteers, future commission meetings would be discussing this approach in detail.

Councillor King explained to the commission that through the budget scrutiny process discussions during Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 23 January 2024; she has learned that there is a plan in place to stabilise the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and its importance, especially considering major works and contract overspends.

The commission learned from Councillor King that it is important procurement and rolling over of contracts are approached with a view to invest right amount of money in right areas to receive the best service possible whilst ensuring the stability of the HRA. Some important factors to consider are leading time for contracts procured and a plan for rollover contracts to ensure the continuity of service to residents, whilst also ensuring framework and procurement processes are considered.

Councillor King informed the commission that it is a legal priority and also a responsibility towards our residents to ensure they are safe and feel safe in their homes. Currently this bill from the central government does not come with any support, there is a need for a clear dialogue with the existing and future governments on the priorities to deliver these works in a timely way. It is a significant challenge delivering these priorities whilst balancing the HRA budget.

David explained to the commission that the overall works programme now includes building safety works and fire safety, helping mitigate some of the costs. The prioritisation of these works in works programme has led to good progress, despite the challenges of having 187 tower blocks. Although compared to some other London boroughs we are in a better place with cladding and fire safety works required for our tower blocks. Regeneration projects this year would see around a thousand homes being handed over to residents from the old stock of housing. There are significant challenges and pressures faced by Local Authorities in delivering these legal duties without any support from central government. There are on-going discussions to look at, ways to invest in growing our own team of reliable fire safety consultants such as ex-fire fighters rather than paying for external consultants.

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The commission discussed at length the need to include an item on Heating and Hot water outages at Rouel road in detail and also a wider item on District Heating across the borough.

The commission agreed to move Housing Resident Participation Framework and Overview of TRAs to the next municipal year 2024-2025

The commission then voted and agreed on items for the upcoming meetings

29 February 2024

- Rouel Road estate - Heating & Hot Water Outages
- Interview with Cabinet Member for Community Safety; Councillor Natasha Enin
 - Noise & Nuisance update

21 March 2024

- Heating & Hot Water Outages - Borough Wide
- Interview with Borough Fire Commander
- Scrutiny report and recommendations

Meeting ended at 9:43 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: