



Overview & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Monday 31 March 2025 at 6.30 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Wingfield (Chair)
Councillor Irina Von Wiese (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Suzanne Abachor
Councillor Cassandra Brown
Councillor Victor Chamberlain
Councillor Sam Foster
Councillor Laura Johnson
Councillor Richard Leeming
Councillor Margy Newens
Councillor Catherine Rose
Jonathan Clay (Co-opted member)

**OTHER
MEMBERS** Councillor Kieron Williams
PRESENT: Councillor Sarah King

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

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Martin Seaton and Martin Brecknell (Co-opted member).

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Richard Leeming.

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

The Chair informed the committee that there were no late items.

Supplemental Agenda No.1 contains reports on Item 5. Electrical Testing in Council Homes and Item 6. Governance and Oversight of Housing Services

Supplemental Agenda No.2 contains Minutes of the meetings held on 27 November 2024.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 27 November 2024 and 8 January 2025 were approved as a correct record.

5. ELECTRICAL TESTING IN COUNCIL HOMES

The committee first heard from Cllr Sarah King, Cabinet Member for Council Homes and Hakeem Osinaike, Strategic Director for Housing on the following points of discussion.

- Self-referral to regulator based on earlier findings of the lack of electrical testing and smoke alarms; Council repairs and external contractors appointed to ensure timelines for electrical safety testing are being met.
- Challenges around procurement of contractors and subsequent delivery of electrical testing; Prioritising electrical testing in higher risk tower blocks and elderly vulnerable tenants and tenants who have concerns
- Existing contractors increase their capacity from May 2025 and procurement of two additional contractors to support them; target is to reach compliance by March 2026 and aiming to access every council home.

The Chair then clarified para.14 of the report; 24256 homes that need electrical testing is a lower starting point; this is to accommodate the new standards of testing in already tested homes. In addition, the Chair explained that it's also necessary to prioritise elderly vulnerable people, factoring in their individual vulnerabilities.

The committee then asked the following questions

- Process for electrical testing in a home, tolerance and contingency within this program and further electrical work as an outcome of the inspection; Communication with residents on the plans for electrical times including lead time and completion.
- Detection of hidden defects in wiring especially around kitchen appliances; Clarification on data issues - 50% of 34,000 homes equated to 17,000 homes, the lower starting point of 24,000 homes equates to 73%.
- General trends in the outcomes of electrical testing currently being carried out; Timeline for electrical testing of street properties who have not raised concerns but received a letter from the council six months prior.

Hakeem explained to the committee that the possible outcomes of electrical testing in homes can range from satisfactory and compliant to urgent and non-urgent work and will be prioritised accordingly. The council has an agreement with contractors that urgent work in a home will be done immediately while on site. Non-urgent work will be prioritised either by Housing Services Repair programme or the planned maintenance work. Furthermore, residents have received a letter explaining the process, the time required and the personnel that would visit their homes who would further explain any additional work that needs to be carried out. Electrical testing is done in a five-year cycle; however, the council intends to start the testing earlier to spread out the workload and as a result it's possible that some homes might have their electrical testing before the five-year timeline for electrical testing in their home ends.

Cllr King explained to the committee that the internal council data indicates that some form of electrical safety testing has taken place in 50% of council homes, however these properties might not necessarily have an electrical safety test certificate. The council in conjunction with the regulator aims to cover all properties that are lacking in the new standards of compliance also ensuring the data is up to date and more accurate and complete. Multiple households living in the same block will be given higher priority for electrical testing.

Hakeem informed the committee that the council's aim is to reach compliance by March 2026 and the contractors have estimated that from May 2025 they should be able to complete 2800 homes every month, in addition two additional contractors will start testing in the summer months and we should be reaching all properties soon, but there needs to be agreement on prioritisation. Budget allocation for the delivery of testing timelines seems to be on track now and no major concerns have been raised with regards to achieving the targets.

The committee then asked further questions on the following themes

- Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR) structures for preventing failures, £250m budget allocations
- Stock condition survey and identifying previously un-discovered vulnerable people post pandemic through annual tenancy checks

- Historical context - Housing Improvement Board report from November 2022 and delay in addressing issues leading to current conditions of EICR in homes; Assurances of meeting the March 2025 target for completion to residents; Informing the regulator of lower starting point in electrical testing; Contingency plan in case target is missed and assurances to residents on safety of their homes

The committee learnt from Cllr King that the Electrical Safety Audit work carried out by the council a year ago led the council to make a self-referral to the Social Housing regulator. The stock condition survey work carried out by the council indicated the need to increase the electrical testing work, the regulator agreed with steps the council had taken to undertake this work. The council is working with the regulator in addressing the concerns in the judgement of the council as a social landlord, also identifying areas that have not been picked up in the audit by the regulator.

Hakeem explained to the committee that the housing team is also working on analysing the root cause of failures in electrical testing to futureproof this process. The stock condition survey being carried out is extensive and covers people living in these properties, not just building structures and the council is also working with partners in Public Health and Adult Social Care.

Cllr King further explained that the council staff such as officers and estate managers are working closely to raise communal repairs issues and identifying vulnerable, and this has been successful recently.

Hakeem informed the committee, as Cllr King mentioned earlier that the computer systems the council used to record electrical safety tests indicate a much higher number of homes where tests have been conducted, however officers are not counting those properties where we haven't been able to locate the EICR certificates. Furthermore, this lower starting point is to give the council complete data assurance and setting higher standards in electrical testing. The regulator for social housing is provided regular updates on issues (EICR) identified by them and the issues identified by the council, the regulator agrees that the council is progressing in the right direction in this regard. The system that the council is using for electrical safety is called True Compliance where one cannot circumvent the electrical safety test certificate, and this would ensure that homes are compliant. The council is doing root cause analysis of past failures in electrical testing.

Cllr King explained to the committee that the council initially wrote to residents on electrical testing and currently using the tenant engagement structure such as repairs improvement board to communicate monthly with residents. The council is also setting up a Housing Management Board to effectively communicate with tenants and learn about their experiences, to provide progress reports and provide assurances here onwards.

6. GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT OF HOUSING SERVICES

The committee then heard from Cllr King and Hakeem on the following topics

- Significant amount of work in the housing department to forensically understand the work needed to deliver good quality housing for residents; New governance procedures, Housing Oversight Board chaired by the leader of the council Cllr Kieron Williams.
- Lead Member (Cllr King) briefings - progress reports, housing investment plan, housing regulator meetings, engagement with tenants ensuring transparency.
- New appointments- Strategic Director of Housing, Director of Housing Needs, Director of Housing Repairs; Increase in skills and expertise within the housing department and the senior team.
- The Corporate Management Team (CMT) including the Chief Executive have expressed that the issues faced within the housing department and its ownership lies with the entire council and are looking to work together holistically to address these issues. The safety, satisfaction and assurance to our residents is of utmost importance to the council.

The Chair addressed the meeting expressing that the council needs to work together to rectify these issues, it's important that the council deliver for our residents, tenants and leaseholders. Furthermore, there needs to be acknowledgement of the things that have gone wrong within housing including but not limited to Canada Estate, Devon Mansions and other housing estates. There also needs to be a deep dive into investigating the failures within housing.

The committee then asked further questions on the following themes

- Culture and the lack of political accountability in previous governance structures; Completion of fire safety remedial actions report due to Cabinet in March 2025; Political accountability for future failings in actions recommended by regulator social housing; Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for housing improvement plan.

The committee heard from Hakeem that all the fire safety remedial actions have not been completed yet, due to the lead time of 12 weeks for contractors; measuring different size fire safety doors, manufacturing doors and then agreeing a date with residents for installation.

Cllr King informed the committee that the housing investment and improvement plan has identified officers operationally responsible for specific areas, however the vast majority of political accountability lies mainly with herself, Cllr Stephanie Cryan for her Cabinet Member role in Finance and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). In addition, the Housing Oversight Board chaired by Cllr Kieron Williams are also politically accountable. Furthermore, Cllr Helen Dennis in her Cabinet Member role for New Homes. The Housing Improvement Plan has been put together by herself and senior officers to address these issues, however there could be challenges in

progress of these plans such as not being able to access tenant properties to carry out these tests, due to unavailability of residents and other factors.

In addition, Cllr King explained to the committee that she felt it was more important to prioritise putting a plan in place to address these issues, versus carrying out a root cause analysis which investigates the past. In terms of past failings there has been resident engagement to investigate the cause within Major Works programmes. Furthermore, work with the independent consultant (Pellings) and the task and finish group is still ongoing. The learnings from failings at Consort Estate being at an early stage in its major work programme has benefitted from a saving of £5m by putting in place better contractual arrangements. There also challenges within the technology used to manage housing data within the council and in general across the sector. Tech companies historically have underinvested in housing solutions, but this is changing with regulations being put on private and social landlords. The council is catching up and learning about these issues live while working on these issues.

The committee heard from Cllr King that tenant satisfaction measures survey are the best way to measure performance in housing improvement, this year's tenant satisfaction measures have been received and is due to be published in June 2025, which would show an improvement in all areas, especially in areas of housing safety. However, this is down to communicating with residents on housing safety rather than the progress of the overall safety work being carried out. Housing complaints, enquiries and timeliness of repairs are all important KPIs. Electrical Safety Testing and Stock Condition Surveys will take a significant amount of time to complete given the high number of council homes in Southwark.

Hakeem explained to the committee that it's difficult to give the committee a definitive date on the report for the root cause analysis as housing services are wide in range such as compliance, repairs and homelessness, and these services are also large in scale.

The Committee then asked further questions on the following points of discussion

- Key recommendations to help the housing improvement plan achieve its goals in the wider context of the support from other council departments
- Lead Member Briefing process to include housing stock issues from estate inspections, whistle-blowers, members enquiries, call centre logs and cabinet member questions. Furthermore, how this factor into the Housing Oversight Board.

Cllr King informed the committee that there have been key improvements in areas of resident and tenant engagement with help of experts from other council departments. A significant hurdle is the financial aspect of housing and the HRA which could benefit from more funding and would ensure stock condition survey targets are met sooner.

Hakeem explained to the committee that there has been exceptional support from

the CMT, Chief Executive and Cabinet Member, Cllr King. In addition, the Resident Engagement Strategy is due to go out to consultation in April 2025.

7. CABINET/SENIOR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIC RESPONSIBILITY

The committee then heard from Cllr Kieron Williams, Leader of the Council and Althea Loderick, Chief Executive on Cabinet/Senior Management Strategic Responsibility covering the following topics

- Post pandemic (2022) restoring council services; New Chief Executive May 2022; Independent peer review 2023 overall council services good especially Adults & Children Services, Community Safety, Economic Development, New Council Homes; Ofsted rating good for schools, youth offending services rated as good.
- Home Care satisfaction from mid-50% to mid-90%; Southwark biggest creator of Youth Apprenticeships in London; Reduction of 19% in number of children coming into care; Number of children in youth offending services reduced by 18%.
- Areas of Improvement- improving our offer to tenants and leaseholders; Detailed review of our housing services- audits; Communication to residents on improving our housing services in response to issues highlighted in audits; Work plan to look after council homes- New Strategic Director for Housing; New Cabinet Member for Council Homes working with officers on housing improvement plan.
- Self- referral to Housing regulator on electrical testing, smoke alarms and fire risk assessments; Housing regulator national framework helpful to politicians to ask the right questions about council housing services; C3 rating from regulator, however regulator confident in our plans to deliver the improvement needed.
- £250m to improve housing services especially housing repairs service, improving estates, new council homes and customer service; Building cabinet for strong leadership and Chief Executive building Senior officer team.
- Commending the work done by OSC and ward councillors for their respective wards and its residents; Council affected by austerity and now rebuilding some back-office checking services.
- Essential components of well-run and successful organisations, large organisations need clarity in the operating context, operating model, staff role & responsibilities, powers through scheme of management, budget delegation, decision making powers; Clarity in hierarchies and structures on supervision and managing staff; Performance management systems for individuals, team, departments and organisation including risks, compliance, audits etc.
- Huge demands on the housing service in day-to-day workload coupled with backlog from post-covid era, issue with skills, tools and ability to undertake tasks, limited financial resources (HRA); Structures that have now been put in place will provide residents assurance of the delivery of housing services.

- Geo-political issues have a knock-on effect on local government services; Funding settlement over 2-3 years will create financial challenges; Local Government re-organisation in London to the Mayoral model will have an impact on Local Government Authorities; Children's Services reform with a focus on early help; Major Local and National NHS Reform; Southwark Council need to have an operating model that proactively respond and deal with these changes.
- One council working to ensure more efficient use of resources and moving away from the federated model of organising and delivering services; Reviewing procurement systems to make it a stronger procurement model; Strategy and Communities delivering transformation and change.

The committee then asked questions on the following points

- Alternate priorities and choices historically that could have resulted in a better outcome for housing services; More political will and focus on governance of housing services historically.
- Political administration holding officers accountable for the advice on the course of action.
- Communication and Engagement with residents by the council officers mainly good overall, issues arise when the delivery of services are provided by intermediaries mainly contractors (major repair works) initiating works without any engagement with residents.
- Privatisation of property and commercial development to the north of the borough and building social housing towards the south where land prices are cheaper, causing disproportionate redistribution of wealth in the borough.

The committee heard from Cllr Williams that during the pandemic it was absolutely the right choice to support residents through the pandemic, post pandemic the focus was to improve the housing repairs services. Housing services were reviewed through the audits, and failings were identified. Financial constraints due to austerity measures meant that three quarters of councils across the country had either had to reduce maintenance of their council homes or cut back on building new homes or sell-off homes. Southwark is increasing the housing repairs service and building new homes. There are examples housing department working hard to improve lives of residents, this has been captured in a documentary on work done by frontline staff in Southwark.

Cllr Williams explained to the committee that the housing Commission held in 2012 gave us three options; focus on maintaining homes or focus on making homes better and building more homes, or less focus on maintaining home and building maximum number of homes. The council and the leadership chose the third option to build maximum number of new homes, this decision was clearly important looking at the current housing waiting list of 18,000 homes needed.

Althea informed the committee that the political direction sets the policy, and the operation is directed by officers who advise politicians on the viable course of action. Council officers are expected to provide the political leadership accurate

insight into the delivery of services.

The committee heard from Cllr Williams that it's important for politicians in leadership roles to have channels and avenues of gaining insight into delivery of services through direct briefing from officers, access to audits, independent assessments from regulator, and resident feedback by engaging with people and communities on delivery and experience of services. All these channels together but especially internal audits give the leadership the answers to identify failings in the housing service at Southwark.

The Chair expressed to the committee that we have inputs from residents at various levels and forums which are being incorporated into the new governance structure as mentioned by Cllr King. The housing commission and its recommendations had come from a great wealth of information from independent regulators and partners not connected to Southwark in anyway.

Cllr Williams explained to the committee there is no deliberate plan to privatisate properties and commercial development to the north of the borough. The strategy is to obtain maximum value in building homes for our residents on land owned by the council. Residents and ward councillors have been asked to help identify sites across the borough, however it is true that the council owns more land in the middle of the borough where we have more council housing and estates. Areas such as Old Kent Road have been purchased by the council as they are less dense and more opportunity for buy to build. The council is building houses across the borough and even up near the riverfronts.

The committee heard from Althea that the council is working on strengthening the procurement model and stronger contract management in some parts of the borough. Better communication and engagement with residents on major works being undertaken, is a core focus area within the housing improvement plan led by Cllr King.

The committee then asked further questions on the following themes

- Southwark being a member-led council, the accountability of the failings in the housing service lies with Cabinet members as well as officers
- Southwark's role in lobbying the government for the delivery of 1.5m homes nationally, stating lack of powers and finances for Southwark's housing delivery plan.
- Principles of values and cultures of the council and its adoption within the council workforce with regards to resident experience on resolution of issues

Cllr Williams informed the committee that issues within the housing services were first uncovered by internal review and audit which was a political ask by OSC members, Cabinet members and ward councillors who raised it politically. The self-referral to the regulator revealed the same findings already uncovered by the council. Cabinet members had asked very searching questions but weren't given all details and information at that time. This resulted in substantial changes in the

governance and oversight of safety & regulatory requirements. Southwark council will receive an extra £2.8bn for affordable housing from the government. The council needs to continue to lobby the government for more funding. The council housing summit held recently brought together many councils, residents and professional groups to collectively lobby the government for more funding.

Althea explained to the committee that since she had taken up her role, the focus has always been getting out there in the community and engaging with residents, the feedback gathered from residents has led to the development of the one council approach. The values that are being developed are following a bottom-up approach based on resident feedback and the pre-existing council values already been set. The council is also working to ensure every staff member has got clarity of their role in the council. One of the key principles of Southwark 2030 strategy is how the council works with our place and our people.

The committee then heard from Cllr Williams that there was a very clear approach in the job advert/recruitment of senior officers ensuring that we bring in people with the ethos of the council values. Cabinet members are also approaching their respective areas with questions on how our services are delivering the needs of our residents, putting residents first.

The Committee then asked further questions on the following points

- Technology and skills issues with the Housing customer management systems; Partnerships with external organisations to address the challenges in technology
- Climate emergency funding of £3.2b, understanding of the climate emergency measures such as carbon footprint within the council, achieving ambitions of climate emergency

Cllr Williams informed the committee that recruiting officers with skills in operating the technology is difficult as other organisations offer higher pay. There is on-going work in developing a much more resilient system for recording customer data. Partnership working is a part of the Southwark 2030 strategy where we work with NHS, Urban Health and the Police whilst looking at the borough holistically.

Althea explained to the commission that there is on-going work to reprocure the Enterprise Resourcing Platform, it's important for the council to have a base level platform to understand the types of data, how it's held and managed. This would also provide a base from where the council could access technology capital, social capital, including digital innovation and AI.

The committee then heard from Cllr Williams that there is a clear political direction when it comes to the climate emergency aims of the council; departments such as the leisure services are looking at ways to reduce the carbon footprint, being the biggest emitters with regards to swimming pools etc. However, there is more work to be done in other areas of the council.

Althea informed the committee that more work needs to be done in distilling the council's commitment to climate emergency amongst departments, where-in it becomes an integrated part of every work process and practice in the council.

The committee then heard a summary of the discussions at this meeting

- On-going root cause assessment of Housing service issues, what went wrong, when and how
- Structural changes to housing governance; fortified elements of the governance structure- strategic housing oversight board with reports from Housing DMTs
- Overload on housing demand with scale of the housing issue combined with factors such post-covid backlog
- Overreliance on central structures, transformation needed around central structures
- Member services and casework, resident engagement and communication
- All the above-mentioned areas coming together in a one council approach.
- Previously political oversight on housing issues were only raised when residents mobilised and were championed by ward councillors

Cllr Williams explained to the committee that extra attention and governance has now been put in place for housing, which is the number one priority for the council. The scale of housing issues in Southwark makes it a priority for the IT team, HR Team, Call Centre Team, Finance team etc. being a collective task. Customer service and handling complaints is important, but its also crucial to learn from those complaints to make the service better. The council needs to have good engagement structures with residents to show changes made because of issues that were raised.

The committee then heard from Althea that having good engagement structures is important and having governance through oversight boards is key to that process. However, in response to the issues raised at meetings, there needs to be clear objectives for a resolution and working towards that change. Furthermore, its also crucial that we find a balance between focusing on housing related issues and maintaining and improving other core council services.

Cllr Williams informed the committee that the housing regulator inspections have revealed that the biggest social landlords in the country are in a very similar position to Southwark. The challenges in the housing repairs sector are on an enormous scale, however there is strong determination across the country to change this. There are on-going talks with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to setup a network for Directors of Housing like the Children's and Adults Services network which led to a national revolution in the sector.

The Chair summarised the meeting by expressing that the issues, comments and questions raised at this meeting reflect the resident experiences; and the focus of this committee, senior officers and cabinet members is to improve trust and

confidence in the council in the community. There are areas of improvement within the overall council services, however there a lot of achievements to be proud of despite the financial hardships faced.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

Proposed agenda items for upcoming meeting: 7 May 2025

- Canada Estate/ Devon Mansions Final Report.
- Delivering Southwark 2030 Strategy- Council Ambitions and Commitments.
- Climate Change Strategy and Performance.
- Refresh the procurement framework to deliver Southwark 2030 strategy.

Meeting ended at 9:15 pm.

CHAIR:

DATED: