

Open Agenda



Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 12 October 2023 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Ellie Cumbo (Chair)
Councillor Emily Tester (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jane Salmon
Councillor Sam Foster
Councillor Victoria Mills
Councillor Portia Mwangangye (Reserve member)
Cris Claridge (Co-opted member)
Ina Negoita (Co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Helen Dennis

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva (Scrutiny officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Esme Hicks and also Councillor Barrie Hargrove who was substituted by Councillor Portia Mwangangye.

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The Chair informed the commission of the change in membership, Councillor Kimberly McIntosh has now been replaced by Councillor Victoria Mills. The Chair also announced that this would be her last meeting as the Chair of this commission and that she would be stepping down due to a change in circumstances of her new

job, which could possibly be politically restricted and an increased work load would mean limited time to dedicate to Chairing this commission.

The Chair also informed the commission that Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its last meeting on 4 October 2023 agreed to include Community Engagement within the remit of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission and also that this commission would now be renamed Housing, Community Safety and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosure of interests and dispensations.

4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2023 were approved as a correct record.

5. SOUTHWARK'S TEMPORARY ACCOMODATION POLICY

The commission was first given an introduction to Temporary Accommodation (TA) by Cabinet Member for New Homes and Sustainable Development, Councillor Helen Dennis on the following points

- Exponential growth in temporary accommodation, increase of 10% since last year
- One in 23 children in London live in temporary accommodation according London Councils Data
- Factors- Lack of supply in the private rented sector decline of 41%; only 2.3 % available housing stock in London available to rent on benefits, Local Housing Allowance needs to be increased to cover the lower 30% rents; cuts to discretionary housing payments; Government policy of housing asylum and refugees - 7 day notice period to seek alternative accommodation.
- Temporary Accommodation Policy revised two years ago to provide a better quality of housing

The commission then received a report from Karen Shaw Head of Housing Solutions on Overview of Southwark's temporary accommodation around the following themes

- Provision of temporary accommodation in Southwark with a total of 3653 households with the breakdown categories in para. 4 table 1 of report

- Increase in Homelessness and approaches over time para. 10 table 2 of report
- Reasons for homelessness over time para. 11 Table 3 of report
- Growth in temporary accommodation over time with recent increase due to cost-of-living, asylum and refugees and inflation. Southwark has 3rd highest TA in London.
- Significant cohort of homelessness in TA within Southwark; Pan London increase in use of provisions such as Bed & Breakfast, commercial hotels or shared nightly paid accommodation
- Challenges in working effectively with the homeless and homelessness to manage demand; Procurement options to develop initiatives for TA

The commission then asked questions around the following topics

- Stability of TA numbers across London Boroughs and reasons behind it
- Mitigating the numbers in TA in Southwark
- Budgeting for family interventions

The commission learned that Newham which has the highest number in TA have been stable with the numbers in TA over the years, Southwark and Lambeth numbers have increased significantly over the last few years especially over the last 12 months, however Southwark has done well to keep the numbers in TA stable. Cost-of-living, inflation and high homeless approach numbers has led to high numbers of TA in Lambeth and Southwark. The commission clarified with Karen that numbers for Lambeth is not in the table due to figures not being published, however communications and data sharing between the council's officers have indicated the high numbers of TA in Lambeth as well as Southwark.

Karen informed the commission that the Council is in process of redesigning the services operational process for TA mainly in demand management, eviction and working with families to find longer term solutions based on their circumstances. The commission also learnt that currently there is a small visiting team within housing solutions and depending on its success, a restructure and review is planned to look at resources and budget for family interventions.

The commission then asked further questions on the following themes

- Quality of TA
- Budgetary pressures on TA
- Selective licensing in the private rented sector

Karen explained to the commission that the officers are working on a paper to Cabinet on TA, contracting arrangements and incentivising for better standards in

TA, however the reality is that good quality accommodations take longer to find. Housing standards are monitored by the council through internal processes and there is a Pan London initiative called 'setting the standards' who inspect properties and grade them and properties below a certain grade are not procured. The council is also looking at longer term procurement solutions in TA which could help balance budgets over a longer period and reduce the budgetary pressures on TA.

Cllr Dennis informed the commission that the council have been looking at new ways to provide value for money and increase savings when it comes to TA and one example is the 80 Aylesbury estate properties which were brought back into use with an investment from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) leading to savings in TA. New procurement initiatives are being looked at to increase the council housing stock which will lead to higher savings and also making the council less reliant on the private rented sector with inflationary rates.

The commission heard from Cllr Dennis that selective licensing was brought in to improve the conditions of properties in the private rented sector especially Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) by incentivising landlords and this initiative needs to be monitored and Pan London discussions on the impact of selective licensing are needed. The council has also initiated gold standards for private landlords who are willing to rent their properties to homeless people through the council giving them exemption from selective licensing fees.

The commission asked further on the following points

- Evictions from council rented properties and housing associations leading to homelessness, relocation of residents to other boroughs and out of London
- Falling Domestic Abuse (DA) cases but increase in relationship breakdowns and marking thresholds for the assessments of such cases.
- Segregation of data between Council properties disrepair and leased properties disrepair.
- Council's mitigation measures for the possible increase in Private Rented Sector (PRS) evictions and Mortgage evictions.

The commission learnt that eviction could be a result of a variety of issues as listed in the para. 11 Table 3 of the report and these numbers include council rented and housing associations properties. The council does intervene to prevent homelessness by using the rent arrears fund and discretionary housing payments for council and housing association tenants. Relocation of evicted residents to other boroughs and out of London in places like Hertfordshire is lower in Southwark (3%) when compared to other London boroughs. The council also has to statutorily (Section 108) notify other boroughs and Local Authorities outside London in the case of relocation of residents outside Southwark.

The commission requested officers that comparison with other boroughs in figures be provided for the commission to review. The commission learnt that out of nightly based and leased properties in TA, 352 households have been relocated to other London boroughs.

The commission learnt that homelessness approaches are mainly due to DA or relationship breakdowns and these cases are further investigated by the council to gauge whether the responsibility should be accepted to house residents in these scenarios. Historically, evictions have always been higher in PRS when compared to mortgage arrears and repossessions, there was a pause in PRS evictions during Covid due to the government ban which now will eventually rise. To manage TA the council have a dedicated specialist team who provide assistance and guidance to landlords and tenants with regards to their responsibilities and rights in eviction cases.

The commission then asked further questions on the following themes

- Timeline for mediation and/or family visits; comparison of number of people calling in for TA and housed in TA; ownership and responsibility of residents in TA outside the borough.
- Impact on local communities and estates due to temporary accommodation
- Procurement, resource implications, budgetary pressures and borough placements of residents in TA policy
- Insight into the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy

The commission learnt from Karen there was a recent redesigning of the TA service with the help of an external company called BASIS focusing on early intervention and mediation in families. The council has taken steps to ensure early intervention and mediation is being carried out.

Karen agreed to provide the comparison of number of people calling in for TA and housed in TA as a result; at a future date for the commission to review.

The ownership and responsibility for residents in TA remains with originating Local Authority (LA) which commissions the TA irrespective of the location except in cases where people are intentionally homeless and then the individual have to access housing services under other local government acts in their current LA area.

Karen explained to the commission that a portion voids on estates are committed towards TA and also that it is custom and practice for properties becoming void for regeneration be used for TA. The commission learnt that the draft homelessness and rough sleeping strategy will be going to cabinet in January 2024 and a period of consultation will follow.

Councillor Dennis informed the commission that the homelessness strategy is currently being worked on with partner organisations and a some more work needs to be done before its ready in draft form, similarly the council is also assessing its success in the TA policy with regards to procurement but also focusing on; borough inside and outside placements, resource implications and budgetary pressures.

The commission then asked further questions on the following topics

- Family interventions initiative accounted for within the budget consideration
- Previous reduction of contingency for TA within the budget and its impact on spending
- Impact of reduction of housing offers from 2 to 1 leading to unsuitability for residents hence increasing pressures on TA

The commission heard from Karen that family interventions were not conducted by officers in the last few years, however the council has reintroduced this initiative within its existing resources and would not be visible in the budgetary reports. The budgetary pressures on TA are due to the rise in costs of 10-40% in the private sector renting. On TA housing offers, the increase in costs of renting privately has led to reduction of housing offers from 2 to 1, however the council is still assessing on the future of 2 housing offers in the TA policy.

The commission requested that officers provide detailed data on budgetary pressures within TA with regards to over spending and resource implications; and also on landlords pulling out of TA due to mortgage pressures.

The commission then asked questions on the following topics

- Reduction in homeless households and rise in acceptance rates of homelessness
- Process for relocation of refugees by the council through the Home Office information
- Projections for the increase in demand for TA and budgetary pressures over the next few years

Karen explained to the commission that due to the change in laws of main duty of prevention of homelessness and the relieve stages, there has been a shift in reduction of homeless households and the homeless acceptance rates. On relocation of refugees the council only gets an application for homelessness once the Home Office makes a decision on the applicant's refugee and asylum status for leave to remain, until this point they are housed by the Home Office. On increase in demand for TA; changes in legislation on Section 21 evictions, calls for Rent Control from the Mayor of London and New Council Homes being ready for Let could possibly see a reduced budget, but at the moment the projections indicate an increased demand for TA. The Council supports the Mayor's call for Rent Control.

6. COMPENSATION SCHEME FOR HEATING OUTAGES

The commission then received a report from Tom Vosper, Strategic Project Manager, Housing and Modernisation on the Compensation Scheme for heating outages on the following topics

- Automated Compensation for heating outages was first introduced in the 2021 Compensation Scheme
- Outages taken place since 2021 and compensation paid to affected properties
- Reliability of the Heating system
- £3 per day compensation not sufficient due to rise in energy costs

The commission requested information/update on the compensation policy review which was meant to take place in 2022/23.

The commission then asked questions on the following themes

- Ofgem Policy on Compensation Scheme for district heating outages
- Automated compensation application to other areas of housing
- Provisions for affected heating outage residents to claim inconvenience and disruption

The commission heard from Tom that there are currently no legislations in place to regulate the market for district heating outages by Ofgem, however legislation is planned on being introduced in 2024 and regulation to begin in 2025.

The commission considered making a recommendation that compensation for district heating outages go into private tenant bank accounts through an application process rather than private landlords and leaseholders who already benefit from all-inclusive energy bills included within the rents. This would however involve the council maintaining a database in customer services for private landlords who have all-inclusive energy bills as part of their tenancy agreements.

Tom explained to the commission that only consecutive 24 hours only qualify to automated compensation, residents can raise an additional complaints for substantive inconsecutive outages, time taken to resolve the issue, detriment to their health and inconvenience. The commission was informed that real time updating of district heating outage compensation amounts with fluctuation in market prices could be considered in line with practices in other boroughs.

The commission then asked questions on the following points

- Continuous reviews of district heating outages compensations being paid to residents

- Communications of the policies and processes of the compensation scheme to the residents of the borough

The commission learnt from Tom that tenants receive a quarterly payment to their rent accounts for consecutive 24 hour heating outages and leaseholders into their service charge accounts. The council has received fewer individual complaints and applications for heating outages which is a positive, however today's scrutiny of the scheme does raise the need for a review amongst officers with regards to currently changing cost of living circumstances.

7. CABINET RESPONSE TO THE SOUTHWARK HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY COMMISSION (2022-2023 REVIEW) - HOUSING REPAIRS SERVICE, COUNCIL LEASEHOLDERS AND EMPTY HOMES.

The commission then discussed the response from Cabinet to the commission's recommendations on Housing Repairs and Leaseholders from 2022-2023

- Recommendation 1 - the response seemed to be focused on managing calls within customer service rather than addressing the issues within the repairs service
- Recommendation 4 & 5 - there is a lack of clarity, transparency and ambiguity in the responses
- Recommendation 3 – response seems to be from repairs without any input from customer services

8. CABINET RESPONSE TO THE SOUTHWARK HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY COMMISSION (2022-2023 REVIEW) - VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS, HATE CRIME AND DOMESTIC ABUSE.

The commission then discussed the response from Cabinet to the commission's recommendations on VAWG, Hate Crime and Domestic Abuse from 2022-23

In conclusion of the discussion of both (agenda Items 7 & 8) responses to recommendations from Cabinet

- The commission discussed proposed setting templates for responses to recommendations accepted, rejected or already implemented.
- The commission and the Chair agreed to email Cabinet Members on the feedback from the Cabinet responses received by the commission

9. PROPOSED WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The commission acknowledged that Community Engagement is now a part of this commission's remit after a decision at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As a result there is a need for an extra meeting to be added to cover Community Engagement and Cabinet Member Interviews.

The commission also felt that the Baroness Casey review on the work programme could be combined with the Borough Police Commander Interview and the Cabinet Member Interview for Community Safety.

Meeting ended at 9:18 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: