



HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Tuesday 6 July 2010 at 7.00 pm at Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Michael Bukola
Councillor Poddy Clark
Councillor Stephen Govier
Councillor Claire Hickson
Councillor Linda Manchester
Councillor Martin Seaton

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Darren Merrill

OFFICER SUPPORT: Shelley Burke, Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Debbie Gooch, Legal Services
Gill Davies, Strategic Director of Environment and Housing
Margaret O'Brien, Environment and Housing
Martin Green, Environment and Housing
Karen Harris, Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Michael Situ (Councillor Martin Seaton attended as reserve), and Councillor Wilma Nelson (Councillor Michael Bukola attended as reserve).

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

2.1 There were none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

- 3.1 Councillors Michael Bukola and Stephen Govier declared personal and non-prejudicial interests as tenants of the council housing service and Councillor Linda Manchester declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as a leaseholder.

4. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

- 4.1 It was agreed that as the sub-committee would be considering issues of direct relevance to the residents of the borough, it would be appropriate to co-opt a member of the Tenants' Council and the Homeowners' Council to join the sub-committee.
- 4.2 It was clarified that co-opted committee members do not have a vote at the sub-committee and would be asked to leave the meeting in the event that the sub-committee needed to discuss any matter in closed session.
- 4.3 It was agreed that the Chair would write to the Tenants' Council and Homeowners' Council, inviting each to nominate a representative to the sub-committee.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Linda Manchester be appointed vice-chair of the sub-committee for the remainder of the municipal year.

5. DISCUSSION WITH STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND HOUSING ON KEY HOUSING ISSUES

- 5.1 Councillor Edwards welcomed Gill Davies, director of environment and housing, and colleagues Margaret O'Brien and Martin Green to the meeting, and invited her to set out the key housing issues and challenges at the moment from the perspective of her Department.
- 5.2 The director of environment and housing explained to the sub-committee the division of responsibilities between the environment and housing department, which has responsibility for housing management and home ownership and the regeneration department, which has responsibility for housing strategy, decent homes and community housing issues.
- 5.3 The director of environment and housing outlined the main housing issues as follows:

As the largest social landlord in London, Southwark has significant responsibility for housing, with some 46,000 properties. The scale of the housing responsibility in itself presents a massive challenge. Southwark also directly manages the housing stock which is quite unusual. The scale of social housing in the borough, which is used by 50% of the population, may be a factor in why councillors deal with so many housing complaints.

Over the past four years the council has been working on a significant improvement programme, with the aim of moving the housing management service out of the bottom quartile nationally in terms of performance.

The main priorities for tenants are (as demonstrated by MORI) :

- Repairs
- Community Safety
- Cleaning

- 5.4 The director of environment and housing went on to explain some of the major choices the council has to make in housing management, such as:-
- the division of resources between preventative work and remedial work
 - piecemeal or aggregated approach to major works contracting
 - housing arrears and collection
 - investment in fire risk assessments
- 5.5 In relation to housing investment until recently there were problems with the quality of asset management data. The results have just been received from the Stock Condition Survey which will facilitate evidence based decision making.
- 5.6 The head of housing management outlined for the sub-committee how the department is affected by external policy changes, such as the review of Housing Revenue Allocations and inspection regimes.
- 5.7 In terms of next years budget it is expected that housing revenue would be lower by 3-5%
- 5.8 The head of housing management explained that the department is placing a high priority on improving rent and arrears collection, taking a tougher approach to maximise income to the council, and on tenants in breach of legal agreements for the payment of their arrears. Each 1% improvement in collection means an additional £750,000 in revenue for the council.
- 5.9 Members of the sub-committee enquired about support available to tenants on financial management issues and sustaining tenancies. It was agreed that although financial advice is available it may be easier to access if it was a central council service rather than being dispersed amongst many departments. This could be an issue that the new administration will address.
- 5.10 Councillors raised detailed and general queries over the accuracy and appropriateness of the performance data on housing, including collections, resident satisfaction, repair times, post-repair customer contact and complaints.
- 5.11 There appear to be discrepancies between the performance management information and the anecdotal information from residents which is received by councillors.
- 5.12 The head of housing management explained genuine improvements have been made, however, there are difficulties with the data in relation to sample size and consistency of data collection. Work is underway with the call centre operator to ensure better consistency of data collection.

- 5.13 There was a discussion about how the data is verified and whether a reciprocal agreement with a neighbouring borough could help, or mystery shopping to get objective data.
- 5.14 The head of housing management agreed to provide the quarterly performance report to the sub-committee to provide more detail on this issue.
- 5.15 The director of environment and housing briefly outlined the home owner management responsibilities of the council covering leaseholder charges, alternative forms of home ownership and tenant management organisations. She explained that there has recently been an audit of leaseholders which has generated around 100 actions for improvement. The council is working with the Homeowners' Council to implement the action plan.
- 5.16 Councillor Edwards thanked the staff from the environment and housing department for their contributions which provided useful background for the new sub-committee.

6. WORK PROGRAMMING AND SCOPING

- 6.1 The sub-committee discussed possible topics for the work programme for the year. Councillor Edwards explained that the topics selected would need to be agreed at the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 6.2 In order to be realistic about what can be achieved in the time available, it was agreed that the sub-committee would look at one major housing issue this year in depth, and have one other housing issue agreed to take forward if there is time. In addition the sub-committee would scrutinise one community safety issue.
- 6.3 Following discussion, it was agreed that the main scrutiny topic would be Performance Management of the Housing Repairs Service.
- 6.4 The main issues to be included in the terms of reference for the review are:
- Why the performance management figures do not reflect the experience of people in the borough
 - The effectiveness of the call centre and quality of information they are using to generate repair orders
 - Why there are so many complaints which are upheld
 - Benchmarking and looking at comparative practice in other boroughs
 - Whether the performance indicators are the most appropriate ones to use
 - How performance data is being gathered and whether this could be done differently/more effectively
- 6.5 It was agreed that Councillor Edwards would prepare a draft scoping document for the review which would be circulated to members of the sub-committee for their comments.

- 6.6 Following a wide ranging discussion on the other topics that the sub-committee would look at, it was agreed that the additional topics to be put forward to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be Housing Under-Occupancy and CCTV. Detailed terms of reference for these topics would be developed at a later date.
- 6.7 The sub-committee discussed how to make best use of the limited meeting time available to undertake the review. It was agreed that when there is to be an evidence session questions should be agreed in advance either through a pre-meeting or via e-mail.
- 6.8 In order for the scrutiny to be effective, it was agreed that background papers and documents would need to be circulated between meetings.
- 6.9 The sub-committee agreed to hold an additional meeting in early September to make progress on the Performance Management of Housing Repairs review

The meeting ended at 9.10pm