



HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Monday 4 April 2011 at 7.00 pm at Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Linda Manchester
Councillor Kevin Ahern
Councillor Poddy Clark
Councillor Claire Hickson
Councillor Michael Situ
John Nosworthy
Jane Salmon
Lesley Wertheimer

OFFICER SUPPORT: Gerri Scott, Director of Housing
Simon Godfrey, Resident Involvement Manager
Shelley Burke, Head of Scrutiny
Sally Masson, Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Miriam Facey

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 There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st February 2011 were agreed as an accurate record.

5. INFORMAL NOTES OF VISIT TO CCTV CONTROL ROOMS (SOUTHWARK AND LEWISHAM)

- 5.1 The information regarding the committees visit to Lewisham, regarding the CCTV item had not been forthcoming. The committee were informed that this item was not close to appearing on the forward plan in the near future and that there was an opportunity to put more thought into the work before it is listed for a decision.
- 5.2 Councillors said that it was a difficult project to do without considerable money available. The equipment that was currently in use was no longer working effectively and would need replacing in the near future. Concerns were raised that the longer Southwark waited to purchase new equipment, the more expensive it would become. It was felt that a budget was also needed to maintain the current system, which because of its age, was becoming increasingly more difficult to find replacement parts. It was highlighted that VHS equipment is no longer being made.
- 5.3 Councillors said that the quality of the pictures in Lewisham seemed to be clearer in quality, however the ease with which operators can pin point times and actions was an extremely useful facility.
- 5.4 There were concerns that should the new committee return to this review, because of the possible change in membership, there might not be impetus to take this work forward.
- 5.5 The committee might wish to write to Councillor Livingstone, as this matter fell under his portfolio and he might be in a position to push the topic further up the Cabinet agenda.
- 5.6 The committee felt that because Anti Social Behaviour had increased in Southwark that it might be a good opportunity to share this project with Lambeth.
- 5.7 The committee agreed that an email should be written to Eden Geddes and Jonathon Toy to express their disappointment at not receiving the information they had expected.

6. DRAFT REPORT ON UNFINISHED SECURITY WORKS AT THE FOUR SQUARES ESTATE

- 6.1 The committee discussed the way the planned repairs and that here had been eight million pounds in total, allocated for the work. Four blocks of flats were expected to cost six million but the repairs had still not been completed. The Chair read from the committee's draft report:
- 6.2 *"On 30th November 2005 Southwark's Investment Programme Group (IPG) agreed to fund security works on the estate. Since that time, until March 2010, there has been a general expectation that Southwark Council would carry out security works*

on all four squares. The total estimated cost of the scheme agreed in 2005 was £8,025,514. This was allocated funding through £2.34 million from the London Housing Board and £5,685,514 allocated from Southwark.

6.3 *To date the Council has spent £6,606,788 on the security works on New Place and Lockwood Squares with a further £130,000 committed to these projects in for retention payments, giving a grand total of 6,736,788 committed and spent. The completion of the security works in these two blocks has lead to a significant reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour to the benefit of all residents living there.”*

6.4 The committee felt that the likelihood of repairs being completed was an unrealistic expectation because it appeared that there wasn't sufficient money from the outset. There was overspending as a result of poor calculations at management level.

6.5 The Chair went over some of the information contained in the committee's report for the benefit of officers:

6.6 *‘The sub-committee also feels that it is a matter for concern that the scale of this overspend in the early stages of the project was not more widely communicated. It is very surprising that the Executive Member(s) either at the time or subsequently did not take action to either:*

- *ensure a ring-fenced allocation of funds was made to cover the additional costs; or*
- *instruct officers to communicate with residents and ward councillors to alert them to the fact that there was a significant overspend and which may lead to a reduction in the security works which had originally been planned.’*

6.7 Point 7.2 ‘delegated decisions of Southwark Council:’

No formal decision was ever made by the previous Executive to allocate money specifically to the Four Squares Security Works. Instead, the original allocation was made by the Investment Programme Group (IPG) which operates under the delegated authority of the Executive Director for Housing. The decision to re-allocate the money to other projects was taken in 2009 as part of the “Investment Delivery Strategy Major Works Commitments 2010-12.” This decision was also made by the Executive Director for Environment and Housing.

6.8 The Chair said that money was then taken away because no formal decision had taken place. The committee felt that there had been very poor communication between the Council and residents overall with re-allocated money not being passed on.

6.9 *“The sub-committee understands the severe financial restraints under which the current Cabinet is working and the huge amount of investment which is needed in Southwark’s housing stock. However, the sub-committee feels that residents of the Four Squares have been treated extremely poorly during this long-running saga. The sub-committee also recognises the commitment already given by the Cabinet Member for Housing to look at this issue very closely once the stock condition survey is complete and an assessment of the priority of works needed across the*

whole borough is complete”.

- 6.10 The chair asked committee Members and residents for comments:
- 6.11 Residents were most concerned that decisions should not be made behind closed doors and that this matter should be referred to the standards committee. It was important that Council protocols should be maintained when making decisions and planning work of this kind.
- 6.12 There had been no consultants to oversee the continuity of the project work. This lack of continuity had been a problem from budgeting to the delivery of the work and residents felt that the Council must acknowledge that this had been a large mistake. It was also felt that a freedom of information request should now be sought as a matter of course.
- 6.13 The Members of the committee said that the report on the Four Squares issue was excellent and contained unbiased facts which highlighted the need for greater transparency, communication and identified areas where apologies were needed.
- 6.14 Members added that they felt the lines of accountability should have been made clearer with both Officers and Councillors understanding their respective roles.
- 6.15 Residents felt that the budget had been miscalculated from the beginning and that Council officers should have shown more restraint when planning and executing the work. It was felt that problems on the estate could have been easily foreseen, had there not been considerable mismanagement. It was recognised that managing contractors is a very difficult thing and it was suggested that perhaps Members should receive training in issues such as contract management. However, the committee felt that Members should feel confident and trust in their officers, with the expectation that they are being provided with comprehensive and good quality information without, necessarily, the need for training themselves. General awareness training regarding the various portfolios might assist with some clarity of roles, which could be helpful for both Members and Officers.
- 6.17 The Vice-Chair thought that the report covered the situation well and that there were no spurious accusations made. The report covered issues of considerable underinvestment in properties in across Southwark, and this was now becoming more apparent. Member's felt that this was a factual report highlighting bad management, inadequate funding and bad planning. For instance, there was work carried out to update security doors which did not need oing and there was the opportunity to make savings there. The lack of management resulted in work taking place that was unnecessary and work that was more vital, overlooked.
- 6.18 Residents had felt that this type of incident was a consistent problem across planning work within Southwark. At the time of the works, there had been concern around there being no forum for tenants to be heard. There were also concerns

around officers involved in the major investment programme not being adequately qualified. Anecdotally, one resident had overheard an officer saying that they did not want to upset the contractors. Then tenants point was that the contractors are employees of the Council and are working to the councils' specifications, not the other way around.

- 6.19 The sub-committee wanted to add an extra recommendation to the report which promoted the idea of tenants being included onto project boards for each work programme. It was thought this could be a useful forum for both disseminating information to residents and to make suggestions to the council as to where work was absolutely necessary and where savings might be made.
- 6.20 The sub-committee agreed the report with the extra recommendation.

7. REPORT ON WORK OF TENANT COUNCIL SPENDING PANEL

- 7.1 Gerri Scott, Strategic Director of Housing, went through a little of the background to this work:
- 7.2 'In September 2011, both Home Owners Council and Tenant Council were asked to consider how best residents could influence the budget agenda given the increasingly apparent need to make significant reductions in funding to housing services. Tenant Council asked that a working party be convened to consider the savings agenda. The first meeting in December was called once the draft HRA budget position had been announced and the reality of the savings process had been confirmed. At this point Home Owner representatives were invited to join the Savings Working Party'.
- 7.3 Currently the group has been meeting fortnightly for long term engagement to examine issues such as where savings might be made during project planning. The group is made up of tenants and home owners and has until recently been led by Margret O'Brien.
- 7.4 Residents expressed concern over the council delegating complaints to contractors. The working party didn't feel that it was in their remit to investigate staff reductions.
- 7.5 The committee were informed that the HRA general fund was split and tenants and leaseholders had effectively been charged twice services. Gerri Scott mentioned that Duncan Whitfield had looked into that issue with Grant Thornton to make further investigations. Residents felt that the working party would operate more effectively with independent advisors which could assist with meeting expectations across the board. It was also thought that the working party would be good for resident engagement, having an input into building proposals and also ensuring a greater awareness of what was going on with the work. The only draw back was that it was expensive for residents to travel to Tooley Street for the fortnightly

meetings.

- 7.6 Residents wanted to know what the complaints procedure was at the moment. They felt that every effort was needed to make the Council procedure work. The Chair said that giving over the duty of dealing with complaints to contractors may not be the best policy in this matter.
- 7.7 Simon Godfrey, Resident Involvement Manager said that the group is looking at other areas building a list of things to look at which may take place later in the year and there would be some thought on how best to consult with residents on what they may feel are priorities.
- 7.8 Members thought that there needed to be more discussions around the individual work areas, with consideration given to voting residents who need clarity on what it is that they're voting for allowing for time limits. Consideration also needed to be given to sensitive areas of work and where there may be any recurring themes, along with the opportunity for residents to see the HRA.
- 7.9 The Vice Chair said that officers of the council needed to remember that members of the public don't always speak, read and understand Council terminology and if meaningful consultation were to go ahead then language needed to be simple to understand. It was felt that this was a valid point to be taken across all meetings that involved members of the public.
- 7.10 The committee discussed the need to have a consistent service area regarding faults and repairs and that there needed to be clear lines of communication, with adequate details, when issues of funding are discussed.

8. FOLLOW UP ON COMMITTEE'S VISIT TO CCTV CONTROL ROOMS

- 8. See minutes for item 5.