



HOUSING, ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Housing, Environment, Transport and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Monday 17 December 2012 at 7.00 pm at 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Graham Neale (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Chris Brown
Councillor Michael Bukola
Councillor Lorraine Lauder MBE
Councillor Martin Seaton

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT: John Nosworthy, Homeowners' Council

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Ian Wingfield, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing Management

ALSO PRESENT: Ian Ritchie, Chair, Tenants Halls Working Party

OFFICER SUPPORT: Stephen Douglass, Head of Community Engagement
Gerri Scott, Strategic Director, Housing & Community Services
Peter Roberts, Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Tim McNally.

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, Graham Neale, Martin Seaton and Lorraine Lauder made disclosures of interests as council tenants.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That, subject to the addition of Councillor Lorraine Lauder to apologies, the minutes of the sub-committee held on 11 September 2012 be agreed as a true and accurate record.

5. CABINET MEMBER INTERVIEW - COUNCILLOR IAN WINGFIELD, DEPUTY LEADER, HOUSING MANAGEMENT

- 5.1 The chair of the sub-committee asked the cabinet member for his overview of tenants' and residents' association (T&RA) halls and how he saw the sub-committee's current review feeding into this issue. Councillor Wingfield replied that this issue had been neglected for some time, although it had been raised by the previous administration. Many halls were in a bad condition and in need of repairs. Funding of over £3 million had been allocated to investment in at least nineteen halls. In Councillor Wingfield's view, the council also needed to look at the usage, management and rents of halls. He stressed that halls were a public resource that should be available to the estates and neighbourhoods that they served and welcomed the scrutiny review and the participation of tenants and residents.
- 5.2 In response to questions, Councillor Wingfield explained that the disparity in rents had arisen over time and needed to be looked at with a view to developing a genuine minimum rate. The finances of all halls needed to be clear and transparent. Councillor Wingfield also reported that a number of people had notified him of halls which they considered to be under-used. He gave an example in Camberwell of a room built as part of an estate which over the years had fallen into disuse, had subsequently been let to various community groups and had finally been turned into a flat. The T&RA was now meeting in another council flat on the estate. Councillor Wingfield felt that flats should be lived in by tenants and that alternative premises should be provided for T&RAs, such as converted garages. He welcomed suggestions from members as to where such situations existed and how they could be improved. The chair commented that he hoped to follow up his recent survey of tenants with a survey of councillors.
- 5.3 Councillor Wingfield gave an update on the housing repairs contract. The key change in the previous year had been the end of the Morrisons contract and the employment of Mears as an interim contractor. Councillor Wingfield believed that Mears had hit the ground running and was providing positive competition for SBS. He stated that there had been marked improvements since the scrutiny of housing repairs two years previously, including the ongoing repairs core group which met on a monthly basis and plans to move the call-centre in-house. In response to

questions, Councillor Wingfield indicated that payment to Vangent depended on various milestones being met and that payment had been reduced accordingly in the last month. Members asked whether payment to Morrisons had been withheld as a result of under-performance. Councillor Wingfield confirmed that this had been the case and that negotiations were still taking place in respect of the final payment.

- 5.4 In respect of the procurement of the longer-term repairs contract, Councillor Wingfield reported that fifty-three organisations had expressed an interest at the end of July and that the council had shortlisted three companies who had been invited to tender by 16 October. The expectation was that the council would award the contract in May. The chair asked the cabinet member's view of a recommendation in the Housing Commission report that the council look at an external body determining the key performance indicators for the housing repairs service. Councillor Wingfield indicated that he was happy to explore this.
- 5.5 Councillor Wingfield reported that customer satisfaction with the repairs service had increased to 84% over the last twelve months. Officers were confident that the satisfaction rate would rise to close to the target of 90% by the end of the year. The chair highlighted issues with carrying out repairs to leaseholder properties, in particular relating to access when the property had been let. Councillor Wingfield stated that problems did not often arise when leaseholders were resident but occurred when leases were owned by companies or people no longer living in the borough. The residents of the properties in question did not necessarily have any commitment to the property or the area. The council often did not know who was living in a property or the number of residents. Councillor Wingfield gave an example of properties on the Four Squares estate which had been converted into homes of multiple occupation. The council had raised its concerns with leaseholders and with the local MPs with a view to leaseholders being required to inform the council who their tenants were.
- 5.6 The vice-chair asked how the council was addressing the issues of over-crowding and houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). Councillor Wingfield explained that these were outside the housing portfolio as the council's powers were largely in the areas of planning and building control. The strategic director of housing added that the licensing of HMOs was carried out within the environment and leisure department. Some HMOs were small and did not fall under licensing guidelines. The housing sector working party was looking at ways to increase council responsibility. Councillor Wingfield explained that there was an ongoing process of tenancy checking for the entire housing stock. The thrust of housing management was to have more direct contact with tenants.
- 5.7 In response to questions, the strategic director of housing and community services stated that she would circulate members to confirm the number of disrepair cases that were outstanding.
- 5.8 Members asked for details of the number of members' housing enquiries. Councillor Wingfield reported that in the period June to November in the current year there were 1,701 enquiries covering a variety of areas, the majority concerning housing options and transfers but also including repairs. Members also

made enquiries outside the specific members' enquiries portal. The vice-chair was concerned at Councillor Wingfield's recent correspondence in the press which had suggested that he, the vice-chair, had only made five enquiries in June when this did not take account of enquiries possibly made outside the portal.

- 5.9 The chair asked for an update in respect of the warm, safe and dry programme and the prospect of any major works being brought forward. Councillor Wingfield stated that, following the ending of the Wates contract, Apollo had continued works on the Hawkstone, Abbeyfield and Four Squares estates. Some of the work on the smaller estates had been delayed while the council looked for a new contractor. There was also a question over works at Draper House. A danger under the partnership contract arrangements was that the council could be left with only one or two contractors able to undertake work. Councillor Wingfield emphasised that the fire safety programme was a key element of the works that were underway. By the end of the current financial year, bar one which would run slightly into the next year, all necessary fire safety works would have been completed on every block in the borough. In terms of the five year major works programme, all schemes scheduled for 2012/13 would be on site by March. Some schemes scheduled to start later in 2014/15 would be brought forward. Councillor Wingfield stated that the council was not as far ahead as it wanted to be because of contractual hold-ups but that now the pace of work would quicken.
- 5.10 In response to a question from the chair, Councillor Wingfield confirmed that he was satisfied with the works being done. When work began on site it often revealed new issues which required a reassessment of the works and budget for each estate. Four Squares was a classic example of this. By and large the wishes of residents were being accommodated and the consultation process seemed to be working well. A member reported the concerns of some elderly residents that fire doors were not easy to open and close. Councillor Wingfield indicated that this issue had been raised with him and that officers were looking at possible solutions. The strategic director of housing and community services added that it would be useful to have any further details of doors which were a particular problem.
- 5.11 The chair asked whether the cabinet member was happy with the involvement of tenants and leaseholders at the design stage, before work was begun. Councillor Wingfield stated that a number of estates were visited as part of the pre-works discussions. The majority of leaseholders did not support the most expensive options and there were always queries about the schedule of work with a view to bringing costs down. In general, residents wanted investment in order to improve their quality of life, to improve security and to make homes warm, safe and dry. There would always be differences of opinion but Councillor Wingfield was confident in the twenty-seven step consultation programme that the council had developed. Members asked what flexibility there existed when TRAs asked for additional works to be done. Councillor Wingfield explained that flexibility related to whether any health and safety issue was involved. The stock condition survey had covered only 10% of properties and issues came up when work began on site. Additional works depended on whether there was a demonstrable need and that works needed to be contained within the overall budgeting. These works could be in response to health and safety risks or to individual demonstrable needs such as adapting a flat to the needs of an infirm resident.

- 5.12 The chair asked for details of the consultation planned on the recommendations of the Housing Commission report. Stephen Douglass, head of community engagement, explained that there were three strands to the consultation which would begin in January with the intention to report to cabinet in July. Tenants and leaseholders were very important and the council would be working through the existing structures, including the Tenants' and Homeowners' Councils. Consultation would be as broad as possible with a series of community conversations involving all ward councillors and young people targeted through the Youth Council and SpeakerBox. The third strand would be other key stakeholders at a regional and national level. The head of community engagement outlined the three key questions for consultation – who was council housing for and for how long, how much council housing and to what standard of quality, and what management models. In response to questions, the head of community engagement stated that there was already a page on the council's website inviting people's details and views and that this would be followed by other publicity and a communications campaign.
- 5.13 The chair asked the cabinet member for any initial thoughts on the various options outlined in the Housing Commission report. Councillor Wingfield emphasised the cabinet's position that it had wanted an independent assessment of the choices facing the authority in respect of its housing stock. The report set out various options for investment and management and the consultation on these was a genuine exercise. The council wanted to talk to everyone in the borough about the housing stock. Councillor Wingfield stressed the current housing crisis and that Southwark could be bearing the full brunt of the government's housing and benefits policies. In response to further questions, Councillor Wingfield emphasised that all political parties had participated in the work of the Housing Commission, that there was consensus in some areas and that it was important to ensure that residents got the best deal possible.
- 5.14 Members were concerned that, in order to receive a meaningful response to the consultation, the council needed to think carefully about what questions to ask and how to ask them. Councillor Wingfield responded that the council had gained valuable experience from the consultation following the recent riots. It was important to make use of new media, to put things in the context of what was happening in London generally and to ensure that there was no political bias. The head of community engagement added that the budget consultation had also provided useful lessons and had been on similarly complex and difficult choices. Creative ways could be found to provide the background which informed choices around housing and to set out the consequences of choices.
- 5.15 In response to questions, Councillor Wingfield informed the committee that the new billing and accounts receivable (BAR) system relating to leaseholders' bills had been up and running since February. The major change was that there was now one account per property with each invoice on the account having its own invoice number. The second phase, from March 2013, would provide an online services portal to allow leaseholders to inspect their accounts online. A third phase, also commencing in March, would enable leaseholders to interrogate each element of their service charge. Councillor Wingfield was aware that the warm, dry and safe

programme could result in large bills to leaseholders and that the council needed to look into ways of assisting them through the process.

- 5.16 A member asked for details of any evictions arising out of the riots. Councillor Wingfield underlined his view that confidence needed to be restored in public order and that he hoped that the council had contributed to this. He was very pleased with the way that officers had dealt with cases in the weeks and months that had followed the riots. In a number of cases tenancies had been relinquished and evictions had not been necessary. Some evictions had been made in response to rent arrears. Councillor Wingfield provided figures for other actions between April and September, including seven anti-social behaviour orders in relation to criminal offences and another four lodged and the serving of eleven notices seeking possession. Councillor Wingfield reported that the council was working a lot more closely with the police and the UK Borders Agency in joint operations across the borough. The council was particularly concerned about anti-social behaviour and the amount of illegal sub-letting and needed to be seen as a responsible landlord.
- 5.17 The vice-chair asked whether there was any reason that a number of properties did not appear on the allocations bidding system. The strategic director of housing and community services replied that a small number of properties were pre-allocated, for instance in cases of severe over-crowding or for specific management reasons. However, most properties went into the bidding system. She asked the vice-chair to let her have details of any concerns. Councillor Wingfield added that management reasons would include cases where a tenant's life was at threat, whether because of a particular domestic situation or perhaps for gang related issues, or that referrals for transfers could come from Social Services. The lettings review report would be issued for consultation at the same time as the Housing Commission report.

6. HOUSING COMMISSION REPORT

- 6.1 The chair highlighted issues in the Housing Commission report, including illegal sub-letting and several suggestions relating to housing repairs. He proposed that the sub-committee begin to look into the issue of illegal sub-letting with an officer presentation to its next meeting.
- 6.2 Members drew out other issues from the report:
- the potential for the council to borrow more in order to invest in its housing stock
 - whether specifications for new build are sufficient in order to limit repairs and maintenance in the future
 - whether financial incentives could be offered to tenants to take up TMOs
- 6.3 The chair indicated that he would take these issues up with officers with a view to reporting back to a future meeting.

7. TENANTS HALLS SURVEY

- 7.1 The chair reported the results of his survey of TRA halls and that he would be inviting comments from councillors. He had also received a large amount of information from officers. The chair would bring a draft scrutiny report to the next meeting of the sub-committee.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm