

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **TUESDAY, 23RD JANUARY, 2024** at 6.30 pm in Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Kemi Atolagbe (Chair), Sagal Abdi-Wali, Richard Cotton, Nasrine Djemai, Tommy Gale, Eddie Hanson, Nancy Jirira, and Bev Chambers and Victor Seedman (co-opted members)

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillor Samata Khatoon

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Meric Apak, Cabinet Member Better Homes

The minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting. They are subject to approval and signature at the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee and any corrections approved at that meeting will be recorded in those minutes.

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Samata Khatoon and for lateness from Councillors Sagal Abdi-Wali, Nasrine Djemai, and Nancy Jirira.

2. DECLARATIONS BY MEMBERS OF STATUTORY DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS, COMPULSORY REGISTERABLE NON-PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND VOLUNTARY REGISTERABLE NON-PECUNIARY INTERESTS IN MATTERS ON THIS AGENDA

There were none.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Broadcast of the meeting

The Chair announced that the meeting was being broadcast live by the Council to the Internet and could be viewed on the website for twelve months after the meeting. After that time, webcasts were archived and could be made available upon request.

Those who had asked to address the meeting were deemed to be consenting to having their contributions recorded and broadcast and to the use of those sound recordings and images for webcasting and/or training purposes.

4. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR DECIDES TO TAKE AS URGENT

There were none.

5. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2023.

RESOLVED –

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2023 be approved and signed as a correct record.

6. DEPUTATIONS

There were none.

7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET AND RENT REVIEW 2024/25

Consideration was given to the report of the Cabinet Member Better Homes.

Michael Webb, Head of Finance Supporting Communities, took the meeting through the report and he along with Councillor Meric Apak, Cabinet Member Better Homes, gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Council was being placed in a very difficult position, as not increasing rents would mean it would have to find approximately £10M from service cuts. Such an approach would have a dramatic effect on service provision and directly impact on those tenants and residents most in need. Raising rents was something that the Council did not do lightly as it was very concerned about the impact the rent and service charge increases would have on its tenants and residents.
- Following the Housing District Management Committee (DMCs) meeting in January, it was noted that 4 out of the 5 DMCs had voted against having a rent increase. The DMCs were the way the Council sought to obtain the views of tenants and residents regarding the proposals outlined in the report. The

DMCs themselves, were made up of TRA representatives who had consulted their members regarding the proposals.

- The Equalities Impact Assessment attached to the report outlined how the proposal would impact on tenants and residents, along with how the Council would seek to mitigate those impacts.
- The Housing and Repairs Services were undergoing a transformation process that sought to improve the services being offered to tenants and residents, through service and operational changes. This process was on-going and cultural changes were being made that sought to improve the way the Council communicated with its tenants and residents along with improving service delivery. Demands from tenants and residents were changing, along with the expectations arising from the new regulatory regime and housing services were working towards meeting those challenges.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

8. TENANCY ARREARS UPDATE

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Housing.

Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, took the meeting through the report and she gave the following key responses to questions:

- The benefits system now required all new applicants to be considered under the Universal Credit process. The only people who could still receive housing benefit were residents who were in temporary accommodation. To overcome the difficulties facing tenants paying their rent who were on Universal Credit, the Council sought to contact them individually (which included home visits if appropriate), to discuss with them moving to alternative payment arrangements whereby rental income was paid to the Council directly.
- The specialist rent team undertaking this process were having some success through working with tenants in rent arrears which had led to reductions in the amount owed during October and November this year. Though there had been an expected increase in rent owed in December, they were again on track to see rent owed reductions going forward.
- There was an automatic escalation process in place that was used to help tenants understand where they were in relation to their rental balance with the Council, though for vulnerable tenants officers from the specialist team could intercept the escalation letter and stop it going out. On these occasions officers would instead make personal contact with those tenants.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

9. SUPPORTING OUR TENANTS DURING THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Housing.

Ododo Dafe, Head of Innovation and Improvement, took the meeting through the report and she along with Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, gave the following key responses to questions:

- Going forward the Welfare Rights Team wanted to ensure that more people in need were aware of the existence of the service, along with what services it provided. This would be taken forward through appropriate publicity and the use of social media. Also the current intensive tenant participation programme, along with the cost of living bus, was engaging with tenants and raising their awareness of what was available to them, along with assisting them in making applications for available cost-of-living funds. This was leading to tenants then sharing this information with other tenants. The engagement process would be continued through the housing officer tenant's visits programme that would be recommenced after the current intensive tenant participation programme had come to a conclusion.
- The work being done to help tenants during the cost of living crisis was not only seeking to increase the money in their pockets through accessing the benefit support they are entitled to, but also through reducing their costs through the work being done in retrofitting homes with a view to reducing their fuel bills. The Welfare Rights Team also helped tenants meet all their financial commitments - not only paying their rent but also meeting Council Tax and utility commitments.
- The Council was currently in the first phase of the intensive tenant's participation programme which sought to cover the Council's biggest housing estates. The next stage, which would be starting soon, would be covering smaller estates along with street properties. Following the conclusion of the estate action day visits, an estate action plan would be developed taking forward how the issues arising from the visit would be delivered. All these processes would provide the Council with valuable information about its tenants and residents along with the fabric of its housing stock. Also the knowledge obtained from phase 1 of the programme had been used to shape phase 2.
- The Council was working with a number of community partners to help people understand what support and benefits were available to them, along with sharing knowledge of how this work was being undertaken. The Council was working with voluntary and community groups to help share the knowledge of where help could be obtained by people. Officers would seek to further understand the support and advice voluntary and community groups were giving to tenants and residents to ensure that the right information was being given.

ACTION BY: Director of Housing (OD)

- Referrals to the Welfare Rights Team came via a number of different sources e.g. housing officers, community groups, schools, individuals, and social workers. Officers worked very hard to ensure tenants obtained the grants and support packages (including Council Tax Support) that were available to be claimed.

The scrutiny committee asked that its thanks be passed through to officers in the Welfare Rights Team for all the good work that they had been doing to help tenants and residents in financial difficulty.

ACTION BY: Director of Housing

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

10. HOUSING OMBUDSMAN - CASE SUMMARY AND SELF ASSESSMENT

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Property Management.

Scott Reid, Head of Property Customer Services and Engagement, took the meeting through the report and he along with Gavin Haynes, Director of Property Management, Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, and Ododo Dafe, Head of Innovation and Improvement, gave the following key responses to questions:

- Officers agreed to contact Councillor Nancy Jirira directly regarding the issue she raised regarding the response from the Council relating to the damp and mould issue she and others had.

ACTION BY: Director of Property Management (SR)

- The Housing Ombudsman had decided to carry out an investigation in relation to the way the Council dealt with leaks, damp and mould, complaints handling and repairs. They decided to undertake the investigation as they felt the Council wasn't handling such cases as well as it should. The Council was the 7th such London local authority that had been investigated by the Housing Ombudsman in relation to similar issues.
- The vast majority of cases the Housing Ombudsman was reviewing were from 2021, and since then a number of improvements had been put in place in the way the Council handled these issues. This had resulted in their being fewer determinations made against the Council over the last 6 months. The Council was looking forward to working with the Housing Ombudsman to explain what the authority had now put in place to improve its processes, along with listening to the Housing Ombudsman regarding any other changes that could be made to processes and procedures.

- The use of new technology to allow tenants and residents to report issues with the Council had seen a huge change in the way they engaged with the authority. The Council spoke to approximately 300,000 residents a year in relation to housing repairs, half of which was carried out by WhatsApp, SMS, live chat, Camden account and other methods. The feedback in relation to the use of these methods (along with the new Saturday appointment offer) was overwhelmingly positive, as tenants and residents felt that these options enabled them to contact the Council easier, when it suited them and in a way that they wanted. Last month there were 7,000 WhatsApp messages and when the service first started a year ago there was 252.
- The Council had set up a Housing Resident's Panel that's been up and running for a year. The operation of the panel had been very successful, and the panel had been helping officers shape policies and procedures (e.g. texting residents when lifts had gone out of order). Also the Council would be setting up a new housing resident's Complaints Panel in February and they would be looking at the complaints that come in across both repairs and housing, as well as looking to see if there were themes and trends that needed to be addressed.
- There had been a recent article published in Inside Housing in terms of the trajectory of damp and mould cases in relation to Camden. The article mentioned how quickly things had changed in relation to the damp and mould issue for Camden, as last year the authority had almost 100 cases of damp and mould being report daily. At the beginning of January, it was down to 12 – 15. This had been due to the approach the Council had taken to pro-actively tackle this issue. This had led the Council to increase its investment in the service to try and deal with this issue, and it was now in a position where it did not have a backlog for getting an appointment to get a damp and mould repair. So a tenant today could go online and book an appointment for a date and time that suited them, usually within 10 working days
- This process of service improvement was continuing, with the Council now seeking to understand why some homes had a continuous problem that the current ways of tackling (e.g. mould wash) were unable to rectify, and put in place alternative approaches to fix the issue on a permanent basis. This could mean looking at the fabric of the building to see what could be done structurally, or if it was due to family overcrowding to see what support could be given to the family.
- The Council was sharing learning across London with housing associations and local authorities as they were all trying to improve their practices in a similar way, along with discussions on case volumes, procurement and service delivery. Also officers were talking to colleagues in the London Borough of Islington on what they had learnt because they had gone through a similar process with the Housing Ombudsman.
- Officers undertaking home visits would seek to understand the needs of the tenant, and as part of this be aware if anything like damp and mould needed to be reported. Officers would provide information regarding the number of damp and mould cases that had been reported by officers instead of the tenant.

ACTION BY: Director of Property Management (SR)

- Officers have been given tailored training to deal with damp and mould inspections and washes to ensure they were offering the most appropriate advice to the tenants and residents. This would include being able to signpost them to support, along with being empathetic and supportive. Relevant repairs staff would also be attending Housing Health and Safety Rating System training during January and February 2024.
- A review of the enhanced residents criteria would be undertaken in 2024, and it was hoped that it would be started in April this year. In future reviews would be undertaken approximately every six months. The consultation process would involve all stakeholders to ensure that the policy was right for Camden. The review would then provide officers with information regarding what and where the trends were, and revise service provision accordingly. Awaabs Law was likely to lead to changes in this area, but until then the Council wanted to ensure that the criteria and delivery processes were fit for purpose.
- The Housing Ombudsman was helping housing services think more about the services provided to tenants and residents to ensure that they were based on a better understanding on a person's individual need. This was now being picked up through the housing transformation programme which had recognised that the Council needed to be better at storing the information it had on tenants (both short and long term information), and enable better sharing of this within the service to provide an individual based service response.
- The Council had provided the Housing Ombudsman with the required responses to the issues and recommendation they had made, and would be meeting them to go through the response.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

11. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Property Management.

Programme of meetings (new items in bold)

FEBRUARY 2024

- CIP annual report
- Report of Cabinet Adviser: Leaseholder billing and service charges
- Homelessness Scrutiny Panel (provisional date)

Housing Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 23rd January, 2024

- Housing's response to domestic abuse: update on progress
- Cabinet Member Better Homes annual report
- Approval of the Procurement Strategy for Water Services and Fire Protection Contracts – Cabinet report
- Work programme

Yet to be programmed

- Tenants Satisfaction Regulatory Survey (including the operation of the Housing Repairs Call Centre), when it was available.
- Update reports regarding the Cabinet Adviser reports on Supporting Rough Sleepers, Estates Mission and Tenants Participation.
- Review of the Rough Sleeping Service

RESOLVED –

THAT the report work programme be revised as outlined above.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

There were none.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm.

CHAIR

Contact Officer: Gianni Franchi

Telephone No: 020 7974 1914

E-Mail: gianni.franchi@camden.gov.uk

MINUTES END