

## **THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN**

At a meeting of the **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **TUESDAY, 10TH DECEMBER, 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), Meric Apak, Joseph Ball, Tommy Gale and Nancy Jirira and Victor Seedman (co-opted member)

### **MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT**

Councillors Richard Cotton, Eddie Hanson and Samata Khatoon and Charles Bertlin and Larissa Hope (co-opted members)

### **ALSO PRESENT**

Councillor Sagal Abdi-Wali, Cabinet Member for 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 Councillors Richard Cotton, Eddie Hanson and Samata Khatoon and Charles Bertlin and Larissa Hope, Co-opted Members.

### **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 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024 be approved and signed as a correct record.

**6. DEPUTATIONS**

There were none.

**7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 25/26 BUDGET UPDATE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Finance

Emma Cardoso, Strategic Finance Lead Housing, took the meeting through the report and key proposals. She advised the meeting that the 5% service charge increase for Communal M&E Maintenance was based on an assessment of expected inflation for 2025/26. This was reviewed annually and would be revised accordingly for the following years' service charge proposals if necessary. Officers would seek to ensure that the report for the January Cabinet and Housing Scrutiny Committee regarding the HRA budgetary proposals would provide a context for the proposed increases at January DMCs, and seek to explain more about what services were being provided for the charges.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the report be noted

**8. PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR - FOLLOW UP REPORT TO THE THEMED OCTOBER DEBATE**

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

Darren Wilsher, Private Sector Housing Service Manager, took the meeting through the report and he advised the meeting that officers were aware of the issues facing tenants in Houses of Multiple Occupation, where some of the homes were being used as short-term lets. Officers in his service were working with colleagues in the Planning Department, who were responsible for undertaking enforcement action, to monitor this issue and take appropriate action when necessary. Officers would be working closely with the Camden Federation of Private Sector Tenants, regarding the sharing of information and providing support and advice to private sector tenants through appropriate systems.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the report be noted

**9. INSIGHT, LEARNING AND IMPACT REPORT - QUARTER 2 2024/25**

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Directors.

Gavin Haynes, Director of Property Management and Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, took the meeting through the report and gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Council had reduced the use of commercial hotels by half and also reduced the expenditure on commercial hotels as well, in relation to placing people who had need of temporary accommodation. As part of this process officers had sought to use alternative hotels instead of the big commercial chains, along with using private sector landlords as they were less expensive to use. Also an officer task force had been set up to try and prevent people from becoming homeless. The task forces would also be involved in the bringing on board hostels, purchasing properties, and building new hostels all of which would be to be used to house people in need of temporary accommodation.
- The Council had already started a transformation programme in relation to its housing services that sort to improve the quality of its service delivery, and therefore the service received by its tenants and residents. As part of the programme a restructuring of housing services had been completed and would be effective from January 2025. The expectation was that housing services would now be more empathetic, and would better meet the needs of the tenants and residents living in the Council's homes. Housing services would also be better at avoiding and repeating similar mistakes, along with learning lessons from issues that arose.

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- The Council saw the Housing Ombudsman report findings as an opportunity to improve its housing services. A report would be submitted to the scrutiny committee in the new year that would contain an action plan that sought to address the issues raised by the Housing Ombudsman. This action plan would be discussed with the Housing Ombudsman in January before it could be made available for consideration by the scrutiny committee, to ensure that the approach proposed was on the right track.
- The Council's Asset Management Strategy would be submitted for consideration to the scrutiny committee at its January 2025 meeting. This report would highlight the challenging nature of some of the Council's housing stock and the proposed approach in seeking to meet that challenge. New requirements e.g. damp and mould, and fire safety had impacted on the Council's capital programme and the Council's ability to undertake normal works to improve its housing stock in a planned way.
- Further information regarding how AI could be used to improve collaboration across the Council to improve housing services would be provided at a future meeting of the scrutiny committee.
- New approaches had been put in place to help improve rent arrears. This included the use of IT software (Rentsense) to provide information to officers that would highlight to them rent accounts that showed rent as being owed, prioritise the information, enabled standardized and systematic approaches to be followed. This would then enable the officer to contact the tenant and seek to support them to deal with their rent arrears. This would include providing information on accessing financial support and payment programmes that could get them over a particular difficulty. Information would also be available to managers to enable them to monitor officer's performance, which would include the number and types of contacts made with a tenant to enable them to check the approach that was followed. This approach had led to the service now being above target for the last 4 months in relation to income collection.
- The non-payment of rent would always be dealt with through a supportive approach with enforcement action being the last resort. Officers would go out and visit tenants in rent arrears and discuss with them the best approach to ensure that they were able to pay their rental payments. At these visits officers would be able to tenant's with information on how to maximise their income or access additional benefits, along with putting in place payment plans that would not allow the rent arrears to get out of hand. These approaches had ensured that there had not been a spike in rent arrears despite more people on benefits being moved over onto universal Credit, where the support payments would be given directly to the individual instead of the Council. If members were aware that individual tenants were being treated inappropriately by officers or systems regarding low rent arrears, then these cases should be forwarded to the appropriate officer so that actions could be reviewed.
- A new contractor procurement process for M&E works would be operational from April 2026. Existing contractors performance would be monitored through feedback from tenants (survey and text message responses), clerks of works, checking if they were meeting KPIs and when issues arose they

would be highlighted to the contractor as part of the Council's regular discussions with them.

- Officers would provide an update regarding the bid for a GLA funded grant in relation to mapping of communal heating systems when it was available.

**ACTION BY: Director of Property Management**

- Officers would provide information regarding how they would ensure the highest number of affordable and social housing units, as part of the regeneration schemes relating specifically the O2 and Regis Road sites and generally.

**ACTION BY: Director of Economy, Regeneration and Investment**

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the report be noted

**10. RETROFIT AT SCALE FOR COUNCIL HOMES - PROCUREMENT STRATEGY**

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

Gavin Haynes, Director of Property Management, took the meeting through the report and he along with Sim Dhinsa, Programme Manager (Retrofit), gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to be established to run the proposed Retrofit Test Model would also be responsible for the delivery of the capital works element of the scheme. The SPV would be managing the skilled contractors who would install the solar panels and the battery storage units for the 3,000 Council Homes included in the proposal. The approach being followed would allow the authority to move the scheme forward at a rate it was comfortable with, so that lessons and system developments could be learnt from as the scheme progressed.
- The Council was engaged with building skills for the future and for this particular contract there would be a social value requirement, so there would be an opportunity for the Euston Skills Centre to place people within the work to be undertaken. At any one time the in-house repairs team had 14 apprentices placed with them to help support building skills for the future.
- The Council was discussing the proposed SPV with Pension Funds, to see if they would be interested in investing into this type of initiative. The scheme would have a risk-sharing aspect, and would allow the Council to understand the type of risk it could manage and the risk that would be easier to share.

- The model provided for the landlord and the investor to fund the work, as the costs were being shared the Council would be getting the works done at a lower cost and allow for the homes to achieve SAP band C or above. The investor would obtain an element of the savings achieved. Here the energy generated by the solar panels would be shared with tenants (leading to a cheaper energy bill) and sold back to the energy grid operator. Part of this profit would then be given to the investor (comfort pricing) as a way of paying back the investment.
- The aim would be to target homes with a low Energy Performance Certificate rating, people suffering from fuel poverty, low and medium rise properties depending on the orientation, angle of the roof, internal structure and whether it would be impacted by shading. The scheme would not be suitable for high rise buildings as the ratio of roof to the number of tenants would not work financially.
- The Council would be undertaking an engagement programme with tenants and residents as part of this initiative. This would involve giving tenants and residents a clear explanation of the scheme, so that they would understand the benefits of taking part. Initial research in this type of measure had shown that tenants and residents would be interested in being part of this type of scheme.
- The Council's main relationship with the SPV would be through the Energy Services Agreement. This contract would help protect the Council from pressures that may come to the SPV as the SPV would need to be self-sustaining and viable in its own right, and the Council was in effect buying a service from the SPV. The contractual elements that underpinned the relationship with the SPV were still being developed.

The Housing Scrutiny Committee welcomed the proposals as set out in the report.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the report be noted

**11. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN**

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

The scrutiny committee recognised the seriousness of the special investigation report from the Housing Ombudsman regarding the Council's landlord services, and following officer advice, it was made aware that the proposed action plan to meet the recommendations outlined by the Housing Ombudsman would not be available until the February meeting of the scrutiny committee. This was to allow officers to discuss the proposed action plan with the Housing Ombudsman, and this would be taking place in January. As a result of this the scrutiny committee asked for a report to the February meeting that would cover the issues raised by the Housing Ombudsman, the Council's action plan to meet the recommendations, along with KPIs regarding

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how the Council would be judged on the issues raised. The meeting also wanted added to its work programme for 25/26 an update report so this issue could be monitored by them going forward. The scrutiny committee also asked officers to consider whether they could be given an update prior to the papers for the February agenda being made available if that were possible.

**ACTION BY: Director of Property Management**

The scrutiny committee noted that the following changes to the work programme, along with the further information required regarding items:

- Housing Ombudsman report on the Council (February 2025)
- Cabinet Member report for January would not be required for that meeting, with the focus on leaseholder services being included in the annual report going to the February meeting
- Domestic Abuse Policy update report (January 2025 if possible)
- Housing Ombudsman report update on progress (to a future meeting)
- Use of AI to improve collaboration across the Council and improve Housing Services (to a future meeting)

**Programme of meetings 2024/25 (new items and information requests in bold)**

**13<sup>th</sup> January 2025**

- Asset Management Strategy (Cabinet Report)
- Renewal of the Council's Additional Houses in Multiple Occupation Licensing Scheme (Cabinet Report)
- HRA Budget & Rent Review 24/25 (Cabinet Report)
- Allocations Policy Report
- **Domestic Abuse Report Update**
- Work Programme

**25<sup>th</sup> February**

- Housing Associations Annual Performance Report
- **Housing Ombudsman report**
- Cabinet Member Better Homes Annual Report
- CIP annual report
- Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (Cabinet Member report)
- Work programme

**Yet to be programmed**

- TSM Housing Regulator update

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- **Housing Ombudsman report update during 25/26**
- **AI – Improving Housing Services**

**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 8.05 pm.

**CHAIR**

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**MINUTES END**