

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **MONDAY, 12TH DECEMBER, 2022** at 6.30 pm in Committee Room 1, Crowndale Centre, 218 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1BD

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Samata Khatoon (Chair), Kemi Atolagbe, Richard Cotton, Nasrine Djemai, Eddie Hanson and Nanouche Umeadi and Co-opted Members Fatoumata Diallo, Houria Pacha and Craig McLeish

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillors Sagal Abdi-Wali, and Nancy Jirira

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. GUIDANCE ON HYBRID MEETINGS

RESOLVED –

THAT the hybrid meeting procedure set out in the agenda be agreed.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sagal Abdi-Wali.

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

Councillor Nasrine Djemai declared an interest in item 8 as her mother was being considered for the position of co-opted member. As a result of this she would leave the room whilst the item was being considered.

4. 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.

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

There were none.

6. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 15th November 2022.

RESOLVED –

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 15th November 2022 be approved and signed as a correct record.

7. DEPUTATIONS

There were none.

8. APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED MEMBERS

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

Councillor Nasrine Djemai left the room at this point.

The Chair advised the meeting that following a shortlisting and interview process for the people who had expressed an interest in becoming co-opted members, she was recommending that the scrutiny committee appoint Fatoumata Diallo, Houria Pacha and Craig McLeish to be co-opted members for the remainder of the municipal year. Also she would be proposing that Ifrax Mahamoud, Beverly Chambers and Andrea Radice be recommended to the 2023/24 scrutiny committee to fill the positions of co-opted members when the scrutiny committee meets in the new municipal year.

RESOLVED –

1. THAT Fatoumata Diallo, Houria Pacha and Craig McLeish be appointed as co-opted members for the remainder of the 22/23 municipal year.
2. THAT Ifrac Mahamoud, Beverly Chambers and Andrea Radice be recommended to be considered as co-opted members for the 23/24 municipal year.

9. UPDATE FOR SCRUTINY ON THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS AND THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Director Corporate Services.

Osian Jones, Head of Corporate Strategy, took the meeting through the report and they along with Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing and Gavin Haynes, Director of Property Management, gave the following key responses to questions:

- Officers agreed to provide the scrutiny committee with information regarding the number of people who had applied for hardship fund payments who were in paid employment; data on the types of people accessing warm spaces; whether the libraries could be opened earlier over the winter months so that people could access them as a warm space; ensuring staff advising people on the accessing the hardship fund were providing consistent information; free school meal auto-enrolment proposal; food vouchers eligibility criteria; cost of living fund eligibility criteria along with how many times a household or an applicant could apply to the fund; along with a general update on the progress of the support measures the Council was providing in the future.

ACTION BY: Executive Directors

- The Council was working with the voluntary and community sector to enable them to contact the elderly and vulnerable to ensure they were contacted and whether they needed to access support. This would also be part of the work that neighbourhood officers would be doing as part of the tenancy visits programme, who would then make appropriate referrals should any issues arise.
- Further information would be made to all residents regarding cost of living issues and accessing support as part of an article in the Camden magazine.
- A North London Waste Authority windfall would allow the Council to help tenants who were in need on low incomes to improve energy efficiency in their homes, and work on this project would commence in the next few weeks.
- Officers were supporting tenants who were in financial difficulty to remain in their homes through the provision of advice, helping them access support, along with ensuring that they continued to pay their rent.
- Currently access to temporary accommodation in Camden was proving to be difficult, so the authority was having to use premises out of borough as a

means of finding people a home. Initiatives were being developed to ensure that this problem was reduced in future by block booking hotels in Camden in advance or seeking to use smaller hotels in Camden. When people were having to be placed out of borough the Council sought to provide them appropriate assistance and support during that time.

- The Council's Welfare Benefits Team were available to provide residents with advice and support in accessing benefits, and Neighbourhood Housing Officers would signpost tenants to that team when they identified a tenant who needed to access support.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

10. A STRATEGY TO TACKLE OVERCROWDING AND PURCHASE FAMILY FRIENDLY HOMES

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

Gavin Haynes, Director of Property Management, took the meeting through the report and he along with Councillor Meric Apak, Cabinet Member Better Homes, and Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Council would assess the number of bedrooms the applicant needed. The Council would compare this with the number of rooms that were currently available for the sole use of the household and which could be used as bedrooms. The Council would count any rooms other than bathrooms, toilets, self-contained kitchens and utility rooms. This would help the Council to decide if the applicant qualified for overcrowding points. The Council reserved the right to decide how they could make best use of the rooms available to the household and to change the application accordingly.
- Where a room which could be used as a bedroom measured less than 50 square feet, the Council would award additional overcrowding points, this would be done on a case-by-case basis.
- There are 3 levels of points for overcrowding. The applicant could only receive one award.
- The Council would be seeking to help more under occupiers in social housing to downsize or relocate by incentivising the process. Funding would continue to be provided for 2 dedicated posts 'Under Occupying Older Tenants Advisors' in the Housing Needs Group, who provided advice and support to council tenants over the age of 60 years to downsize. Evidence from a pan-London 2022 survey confirmed that support provided by officers to potential downsizers, which was bespoke to their individual needs, had the greatest impact upon numbers of homes freed up. The Neighbourhood Housing Officers (NHOs) would begin annual tenancy visits and initiate conversations

with under occupiers of all ages about downsizing or mutual exchange. Downsizing moves would be closely monitored on a quarterly basis to evaluate success. Camden's lump sum financial incentives to downsize were competitive and some of the most generous in London. There would be a review to consider how best to utilise this fund, to help cover the costs of moving and starting again in a new home, based on individual needs.

- A further strand of the programme would explore solutions for the conversion and/or refurbishment of high-cost, otherwise unsuitable properties or in-situation solutions for the applicant (e.g. using bunk beds, knocking through rooms to create a further bedroom, merging homes to create a bigger home). The Council had a small number of large family homes that had substantial repair costs. The policy could generate resources to bring such homes back into use as social housing without impacting severely on the Council's budgets. Each property would be assessed on its merits and work would also be undertaken to secure grant where possible, e.g. for retrofit work, or resources for conversion work from the Affordable Housing Fund (generated through s.106 agreements).
- The Council had an on-going community investment programme that sought to ensure that affordable and social housing was being built in the borough. On-going information on the programme and specific schemes were considered by the scrutiny committee on an as and when basis.
- Neighbourhood Housing Officers would give tenants advance notification that they would be making a visit. Whilst there they would have conversations with the tenant regarding their needs and support requirements, but also be aware of whether the home was being fully occupied. Neighbourhood Housing Officers would also undertake unannounced visits if tenants do not respond to appointment suggestions.

The scrutiny committee welcomed the proposals contained in the report and the support that would be given in helping vulnerable and people with disabilities should they wish to use the scheme.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

11. TRANSFORMATION OF HOUSING SERVICES

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Housing

Glendine Shepherd, Director of Housing, took the meeting through the report and she along with Councillor Meric Apak, Cabinet Member Better Homes, gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Council's performance data had shown that there were two areas where housing services were underperforming, this is was the turnaround of void properties and income collections from tenants in rent arrears. In October 2022, officers set up interim teams to focus immediately on improving these

two areas. Neighbourhood Housing Managers and Officers had been redistributed to create fixed-term specialist teams to deal with these issues. The purpose was to have a rapid impact on these underperforming areas, amend work practices, and to learn lessons for future service design. The team would seek to ensure that when tenants were having difficulty making their rent payment, they would be given advice and help access support that would enable them to continue making rental payments. This approach was already showing improvement in the rent collection figures with arrears now standing at £13.8M which was down from over £14M.

- Creating these teams should not only reduce lost income in rent arrears and void property turnaround, but also allow space for existing Landlord Service staff to focus on delivering a holistic, neighbourhood model of working.
- The approach was seeking to address historic issues regarding service performance and the ambitious programme of transformation also sought to address issues around finance, performance, culture, staff empowerment, and improving the tenants and residents experience. Appropriate staff training would form part of the change process.
- Information regarding the service transformation process had been well received at the recent meetings of the Housing District Management Committees, where tenants and residents had welcomed the service changes.
- Housing Neighbourhood Officers would now be responsible for approximately 400 tenants, a figure much lower than the London average of approximately 800 which had been the previous level in Camden.
- The Council's Allocation process was going through a deep dive review to understand and improve the tenant's experience, as currently it didn't match the aspirations of the Council or tenants. This review would cover the medical assessment process along with ensuring staff understood the importance of the tenant's well-being as part of that process.
- Officers did have a delivery plan for the transformation programme but service issues and recruitment and retention issues could impact on the timeline. All appropriate means were being used to seek to attract the right staff to form part of the new service, including offering staff secondments that would allow officers to change roles.
- Officers agreed to provide an update at a future meeting that would also look at local recruitment opportunities (including local apprenticeships) and they would provide a breakdown of the data regarding rent arrears.

ACTION BY: Director of Housing

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

12. UPDATE FROM CABINET MEMBER FOR BETTER HOMES

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

Councillor Meric Apak, Cabinet Member Better Homes, gave the following key responses to questions:

- In January 2021, Camden responded to increased casework trends during the pandemic with resources allocated to deal with damp and mould. This led to the creation of a 'Damp and Mould Team' who had been assessing referrals and where required to commission damp and mould work. In recognition of the impact of other factors on damp and mould, the Repairs Service also set up a 'leak hub' that would be focused on finding the root causes of leaks. This was in addition to the work already established to periodically check gullies and outlets. A Damp and Mould cross Council project board had been set up with the mission that no one was at risk of harm in Camden from damp and mould. The approach the Council had undertaken to tackling this issue was being seen as ahead of many other local authorities, some of whom were contacting the Council seeking information regarding the way Camden had approached this.
- As part of the next stage of dealing with damp and mould issues the Council had sent out approx. 17,500 SMS to registered residents on Friday 9th December asking if tenants had damp and mould issues. Following this over 921 tenants had responded as of today, advising the Council of damp and mould issues they felt needed to be addressed. The Council would also be sending out a letter or email to households advising them on how to reduce moisture in their homes this winter, and asking them to report damp and mould on-line or by text.
- The Repairs Service has scaled up its resources to respond to the anticipated increase in the volume of damp and mould reports. Neighbourhood Housing Officers would also increase visits where they would check for damp and mould and refer it to the Repairs Service where it was identified.
- In keeping with the wider market, there were challenges around supply chain issues and availability of suitable staff, and it was noted this may have an impact on turn-around times but this was being monitored appropriately.
- The Repairs Service was continuing its work in developing a new 'front-end' for the repairs service so residents could track progress on their repair, but work on the 'back-end' of the system was needed first and this was being taken forward by the service.
- The Repairs Service was now seeing over 50% of repairs being reported through remote methods leading to call handlers being able to respond to those still using the phone (who tended to be more vulnerable tenants) quicker.
- Officers would look at promoting the SMS service as part of the rent statement changes that would be circulated to all tenants, along with providing further information on the remote reporting methods on community noticeboards.

**ACTION BY: Director of Housing
(AS)/Director of Property Management
(SR)**

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

13. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Housing

The Chair advised the meeting that the following items should be added to the agendas for future meetings:

January 23

Cabinet report – Fair Funding Agreement with HS2

Housing Transformation update – to a future meeting

Also she had asked that the Cabinet Member Better Homes provide an update regarding the position of the Tenants Voice, as part of his annual report to the scrutiny committee.

**ACTION BY: Cabinet Member Better
Homes/Director of Housing**

Officers agreed to provide members with a further breakdown of the response times regarding the call backs, SMS and Chat reporting methods.

**ACTION BY: Director of Property
Management**

Programme of meetings (new items in bold)

17TH JANUARY 2023

Draft agenda

- Medium Term Financial Strategy
(Cabinet report)
- Cabinet report – HRA budget setting
(Cabinet report)

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- Corporate Performance report (Q2)
- Cabinet Member Better Homes (update report)
- Improving the safety of estates (assess crime and ASB data, progress on CCTV Installation across the borough)
- Community Investment Programme Annual report
- **HS2 – Fair Funding Agreement (Cabinet report)**
- Work programme

21ST FEBRUARY 2023

Draft agenda

- Annual portfolio report: Better Homes
- Report of the Cabinet Adviser (Rough sleeping: homelessness prevention, temporary accommodation, and the review with public health of homelessness provision)
- Report of the Cabinet Adviser (Estates Mission)
- State of the Borough report
- Work programme

Yet to be programmed

- Allocations Policy (Policy review and service redesign)
- Leaseholder services
- Landlord Licensing Scheme update
- Camden Housing Strategy
- **Housing Transformation Update**

RESOLVED –

THAT the report work programme be revised as outlined above.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

There were none.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm.

CHAIR

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MINUTES END