

Tenant and Leaseholder Panel

Meeting held on Wednesday, 28 July 2021 at 6.30 pm, this meeting was held virtually.

Minutes

Present: Yaw Boateng (Chair)

Nina Grads, Patricia Hay-Justice, Louisa Woodley, Michael Neal, Lynne Hale, Pat Ryan, Clive Fraser.

Also Present: Alison Knight (Executive Director of Housing), Chris Stock (Resident Involvement Manager), Verna Francis (Senior Resident Involvement Officer), Sharon Murphy (Head of Tenancy and Caretaking Services, Housing Assessment and Solution), Leila Ben-Hassel (Councillor), Jill Arboine (Resident), Ishia Beckford (Resident), Kim Wakely (Resident), Marilyn Smithies (Resident), Leslie Parry (Resident), Dave Mundy (Resident), Monica Binns (Resident).

PART A

Welcome and Introductions

The Panel Members, Councillors and officers in attendance introduced themselves.

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Jade Appleton, Saheed Ullah, James Gitau.

Disclosure of Interest

There were no disclosures at this meeting.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

A resident noted that the housing department agreed to present a report at the next Tenants & Leaseholders Panel meeting; however, this was not listed on the agenda for discussion.

The Chair informed the Panel that he would sign the minutes once the recent social distancing measures had been relaxed enough to allow him to do so.

RESOLVED - The minutes of the meeting held on 9th February 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

Introduction of the new Interim Head of Repairs

The Chair introduced the item and the Cabinet Member for Homes informed the Panel that the new Interim Head of Repairs had been with the Council since the 28 June 2021.

The new Interim Head of Repairs introduced himself to the Panel and outlined his previous experience with working for local authorities in similar positions to Croydon Council at this moment in time.

In response to a resident, the interim Head of Repairs confirmed that they would be looking at providing repairs training for young people. He further explained to queries raised by the Panel that he was responsible for overseeing the contracts and the repairs service as a whole, which included making recommendations and comments to the Executive Director of Housing.

Regina Road Update and Development of Housing Improvement Board

The Chair introduced the item and the Cabinet Member for Homes informed the Panel that there had been a fire at Regina Road. She detailed how the fire began, the response from the fire brigade, and how residents reacted. The Panel were informed that nobody was injured and that the fire did not spread.

The Cabinet Member for Homes also stated that letters had been distributed to residents, informing them of the response to the fire.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing shared a presentation with the Panel, which outlined the emerging Housing Improvement Plan, which the officers were recommending to the Panel to adopt.

The Interim Executive Director gave an overview of the Ark Report, stating that there were issues around care and respect, communication, complaints, performance management, data and intelligence. The recommendations set out in the report were to ensure that there was a team focused on policy and performance, improving the investment planning and making sure that there was a strategic group that have the power to oversee the development and implementation of the plan. There were other recommendations around governance, leadership, planning, and workforce planning.

An action plan was developed and work had begun on the Housing Improvement Plan.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing stated that a structure was agreed at the previous Full Council meeting, following the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive. In future there would be a Corporate Director of Housing which would be a permanent role in the new structure. The structure would also include a Head of Policy and Performance, who would be responsible for developing a new housing strategy and looking at all of the policies. The Head of Responsive Repairs and Safety would have a complete overview of all of the safety aspects. The Head of Housing Service Planning and Delivery, would have a few slight changes to their position but they would oversee capital delivery, planned maintenance, asset management and the Council's plan to improve the estate in the future, making sure that there's a plan of works that fit in with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan.

The Interim Executive Director had been tasked with pulling the teams in the Housing Department together into a new directorate, to ensure that the new structure would be ready in the coming months. She further outlined the broad structure of the new directorate, however, it was noted that this may be subject to small changes prior to implementation.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing further outlined the importance of focusing on resident engagement and the need to address comments in the ARK report around the size of patches, the number of cases people are working with, and the number of resident's people are working with. This would require additional resources in order to be addressed.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing then informed the Panel that the Housing Improvement Board was a recommendation following the governance comment that was in the ARK report about having a strategic board that would oversee the Council's actions, hold the Council to account in regards to their performance. This board would be independently chaired and would make recommendations to Cabinet.

The Housing Improvement Board would reflect the aims of the Charter for Social Housing about safety, monitoring how the landlord was performing, and ensuring complaints were dealt with promptly and fairly.

The Independent Chair of the Board would be appointed by the Interim Executive Director of Housing, the Cabinet Member for Homes and the Leader of the Council. Representatives on the Board would include individuals from the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel and the Improvement Panel, There would also potentially be representatives from the Local Government Association (LGA), an external representative from a London Council or a housing association, and an individual from the voluntary and community sector. The invite would also be extended to the Regulator for Social Housing, who would occasionally attend, but would not be a formal member as this would be seen as a conflict given the regulation notice.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing informed the Panel that, based on the ARK report, there was a need for a work stream around vision and strategy, which would have governance arrangements. There would be a separate work stream focussed on performance and developing a baseline performance management framework. There was also a need to review the complaint system to ensure it worked effectively to enable the Council to identify service improvement in the future. There was also a work stream focussed on resident engagement, for which the resident engagement team would play an important part in looking at whether the existing structures were fit for purpose.

There had been a focus on improving the statistics related to compliance and safety, ensuring that the Council had up to date statistics on various areas such as fire regulation, gas, electric, lifts, water and asbestos which are all key areas for resident's safety. There was also a renewed focus on the management of the repairs contract.

Business intelligence would be included in asset management and investment planning to ensure that the HRA 30 year business plan had an underlying improvement strategy to outline how the Council will improve its housing stock over that time frame.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing advised that the work stream on workforce planning and staff development included the Council reviewing whether it had the right resources in place, the use of the HRA rate and how staff development would have led to a culture change and an improved customer service. Invoice management would also be addressed with changes to be made based on some of the ideas that have come forward with the papers that have been submitted.

Temporary accommodation was another area that needed to be addressed, with a strategy in development aimed at improving how the Council managed its' with temporary accommodation. This would include a focus on demand management and where the Council could make better use of its void properties and other types of accommodation.

Prior to opening the floor for questions, the Chair addressed the Panel, advising that resident's experiences needed to be central to the service going forward. This would require the Council to listen to its residents and find ways to actively involved involve them. The Chair stated that while it was accepted that the Housing Board structure had not been finalised, it was hoped that tenants would be central in the new structure. The Chair also expressed his view that the complaints process at the Council was sufficient at ground level, but there were many roadblocks within the system.

In response to a question from a resident regarding the workshops local residents were able to access, it was explained that the workshops implemented by the Council were in response to the findings in the ARK report and was a key reason why the Council have a key work stream built around resident involvement. The Cabinet Member for Homes informed the Panel that tenancy engagement was very important to the Council, highlighting some of the changes that had already been implemented such as tenancy officers and caretakers reporting issues back to the Council. This meant that when a resident received engagement from one or two officers they were really engaging with the whole team.

Regulator for Social Housing – Voluntary Undertaking

The Chair introduced the item and invited the Interim Executive Director of Housing to speak. A resident asked about the improvement plan for Regina Road and whether it would appear on the Panel's agenda. In response it was highlighted that all of the key actions taken around Regina Road could be found within the appendix.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing informed the Panel that the regulatory notice was issued on the 20 May 2021, this notice stated that the Council had breached the home standard and the tenant involvement and empowerment standard. The notice also discussed cost effective repairs, the maintenance service, and health and safety requirements. With regard to the tenant involvement and

empowerment standard, the notice stated that the Council needed to treat its tenants with fairness and respect by resolving complaints promptly, politely and fairly.

The Council have held discussions with the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), the first few meetings were focussed on improving the service through achieving things like gas certificates which were currently at 99.5%, and expected to be 100% very shortly. The RSH would like the Council to give a voluntary undertaking in respect to the matters that were raised in the meeting, and they will work with the Council to ensure that they are meeting these voluntary requirements.

The RSH outlined the make-up of a voluntary undertaking, which was a three-stage approach. The outline of a voluntary undertaking was that at the first stage the Council needed to address the issue, this can be done by drafting a short summary of the weaknesses needing to be addressed. The second step required the Council to state how they will rectify the identified issues. The final step focussed on gaining assurance that the Council was compliant which would require extra independent verification. This would then be set out in a document to highlight how they will be transitioning from non-compliant to compliant. The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council would have to agree these commitments with the regulator along with a timetable of actions.

The Council will be working with another local authority to identify how it would manage the various aspects of the undertaking and the steps required to achieve it. Once this work was complete, the commitments and standards would be set out in the voluntary undertaking.

The Panel was advised that the Council's voluntary undertaking needed to demonstrate that its commitment to health and safety was paramount, the development of a responsive repairs service that fully monitors complaints and service satisfaction, that residents are engaged and feel as though they were listened to and treated with respect; the ways in which the Council measured its success including key performance indicators (KPI), baseline data and the development of a fully priced HRA plan showing estate improvements.

The Council would monitor this through the Housing Improvement Board, the Housing Improvement Plan, meetings with the Regulator of Social Housing, external validation, resident's feedback (including Star surveys), tenant & leaseholder Panels (H&S, Tenancy Focus Group, TLP, Scrutiny and PMG) and having established timelines for success.

The Interim Executive Director of Housing informed the Panel that the Council aimed compile data which would be used as a baseline to measure progress. This data would be generated by asking residents a series of questions such as 'how satisfied are you with the overall quality in your home?', 'how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that repairs and maintenance are carried out?', 'how satisfied are you that the Council listens to you?', 'how difficult was it to get your most recent inquiry resolved?' and 'how satisfied are you satisfied with the resident involvement opportunities'. These questions would help the Council to then validate what it was being told by the repairs service.

It was confirmed that the many of the KPI's which will be used to monitor the progress of the improvement plan would also be part of the wider housing service.

An Update on the Grounds Maintenance Service

The Chair introduced the next item, which was clarified would be looking at the Grounds Maintenance Service and not the grounds maintenance contract.

The Panel was advised that due to the constraints on the Council's finances, the Service had developed a strategy which focussed its grounds maintenance resources on ensuring parks were ready for the school holiday and maintaining cemeteries. This program was ending which would provide the opportunity to refocus the service on other areas such as housing. The Interim Head of Environmental Services confirmed that housing managers, directors and officers had been unaware of the impact of the changes and the service cuts, which has led to some internal inquiries. The Chair expressed concern about the approach of the Council and highlighted how this may impact the relationship between the Council and its tenants.

In response to concerns raised about the length of the grass in areas that had not received regular cuts, assurance was given that this would be addressed and the Council was aware that the grass may conceal things such as broken glass, drug paraphernalia and dog waste which was unpleasant for tenants. It was also acknowledged that the decisions made regarding the grounds maintenance service had made things such as litter picking more difficult due to the length of the grass.

It was acknowledged that the service had mostly been reactive, however it would be working towards becoming more proactive in future. It was also reiterated that the grass would be cut by the start of August in all of Croydon's 127 parks, after which it would be possible to refocus resources towards providing an improved service to the HRA and highways. It was confirmed that the Council would work with residents to plan the maintenance of the grass in communal areas on housing estates and in parks.

It was highlighted that the Council had brought the grounds maintenance contract back in house in 2018, and at the time there a plan to ease the transition and minimise any teething issues arising, however the pandemic had forced these plans to be put on hold. Subsequently, there had been a decision to reduce the grounds maintenance service by allowing the grass in certain areas to meadow, in order to help to ease the Council's financial predicament.

It was also highlighted that issues had arisen in the past due to the contractors using equipment that was of a poor quality. The Council currently had its own staff delivering the service with the same equipment, but there would be funding for new equipment in future. It was also clarified that although the Council had reduced the number of permanent staff, additional capacity was created by hiring seasonal staff, although it was acknowledged that recruitment was a challenge at present, particular for seasonal staff. It was confirmed that the service had six available teams which could be split into five teams of five or six teams of four depending on annual leave and other staff absence.

The Panel was advised that while the Council would like to avoid residents cutting the grass in their local area, there was scope for resident groups to provide assistance as long as risk assessments were conducted and resident involvement could be provided in a measured and safe manner.

A Tenants' Charter Proposal

The Chair introduced the item and explained that the Tenants Charter Proposal was developed because of the findings in the ARK report. The proposal was based on the principle that tenants need to be listened to.

A resident addressed the Panel and gave an outline of the Tenants Charter Proposal, explaining that the document was not an official proposal and was not being placed in front of the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel or the management team or local politicians to negotiate, instead it was more of a menu of ideas. The purpose of the documents was to provide tenants, leaseholders, free holders, garage tenants etc. with an opportunity to be heard by the Council which would help to inform service improvement.

The aim was for those in positions of responsibility at the Council to review the Tenants Charter Proposal before reporting back to explaining what could and couldn't be achieved from the proposal. The Interim Executive Director of Housing confirmed that the Proposal would receive full consideration and a response provided.

Resident Involvement Roadshow

The Chair introduced the item and invited the Senior Resident Involvement Officer to address the Panel. The Senior Resident Involvement Officer informed the Panel that they had received 118 questionnaires and knocked on around 460 doors. The team had been well received by residents, with posters put up before they arrive to ensure residents were aware that they were coming. A card providing contact information had been posted through the doors of residents they were unable to contact which had led to a number of residents getting in touch with them. There were 22 more areas left to visit on the current round of the roadshow and there was a list being drawn up for areas to visit on the next round.

The team had been focusing on the high-rise blocks at first as they received a lot of services. In areas without any high-rise blocks, the initial focus would be on those estates without representation or where the Council does not generally hear from residents.

The team left 'get involved forms' which provided residents with information about ways that they can get involved. This would be followed up by telephone calls to explain to residents why they left the form and offer to help fill them in.

Feedback

The Chair introduced the item and updated the Panel of the following:

- Representing Croydon on the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH).
- Confirming that some members had left the Panel as they did not like virtual meetings. It was hoped that a face-to-face meeting may be possible in September.

Any Other Business

The Chair introduced the item, advising that there had been some confusion between the Scrutiny Committee and the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Resident Involvement Team had been asked to look into the issue regarding the name of the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

The Chair also stated that had also been some confusion amongst the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel regarding the responsibilities of the Highways team and the Housing team. It was agreed that this issue needed to be resolved as soon as possible.

A resident raised concern about the management of the garages, which may result in significant lost revenue to the Council. It was also highlighted that those tenants who owned garages had various issues and there was no maintenance contract for garages. As a result, members of the Panel had produced a report in April to seek a solution to these issues. This report was presented to the performance monitoring group.

All of the tenants, leaseholders and freeholders unanimously endorsed the report leading to it being submitted to the Council for consideration. There was disappointment about the response given to the report by the Council, which was felt did not address the recommendations. It was agreed that support was needed to ensure the report would be reviewed by the senior management of the Council. . He stated that he wanted to find an avenue on behalf of the Panel to get the members of senior management to look the report.

The Director of Housing Assessment and Solutions, Housing Assessment and Solution advised that they would ensure the report was reviewed by the appropriate managers and received a full response. .

The Chair informed the Panel that a survey had been circulated to determine whether people were comfortable with attending meetings in person. The Democratic Services Officer informed the Panel that restrictions were still in place and anyone attending a meeting in the Council Chamber had to adhere to social distancing, this meant that at present, the next tenants and leaseholders meeting could not be held in the Council Chamber due to lack of capacity. However, these regulations were being revised regularly and may have changed by the time of the next meeting.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for the 12th October 2021