



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Wednesday 5th June, 2019**, Rooms 18.01 & 18.03, 18th Floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

**Members Present:** Councillors Melvyn Caplan (Chairman), Antonia Cox, Richard Elcho, Guthrie McKie, Matt Noble, Tim Roca, Mark Shearer and James Spencer.

**Also Present:** Councillor Rachael Robathan (Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration), Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing Services), Councillor Murad Gassanly (Deputy Cabinet Member for Housing Services), Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director – Finance and Resources), Barbara Brownlee (Executive Director – Growth, Planning and Housing), Greg Roberts (Head of Supply), Jennifer Travassos (Head of Prevention), Aaron Hardy (Policy and Scrutiny Manager) and Toby Howes (Senior Committee and Governance Officer).

#### 1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 It was noted that Councillors Guthrie McKie and Tim Roca were replacing Councillors Adam Hug and Pancho Lewis respectively.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

#### 3 MINUTES

- 3.1 The Chairman asked if Members would be circulated details of staff names for the new Housing Management that had replaced CityWest Homes (CWH). In reply, Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing Services) advised that he would liaise with officers and make sure this was circulated.

#### 3.2 RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record of proceedings.

#### **4 CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PROPERTY AND REGENERATION UPDATE**

- 4.1 Councillor Rachael Robathan (Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration) presented the report and advised that the Property function had been transferred from Growth, Planning and Housing to Finance. The change made a logical fit and help ensure that the appropriate financial controls were in place. The position of Director of Property Investments and Estates had been vacated and David Hodgkinson was now leading in his role as Director of Corporate Finance and Property and a more strategic approach was being taken. Councillor Robathan also informed the Committee that the Economic Development function previously covered by the vacant Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Education and Skills would come under her portfolio for now and this would fit in well with the regeneration aspects of her portfolio.
- 4.2 During Members' discussions, the refurbishment of City Hall and the progress in the letting of floors was welcomed and it was asked whether the new Facilities Management contract was going well. Members queried the reasons for the net underspend of £44.571m in the General Fund and was this partly attributable to delays to projects. It was remarked that the Council received comparatively high revenue levels compared to other local authorities, and in addition to setting low Council Tax rates, it was asked whether this could affect the Council's chance in respect of the Fair Funding Review. Members also asked whether the underspend for 2019-20 was more likely to be in the region of 10%. A Member referred to comments in the report stating that there were concerns about the level of support provided by the Department of Work and Pensions regarding Universal Credit applications and asked in what ways could the Council help. Another Member asked who benefitted from the Community Contribution and why was a separate contract pursued for demolition works in respect of the Ebury Bridge renewal project. He also asked for an update on progress in respect of Beachcroft.
- 4.3 Members sought further details regarding timescales for construction in respect of the Infill Programme and whether recent market trends would help the Council acquire land for less. Further information was also requested in respect of the Council's Apprenticeship Scheme. A Member asked why there was not a service contract in place in respect of public conveniences. He also enquired on the number of new homes built to date. Another Member asked if there were appropriate benchmarks in place with regard to local authority reserves and emphasised the importance in maintaining careful management of this.
- 4.4 In reply to issues raised by the Committee, Councillor Robathan advised that she was not aware of any particular issues with regard to the new Facilities Management contract. The underspend in the General Fund was due to delays to some projects, such as Beechcroft and Ebury Bridge and there was also an underspend on temporary accommodation, although a lot of work was being undertaken to address this. Councillor Robathan felt that the objectives of the Capital Programme were ambitious but realistic and there would inevitably be some delays. She anticipated that the underspend for 2019-20

may be more in the region of 10%, however there were still challenges to be surmounted. Councillor Robathan was comfortable with the reserves available and steps were being taken to obtain a prudent position. The Government encouraged local authorities to set low Council Taxes, In respect of the Fair Funding Review, there had been a lot of discussion with central Government and the Council was emphasising the Westminster specific challenges it faced and it was possible that the outcome of the review would be delayed.

- 4.5 Councillor Robathan commented that she had concerns with regard to the level of support the Government was providing in respect of Universal Credit applications and there was a full time officer at the Marylebone office to provide support and advice on this. She added that there needed to be more focus on this issue in job centres. With regard to the Community Contribution scheme, the Committee was advised that £70,000 had been allocated to the Riverside Centre and £33,000 to homelessness services. The Ebury Bridge renewal project was anticipated to be completed between April to June 2020 and there was a lot of interest in the flats that were to be built. Beechcroft Care Home was now on track and Adult Social Care had led on the consultation. Councillor Robathan advised that Infill schemes typically took half the time to complete compared to larger schemes, although it was important that proper engagement with residents was undertaken. It was hoped that the current market conditions may give the Council opportunities to acquire land for less.
- 4.6 Councillor Robathan advised that a review of public conveniences was being undertaken to identify where there was most need. There were two types of public conveniences provided, the more traditional W/Cs and automated facilities. City Management were also involved in the review. With regard to the target of providing 1,850 new affordable homes, Councillor Robathan advised that this was on track.
- 4.7 Barbara Brownlee (Executive Director – Growth, Planning and Housing) added that in respect of Ebury Bridge, the Council was seeking a straightforward contract in respect of completion of the scheme and it would retain complete control over development.
- 4.8 Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director – Finance and Resources) advised that there was no published thresholds and benchmarks in respect of local authority reserves and it was dependent on the individual circumstances for each council. He added that it was important that local authorities understood the potential risks that they could be exposed to.
- 4.9 **ACTION:**
1. Details of which officers are responsible for which services were in the new Housing Management Team be provided (**Action for: Councillor Robathan and Barbara Brownlee**).
  2. A briefing on the Council's Apprenticeship Scheme to be provided (**Action for: Councillor Robathan**).

3. Provide a note on the number of homes the Council had started and completed, as well as a list of schemes on site (**Action for: Councillor Robathan and Barbara Brownlee**).

## **5 CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE**

- 5.1 Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing Services) presented the report and provided updates on areas including the performance of the Contact Centre, an update on anti-social behaviour services, parking and resident engagement. In respect of the Contact Centre, 84% of calls had been answered within 30 seconds, above the target of 70%, and 96% of all calls were answered in quarter 4 of 2018-19. Satisfaction with regard to the handling of anti-social behaviour was recorded at 74% for 2018-19, against a target of 83%. The main three complaints on anti-social behaviour related to noise, drug dealing/misuse and verbal abuse and harassment.
- 5.2 The Chairman suggested that a task group on anti-social behaviour may be set up at a future date. With regard to major works, he sought details with regard to consultation timescales. He noted that spend on repairs was greater than major works and enquired whether a more joined up approach should be taken.
- 5.3 Members commented that the number of complaints in respect of repairs was still quite high and asked what steps were being taken to reduce this. With regard to fire safety assessments, Members asked if these were undertaken promptly and what would happen in the event of leaseholders not agreeing on fire door works. Members asked if there was an update on online reporting of anti-social behaviour and did the Police have sight of this. It was suggested that residents' associations be encouraged to provide a list of repairs that they wanted undertaken.
- 5.4 A Member expressed concern regarding tenancy reviews where this involved vulnerable residents which may involve delicate matters and he asked whether the appropriate people were undertaking the assessments. A Member asked whether drop keys were being used in respect of Allsort Terrace in Bayswater. Another Member commented that there needed to be a reinvigoration of residents' engagement and asked whether the Council was being ambitious enough in respect of initiatives concerning sprinklers and whether progress on this could be accelerated. The Chairman added that there would be an update on the sprinklers programme at a future meeting.
- 5.5 In reply to issues raised by Members, Councillor Smith acknowledged that residents may face financial difficulties and financial planning issues in respect of major works and steps were being taken to provide more information and consultation prior to these works. He accepted that that there needed to be a more joined-up approach in respect of repairs and major works. Councillor Smith also acknowledged that complaints concerning repairs was still relatively high, however this had to be taken in context as the number of repairs carried out was very large. There had been an increase in the number of repair inspections and there were key performance indicators to monitor this. There was also a better working relationship between the

Contact Centre and the Repairs Team. Councillor Smith advised that fire door safety checks had been carried out promptly and issues identified were followed up. Additional resources were in place to ensure the checks would be completed before year end. Action would also be taken if leaseholders refused to agree to fire door works.

- 5.6 Councillor Smith advised that there would be an update on online reporting of anti-social behaviour shortly and he welcomed the suggestion of encouraging residents' associations to list what repairs they wanted prioritised. He felt the tenancy reviews were carried out appropriately, including where this involved vulnerable people and every effort was made to ensure that all the relevant information had been factored in. Councillor Smith agreed to look into the use of drop keys at Allsort Terrace. With regard to installation of sprinklers, Councillor Smith advised that every effort was being made to ensure that this was being undertaken at pace, however it was also important that a thorough approach was taken. There was also a high number of leaseholders involved in the exercise.

**ACTION:**

1. Next report to include details of the fire door inspections, including figures. **(Action for: Councillor Smith and Barbara Brownlee).**
2. A response to be provided to Councillor Elcho in respect of use of drop keys at Allsort Terrace in Bayswater **(Action for: Councillor Smith and Barbara Brownlee).**

**6 WESTMINSTER HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY**

- 6.1 Jennifer Travassos (Head of Prevention) gave a presentation on the Homelessness Strategy. Members noted the unique challenges Westminster faced in tackling homelessness and welcomed the efforts the Council made in approaching the Government in addressing this issue. It was also noted that the focus was on early prevention to stop people facing a situation where they faced homelessness.
- 6.2 Members acknowledged the efforts made by officers in tackling homelessness and asked what steps councillors could take to assist officers. In reply, Jennifer Travassos suggested that officers could attend Members' surgeries.
- 6.3 The Committee requested that progress with regard to the strategy be revisited at a future meeting.

**7 PROVISION OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION FOR HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS**

- 7.1 Greg Roberts (Head of Supply) introduced the report and advised that there were around 2,740 households in temporary accommodation, of which just under a half were located within Westminster. The Council was seeking to make more use of the private rented sector in order to prevent homelessness and in reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation.

- 7.2 Members then discussed the report and welcomed the efforts made to tackle homelessness in Westminster, underpinned by the Homelessness Strategy. It was acknowledged that the number of homeless people had increased. Members asked if there were ways they could help to ensure that there was earlier intervention in tackling this issue. It was also queried what steps were taken to stop people falling through gaps in services when they had initially been seen by the wrong service and was the linking up of services improving. Members expressed an interest in receiving training on tackling homelessness. A Member stated that there was currently a 10 year wait for a 2 bed property and the situation was worsening. He felt that policy supported private landlords and he asked if the Council could make an arrangement with central Government to purchase private accommodation so that tenants would become Council tenants, thus making providing support easier.
- 7.3 A Member commented that rough sleeping was a global issue and asked whether the Government was providing the support that the Council needed. He stated that the build to rent market was now huge and asked if there was a strategy to encourage long leases for such properties. He also asked whether those seeking accommodation wished to remain in Westminster or would be content to move out of borough. Another Member commented that use of private sector properties was not a long term solution to tackle homelessness as this was a less secure form of accommodation and rents were higher than social housing, which would lead to repeat customers seeking another home. Another Member commented that some people seeking accommodation had made a choice to accept offers of accommodation outside of Westminster and this was a realistic approach to take. One Member remarked that the number of homelessness had doubled in the last 9 years, despite economic growth throughout this period. A radical approach was needed to influence Government Policy on matters such as welfare reform to reduce homelessness. He added that some local authorities were looking at introducing a licensing system to prevent rogue landlords
- 7.4 In reply to the issues raised. Jennifer Travassos suggested that there might be some worth in officers attending councillor surgeries to assist in homelessness matters. There were some data gaps that needed plugging and there also existed the 'hidden homelessness'. It was a cross Council priority for services to work together in a more joined-up way, including between Adult Social Care and Children's Services. Jennifer Travassos stated that she could discuss with Janis Best (Member Services Manager) about training for Members on homelessness. Jennifer Travassos stated that there were regular meetings with central Government on rough sleeping in Westminster and substantial lobbying took place.
- 7.5 Greg Roberts advised that most needing accommodation wanted to remain in Westminster, however they were more likely to outside of the borough if they viewed the property first before making their decision. He stated that there was a range of options in finding homeless people accommodation, and not just through the private sector.

- 7.6 Barbara Brownlee advised that there would need to be a change in national policy to support councils to purchase private accommodation. With regard to build to rent, she informed Members that it was difficult to secure such accommodation for those on housing benefit or on low income levels. Barbara Brownlee advised that options had been discussed on how to tackle rogue landlords and further information could be provided on this. There was not a licensing scheme in place for landlords, however this could be considered further. Barbara Brownlee added that big efforts were being made in getting people into employment and this was an essential component in tackling homelessness.
- 7.7 The Chairman concluded discussions on this item by stating that the private rented sector in Westminster differed quite markedly to that of other local authorities. He stated that an update on progress on tackling homelessness would be presented at a future meeting.

## **8 WORKSHOP PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER**

- 8.1 Members had before them the Committee's Work Programme and Action Tracker. Aaron Hardy (Policy and Scrutiny Manager) advised that Resident Engagement was to be added to the Work Programme.

## **9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT**

- 9.1 There was no other business.

The Meeting ended at 9.24 pm.

**CHAIRMAN:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_