



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Housing, Finance and Customer Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing, Finance and Customer Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday 27th September, 2018**, Room 3.1, 3rd Floor, 5 Strand, London, WC2 5HR.

**Members Present:** Councillors Melvyn Caplan (Chairman), Elizabeth Hitchcock, Adam Hug, Eoghain Murphy, Matt Noble, Tim Roca, James Spencer and Paul Swaddle OBE.

**Also Present:** Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services), Councillor Robert Rigby (Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration), Barbara Brownlee (Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing), Izzet Guran (Information Officer), Aaron Hardy (Policy and Scrutiny Manager), Tom McGregor (Director of Housing and Regeneration), Sandra Skeete (Interim Managing Director, CityWest Homes) and Toby Howes (Senior Committee and Governance Officer).

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Pancho Lewis and Mark Shearer.

#### 1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 It was noted that Councillors Tim Roca and Paul Swaddle OBE were replacing Councillors Pancho Lewis and Mark Shearer respectively.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

#### 3 MINUTES

##### 3.1 RESOLVED:

1. That the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 20 June 2018 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record of proceedings.
2. That the minutes of the meeting held on Monday, 30 July 2018 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record of proceedings.

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

- 4.1 Councillor Robert Rigby (Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration) presented the report and began by informing Members that the Budget and Performance Task Group was due to consider the Budget for 2019-20 and the Capital Programme. In respect of the programme to replace BT Managed Services with the IBC Solution from Hampshire County Council (HCC), officers were testing the system and feedback received to date was positive. HCC were due to go live with the new payroll system on 1 December 2018. In respect of the Church Street regeneration programme, Members heard that Councillor Robathan had recently visited the site to view progress to date. Councillor Rigby advised that the new Leaseholder Policy for Housing Renewal Areas 2018 had just been published and the options to buy offered were generous in comparison with other local authorities.
- 4.2 Councillor Rigby reported that the business plan for the Wholly Owned Company (WOC) had been well received by the Capital Review Group. He also advised that City Hall works in Victoria Street were on track and within budget. There would be opportunities for Members to visit City Hall before it re-opened. The City Council was seeking to invite local enterprise groups to operate the canteen in City Hall. Members were informed that there had been strong public support to keep St John's Wood Post Office in Circus Road open during a recent public consultation. Councillor Rigby also advised that the City Council was due to take over building facilities services when the Amey contract expires on 31 March 2019.
- 4.3 During Members' discussions, it was commented that it would be useful to see how the City Council compared with others using a league table in respect of Council Tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) collection rates. Information was sought on how much had been spent on the Community Contribution to date. In respect of St John's Post Office, a Member asked if there was room for flexibility regarding the rent the Post Office was willing to pay. He also sought details on how the Futures Groups for the Church Street and Ebury Bridge Regeneration schemes were progressing, including who would be chairing these groups in future. Members asked for further information on Marylebone Job Centre's implementation of the transition from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit, progress in sub-letting space at City Hall and what activities would the WOC perform.
- 4.4 The Chairman commented that there needed to be careful consideration of the City Council's needs regarding building facilities services when the Amey contract expires.
- 4.5 In reply to issues raised by Members, Councillor Rigby advised that the Council Tax and NNDR collection target rates were 96.5% and 98.5% respectively. He agreed to provide details of how much had been spent on the Community Contribution to date. In respect of St John's Wood Post Office, the City Council was taking a very flexible approach and the rent was below market value. Officers were making every effort to ensure that the Post Office continued to operate as it played an important role in the community.

Councillor Rigby would feedback to officers the Chairman's thoughts on the need to carefully consider what building facilities services were needed. He advised that the Marylebone Job Centre's implementation of the transition from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit had gone well and the Department for Work and Pensions had stated that it was an example of best practice. Councillor Rigby advised that the City Council was actively marketing space to sub-let in City Hall. He commented that developing the WOC was a time consuming process and he was on the WOC Board with three officers and it was hoped the scheme would be up and running in the next few months. Councillor Rigby acknowledged that it was crucial to have the right chairs in respect of the Futures Groups for the Church Street and Ebury Bridge regeneration schemes.

- 4.6 Barbara Brownlee (Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing) added that there was currently a review of the Church Street Futures Group and how the City Council proceeds with this group awaits the outcome of this review. She stated that many other consultation groups are up and running on Church Street dealing with specific projects. In respect of Ebury Bridge, clarification in respect of future arrangements were likely to take longer as there were extensive building works taking place at present. In respect of the WOC, Barbara Brownlee advised that the business plan required formal approval before the scheme would commence. The business plan would need to demonstrate that it was workable, and once this was approved, consideration would then be needed as to how the scheme would start.
- 4.7 The Chairman advised that an update on the WOC was due to be presented at the 14 January 2019 meeting and the input of Members would be important.

4.8 **ACTION:**

Information on how much has been spent on the Community Contribution to be circulated to Members. **(Action for: Councillor Robert Rigby and Steven Mair, City Treasurer.)**

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

- 5.1 Councillor Andrew Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services) presented the report and began by stating that it was proposed to bring the housing management function back under the City Council from CityWest Homes (CWH). He advised that the performance for CWH's Contact Centre had improved overall, despite a slight decline in August. Tenant satisfaction for repairs had plateaued at around 82% and a review of tenant feedback and the current repairs process was underway. A detailed review of repairs using data going back 5 years had been completed to enable performance to be improved and a more proactive approach would be taken.
- 5.2 Councillor Smith advised that the Council was in the process of drawing up Traffic Management Orders (TMOs) to provide parking restrictions on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) land. The evaluation of tenders for estate services

contracts had been completed by City Council and CWH staff and residents and these were due to be moderated and finalised by the end of September. Councillor Smith advised that a Prevention Team had been set up to bring homelessness and prevention of homelessness services under one team. The aim of the team was to improve and expand the focus on early intervention and to increase links with the community to reduce the number of people who find themselves homeless. The Committee was informed that a decision had also been made to install a fire curtain at Ingestre Court, following a residents' consultation. Councillor Smith added that a review of the 'Report It' and 'My Account' digital services was being undertaken and the web was also being reviewed which was due to undergo re-platforming.

- 5.3 During Members' discussions, the Chairman, in noting the number of estates involved, asked to what extent the implementation of the TMOs would be staggered and when would information on the timetable be provided. He sought further details on progress with regards to CWH's work on leak prevention which was a particular problem in tower blocks.
- 5.4 Members enquired how the TMO would be enforced and would this be carried out by the City Council's own Enforcement Team since CWH was to be brought back in-house. In noting that implementation of the TMOs would take place during October and November, Members asked if undertaking enforcement would be possible at the same time. Clarification was sought as to the reasons why it was proposed to bring the housing management function back under the City Council and would there be costs involved. A Member, in welcoming the move to in-house, stated that there had been concerns about residents' representation under CWH and how would this representation be enhanced under the City Council. In respect of TMOs, he commented that all estates were different and so there should be no one size fits all solution.
- 5.5 In reply to Members' questions, Councillor Smith advised that implementation of TMOs would be staggered and balanced by the need to provide adequate consultation to residents and timely implementation. He agreed to provide further details in respect of the schedule for the roll out of TMOs. Councillor Smith concurred that it would make sense for the enforcement of the TMOs to be undertaken by the City Council's own enforcement team as housing management functions were due to become in-house. Councillor Smith advised that he was working with Councillor Tim Mitchell, Cabinet Member for Environment and City Management on the mechanisms to enforce the TMOs.
- 5.6 Councillor Smith stated that addressing leaks was a key priority and a task force had been created that was tracking why so many leaks were occurring. Pro-active maintenance would also be undertaken, however sometimes access to property was an issue, including where properties were vacant. Councillor Smith stated that the option of bringing the housing management function back under the City Council was proposed as it was felt that this option would enable more pro-active engagement with residents through a number of means, including through both digital and face to face contact. Councillor Smith stated that whilst there would be costs in returning the function under the City Council, the move would bring savings in the longer

term. He emphasised that resident engagement was key to improving services and a separate structure needed to be created to engage with residents.

#### 5.7 **ACTION:**

Schedule of TMO rollout on HRA properties to be circulated to Members.  
**(Action for: Councillor Andrew Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services and Barbara Brownlee, Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing.)**

### 6 **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY**

- 6.1 Izzet Guran (Information Officer) presented the report and advised that work on restructuring digital delivery to be City Council driven had commenced in May 2017. The 'Report It' function had seen significant uptake, with around 8,000 residents registered to use the service and around 16,000 cases created. Since 'Report It' had been created, there had been a number of improvements to the service, with all but two journeys now not requiring users to register with the service and to be able to access services as guests. Improvements were also being made to on-mapping services, with unnecessary maps being removed. Izzet Guran advised that steps were being made to place the Contact Centre on the same web platform as the Council's website. This would bring the same customer database across the Contact Centre and the website and bring an 'omni-channel' experience to customers.
- 6.2 Izzet Guran advised that an external agency had been commissioned to review the City Council's website and had undertaken a number of 'light sprints' covering the following functions:
- Homepage
  - Find it
  - Apply and pay
  - What's new in Westminster
  - Life stage – moving into Westminster
- 6.3 Izzet Guran informed Members that in the longer term, a procurement for a new web platform would be undertaken and implementation timescales would be based on other local authorities' experiences, including looking at how these transpired at Manchester City Council and Birmingham City Council.
- 6.4 During discussions, a Member emphasised the need to ensure that digital services were 'mobile first' so that customers could access and use them on their mobile phones. He felt that some customer journeys were still too long and he suggested that commercial organisations offering good mobile services be approached for ideas. Members commented that they would be happy to help test mobile digital services. It was asked who reviewed changes to the website to assess whether they offered improvements. A Member queried when would it be possible to upload photographs on 'Report It' forms. Another Member requested that 'councillor' be added as an option to the

'Report It' forms and asked what steps were being made to make customer journeys faster. Members also expressed a desire to be more fully engaged in developing the Digital Transformation Strategy.

6.5 The Chairman concurred that it was important that services could be accessed by mobile devices as otherwise there was a danger that the City Council would fall behind the technology other organisations were offering. He emphasised the importance of digital services being able to work well on popular mobile platforms such as Apple and Android. He sought details of the timescale by which time most services could be used through mobile phones. The Chairman welcomed the progress on mapping.

6.6 In reply to issues raised by Members, Izzet Guran acknowledged that progress needed to be made in making digital services accessible to mobile devices, and there would be recognisable improvements in respect of this by November/December 2018. Testing was currently being undertaken on a number of different types of devices, including mobile phones. With regard to the City Council's website, Izzet Guran advised that the design had initially been service led. This approach was now being changed and customer focus groups were being used to provide their views on the website. The post of Head of Customer Experience had been created and was responsible for liaising with the focus groups. In respect of uploading photographs on 'Report It', Izzet Guran advised that there was already some functionality, although this needed to be developed more widely. Efforts were also being made to make customer journeys faster, although mapping was the biggest obstacle to this because of the complexities involved and alternatives were being looked at.

6.7 The Chairman thanked officers for the progress made to date and encouraged there to be more dialogue with Members and customers on this. However, it was important that progress continue to be made in improving digital services. The Chairman requested that councillors be sent details of officers they could contact for ideas about the website. He also requested that the Digital Strategy be included in the next Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services update.

6.8 **ACTIONS:**

1. Add 'councillor' as an option to the 'Report It' function. **(Action for: Ben Goward, Chief Information Officer.)**
2. Details to be provided on photograph upload capability on all Report It forms and when this will be. **(Action for: Ben Goward, Chief Information Officer.)**
3. Councillors to be sent details of officers they could contact for ideas about the website. **(Action for: Ben Goward, Chief Information Officer.)**
4. Digital Strategy to be included in the next Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services. **(Action for: Ben Goward, Chief Information Officer and David Lee, Cabinet Officer.)**

## **7 CITYWEST HOMES TASK GROUP REPORT**

- 7.1 The Chairman introduced the report and advised that the Task Group was unanimous in making the recommendations included in the report. The report was comprehensive and the Chairman thanked officers for the diligence shown. He then invited officers to make any observations and suggestions.
- 7.2 Sandra Skeete (Interim Managing Director, CityWest Homes) stated that she felt the whole process had been constructive and plans were in place for improvements. There were three broad areas the Task Group report had captured that needed to be addressed. Sandra Skeete advised that potentially some recommendations may lead to increased costs, whilst others may not be popular with all customers. Assessments would be carried out to ensure that the recommendations and steps made for improvement have had the desired effects.
- 7.3 Barbara Brownlee also felt that the process had proved extremely useful and every effort would be made to put residents at the heart of future ways of working. She also emphasised the importance of ensuring staff stability during the changes and to not lose sight of the existing improvement process. Tom McGregor (Director of Housing and Regeneration) also acknowledged the thorough process that had been undertaken and the need for staff stability, adding that it was important to maintain staff morale.
- 7.4 Councillor Smith welcomed the report and stated that he had encouraged the Committee to take on this piece of work. He welcomed the invaluable input and insight that Members had provided and acknowledged that the culture issue had been highlighted as a major area needing change.
- 7.5 During Members' discussions, a Member commented that there was still plenty of work to do. Consideration needed to be given as to working arrangements when the housing management function was returned to the City Council. The right mechanisms needed to be in place to address the culture issue, whilst also ensuring staff morale did not suffer. The move also offered the opportunity to integrate housing with other services. Another Member emphasised the need for good staff and resident relations and there also needed to be changes in respect of governance and accountability. It was asked what steps were to be taken in respect of changing the culture.
- 7.6 Members asked whether all CWH staff would be transferred to the City Council, or would they need to re-apply for their positions. It was also asked whether there would be any financial impact with regard to additional pensions coming under the City Council and how would this be modelled. It was suggested that residents could also be included in any future task groups. Further observations were sought as to what recommendations may not be popular with all residents. Members commented that the City Council should take some responsibility for the problems experienced as well as CWH. Proposals to increase engagement with residents was welcomed, however in respect of previous consultations, residents sometimes felt that they had not been provided with all the necessary information.

- 7.7 In reply to the issues raised by Members, Sandra Skeete stated that every effort needed to be made to reassure staff and it was recognised that some did have concerns. It was also important to retain as many staff as possible. In respect of engagement with residents, steps were being taken to obtain the views of residents who were currently not in residents' groups.
- 7.8 Barbara Brownlee stated that changing the culture was a key issue and would not be straightforward. However, co-locating staff on the same site would be helpful and staff would receive City Council training and be immersed in its values. She also advised that pension arrangements were tightly bound by law.
- 7.9 Councillor Smith commented that having CWH staff back in house would facilitate changing the culture and he confirmed that TUPE arrangements would apply.
- 7.10 In respect of the task group recommendations, Sandra Skeete suggested that with regard to recommendation 22, it may not be practical to ensure that all repairs were inspected upon completion. The Committee agreed to the Chairman's suggestion that this be appropriately re-worded so that there be an appreciable increase in the proportion of repairs inspected compared to what was currently undertaken. Barbara Brownlee suggested that it may also not be practical to ensure that all residents' communications were reviewed by councillors before issue. Members agreed to the Chairman's suggestion that this be re-worded so that it includes major communications, or meetings involving contractors when councillors were otherwise engaged at City Council meetings, or where there had been major incidents.
- 7.11 The Chairman stated that there was no intention to place blame on hard working staff and their dedication to their roles was recognised. It was understood that the changes could be unsettling and every effort should be made to address this. The main intention of the task group's recommendations was to improve the residents' experiences. The Chairman suggested that the implementation of the task group's recommendations be reviewed in around 6 months' time.

7.12 **RESOLVED:**

That the recommendations of the CityWest Homes Task Group report be agreed, subject to the comments set out above.

## **8 SPRINKLERS TASK GROUP REPORT**

- 8.1 The Chairman introduced the report and acknowledged that the recommendations in the report put forward will have cost implications and logistical challenges, although the general direction of travel set out in the recommendations should be progressed.
- 8.2 Members commented that the recommendations were designed to ensure the best outcomes for residents. A number of lessons could be learnt in respect of works to be undertaken in Glastonbury House, which was the first site due to



have sprinklers installed. It was asked what the unit cost per flat and legal implications are in respect of Glastonbury House. Members also asked what would happen in respect of buildings that may face demolition in future.

8.3 In reply to issues raised by Members, Barbara Brownlee advised that there was a large proportion of older residents in Glastonbury House. Every effort would be made to find workable solutions, whilst taking into account financial limitations. In respect of buildings that may face demolition in future, consideration needed to be given regarding the implementation timetable. Councillor Smith added that the task group built on the lessons learnt and that the City Council was honest in the challenges it faced.

8.4 The Chairman requested that a briefing note be circulated in respect of the lessons learnt in installing sprinklers at Glastonbury House.

8.5 **RESOLVED:**

That the recommendations of the Sprinklers Task Group be agreed.

8.6 **ACTIONS:**

1. Briefing note to be circulated on lessons learnt in installing sprinklers at Glastonbury House. **(Action for: Barabara Brownlee, Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing.)**
2. Aaron Hardy to provide Councillor Andrew Hug with information on the legal implications in respect of CityWest Homes staff moving back in-house. **(Action for: Aaron Hardy, Policy and Scrutiny Manager.)**

## **9 WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER**

9.1 A Member requested an update in respect of CWH for the March 2019 meeting. Members noted that there would be a review of property at a future meeting.

9.2 **ACTION:**

Update on CWH to be provided at the 18 March 2018 meeting. **(Action for: Barbara Brownlee, Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing.)**

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

10.1 There was no other business.

The Meeting ended at 8.52 pm.

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

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