



MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 9th OCTOBER 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S Smith (Chair), Councillors G Coates, M Couchman, H Hadley and M Summers

CABINET Councillor Ben Clarke

The following officers were present: Rob Barnes (Executive Director Communities), Joanne Goodfellow (Interim Executive Director Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer), Tina Mustafa (Assistant Director Neighbourhoods), Leanne Costello (Senior Scrutiny and Democratic Services Officer) and Laura Sandland (Democratic and Executive Support Officer)

43 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs T Jay, K Norchi and A Wells.

Apologies were also received from Cllr G Coates who would have to leave the meeting early.

44 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr H Hadley disclosed a declaration of interest for item number eight as a Leaseholder.

45 CHAIR'S UPDATE

There was none.

46 RESPONSES TO REPORTS OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were none.

47 CONSIDERATION OF MATTERS REFERRED TO THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FROM CABINET / COUNCIL

There were none.

The Chair highlighted to the Committee that due to proximity of the Cabinet meeting to this meeting that they are receiving the reports in their Cabinet format with a copy of their recommendations to Cabinet.

48 SOCIAL HOUSING REGULATORY PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Chair welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness and Planning and the Assistant Director. Neighbourhood for the report to:

1. provide an update on the latest position regarding compliance with the Regulator Social Housing (RSH) Consumer Standards, published with effect from 2nd April 2024
2. support any emerging and/or additional recommendations arising from Corporate Scrutiny meeting on 09th October 2024; further informed by discussions at the Homelessness & Housing Advisory Board meeting on 1st October 2024

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and thanked the Assistant Director for their hard work, acknowledging that whilst the Council are not where they want to be they are well on the way. It was highlighted that the report updated the Committee on the self-referral made in relation to the regulatory social housing consumer standards.

The Assistant Director highlighted that there was a copy of the self-referral letter sent in the pack before going through the recommendations that were being presented to Cabinet. It was highlighted that the referral was made in the interests of transparency not as a result of any incident or complaint.

The Chair thanked Officers for the report and acknowledged that making a self-referral was a brave move by the Council.

The Committee made the following comments/observations and asked the following questions:

1. Clarification as to how the number of breaches around electrical inspections arose?
The Officer highlighted that the inspections are not a requirement of the regulator but are seen as good practice and the report shows that there are other organisations in similar positions. Immediate action to address the situation has been taken, an external contractor has been appointed and they are due to start work on a project plan to bring the inspections up to date by March 2025 aiming for 320 inspections per month, with some mop up expected to be required around properties where there are issues with access. There will then be an opportunity to take a review to see how the Council came to be in this position.
2. Why are the Council not where they want to be and whether the repairs services commissioned by the Council had impacted on this?
Officers confirmed that as a result of the Social Housing Regulatory Programme a self-assessment was undertaken which enabled the Council to identify gaps which they can now focus on rectifying and then complete a review to inform a decision around how we structure moving forward.

The Assistant Director acknowledged that tenant satisfaction had fallen from 78 – 58% and that repairs contributed to that however there were a number of different factors, and it would be wrong to lay the blame on the contractors, but that shortfalls have been revealed. It was highlighted that there were some planned roadshows to involve tenants in driving improvement and satisfaction.

It was suggested by Members that it may be beneficial to complete more regular inspections of repairs in the future.

3. What impact this would have on the HRA account?

Officers confirmed that a report went to Cabinet in February which pointed to challenges around the budget and that a viability project was being carried out with reports planned to go to Cabinet after Christmas.

4. What the relationship with the regulator was like?

Officers confirmed that they had welcomed the transparency of the Council, that they had been supportive and there lots of discussions taking place and that the Council welcomed their expertise.

5. More information about how the 'continuous learning' referred on page five would be delivered/measured.

It was explained that a deadline to submit a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Code had been missed and subsequently rectified (Confirmed in a report to Cabinet in August) which led to a positive response from the regulator and whilst there are detailed actions within the improvement plan around what could be learnt, if the Committee wanted more information they could request that the Officers involved in this attend Committee.

6. More information about the Tenant Advocate Positions and finding the right person?

It was confirmed that this came about as a result of discussions with the tenant consultative group and the Tenant participatory Advisory Service (TPAS) to strengthen their position to hold Councillors and Officers to account for performance, a similar position to that held by non-executive directors on registered providers boards. The job profile would be developed and worked on with tenants and leaseholders, it would not be politically affiliated, and they would be looking for experience/expertise in working with boards and housing service.

Resolved that the Committee:

Endorsed the recommendations to be presented to Cabinet on the 10th October 2024.

(Moved by Councillor S Smith and seconded by Councillor M Couchman)

49 UPDATE ON STRATEGIC REVIEW OF LEASEHOLD SERVICE CHARGES

Councillor Hadley left the meeting for the discussion on this item.

The Chair welcome the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness and Planning and the Executive Director Communities to discuss the report to provide an update on the work done by Campbell Tickell in relation to Leasehold Service Charges and sets out a series of recommendations in relation to that report. The Interim Section 151 Officer and the Recoveries Manager were also in attendance for this item.

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report highlighting that further to the discussion at the last Scrutiny meeting that recommendation 4 had been amended.

The Committee made the following comments/observations and asked the following questions:

- Clarification around what repairs were required for the affected Leaseholders.
The Officer confirmed that following assessment by Campbell Tickall (CT), the majority of roofs had been assessed as needing repairs which could extend their lifespan before replacement being needed by approximately 10 years subject to reinspection after 5 years.

The Committee then addressed each recommendation that was being made to Cabinet for comment

- **Recommendation 1:**
Were Cabinet being asked to endorse the all the recommendations made by CT?
- Officers confirmed that they were looking for Cabinet to endorse all of the of CT recommendations except for the ones relating to the extending of payments terms and loans, which they were not looking to carry forward.
- **Recommendation 2:**
Clarification was sought from Officers who confirmed that the Corporate Credit Policy laid out terms for debts and where a debtor had means to pay they would expect them to, however the recovery team could look at individual circumstances to offer a payment plan of up to 12 months as standard, but that a longer term could be offered where appropriate subject to an assessment of individual circumstances, supported by proof of income and expenditure. It was also confirmed that the option to place a charge on the property can be used when required.
The Committee expressed concern at assessing on an individual basis as this may lead to inconsistent decisions.
Discussions were had around whether it was made clear that a payment plan was available, and Officers confirmed that they needed to ensure they were collecting income on a timely basis and not incurring administration costs, and that spreading the cost was not an option for everyone and therefore they needed to make sure this wasn't taken advantage of, however invoices did state that that if you were struggling to pay to get in touch with the recovery team.

Following discussion around whether the letters to residents should state that a payment plan should be offered the Committee agreed that as not everyone would be eligible for a payment plan that it should state that if they are having financial difficulty that they should talk to the Council as soon as possible to look at what arrangements.

It was confirmed that there was some general advice on the invoice but that something could be added to the covering letter to encourage that early engagement.

A recommendation was moved for Cabinet around the payment plans.

➤ **Recommendation 3:**

The Committee welcomed sight of the Service Improvement Plan (SIP) which they had highlighted at the meeting in August, it was noted that the SIP appeared to be written in conjunction with Trueman Change rather than CT and asked for clarification on why this was?

Officers confirmed that CT were consulted on as the experts but Trueman Change who the Council are working with across a number of projects were supporting with the administration. It was confirmed that using the two companies did not incur any additional costs as there were enough allocated hours available.

The Committee made suggestions of improving the plan including have a resource requirement column so that this could be addressed for every section and that an application such as Microsoft project could be used to define data and actionable tasks. Officers welcomed their suggestions.

How would they ensure that letters did not go out with the wrong information on as they and done previously?

Officers confirmed that they would take this point away and provide a response.

What timescales would be given to leaseholders to enable them to budget for upcoming works?

Officers confirmed that they would be given a forward plan of works which following the stock condition survey should give a five year program of replacements and major works alongside the statutory consultation period.

➤ **Recommendation 4:**

Clarification around varying estimated cost of works and clarification as to whether roofing felt would be replaced or repaired. Officers confirmed that works recommended by CT had been costed by the contractors but that they still needed to go through the consultation process subject to cabinet approval to proceed. Only works recommended by CT were being completed so if that included replacement of the felt then this was being looked at.

The Committee requested sight of the costings of the works and an amendment to this recommendation was moved by the Committee.

➤ **Recommendation 5:**

The Committee acknowledged that they supported the Continued use of CT to develop a policy.

➤ **Recommendation 6:**

It was noted that in the minutes from the meeting on the 13th August that the Committee highlighted that the suite of letters were still not customer friendly enough.

Officers confirmed that this is the suite of letters that they would be using but that any letters would be accompanied by an explanatory covering letter from the Portfolio Holder.

➤ **Recommendation 7:**

There were no questions or comments on this on this.

➤ **Recommendations 8:**

The Committee acknowledged that they were happy with the revised wording to includes those who are 'willing to participate'.

Following revision of the eight recommendations being made to Cabinet the committee recommended an amendment to recommendation four :

Cabinet approves the process for remedial works based on the completed surveys and utilising the QLTA approach. A detailed cost breakdown must be submitted to the next available Corporate Scrutiny committee as a briefing note. Both these costs and the final invoices require approval from the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness, and Planning.

(Moved by Councillor S Smith and seconded Councillor M Couchman)

The Committee made an addition recommendation to Cabinet that they

Review and revise the payment plan criteria including the statement of means to ensure fairness and consistency.

(Moved by Councillor S Smith and seconded by Councillor M Summers)

Councillor G Coates left the meeting at 6:55pm.

50 WORKING GROUP UPDATES

There were none.

51 FORWARD PLAN

It was requested that Tenancy management Policy be added to the agenda for the meeting on the 19th November before it is considered by Cabinet on the 21st November.

52 CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN

The Committee reviewed the work plan and it was confirmed that the next meeting was on the 19th November where they would receive the next quarterly performance update and the Tenancy Management Policy.

53 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

That in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meeting and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012, and Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act and the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

(Moved by Councillor M Summers and seconded by Councillor M Couchman)

54 UPDATE ON HOUSING REPAIRS CONTRACT

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness and Planning, the Assistant director Assets and a representative from Ark Consultancy attended to provide the Committee with the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness and Planning to update on the commercial position of the current repairs and investment contract with Equans, it identified terms of a commercial negotiation and provided details of contract value amendments to reflect the commercial/financial position of the contractual arrangements, including a contract reset and internal service transformation with the aim of improving service to tenants and leaseholders.

There were no specific recommendation for the Committee to endorse, the Chair thanked the Officers and consultants for updating them on the report going to Cabinet.

Chair