

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 6th January, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Hulme (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Begum, Matloob, Minhas, S Parmar and Sabah.

Manvinder Matharu and Trevor Pollard (Residents Panel Board)

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Gahir and Nazir.

Apologies for Absence:- None.

PART 1

40. Declarations of Interest

None were received.

41. Minutes of the meetings held on 22nd October 2020 and 18th November 2020

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 22nd October and 18th November 2020 be approved as a correct record.

42. Member Questions

None had been received.

43. Housing Allocation Policy

The Housing Allocations Manager delivered a presentation in relation to the Housing Allocation Policy, outlining the legal framework and noting that the Localism Act 2011 enabled local authorities to determine which applicants qualified for social housing. Members were reminded of the criteria used to assess who qualified to be on the Housing Register and what was defined as urgent preference. The number of applications for housing for the period 2019-2020 and average waiting time were outlined.

The Chair invited comments and questions from the Panel and during the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Whilst acknowledging that more affordable homes were needed it was noted that the lack of available land within the borough placed significant pressure on the housing register. It was noted that many of the properties in the existing housing stock had been built in the 1950s and was not disability friendly.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 06.01.21

- It was explained that those tenants placed within the Borough did not become the local authority's responsibility unless they were deemed to be homeless.
- A Member asked about specific housing provisions for Key Workers and was informed that there had been minimal uptake on schemes implemented for key workers and referred to the recent development of flats on Stoke Road.
- Housing Associations and their role in assisting with the housing register was discussed and it was recognised that they could play a greater role in assisting the local authority.
- What information was given to individuals to inform them of how realistic their chances of securing a property were. It was noted that if an individual was successful in joining the housing register, they were provided with an approximate indication of the length of time it would take in securing a property and further details were included in a newsletter sent to all applicants which detailed information relating to waiting times for a council property. It was noted that there were currently 340 individuals/families who had been successful in joining the housing register but were currently in temporary accommodation due to the lack of availability of suitable properties.
- The Chair asked if a council tenant with a social rent (i.e. target rent) moved to another property, whether they would have protection for their rent levels so that they did not move to a property with a much higher rent level: i.e. moving from a weekly HRA property to an affordable rent property. Also, if they were offered a transfer, were they made aware that it was a different tenure at a higher rent and there was no rent level protection. It was agreed that the Housing Allocations Manager would obtain the details and circulate to the Panel.
- The Panel were informed that if an individual refused an offer of a property, with no good reason, they were taken off the housing register. Given the demand for council housing Slough had a 'One Offer Policy' and this was explained to individuals in order to ensure that they were fully aware of the consequences of refusal of acceptance of an offer.
- Members discussed the role of private landlords. The Lead Member for Housing and Community Safety informed the meeting that landlords were offered an incentive of up to £5k which had resulted in approximately 40-50 more properties being made available to the Council.

The Chair then invited councillors in attendance to address the Panel under Rule 30.

Councillor Gahir sought clarification regarding the number of appeals against a housing allocation decision that had been submitted on medical/welfare grounds - and success rate of those appeals - for the previous two years. The Panel were informed that the review team was independent to the Housing Allocation Team and that this information would be ascertained and circulated after the meeting.

The Chair thanked the Housing Allocations Manager for an informative presentation, details of which would be useful when reviewing the policy at a future stage.

Resolved – That details of the presentation be noted.

44. Housing Rents and Service Charges 2021/22

The Project Manager, Housing Services introduced a report detailing the changes in the Housing Rents and Service Charges for 2021/22 and information relating to the coverage of tenant service charges and water charging.

From April 2020, the Regulator of Social Housing introduced the new Rent Standard, which applied to all registered local authority providers of social housing and primarily affected the calculation of HRA social and affordable rents. The new rent standard followed the end of the four year rent reduction period that had been introduced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. Members were reminded that the prior to the Rent Standard, the government's rent restructuring policy aimed to harmonise rents in the social housing sector. Council rents are typically lower than housing association rents and the policy aimed to introduced broadly similar rents for different types of properties irrespective of landlord type.

It was noted that although the Rent Standard did not apply to James Elliman Homes (JEH) as it was not a registered provider of social housing, JEH aimed to follow council principles for rent reviews. The Chair expressed concern that there didn't seem to be a procedure in place to scrutinise the various housing companies that had been established. It was agreed that clarification relating to what the governance arrangements were to scrutinise the Housing Companies that had been established, like James Elliman Homes, would be sought.

It was highlighted that that Council was intending to carry out a significant review of service charging to tenants during 2021/22. It was envisaged that this review would lead to improved information to tenants about how their service charges had been calculated and the costs used to reach such charges. Tenants would be able to request details about the individual costs used towards their charges and assist the council in improving service delivery monitoring by contractors and third party suppliers. It was noted that the Residents Board Group would be consulted regarding the proposed changes in service charges and it was agreed that the Panel be provided with details of the consultation timeline and process at a future meeting.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 06.01.21

It was brought to the Panel's attention that in October 2020, the Court of Appeal upheld a judgement against a London local authority relating to its agreement with Thames Water (TW) to collect water charges on TW's behalf. The Council had a similar agreement with TW and was currently receiving ongoing legal advice as to the scope of refunding requirements and calculation processes.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Concern regarding the timing of increase in service charges given that many households were struggling financially due to the global pandemic. Whilst sympathetic to the current situation, it was explained that there had been a 1% decrease in service charges over the past four years. In addition to government guidelines being taken into account when calculating the charges, the council had to evidence what it was proposing to do with the additional income generated. This also contributed towards creating financial stability and long term planning for future builds.
- A Member asked whether the council had prepared any projections for the impact on rent arrears as a result of the Covid pandemic and if there was information available relating to any expected increase in arrears as a result of financial difficulties/loss of employment/furloughing. It was noted this information would be circulated to the Panel after the meeting.
- The Chair asked whether the council received any information from its RSL partners on their rent arrears that could help create a holistic picture of social housing arrears in the borough. It was agreed that the Rent Arrears Team would be contacted to ascertain the information and if available this would be circulated to the Panel.
- Responding to what the complaints procedure was for tenants who were not in agreement for what they had been charged, it was explained that the service has introduced processes for looking at complaints about non-delivery of services charged for. A process was now in place to address any service delivery shortfalls, including reimbursing for proven service failures. This was linked to better performance monitoring processes with service partners to ensure charges more accurately reflect the services actually delivered.
- A Member asked what the financial impact of the water charges was likely to be and it was noted that a further progress report would be provided once the impact assessment had been completed.

The Chair thanked the Project Manger, Housing services for presenting the report and answering the Panel's questions.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted as follows:

- (a) Council house dwelling rents for 2021/22 **to increase by 1.5% (Consumer Price Index (CPI) + 1%)** over the 2020/21 rent with effect from Monday 5th April 2021. This is in line with current government guidelines and legislation.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 06.01.21

- (b) Garage rents, heating, utility and ancillary charges to **increase by 0.5%** with effect from Monday 5th April 2021. This is based upon the September CPI figure.
- (c) Service charges to **increase by 0.5%** with effect from Monday 5th April 2021. This is based upon the September CPI figure.
- (d) 'Other committee' property rents to increase by an average of **0.5%** from Monday 5th April 2021 in line with the September CPI figure.
- (e) Properties leased from James Elliman Homes to **increase by 1.5% (CPI + 1%)** from Monday 5th April 2021 This is based upon the September CPI figure.
- (f) DISH property rents are recommended to increase by **1.5% (CPI + 1%)** over the 2020/21 rent and service charges to **increase by 0.5%** both with effect from Monday 5th April 2021. This is as per the Council's recommendation to the DISH Board.

45. Work Programme 2020/21

Members considered details of the Work Programme. The Policy Insight Manager reported that the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Task and Finish Group report had been finalised and would be submitted for consideration to the extraordinary meeting scheduled for 9th February 2021.

Following a Member request, it was agreed that the Repairs, Maintenance & Investment Contract Follow Up report for the extraordinary meeting would include details relating to voids.

Resolved – That subject to the amendments and inclusions detailed above, the Work Programme, as set out in Appendix A of the report be agreed.

46. Members' Attendance Record 2020/21

Resolved – That the details of the Members' Attendance record be noted.

47. Date of Next Meeting - Extraordinary Meeting on 9th February 2021

Resolved - That the date of the extraordinary meeting of the Panel be noted as 9th February 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.48 pm)