

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON THURSDAY, 17TH MARCH, 2022

MEMBERS: Councillors Anne Brown, Ergin Erbil (Associate Cabinet Member (Non-geographical based)), Aytan Guzel, James Hockney and Hass Yusuf

Officers: Joanne Drew (Director of Housing & Regeneration), Amena Matin (Housing Development & Regeneration Programme Manager), Stacey Gilmour (Governance Officer)

Also Attending: Joanne Embling, Independent Director, Housing Gateway Ltd

1. WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and introductions were made. Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Margaret Greer, Edward Smith and Cllr Gina Needs, Cabinet Member for Social Housing. Cllr Mike Rye was substituting for Cllr Edward Smith.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2021.

4. HOUSING GATEWAY AND HOUSING UNDERSPENDS

RECEIVED the report of Kayt Wilson, Head of Private Housing Solutions.

NOTED

1. The verbal introduction by Joanne Drew, Director of Housing & Regeneration outlining progress to date on the performance of Housing Gateway Ltd (HGL).
2. HGL was created in 2014 as a response to the Council's budget pressure on temporary accommodation.
3. HGL supports the Council in delivering the aims of its housing strategy. HGL's purpose is to provide quality housing for Enfield's residents to help the Council end the use of temporary accommodation.
4. HGL was initially commissioned to purchase 100 properties that could be used as an alternative to temporary accommodation. Since this time HGL has expanded its portfolio to 611 properties and diversified to create an ethical letting agency, provide specialised housing for severely disabled service users and purchased accommodation for rough sleepers.

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5. Good progress has been made on property acquisitions however, it has been a challenging year namely due to the pandemic and the economic impact that this has had on residents and the property market.
6. HGL had the capital funding to purchase an additional 100 properties in 2021/22. At the end of January 2022 HGL had purchased 46 properties and it is anticipated that a further 24 properties will be purchased by year end.
7. The current portfolio saves the London Borough of Enfield (LBE) c.£2m per annum (pa) and has saved c.£11.2m to date.
8. Further information was provided on the Rough Sleeper Accommodation, the Ethical Lettings agency and the integrated learning disabilities accommodation.
9. In response to members' queries regarding the acquisitions programme it was advised that the property market has remained buoyant and prices have risen at times, despite the pandemic. The changes to stamp duty stimulated the market and meant that there was not as many properties were available in HGL's price range. As HGL is committed to renting its properties at a submarket rent, this restricts the amount HGL can purchase a property for and this is significantly lower than most investment landlords that HGL is competing with.
10. Furthermore, it was explained that HGL makes an offer on every available and suitable property on the market, and HGL's excellent reputation and ability to purchase quickly, often secures a property at less than market value.
11. In response to a question about the Council's Landlord Licensing Scheme Members were advised that to date, HGL has submitted applications for 92% of its properties. HGL fully renovates all properties when purchased and ensures they are well maintained via regular inspections and using the Council's repairs team, Enfield Repairs Direct.
12. In response to concerns raised by Members regarding the lack of availability of three- and four-bedroom homes for Enfield residents, it was advised that HGL buys a mix of properties including larger homes whenever possible. However, these are not always as easy to come by as new homes built by third parties are often two-bedrooms as this is where the private market makes most of its money.
13. Further information was provided on the Rough Sleeper Accommodation, the Ethical Lettings Agency and the Integrated Learning Disabilities Accommodation.
14. Enfield Let leases properties from private landlords in the Borough, offering long leases of 3-5 years. Landlords are offered guaranteed rent, paid monthly in advance and a full management service.
15. Enfield Let has grown a portfolio of 195 leased properties since its inception, providing quality homes in private rented sector for families who would otherwise be placed in temporary accommodation.
16. In response to Members' concerns regarding the lack of detailed property information and budget/financial figures included in the report it was agreed that further facts/information would be circulated following the meeting.

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17. It was also suggested that moving forward an HGL Transfer List would be most useful.

The Scrutiny Panel agreed the following recommendations:

- (i) More facts and financial/budget details to be circulated to Members.
- (ii) An HGL Transfer List to be implemented.

5. NEW PARTNER ARRANGEMENTS WITH REGISTERED PROVIDERS

RECEIVED the report of Amena Matin, Head of Regeneration and Growth.

NOTED

1. The partnership arrangements outlined in the report seek to deliver on the commitment to ensure all residents, regardless of whether they are council tenants or housing association tenants, are provided with good homes, in well-connected neighbourhoods and the creation of management of safe, healthy and confident communities.
2. There are currently 39 stock owning Registered Providers (RPS) (also known as Housing Associations) in the Borough with a total of 8566 homes. This represents 6.8% of the Boroughs housing stock in 2019.
3. In 2020, the Council set out an approach to establish a new way of working with Housing Associations (also known as Registered Providers) and a range of Affordable Housing Providers to maximise contributors towards the delivery of the Council's Good Growth Housing Strategy and contribution to housing supply delivery of 12,460 homes over the Local Plan period.
4. A range of activities have taken place to build relationships with Housing Associations over the pandemic and the proposed arrangements will continue to be outcome focussed.
5. To continue to establish a strong collaboration, the Council will seek to establish a 'Charter for Delivering Better Housing Outcomes' and creating an 'Affordable Housing Developer Framework'. Regular engagement meetings will continue and the suggested work plan for these in 2022/23 is attached as Appendix A to the agenda.
6. Further information was provided on Enabling Development, Skills and Social Mobility and Nominations.
7. In response to Members' queries regarding the numbers of social housing stock it was advised that Enfield generally has lower levels compared to other Boroughs with much of that being older stock.
8. The overall supply of new homes has reduced over the past few years which has reduced overall churn of new lets for people on the housing register.
9. In response to a question raised about understanding the market issues better, it was advised that the Council has appointed a Housing Enabling Team to engage landowners, Registered Providers and the planning service to establish better intelligence on the local market to inform policy.

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10. The key to delivering homes in the borough is the need for affordable housing grant which Registered Providers will need to secure on a programme basis similar to the Council's own arrangements with the Greater London Authority (GLA). There are currently 11 Registered Providers who have grant allocations and actively progressing schemes under the current Affordable Homes programme (2016-2023) and Enfield Council are working with them to accelerate through the planning system or during construction.
11. The Chair welcomed the report in terms of Housing Associations (HAs) and asked if this sort of report was duplicated in other Local Authorities (LAs) in London. Officers responded by saying that Enfield is at the forefront of LAs in London with regards to engagement with Registered Providers (RPs) and Housing Association Partners and it was not thought that any other Boroughs were as pro-active.
12. Members raised concerns about the ongoing issues they continue to experience when attempting to liaise with Housing Associations over various issues such as repairs, health and safety and crime hotspots on estates and despite regularly raising these complaints with the relevant HA responses are not received.
13. Members also questioned whether meetings still took place between the Council and HAs as in the past regular engagement meetings were held between Council Officers and the HA Chief Executives, and these had proved most useful for discussing and resolving issues.
14. It was advised that regular Housing Operation meetings are held quarterly at which the Leader of the Council addresses problems with the HAs Chief Executives as and when they arise. Joanne Drew, Director of Housing and Regeneration also encouraged Members to forward any concerns to her and she would also raise these accordingly.
15. In conclusion it was noted that the Housing Association market is changing but the Council is committed to working with all residents across the Borough regardless of who their Landlord is, and ensuring that residents are treated fairly, with respect and fee safe and secure in their homes. This can only be achieved if Housing Associations proactively work with the Council to deliver on that shared commitment and common goal.

The Scrutiny Panel agreed to the following recommendations:

- (i) Given the challenges Councillors have with HAs/RPs and lack of responsiveness it was recommended that a Communications Strategy be implemented (best practice and senior level engagement with HAs).
- (ii) Housing Operations meetings – Councillors to be provided with dates of these meetings so that they can feedback their concerns/queries.
- (iii) Officers to advise Councillors on the correct process for escalating complaints.

6. RETENTION OF STAFF IN HOUSING DEPARTMENT

RECEIVED the report of Vanessa Tanner, HR Business Partner.

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NOTED

1. Joanne Drew, Director of Housing & Regeneration presented the report and advised that the Council Housing department had recently completed a significant restructure with the aim of creating a service fit for the future.
2. The structure review encompassed the full breadth of the Council Housing teams, recognising the need for change within the context of the broader legislative framework and the opportunities afforded by new ways of working and new more mobile technologies.
3. In designing the new structure, the senior leadership took a broad and holistic approach taking into consideration feedback from residents; the views from the teams; preparing for the implementation of the Social Housing White Paper as well as reflecting on lessons learnt and challenges associated with the pandemic.
4. The report also addressed the following matters and discussions took place around each of them:
 - How the restructure affected the number of Neighbourhood Officers on the ground;
 - Similar questions on Caretakers;
 - Update around the new Board;
 - Turnover of staff historical/current and
 - New strategies from Human Resources (HR)
5. The restructure had created three new teams; the First Response Team, the Community Partnerships team and the Resident Relationship Team. In addition to these a Place Improvement team had also been created. Information was provided on the roles and responsibilities of each of these teams.
6. In response to Members' queries regarding caretakers it was advised that as part of the restructure the Estate Services Team, which includes the caretakers, was moved across to the newly created Repairs & Estate Service. There were no other substantive changes to this team with the number of caretakers and senior caretakers remaining unchanged.
7. In response to concerns from Members regarding the turnover of staff from within the Council Housing department, detailed information was included in the report comparing the turnover within Housing with both the Place Directorate and the Council.
8. Members felt that it was important for the new teams to have clear lines and responsibilities as this had been somewhat lacking in the past. Officers advised that an implementation plan for the new service is being developed and will include clear team plans which link to the wider departmental objectives. As part of the development of the implementation plan staff engagement, to ensure staff feel engaged with the plan, will take place.
9. A training programme for the department is being developed which will be informed by the new approach and training needs analysis with staff as part of the annual Personal Development Review (PDR) process and recent Investors in People (IIP) survey.

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10. In response to a question regarding diversity within the Council's workforce it was advised that the restructure had allowed for the creation of new and diverse talent and trainee surveyor roles had even been created to try and build pipeline talent and increased opportunity for professional development.
11. Members requested to view the diversity figures for the Housing Department workforce, and it was agreed that these would be brought to a future meeting of the Panel.
12. Concerns were raised about the previous ineffectiveness of the Council Housing Department, especially in responding to Members/residents enquiries/complaints and it was felt that they were one of the least responsive of any Council service. Joanne Drew, Director of Housing & Regeneration said that she was sorry to hear of the problems experienced. She assured Members however that improving the Council Housing service was priority and she was confident that the restructure would result in significant improvements.
13. With regards to the First Response Teams/Officers, it was agreed that moving forward Members would be better updated on the details of these teams for each of their wards and kept aware of any changes to personnel/officers.

The Scrutiny panel agreed to the following recommendations:

- (i) Work force diversity figures within the Housing Department to come back to the next meeting of the Panel.
- (ii) Following the Local Election in May 2022, Housing Team to provide all Members with details of the First Response Teams for their wards and going forward Members to be continuously updated on any change to personnel/officers.

7. WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

NOTED the completed work programme for 2021/22.

8. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

NOTED that future meeting dates will be agreed at Annual Council in May 2022.

The Chair, Cllr Ergin Erbil thanked Officers from Housing and Governance for all their support throughout the past year. He also thanked the panel members for their contributions and participations in discussions and said it had been a pleasure working with everyone.

Cllr Hass Yusef (Vice-Chair) thanked Cllr Ergin Erbil for his efforts in Chairing the panel over the past year.

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