

ROYAL BOROUGH OF GREENWICH

HOUSING & ANTI-POVERTY SCRUTINY PANEL

TUESDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2017 AT 7.00 PM

MINUTES

PRESENT:

Members:

Councillor Christine May (Chair), Councillors Bill Freeman, Matthew Morrow, Steve Offord and Nuala Geary

Officers

Assistant Director Housing (Housing and Safer Communities), Welfare Rights Officer, Senior Corporate Development Officer, Senior Corporate Development Officer and Committee Officer

Councillor Christine May thanked Councillor Tonia Ashikodi for chairing meetings of the Panel during her absence.

Item

No.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tonia Ashikodi and Mehboob Khan.

Apologies for absence were given for Councillor Averil Lekau, Cabinet Member for Housing and Anti-Poverty.

2 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

3 Declarations of Interest

With regard to the housing items, Councillor Bill Freeman stated that he was an employee of Lewisham Homes but that it did not constitute an interest.

Resolved -

That the list of Councillors' memberships as Council appointed representatives on outside bodies, joint committees and school governing bodies is noted.

4 Minutes

Resolved -

That the minutes of the meeting of the Housing and Anti-Poverty Scrutiny Panel held on 11 April 2017 be agreed and signed as a true and accurate record.

5 Cabinet Member for Housing & Anti-Poverty: Priorities and Achievements

6 Quarter 4 Performance Reporting - Housing

The Chair took Items 5 and 6 together

The report was introduced by the Assistant Director Housing (Housing and Safer Communities). Apologies for absence were given for the Cabinet Member for Housing and Anti-Poverty. The Assistant Director commented that housing services were going through changes with the formation of the new Housing and Safer Communities Directorate. He noted the work undertaken following the Grenfell tragedy. He indicated that voids were lower than expected, and he suggested reasons for that could be properties lost through right to buy, large scale regeneration, and perhaps fewer tenants moving due to affordability issues. He advised Members on the housing stock condition survey, on the transformation plan for asset management, and on the number of refugees in the Borough. He highlighted that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 would take effect in April 2018, and he drew the Panel's attention to the duties it would impose on the authority and on its expected impact. He stressed that the introduction of full service Universal Credit next year was expected to create a lot of pressure on the service.

Information on average time length of stay in temporary accommodation to be circulated.

Action: DHSC

In response to questions from the Panel on affordable tenure types the Assistant Director Housing (Housing and Safer Communities) replied that a Housing Strategy was being developed and a key component of that was to identify the relative number of desired affordable units according to tenure type on new developments. It was recognised that the different affordable tenures types varied in terms of actual costs, with Council rented property being the cheapest, and so the Strategy would look at the ways they could increase the proportion of the lower rental accommodation.

In response to questions from the Panel on the Landlord Accreditation Scheme the Assistant Director Housing (Housing and Safer Communities) replied that Officers had hoped for more approvals under the Landlord Accreditation Scheme. The challenge was that landlords were seeking to maximise their income streams. The new Housing Strategy would look at models and options.

Update on numbers of approved under the Landlord Accreditation Scheme, and whether there was a target number for approvals to be provided.

Action: DHSC

During discussion of the matter, while accepting the factors involved with Directorate changes, Members expressed frustration with the speed of progress. Members requested that targets should be stated and outcomes should be given on projects.

With regard to changes to Housing Panels the Assistant Director Housing (Housing and Safer Communities) confirmed that a decision had not yet been made on the matter by Cabinet. He added that they were moving into a position where they could do more feedback and consultation digitally with tenants, which would be both quicker and involve a greater number.

Resolved -

That each report be noted

7 Local Welfare Support Provision

The report was introduced by the Senior Corporate Development Officer.

In response to questions from the Panel the Senior Corporate Development Officer confirmed that when Universal Credit was introduced figures were recorded on how that affected uncollected rent. Figures were already collected on the rent difference for those tenants with the benefit cap and the amount they were required to pay themselves and the amount they

actually paid, it being noted that some also received discretionary housing payments. The Welfare Rights Officer added that Housing recorded data on Universal Credit tenants and their arrears and if subsequently evicted they were tracked through their housing options after that.

In response to questions from the Panel the Welfare Rights Officer said they had a good working relationship at the local level with the job centre. There were some issues with data provision from the DWP and that might impact on the processing of the full service Universal Credit. She explained that some people who were waiting for the first payment of a benefits claim were being misdirected by the job centre to the Council to try and claim under the emergency support scheme when instead they should be going to the DWP for an advance on their benefits.

Information required on how Universal Credit will affect households who have not downsized.

Action: DCE/DoF

In response to questions from the Panel about full service Universal Credit the Welfare Rights Officer commented that a major issue had been the scale and complexity of the welfare reforms, and it was predicted that full service Universal Credit would create an even further significant change. The main challenges expected for full service Universal Credit were: its online nature which required claimants to have the necessary IT skills; verification and production of documents; data sharing and the time it might take to determine housing costs which could delay payments; and that it was a monthly payment. The Welfare Rights Officer clarified the position for those aged under 21. The Welfare Rights Officer added that benefits claimants were not able to get online support at the moment; they were able to get budgeting support but it was often debt advice that they needed rather than budgeting support.

Members requested that if possible that a representative from the DWP attend an appropriate meeting of the Panel

Action: DCE

Resolved –

That the report be noted.

8 2017/18 Work Programme Schedule

Members requested DWP involvement on the next report on welfare changes, and also on any report after the implementation of full service Universal Credit.

Action: DCE

Resolved -

That the schedule for the Housing and Anti-Poverty Scrutiny Panel work programme for 2017/18 as set out in the appendix to the report be agreed.

9 Commissioning Future Reports - Specification of Requirements

Resolved -

That the items scheduled to be presented at the next meeting of the Housing and Anti-Poverty Scrutiny Panel be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.00 pm

Chair