

ROYAL BOROUGH OF GREENWICH

HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2024 AT 6:30 PM

MINUTES

PRESENT:

Members:

Councillors Leo Fletcher (Chair), Roger Tester, Sandra Thomas, Majella Anning, Nas Asghar, John Fahy and Miranda Williams

Officers

Senior Assistant Director - Repairs and Investment Housing Services, Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy, Scrutiny officer

Under Standing Orders

Councillor Pat Slattery (Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Homelessness)

The Chair made introductions and advised the attendees of the relevant procedures of the meeting.

Item No.

1 Apologies for Absence.

Apologies received from Councillor Lakshan Saldin.

2 Urgent Business.

There was no urgent business.

3 Declaration of Interest.

ITEM NO: 4

Councillor Fletcher stated that he was a council tenant Councillor.
Councillor Tester informed the Panel that he was a electrical contractor and carried out EICR reports professionally.

Resolved -

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

4 Minutes

The Panel

Resolved -

Confirmed as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting held on 9th July 2024

5 Annual Housing Compliance Report 2024

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Homelessness introduced the item emphasising the importance of building safety for tenants was, that this issue was more critical than ever, especially in light of recent events. It was noted that the organisation self-reported to the regulator in May 2022 regarding non-compliance with certain building safety legislation however, significant progress has been made since, thanks to the dedicated efforts of officers, who engaged with the regulator to address these issues. The Cabinet member expressed a desire to maintain this momentum and ensure ongoing compliance, inviting feedback and recommendations from colleagues during the discussion.

Senior Assistant Director - Repairs and Investment Housing Services elaborated on the crucial aspects of the report, highlighting that tenant safety was the primary concern driving their actions. He pointed out the introduction of a new consumer regulation regime by the Regulator of Social Housing, which would involve proactive inspections over the next five years, who would assess compliance with established standards, and Senior Assistant Director referenced a recent judgment against another housing provider that

underscored the consequences of failing to meet health and safety standards, and ensured that the aim was to avoid similar pitfalls by ensuring robust systems and processes were in place to safeguard residents.

Senior Assistant Director detailed various initiatives undertaken over the past two years, including key performance indicators (KPIs) and updates on specific issues such as damp and mold. He explained that they are working on building safety cases for their 67 high-rise buildings, which required evidence-based statements confirming their safety. Senior Assistant Director concluded by inviting questions from members, emphasising that transparency and accountability were paramount in their ongoing efforts to enhance health and safety within the housing services.

In answering the question from the Panel, Senior Assistant Director provided an update on the Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR) performance for the council's properties. He explained that Initially, it had around 7,000 outdated domestic EICRs, which was a significant compliance issue however, Over the past two years, it had made substantial progress, increasing the percentage of in-date domestic EICRs from a low starting point to 93% as of the last month, and this improvement represented the completion of approximately 12,000 EICRs in 18 months, which was a significant achievement given the time-consuming nature of the inspections.

Senior Assistant Director also explained that tier one contractors were large, well-known companies in the construction and refurbishment industry. These contractors often have some in-house labour but also subcontract much of their work however, he wasn't certain of the exact financial threshold that defines a tier one contractor.

Senior Assistant Director provided detailed responses in answering the questions from the Panel explaining that the Council had invested approximately one million pounds in damp and mold services over the past year, implementing significant improvements through a new triage service in the contact centre and establishing a dedicated team to handle these concerns. He further explained that the response timeline for addressing damp and mold had notably improved; for vulnerable residents, initial interventions are now completed within three working days, while non-vulnerable residents can expect an initial response within 10 to 15 working days; Following this, surveys to identify the underlying causes of damp and mold were conducted within five days. He further explained that although the time required to complete necessary repairs can vary based on the complexity of the issues, the key

enhancement lies in the much quicker response to eliminate immediate threats posed by mold.

The Senior Assistant Director noted that a response rate of 71% for the recent survey was commendable, that the council was performing favorably compared to other local authorities on many of the ten satisfaction measures, scoring above its peers in several areas, while the 26% satisfaction rate concerning complaint handling was lower than desired, it still exceeded the average for London. He highlighted that these comparative results were shared with tenants during a recent borough-wide housing panel meeting. He acknowledged that there was room for improvement, particularly in complaint handling, but emphasised that overall, the Council's performance on tenant satisfaction measures was encouraging and reflects positively against other authorities.

In answering another question from the Panel, the Senior Assistant Director stated that while there wasn't a single comprehensive model to address all issues at once, there were several approaches the housing department uses to tackle various problems; for damp and mold issues, a recently redesigned model included an effective triage system that prioritises vulnerability and ensures quick inspections, for responsive repairs like broken toilets, there was a system in place for individual fixes. The Senior Assistant Director explained that a new approach was being developed to address persistent leak problems, which often result in recurring issues and complaints. He further explained that while there wasn't a widespread system for comprehensive property assessments, there were Property Service Officers (PSOs) who conducted thorough inspections of properties with significant issues and these officers assessed multiple problems and determined necessary actions, including both immediate repairs and potential capital investments like kitchen replacement, however he noted that there were limited PSO resources available, with only a few permanent posts, some of which were currently vacant.

The Senior Assistant Director encouraged councillors to email him, the head of service, or the Cabinet member directly to arrange for a PSO to conduct a comprehensive property assessment so to "trigger" this process for tenants with multiple, persistent issues.

The Senior Assistant Director further provided a comprehensive update on several key areas of housing management and safety:

Asbestos actions: All high-risk asbestos actions had been completed. The stock was surveyed regularly, with no outstanding high-risk actions at present.

He further explained that the department had implemented a new structure with clear responsibilities with a head of service overseeing all safety aspects, with key delivery managers for each of the "big six" areas: asbestos, fire, water, gas, lifts, and electrical safety and these positions were crucial for ensuring accountability and proper management of safety issues.

Fire risk assessors: Recruiting and retaining fire risk assessors had been challenging due to market competition. To address this, the department was moving towards outsourcing fire risk assessments to a professional company while maintaining an internal clienting manager to oversee the process. This approach aimed to ensure consistent quality and mitigate risks associated with staff turnover.

High-risk buildings: The borough has 67 high-rise buildings (HRBs) under the purview of the Building Safety Regulator, with more expected in the future. Some buildings had cladding, specifically high-pressure laminate (HPL) cladding, which was currently deemed suitable. However, there was ongoing assessment of these buildings, and the department was prepared to respond to any future changes in guidelines or regulator opinions.

Stock condition surveys: While a major survey was conducted in 2017, the department recognised the need for more frequent and comprehensive stock condition surveys. They were currently validating their capital program and looking for Category I hazards during works. However, in light of recent regulatory judgments, there was an acknowledgment that they may need to accelerate and expand their stock condition survey efforts to ensure they have sufficient, up-to-date data on their housing stock.

The Senior Assistant Director further provided detailed explanations on several key points regarding mold remediation, electrical safety, and communal areas in response to questions from the Panel;

Mold Remediation Process:

The initial mold wash was typically completed within three days, which was crucial for removing the immediate health hazard posed by mold spores. Following this, a surveyor usually assessed the underlying causes within about five days. The time required for subsequent repairs varies depending on the nature of the problem. Simple fixes like installing an extractor fan might take around 20 days, while more complex issues requiring capital program interventions could take months or even a year. The department had invested significantly in this area, allocating about a million pounds for staffing and additional resources for contractors. Performance is regularly monitored and reported to senior management.

Electrical Installation Condition Reports (EICRs):

The Senior Assistant Director clarified that the reported 93% completion rate for EICRs refers only to satisfactory reports. Unsatisfactory reports were not counted in this figure; instead, issues were fixed, and the EICR was redone until a satisfactory result was achieved. This means the actual number of inspections conducted was higher than the reported figure.

Communal Areas:

For communal areas, there had been challenges with the initial contracts, which were not priced appropriately, leading to reluctance from contractors. However, significant progress had been made, with 85% of blocks now having satisfactory EICRs for communal areas. Importantly, all blocks had been surveyed, but 15% still require work to achieve a satisfactory EICR. The department was actively working on addressing these remaining issues.

The Senior Assistant Director addressed concerns about the general repairs process and asbestos management:

General Repairs Process:

The department had implemented improvements in their transformation program, particularly for non-health and safety repairs such as plumbing and carpentry. They had established a follow-on line where trade staff can immediately schedule follow-up appointments and provide this information to residents. This addressed a previous issue where tenants felt they were project managing their own repairs.

Asbestos Management:

The asbestos-related processes involve several steps: Initial surveys of communal areas to identify asbestos presence. If asbestos was found, re-surveys were conducted, typically annually, but this could vary based on risk levels.

The Panel

Resolved -

Considered the report on Compliance Building Safety Update

6 Homelessness and at-risk residents

The Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy provided a comprehensive overview of the current homelessness crisis in Greenwich, emphasising that the borough was performing well in preventing homelessness, ranking in the top third of London boroughs, however, he highlighted several significant challenges that hinder these efforts; an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers were becoming homeless after receiving positive decisions, adding to the demand for housing, additionally, a substantial proportion of

homeless households—41.9%—have one or more support needs, indicating heightened vulnerability among this population and further more, the lack of genuinely affordable properties exacerbates the situation, creating a "triple whammy" effect: people in insecure housing cannot afford to rent or buy in the private sector, councils struggle to collaborate with landlords to secure properties, and evictions have risen as landlords seek higher rents.

To combat these challenges, the Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy explained that Greenwich had implemented a systematic approach to preventing homelessness which included providing better information about housing options through a Housing Support Finder and working to help residents maintain their tenancies with friends and family. He further explained that the council also assisted private renters in keeping their homes and supports homeless households in moving into the private rented sector when possible. Furthermore, they help residents find social housing options, including opportunities outside Greenwich. The Assistant Director emphasised the importance of collaborating more closely with other services to prioritise homelessness prevention, acknowledging that this was crucial for effectively addressing the complex issues at hand.

The Assistant Director noted that the ongoing homelessness crisis had forced the borough to focus more on managing the temporary accommodation budget crisis rather than on prevention strategies, recognising that this shift in focus was counterproductive and expressed a commitment to maintaining emphasis on prevention and housing options.

In answering the question from the panel, the Assistant Director emphasised the need for services to be geared towards addressing those specific challenges, including training outreach staff to work with men who may exhibit challenging behavior. He also highlighted a gap in services, which could contribute to ongoing cycles of homelessness for some men.

Action: Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy

In answering the question from the panel in terms of collaboration with other boroughs, the Assistant Director outlined several initiatives, which included high-level partnerships such as the London Council's Housing Director's Group and the Heads of Housing Needs and Homelessness Group, which facilitated information sharing and best practice exchange. He also mentioned joint funding bids for homelessness projects and the South London Southeast London Housing Partnership. He added that regarding resource pooling, while there were challenges in sharing housing stock between boroughs, there were attempts at reciprocal arrangements, particularly for families who need to relocate for safety reasons. The Assistant Director also detailed efforts to

prevent homelessness in the private rented sector, including a homeless prevention fund and the use of discretionary housing payments to bridge gaps between housing benefits and rent.

In answering the question from the Panel, the Assistant Director clarified that none of the 99 families as of September 30th are current asylum seekers, as it was illegal to accommodate them in temporary housing. However, some may be former asylum seekers who had received positive decisions on their right to remain in the country, although he could not provide an exact number.

The Assistant Director differed answering the question on use of hotels for temporary accommodation as it was better suited for item 7 where the topic is addressed in more details.

Action: Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy

The Panel

Resolved –

Considered the report on Homelessness and at-risk Residents

7 Temporary Accommodation

Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy highlighted the significant challenges faced by London councils in providing temporary accommodation (TA) for homeless families, particularly the alarming trend of families remaining in unsuitable hotel rooms for extended periods. He further stated that many families were staying in hotels for much longer than the legal limit of six weeks, with an average stay of 19 weeks. He added that due to hotel policies, these families often had to move between different rooms and even different hotel branches during their stay, which added to their instability and distress.

To address this crisis, the Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy stated that the council had set an ambitious goal to eliminate hotel placements entirely by March 2026 and to reduce the number of emergency overnight accommodation (EOA) placements located far from Greenwich. This initiative was visually represented through maps that displayed current hotel and EOA placements, underscoring the urgency of improving living conditions for homeless families. He further explained that the accommodations provided in hotels were described as highly unsuitable, lacking essential amenities such as cooking facilities, fridges, and bottle warmers, which complicated daily life.

Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy stated that in response to these challenges, the council was collaborating with organizations like Creating Ground to enhance support for those in temporary accommodation. Initiatives include providing free SIM cards for improved Wi-Fi access and addressing critical storage issues for residents' belongings. He further stated that the financial implications of relying on hotels for TA are substantial, with councils losing about £70 per night for each hotel room after housing benefit subsidy, highlighting the need for more sustainable solutions to this pressing issue.

In answering the question from the Panel, Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy explained the council's strategic asset review process, which was led by the Department for Regeneration, Enterprise and Skills. He stated that this process aimed to evaluate how best to utilise council-owned assets, particularly in relation to housing. When there were plans to dispose of a building, the housing department was consulted to determine if the asset could be repurposed for residential use. The Panel member commented that there may be opportunities to consider non-residential buildings for conversion into housing, encouraging a more creative approach to asset management.

Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy together with the Cabinet Member expressed frustration over Travelodge's strict policies that prohibit the use of electrical appliances like microwaves and bottle warmers in hotel rooms, citing safety concerns. The Cabinet Member explained that despite attempts to address these issues during a visit to a Travelodge in Woolwich, the national policy remains unchanged. The Panel member highlighted the impracticality of these restrictions, especially for families with young children who require such amenities. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that while they could advocate for change, the ultimate decision lies with Travelodge, making it difficult to improve the living conditions for families in temporary accommodation. Overall, there is a strong desire within the council to find more suitable solutions for housing vulnerable populations.

Action: Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy

In answering the question from the Panel, the Assistant Director explained that the council had set an ambitious goal to eliminate hotel use for temporary accommodation by March 2026. He explained that significant progress were already made, reducing hotel room usage from 291 in April to below 150 currently. He stated that this had been achieved through a comprehensive program of interventions, including:

1. **Acquiring properties:** The council has purchased 133 homes, including blocks at Grman Village and Sandy Hill Road. They've also bought about 600 properties from the open housing market to use as temporary accommodation.
2. **Converting existing stock:** 50 general needs housing voids were converted into temporary accommodation. There are plans to convert 100 more.
3. **Direct offers:** 100 direct offers of social housing were made to homeless households in temporary accommodation within 6 months. This initiative saved millions of pounds and helped move people out of hotels. The council plans to make 505 more direct offers by March 2026.

The Assistant Director stated that to reach zero hotel use by March 2026, the council would continue these strategies, acquiring more properties and making more direct offers. The aim was to not only eliminate hotel use but also reduce the number of households in emergency overnight accommodation by over 200. This approach involved collaboration across various council departments and services. He expressed that the council's ultimate goal was to achieve budget neutrality on temporary accommodation by 2026, although he acknowledge this may be challenging.

Action: Assistant Director, Housing Needs & Tenancy

The Panel

Resolved –

Considered the Temporary Accommodation Housing Report

8 **Commissioning of Future Reports**

The Panel

Resolved –

That the Commissioning of Future Reports be noted.

The meeting closed at 20:57.

(Chair)

ITEM NO: 4