

Neighbourhoods and Environment Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2017

Present:

Councillor Paul – in the Chair

Councillors Akbar, Shaukat Ali, Appleby, Hughes, Igbon, Kirkpatrick, Longsdon, Noor, Rawson and Sadler

Councillor B Priest, Deputy Leader

Councillor Stogia, Executive Member for the Environment

Councillor Craig, Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing

Councillor Flanagan, Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources

Charlie Baker, RED Cooperative

Robin Lawler, Chief Executive, Northwards Housing

Jaque Allen, Executive Director of Housing, Wythenshawe Community Housing Group

Karen Mitchell, Chief Executive, Southway Housing

Dave Power, Chief Executive, One Manchester

Apologies: Councillors Azra Ali, Chohan, Leech and Ludford

NESC/17/51 Minutes

Decisions

1. To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2017 as a correct record.
2. To note the minutes of the Road Safety Around Schools Task and Finish Group meeting of 17 October 2017.

NESC/17/52 Housing issues (stock transfer promises; homelessness and improving the private rented sector)

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Housing and Residential Growth. The report was presented in three sections, Section 1 addressed Tenants' Rights post transfer from Council stock to Housing Associations; Section 2 provided an update on Homelessness and Section 3 described activities to promote good practice in the Private Rented Sector. The report also provided information on the work undertaken to existing properties to improve energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty. It highlighted work undertaken by the Council's Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Northwards Housing and work undertaken and/or partly funded by the City Council in the private sector.

The Committee agreed to consider the report in sections and some of the key points that arose from the Committees discussions around the issue of stock transfer were:-

- Tenant repairs and costs;
- Action taken against those tenants experiencing rent arrears;
- The impact of welfare reform and benefit changes;
- Tenancy succession rights following the death of a tenant; and
- Take up rates of Right To Buy and the impact of this on the availability of Social Housing.

The Chief Executive, One Manchester said that their repair policy had changed over the years so that tenants understood who was responsible for what type of repair. He said that tenants can undertake the repairs that they were responsible for themselves, or they could request that One Manchester took the repair work at a cost price. He said that they also offered a handyman service, and the handyman was employed by One Manchester.

The Chief Executive Southway Housing said that their tenants were predominantly older residents and they offered them a comprehensive repair service, and they also offered a commercial repair service.

The Executive Director of Housing, Wythenshawe Community Housing Group said that their repair policy had not varied since the stock transfer. She said that repairs were delivered at a cost price for those repairs that tenants were responsible for, and that payment arrangements could be made with tenants.

The Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that they also offered their tenants a handyman scheme at a modest cost.

In response to the issue of rent arrears and benefit reforms the Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that welfare reform and benefit changes had a significant impact on the number of tenants experiencing rent arrears. He described that to support their tenants a team of advisors had been established to help residents. He said advisors assisted with a range of issues such as benefit advice, debt and employment and skill opportunities, and every attempt was made to agree affordable repayment plans to avoid any escalation of rent arrears and subsequent recovery action. He said that there was insufficient stock to offer suitable alternatives for those tenants wishing to downsize as a result of the bedroom tax.

The Chief Executive, Southway Housing said that they intervened quickly to prevent cases of arrears escalating. She said that they would engage with tenants experiencing financial problems and offer appropriate support, and eviction was used only as final resort. She said that the introduction of the Bedroom Tax had resulted in approximately 20% of those tenants affected relocating. She said that a lot of tenants affected had been awarded Discretionary Housing Benefit payments, however this is not a permanent award and some tenants had found the money to meet the shortfall themselves.

The Executive Director of Housing, Wythenshawe Community Housing Group said that they also undertook pre tenancy affordability checks to ensure that residents would be able to afford a property and reduce the risk of rent arrears occurring. She

said that they had a panel who met to consider and support those tenants wishing to move as a result of the Bedroom Tax.

The Chief Executive, One Manchester said that they offered a triage system to support their tenants who were experiencing debt or employment issues. He said that preventive interventions to support tenants navigate the benefit changes, especially for those in receipt of in work benefits is very important.

All of the representatives' present expressed concern over the continued roll out of Universal Credit and the impact this undoubtedly had on their tenants. The Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that all partners were working collaboratively to respond to this issue and support tenants.

In response to the issue of Right To Buy the Chief Executive, One Manchester said that this only applied in England and he described this as a clumsy and unbalanced subsidy. He said that they lost approximately 130 properties a year through the Right To Buy scheme.

The Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that they lost approximately 100 properties a year through the Right To Buy scheme and this was often the better stock, sold at a significant discount despite the continuing demand for social housing.

The Head of Housing said that with regard to tenancy successions and Right To Buy, family members could take over the tenancy from their parents but there are legal rules and each case would be looked at in isolation. He said there can only be one legal "succession" and this happens when a tenant dies and a family member is living in the property and has done so for a given period of time. He said that it is possible that the family member taking over the tenancy could claim a discount for the years that they had lived in the property.

The Deputy Leader said that every opportunity was taken to lobby the Government to reduce the Right To Buy scheme as it represented an unfair subsidy, and failed to provide enough funding to replace much needed housing stock that is lost through this scheme.

The Committee then discussed the section of the report that provided information on Housing retrofit and provided examples of work undertaken to existing properties to improve energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty. A key point that arose from the Committees discussions was:-

- The approach taken to retrofit older housing stock.

The Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that Social Landlords were working collaboratively to address the issue of energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions. He said that Northwards had a Climate Change Strategy and all staff were carbon literacy trained. He said that the intention was to make this training available to their supply chain and their tenants. He said the biggest challenge was to get the private rented sector to engage in this area of activity.

The Committee welcomed Charlie Baker, RED Cooperative. He said that it was calculated that 15% of the population lived in fuel poverty. He said it was important that investment is made now to invest in properties and reduce carbon emissions. He said that there were many positive examples of collaborative working to deliver imaginative solutions and that it was important that the Public Sector took a lead on this issue as it was evident that the Private Sector had failed to do this.

He said that consideration had to be given to local energy supply schemes and energy storage. He said investing in this area would benefit residents, help with emissions targets and boost the local economy by providing work. He said there were many good examples of where this has worked in cities across Europe where investment in new technologies, research and products had positively impacted on residents and neighbourhoods. He said that ultimately this investment, along with an investment in training skilled workers to deliver this programme of work at scale would help save money in the long term.

The Chief Executive, Northwards Housing said that there were many good examples of where very old properties had benefited from retrofitting, such as cladding and ground source heating.

The Chief Executive, One Manchester said that they also recognised the importance of investment into properties to address the issue of fuel poverty and reducing carbon emissions.

The Committee welcomed an offer made by Mr Baker, Mr Power and Mr Lawler to undertake a site inspection to view examples of properties that had benefited from retrofit work. The Chair said that these visits would be arranged for January 2018.

The Committee then considered the section of the report that provided information on Homelessness. Some of the key points that arose from the Committees discussions were:-

- An explanation was sought as to why more people from the north and north east of the city presented as homeless;
- What provision was there for women fleeing domestic violence; and
- The impact of the Homelessness Reduction Bill for Manchester.

The Director of Housing and Residential Growth said that a detailed report was to be considered by the Executive at their November meeting that outlined the importance of reducing homelessness by working closely and in new ways with the Manchester Homeless Partnership. He said the report also considered the increased pressures that would be experienced by Manchester from April next year following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Bill. He said that work was ongoing at a Greater Manchester level to respond to this legislation.

He said that the reason why more people from the north and north east of the city presented as homeless was because there was a higher percentage of tenants in lower standard private rented sector accommodation. He further informed the Committee that women fleeing domestic violence were prioritised for emergency accommodation.

The Committee then considered the section of the report that provided information on Private Rented Sector (PRS). Some of the key points that arose from the Committees discussions were:-

- The importance of addressing rogue landlords operating in the Private Rented Sector;
- Further information was requested on the development of a Social Lettings Agency; and
- The impact of the Rental Pledge in raising standards in the Private Rented Sector (PRS).

The Director of Housing and Residential Growth said that work continued to address poor practice in the PRS. He said that the Selective Licensing Schemes that had been reported to the Committee continued to engage with Landlords to improve management standards within this sector. He said that the licensing of Houses of Multiple Occupation was managed so that regular inspections were undertaken to ensure they complied with all of the statutory requirements. He said one of the biggest challenges for tenants in the PRS was the shortness of the tenancies awarded, typically a six month assured shorthold tenancy.

He said that the Rental Pledge was promoted amongst Landlords, and Landlords were encouraged to sign up to this pledge, especially in those Selective Licensing areas and this was further promoted at Landlord Forums organised across the city. He said that this was a voluntary scheme and there were currently 52 landlords and 11 tenants signed up to the pledge covering 21,788 properties across Manchester.

The Chief Executive, One Manchester said that addressing the issue of bad practices in the PRS was very important. He said that in particular areas of the city properties were regularly bought and sold at auction, often by investors outside of the city, who then did not invest or maintain the property and then sell on again for a profit. He said that this type of practice can cause problems in neighbourhoods and was not good for tenants. He said that work was underway to understand this issue and formulate an effective response as this was needed to improve standards for tenants.

The Chief Executive Southway Housing said that they target properties in the PRS to purchase, such as empty properties to help improve an area and then let at an affordable rent. She said that this approach contributed to the improvement of neighbourhoods.

In response to the question asked about the development of a Social Lettings Agency the Director of Housing and Residential Growth said that this had been considered, however it was not considered to be viable. He said that an analysis of established existing schemes in other areas had shown that they were struggling. He said that the GMCA, as part of its work on the devolved homelessness funding, was also looking to establish a GM wide social lettings agency.

Decisions

1. To note the negative effect the Bedroom Tax and other benefit changes have had on the Social Housing Sector and their tenants.
2. To note the negative effect the Governments Right To Buy policy and specific implementation has had on the ability of Social Landlords to build enough replacement properties to meet the demand for social housing.
3. To note the levels of fuel and energy poverty and the poor quality energy efficiency of the majority of the UK housing stock.
4. To note the skills gap in the construction sector with respect to housing retrofit and welcome any steps taken to address this issue.
5. To request a further report on the retrofitting of housing and for the Committee to undertake a series of visits to see examples of properties that have benefited from retrofitting.
6. To welcome the developments described between the Social and Private Sector to improve standards for tenants.
7. To request that the Homelessness report that is to be considered by the Executive at their meeting of 15 November is circulated to all Members of the Committee for information.

[Councillor Appleby declared a personal interest as a member of the Northwards Housing Board]

NESC/17/53 Final Report and Recommendations of the Air Quality Task and Finish Group

The Committee received the report of the Air Quality Task and Finish Group. The report presented the findings of the detailed investigation undertaken by the Group and the Committee was invited to agree the recommendations as set out in the report.

The Executive Member for the Environment addressed the Committee and thanked all of those who had contributed to the work of the Task and Finish Group. The recommendations demonstrated a commitment to addressing the serious threat that poor air quality presented to residents of the city and that the work to progress the recommendations would inform the Action Plan that was due in 2018.

The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing welcomed the report and recommendations. It was recognised that improving air quality was an important contributor to resident's health and wellbeing.

Decisions

1. To note the findings of the Task and Finish Group and endorse the recommendations as set out in the report.
2. To request an update report on the implementation of the recommendations contained within this report within the next 6 months.

NESC/17/54 Budget Refresh 2018 – 2020

The Committee received the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer. The report set out a proposed budget refresh process for 2018-20, including proposals for scrutiny of Directorate Budget and Business Plans.

The Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources referred to the main points and themes within the report which included:-

- although a three year budget was set in March, the Council's budget and business plans were kept under continuous review to ensure the Council could respond to new and emerging challenges and opportunities;
- there were unavoidable cost pressures arising throughout the budget period, such as those relating to demand and price changes in Adult Social Care and Children's Services;
- whether the Committee wished to consider the refreshed versions of the directorate budget and business plans that it scrutinised during the last budget cycle; and
- the proposed budget refresh timetable in full.

Decision

To consider the refreshed Directorate Budget and Business Plan Report and Delivery Plan – Growth and Neighbourhoods at Committee's meeting of 31 January 2018.

NESC/17/55 Overview Report

The report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which contained key decisions within the Committee's remit and responses to previous recommendations was submitted for comment. Members were also invited to agree the Committee's future work programme.

Decision

To note the report and approve the work programme.