

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

HOMES O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

1400 hours on Thursday 22 February 2024, Committee Room 6, Council House

Minutes

Present:

Councillor Lauren Rainbow (Deputy Chair)

Councillors: Ziaul Islam, Rinkal Shergill, Ron Storer and Ken Wood

Also Present:

Collette Campbell, Acting Strategic Lead, Strategy and Enabling Service

Guy Chaundy, Assistant Director, Housing Strategy and Enabling

Jayne Bowles, Scrutiny Officer

Amelia Wiltshire, Overview and Scrutiny Manager

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair advised that this meeting would be webcast for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's Public-I microsite and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there are confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Mohammed Idrees, Saqib Khan and Penny Wagg.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded they must declare all relevant pecuniary and other registerable interests arising from any business to be discussed at this meeting.

The following interests were declared:

Councillor Ziaul Islam owns a property which is privately let.

Councillor Rinkal Shergill owns a property which is privately let.

4. MINUTES

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2024 be confirmed as correct and signed by the Chair.

5. ACTION TRACKER

The Chair advised Committee that the contractor performance information had not yet been received and would be followed up.

RESOLVED:

That the action tracker be noted.

6. COMMISSIONER'S REVIEW AND COMMENTS ON THE AGENDA

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted there were no comments on the agenda from the Commissioner.

7. EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKING UPDATE

Guy Chaundy, Assistant Director, Housing Strategy and Enabling; and Collette Campbell, Acting Strategic Lead, Strategy and Enabling Service, were in attendance for this item.

The Committee was advised that Councillor Jayne Francis, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, had given her apologies.

The Assistant Director, Strategy and Enabling, introduced the report and provided the background to the work on Exempt Accommodation. The main points included:

- In 2020/21 Birmingham was invited to be part of the supported housing pilot which came with funding to allow the establishment of a multi-discipline team. This included putting in place a dedicated housing benefit team to look at supported exempt accommodation claims and introduced a housing benefit review process.
- The Birmingham Quality Standard was also developed, and an Accreditation Scheme was introduced.
- A Supported Housing Needs Assessment was undertaken which resulted in a new Supported Housing Strategy.
- The initial funding ended in 2021/22 and the Council allocated £1.9m through the Invest 2 Deliver programme to allow the work within the multi-disciplinary team and accreditation to continue.
- Following the end of the Invest 2 Deliver funding, there was a further round of Government funded activity through the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP). This is currently in place and available until March 2025.

- There is a lack of regulation for this sector. The Council has undertaken considerable lobbying to Government for greater powers to control both the rate of growth and the issues around quality.
- Following the lobbying work, feeding into parliamentary select committees, working with pilot authorities and raising the issues and concerns around the lack of regulation, a draft Supported Housing Bill was consulted on and the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act came into force in mid-2023.
- The Act seeks to provide additional regulation and control for local authorities. It includes the introduction of a licensing scheme, the introduction of a suite of national standards, the establishment of a national advisory panel and the option for the Secretary of State to look at introducing further planning controls. It did not go as far as having similar planning controls as those for Houses in Multiple Occupation.
- The Act cannot be put into practice without the regulations being in place and they are currently being developed by the Government. It had initially been hoped they would be in place by March 2025, which is when the current funding ends, however there is not 100% certainty that will be the case. Discussions are taking place with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in terms of the continuation of funding and the Committee will be updated on progress.

The Acting Strategic Lead, Strategy and Enabling Service, referred to the tracking report and highlighted the following key points:

- It had not been possible to achieve some of the actions due to the size of the team, for example inspecting all 20,000 units. In the term of the project, just under 3,000 units had been inspected.
- Inspections are an ongoing operational requirement as a partnership and will continue, as well as responding to complaints; looking at trends, for example issues around anti-social behaviour; and undertaking sample tests of properties belonging to a particular managing agent.
- Another action not yet achieved relates to increased resident engagement. However, the Committee was advised that the Council website had been updated. This now includes specific information on exempt accommodation, and contact details and individual officers responsible for particular wards within the city. In addition to this, monthly meetings were being held with members of the city-wide Exempt Forum to update them on SHIP progress and activities.

During the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the main points included:

- The Committee noted the hard work that had been done addressing what is a serious issue across the city but raised concerns regarding the underspend on the Invest 2 Deliver funding. The Assistant Director, Strategy and Enabling, advised that the underspend had been due to budget monitoring issues and also problems with the recruitment and retention of staff. The grant funding arrangements allowed for funding to be carried over and included in this year's budget allocation and every effort will be made to ensure that underspend does not happen again.

- Members sought reassurance that the Council was continuing to lobby on further planning controls and that local MPs were included in that lobbying.
- The Committee was advised that Jackie Belton, the Commissioner with responsibility for supporting housing, had been briefed on the issues around exempt accommodation and the work that had been done. She subsequently met with MPs and lobbying will continue, specifically in relation to funding post-March 2025, accelerating work to get the regulations in place, and those areas not in the Act, such as planning.
- With regard to the Accreditation Scheme, there are 30 providers on the preferred provider list – 22 with awards ranging from gold to bronze (a score of 70% in the assessment is needed to achieve bronze) and eight currently under assessment, but on the preferred provider list having been vetted by the team.
- The five largest providers make up the vast majority of provision in the city and so the focus has to be on working with them. Not all of them have engaged in the accreditation process. The Committee was advised that the Assistant Director, Strategy and Enabling would shortly be meeting with the Chief Executive of one of the providers, and another was working on de-conversion strategies to introduce more family housing.
- These were small steps but the regulations need to be in place to enable enforcement, as it is all voluntary at the moment.
- The number of properties the providers on the approved list were operating in the city, and how many properties were being operated by providers who had not been assessed or had failed the assessment (especially large providers) was queried. The Acting Strategic Lead advised that those numbers were not available in the meeting but a response would be provided. The Committee was advised that one of the largest providers had around 25% of the market.
- When officers respond to complaints in relation to providers who have awards, they do highlight specific areas of improvement needed to maintain those awards.
- In instances where there are concerns with managing agents, the team chooses which properties to visit and entry is gained under the Housing Act 2004.

The Committee agreed the Cabinet Member assessments for each of the outstanding recommendations, with the exception of Recommendation 07 in relation to lobbying for change, which had been assessed previously as 'Achieved (Fully)'. It was agreed that recommendation would be amended to reflect that the initial target had been achieved but there was ongoing activity.

RESOLVED:

- That a response be provided to Committee on the number of properties operated by the providers on the preferred provider list and how many properties were operated by providers who had not been assessed or had failed the assessment.
- That the Cabinet Member's assessments for each of the outstanding recommendations were agreed, but with an amendment to the assessment for Recommendation 07 to reflect the ongoing activity.
- That the next tracking report be scheduled for September 2024.

- That the report be noted.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

The following items were agreed for the March and April meetings:

March – Affordable Housing; Invite to Birmingham Social Housing Partnership – to be confirmed.

April – Regulatory Compliance; Budget Savings 2023/24 and 2024/25.

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager updated the Committee on the evidence-gathering for the Improving Standards of Re-let Properties Inquiry and the revised Terms of Reference were noted.

RESOLVED:

- That the work programme be agreed.
- That the revised Terms of Reference for the Improving Standards of Re-let Properties Inquiry be noted.

9. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the date of the next meeting on Thursday 14 March at 1400 hours in Committee Room 6.

10. REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN/COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/PETITIONS RECEIVED (IF ANY)

None.

11. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Ziaul Islam referred to the communication sent to all Councillors in relation to the recruitment of new officers in Housing Management and put on record that this was welcome news for the City's council tenants.

12. AUTHORITY TO CHAIR AND OFFICERS

RESOLVED:

That in an urgent situation between meetings, the Chair jointly with the relevant Chief Officer, has authority to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 1430 hours.