

PRESENT

Committee Members

Cllr Claire Simmons (Chair)
Cllr Gregory Hammond (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Will Lane
Cllr Lloyd North
Cllr Marie-Therese Rossi

Others Present

Cllr Sarah Addenbrooke, Lead Member for Communities & Community Safety
Cllr Sof McVeigh, Lead Member for Housing Management, Housing Safety and Building New Homes
Cllr Mary Weale, Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Council Officers

Christine Addison, Director of Social Investment
James Carroll, Head of Resident Safety and Repairs
Luke Curran, Governance Officer
Bernadette Fry, Assistant Director of Resident's Services
Doug Goldring, Director of Housing Management
Dan Hawthorn, Executive Director of Housing and Social Investment
Bella Jessop, Scrutiny and Policy Officer
Jana du Preez, Head of Home Ownership
Kojo Sarpong, Director of Housing Needs
Moirra Ugoji, Director of Communities

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Joanna Gardner and Cllr Linda Wade.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meetings held on 1 February 2024 and 6 February 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 COMMUNITIES PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

The Chair introduced the item and invited the Lead Member for Communities and Community Safety and supporting officers to comment on the report. Officers noted feedback from the Committee's prior scrutiny of the item had been incorporated into the report and welcomed additional comments for the information to be refined further.

The Chair invited the Committee to comment or ask questions on the report. Members of the Committee:

1. Requested that where response levels were mapped across the borough by ward, the population of each ward and proportion of responses be provided in future reports.
2. Noted the response rate for surveys of the Citizens' Panel was approximately 20% in March 2024 and queried why the figure was so low. The Lead Member advised that response rate was linked to topic area and whether the survey was conducted online or in-person. It was hoped that a refresh of the Panel would lead to better engagement. The Committee requested information on incentives for residents to join the Panel.
3. Requested that where data was categorised by age group, the category 'over 60' be expanded in future reports to provide data for more specific sub-groups within that range.
4. Asked whether the strategic outreach and communications strategy was the same for all consultations or bespoke to each one. Officers confirmed that the same communications resources were available for all consultations, however different service areas could deploy additional communications via user groups to improve reach.
5. Discussed the process for effectively naming consultations to improve response-rate.
6. Urged the Council to make use of Residents' Associations to help promote consultations in local areas and highlighted the importance of maintaining up-to-date contact information for all RAs in the borough.
7. Requested that future reports include data on consultations with local business.
8. Requested that future reports include performance data for the Voluntary Sector Support Fund and City Living, Local Life programme, including efficiency metrics such as response times and average length of time for funding to be granted.

The Chair invited residents in attendance at the meeting to comment or ask questions on the item. Residents:

9. Urged the Council to be mindful of consultation exhaustion among the community.

10. Suggested keeping residents informed of action taken in response to consultations could improve response rates.

ACTIONS

Information on Citizens' Panel incentives to be shared with the Committee.

Action: Director of Communities

5 LEASEHOLD SERVICE CHARGES

The Chair introduced the item by stating that the item had come to the Committee in response to concerns raised by leaseholders about the accuracy and transparency of the service charge process.

The Chair invited residents in attendance to share their experiences or concerns with the Committee. Residents:

1. Raised the lack of transparency from the Council on service charges, particularly on the limited advance notice of charges, lack of explanation for the fluctuation of charges, and the process by which charges were initially estimated and then corrected after six months.
2. Criticised the increase in service charges for maintenance services despite poor standards in cleaning, caretaking, and maintenance of communal areas.
3. Found it difficult to contact Housing Management to raise issues, dispute service charges or receive invoices related to service charges that had been requested in a timely manner.
4. Highlighted higher charges for out-of-hours services and requested out-of-hours services be limited to emergencies only. Where general maintenance services were required, residents felt that those services should be completed during business hours to minimise costs.
5. Highlighted several instances of misbilling which had only been discovered after residents requested access to invoices.
6. Had little confidence that the system was being effectively administered by the Council.
7. Criticised the imposition of full service-charges for the Lancaster West estate considering the level of ongoing major works and general condition of the estate.
8. Raised that tenants and leaseholders of properties owned by Registered Providers also faced increasing service charges and called on the Council to work to better hold RPs to account.

The Chair thanked residents for their input and highlighted the key themes of transparency, accountability and fairness that were evident throughout.

The Lead Member for Housing Management, Housing Safety and Building New Homes and supporting officers were invited by the Chair to comment on the report. The Lead Member apologised for the issues raised by residents and assured those in attendance that all issues would be followed up. Moving to the report, the Lead Member highlighted the challenges facing the Council and leaseholders of rising energy and insurance costs. Officers added that the Council needed to do more to ensure the process was as open and accountable as possible and made clear that all charges were challengeable via a disputes process.

The Chair invited the Committee to comment or ask questions on the report.
Members:

1. Asked to what extent service charges were attributed to individual properties, or whether charges differed depending on the size of properties. Officers advised that service charges were generally applied subject to the lease. Charges were allocated on a points-based system depending on the number of habitable rooms in a dwelling. Where floorplan information was available, charges were allocated according to square footage.
2. In response to a concern, received assurance that building insurance was disaggregated where properties had commercial floorspace and leaseholders received a credit for the service charge for the commercial portion of the building.
3. Discussed the implementation of sinking funds to assist with the costs of periodic large maintenance projects. Officers advised sinking funds had previously been suggested to leaseholders and appetite had been weak. The Council instead extended payment periods to give leaseholders more flexibility.
4. Asked whether there was sufficient financial support for leaseholders unable to meet the increased service charge costs. Officers stated in response that the Council offered flexible payment options and committed to working with residents to agree affordable payment plans.
5. Highlighted the importance of engagement and consultation with residents' groups on service charges as part of a transparent and accountable process.
6. Welcomed the provision for residents to request all invoices or supporting documentation related to charges as a key element of ensuring the process was transparent and called on the Council to ensure leaseholders could access invoices without difficulty. Officers advised that the Council would provide invoices in accordance with the Landlord and Tenant Act as quickly as possible, but could be delayed by the operation of multiple systems for the management of repairs, maintenance and service charges that made it difficult to collate information quickly and efficiently. The introduction of a more integrated system scheduled for spring 2025 would improve efficiency in that area.
7. Pointed to the Leasehold Advisory Service as an independent advice service for residential leaseholders.

8. Discussed the possibility of recommending to the Leadership Team that an action plan be produced to improve transparency and accuracy of the service charge process.

6 HOUSING AND SOCIAL INVESTMENT PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

The Chair introduced the item and invited the Lead Member for Housing Management, Housing Safety and Building New Homes and supporting officers to comment on the report. Officers noted that whilst the directorate reported performance data to the Select Committee biannually, performance information was available quarterly via the [Council's website](#).

The Chair invited the Committee to comment or ask questions on the report.
Members:

1. Commended the increase in Housing Need stage 1 complaints answered within the target response time between Q3 and Q4 2023-24 and asked how it had been achieved. Officers stated the department had enacted a performance drive in Q4 to ensure a backlog of complaints were resolved and new complaints answered in a timelier fashion. There had also been a focus on improving the quality of responses.
2. Noted a decrease in Housing Management stage 1 complaints answered within the target response time between Q3 and Q4 2023-24. Officers advised that there had been teething issues following the implementation of a new complaint booking system which had since been resolved.
3. Noted Housing Management arrears as a percentage of rent roll had risen further above the target rate. Officers apportioned the increase in arrears to cost-of-living pressures on households. In response, the Council had increased financial support and advice for residents.
4. Challenged the rising average number of days to re-let a standard works void property during the financial year 2023-24. Officers accepted the trend was too high due to various factors, including departmental capacity and performance, exacerbated by staff sickness, but emphasised work was underway to reduce the average days to re-let, including working with dedicated contractors and restructuring the department. Teams across Housing were also working closely to ensure efficiency with housing nominations and viewings to limit the amount of time properties were vacant. The Committee resolved to continue scrutiny of void properties in the municipal year 2024-25.
5. Sought clarity on the meaning of the homeless prevention outcome of 'other'. Officers clarified that prevention was categorised as other when an application had been withdrawn or cancelled.
6. Requested that future reports with graphs showing financial balances over time stated whether the figures presented were nominal or real to help understand the extent to which increases over time were driven by inflation as opposed to actual growth.

7. Noted that, whilst high, the percentage of properties with a valid Landlords Gas Safety Certificate (LGSC) was not 100% and asked why any Council-owned property would not have a valid LGSC. Officers explained the reason for small numbers of properties without a valid LGSC at any one time were often circumstantial and prevented the Council or its contractors from entering a property to conduct the relevant checks. Where a certificate's validity lapsed, it was generally resolved within a few days.
8. Were assured the figures for rough sleepers in the borough were accurate. The Council conducted a check monthly and reported the figure in line with the Government definition of rough sleeping.
9. Requested the number of Housing Management complaints referred to the Ombudsman be included in future performance reports.
10. Requested quarterly reporting on Personalised Housing Plans to the Leadership Team be circulated to the Committee.
11. Received assurance that where the homeless relief duty outcome was unsuccessful, this was because the Council either had no duty to the applicant or had provided alternative support.

The Chair summarised the discussion and the additions to be made to future performance reports.

ACTIONS

Quarterly reporting on Personalised Housing Plans to be circulated to the Committee.

Action: Executive Director of Housing and Social Investment

7 REPORT ON RESIDENTS' REPAIRS CONFERENCE

The Chair introduced the item and invited Cllr Hammond as Chair of the Conference to comment on the report. Cllr Hammond welcomed the evidence gained at the event from residents and at the follow-up visit to the repairs call centre. The Committee was invited to agree to the report and refer the report to the Lead Member for a response to the main issues raised.

The Committee AGREED the report and referred it to the Lead Member for Housing Management, Housing Safety and Building New Homes for a response to each of the main themes identified within the report.

ACTIONS

Report on Residents' Repairs Conference to be referred to the Lead Member for Housing Management, Housing Safety and Building New Homes for a response to each of the main themes identified within the report.

Action: Governance Officer

8 WORK PROGRAMME REPORT

The Chair introduced the report, which provided a summary of the Committee's topics of scrutiny throughout the municipal year. Members of the Committee were invited to suggest topics for the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2024/25 in writing to scrutiny@rbkc.gov.uk. Residents were also invited to submit any topic areas via email.

The meeting ended at 8.56 pm

Chair

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