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SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL - THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF SOCIAL HOUSING PROVIDERS TO THE COUNCIL AND RESIDENTS OF STOCKPORT

Meeting: 27 November 2024
At: 6.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor Dena Ryness (Chair) in the chair; Councillors Claire Vibert and David Meller.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors and officers to declare any interests which they had in any of the items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations were made.

2 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 August 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

3 COMPARATIVE DATA

As part of the scope of the review, the Scrutiny Review Panel agreed to review examples of large social housing providers operating in other local authority areas as part of the evidence-gathering phase of the review to help inform the review.

At the meeting held on 2 February 2024, members identified Blackpool Council and London Borough of Barnet as comparable local authorities with arms-length management organisations with which to compare and contrast findings with. The aim of the research was to ascertain what existing mechanisms of accountability were in place for Stockport's provider of social housing to enable members to consider whether these mechanisms were still fit for purpose.

The following information was provided:

- Data on Stockport Homes Group (Stockport).
- Data on Blackpool Coastal Housing (Blackpool).
- Data on Barnet Homes (London Borough of Barnet).
- Comparative performance data relating to Stockport Homes Group, Blackpool Coastal Housing, Barnet Homes, Salix Homes (Salford) and Weaver Vale Housing Trust (Northwich).

Supplementary data was provided listing further mechanisms of accountability to residents in relation to Stockport Homes Group (SHG).

The following comments were made/issues raised:

- It was noted that councillors formed part of the board membership for Barnet Homes, and that this could be considered as a recommendation for Cabinet to explore to

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enable councillors to act as a conduit between the council and SHG, supporting the implementation of the direction of the council and bridging a gap in accountability. It was advised that councillors had previously been appointed to the board for over approximately a 10-year period. Owing to governance concerns at the time, a review took place leading to several changes which included but was not limited to, the establishment of the Member Committee to enable broader oversight of SHG. It was reported that payments to board members had enabled the council to attract a professional board, including people with housing and legal expertise who were able to suitably interrogate matters and ask the relevant questions. Tenants also formed part of the board's membership. It was suggested that, as part of any potential recommendation, prospective councillors appointed to the board should be appropriately trained, and that their role and responsibilities to the board made clear. It was not anticipated that councillors should receive a payment for being a board member.

- It was noted that the mystery shopper, Reading Panel, clean and green warden opportunities at Blackpool Coastal Housing and Barnet Homes were interesting approaches to resident involvement. It was recognised that there were opportunities for resident involvement in housing matters at SHG through a number of means. Panel members found it difficult from the evidence to determine how successful resident engagement and involvement was, given that the evidence was desk-top research undertaken by panel members and officers. A number of local authorities had been contacted as part of this evidence-gathering work; however, no information had been forthcoming.
- It was suggested that information could be sought from SHG to demonstrate how successful resident engagement and involvement was in Stockport.
- It was queried as to whether SHG residents were compensated for their involvement in recognising their time and expertise.
- It was reported that local authorities were awaiting information from the regulator of social housing around how providers should be engaging with tenants and seeking their involvement in housing matters.
- Members were advised that SHG had, over the years, explored a variety of ways to increase resident engagement and that this had proved challenging. It was noted that payments to residents could affect benefit payments, and that paying for expenses was an alternative option.
- It was suggested that a list of good practice could be drawn up and SHG be recommended to carry out a piece of work as to how they engage with tenants and assess their findings against the list of good practice. Following this, SHG could make any recommendations as to their engagement strategy going forward arising from this piece of work. Further, that this piece of work be done in conjunction with tenants. Members were keen to know resident perception of engagement and mechanisms of accountability.
- It was noted that the Resident Procurement Group at Barnet Homes gave residents the opportunity to be involved in appointing contractors to carry out a range of external repairs and improvements to homes. Resident involvement included but was not limited to, evaluating contractor proposals, being on an interview panel or monitoring the quality of service. The nature of this group enabled an element of shared accountability between Barnet Homes and residents, with the quality of work being monitored by both. Members felt that this opportunity could be explored further as part of the panel's recommendations to Cabinet. This opportunity also enabled the upskilling of residents, and it was noted that full training and support was provided.

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- Members felt that SHG were proactive in relation to opportunities to develop resident skill sets.

4 NEXT STEPS FOR THE REVIEW

The following comments were made/issues raised:

- It was noted that the next steps for the review were to refine potential recommendations to Cabinet.
- It was suggested that the Member Committee could be recommended to consider the differing opportunities for resident engagement e.g., mystery shopper scheme etc.
- The panel recognised that there was a wider review of Stockport's housing management arrangements taking place and that it would be useful to take the review's report into account once it had been released.
- The next meeting of the panel was scheduled to take place on 21 January 2025. The panel's draft final report would then go on to be considered by the Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee, and thereafter, Cabinet.

The meeting closed at 6.42 pm