
London Borough of Hackney
Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission
Municipal Year 2020/21
Wednesday 13 July 2022

Minutes of the proceedings of
the Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission held at
Hackney Town Hall, Mare
Street, London E8 1EA

Chair: Cllr Soraya Adejare

Councillors in Attendance: Cllr Ian Rathbone, Cllr Penny Wrout, Cllr Soraya Adejare, Cllr Joseph Ogundemuren, Cllr Sam Pallis, Cllr Zoe Garbett and Cll Ali Sadek

Apologies: Cllr Sarah Young

Councillors in Virtual Attendance: Cllr Clare Joseph and Cllr M Can Ozsen

Other People in Virtual Attendance: Stefanie Turton (Regional Housing Director, London and South East, Sanctuary Housing Association), Tom Forty (Director of Customer Experience, Sanctuary Housing Association), Richard Hill (Group Chief Executive Officer, One Housing), Chyrel Brown (Chief Operating Officer, One Housing), Leslie Laniyan (Managing Director, Shian Housing Association), Minara Sultana, (Operations Director, Shian Housing Association), Aaron Whitaker (Chair of the Management Board, Shian Housing Association), Terry Harper (Committee Member, Social Housing Action Campaign) and Mick O’Sullivan (Committee Member, Social Housing Action Campaign)

Officer Contact: **Craig Player**
☎ 020 8356 4316
✉ craig.player@hackney.gov.uk

Cllr Soraya Adejare in the Chair

1 Election of Chair & Vice-Chair

- 1.1. Councillor Adejare was duly elected as Chair for the 2022/23 municipal year.
- 1.2. Councillor Joseph was duly elected as the Vice-Chair for the 2022/23 municipal year.

2 Apologies for Absence

2.1. The Chair updated those in attendance on the meeting etiquette and that the meeting was being recorded and livestreamed.

2.2 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Young.

2.3 Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Rathbone.

2.4 Councillors Ozsen and Joseph were in virtual attendance.

3 Urgent Items / Order of Business

3.1 There were no urgent items, and the order of business was as set out in the agenda.

4 Declaration of Interest

4.1 Councillors Adejare and Joseph declared that they were Clarion Housing Association tenants.

4.2 Councillor Ogundemuren declared that he was a Clarion Housing Association employee.

5 Implementation of the Charter for Social Housing Residents - Resident Experiences

5.1 The Chair opened the item by explaining that the session would cover how local housing providers in the borough had responded to and were implementing the seven commitments outlined in the Charter for Social Housing Residents - Social Housing White Paper November 2020, which outlined plans for new regulation, a strengthened Housing Ombudsman to speed up complaints, and a set of tenant satisfaction measures that social landlords had to report against.

5.2 The Chair explained that further sessions would be held to cover Hackney Council in relation to the charter, but with the constraints on time and to ensure a full discussion it had been agreed to bring local housing associations together for a standalone session.

5.3 The Chair reminded those in attendance that the Commission would not expect a response to individual cases but to patterns and trends, issues raised about processes and key points made in the meeting.

5.4 The Chair then explained that Commission Members would reflect after the meeting on the evidence heard and may make recommendations for improvement to the organisations for consideration.

5.5 This item would cover tenants' experiences of local social housing since the charter was put forward and the work of local advocacy groups in supporting social housing tenants.

5.6 Representing Social Housing Action Campaign

- Mick O'Sullivan - Committee Member
- Terry Harper - Committee Member

5.7 The Chair invited Councillor Joseph to give a summary of the written testimonies received. The main points are summarised below.

5.8 One of the major issues that social housing tenants faced was disrepair. Some had waited years for issues such as cracks, damp and mould to be dealt with. One resident had seen multiple target completion dates missed, leaving her to live with her children in a damp and overcrowded home.

5.9 Another resident had explained that the housing association had failed to respond to five emails and a lack of engagement meant that he was unsure if contractors would turn up, or what they were scheduled to do on dates given by the housing association. Some said that contractors ring up and cancel on the day, and for one resident this mean losing out on money having taken the day off work.

5.10 A pensioner had waited over 18 months for repairs as a result of flood damage, despite making multiple calls to service lines. She felt that estate offices serve her needs much better, and questioned what accountability structures were now in place.

5.11 Many residents questioned the value for money that their housing associations provided. One resident said that her key worker accommodation had risen rapidly, and another in sheltered accommodation described increased service charges and expensive charges for adjustments for disabilities. A resident said that their pension once comfortably covered rent but now she was forced to claim housing benefits to meet the cost.

5.12 Some residents pointed out significant housing regeneration and building schemes in their local areas, but felt that little of this would provide for social housing.

5.13 Those in attendance were then played three resident testimony videos. The main points are summarised below.

Resident Testimony 1

5.14 The resident had been waiting around two years for repairs. She showed cracking, damp and mould on the walls and ceilings in her home that she shared with her children, which had led to leaking in some places. She had tried to clean and/or paint over areas of damp, mould or cracking but the issues would always return.

Resident Testimony 2

5.15 The resident showed cracking and leaking on the walls and ceilings in her home. The water tank on the roof had overflowed leading to her needing to collect leaking water with a bucket and towels. She had kept a log of her interactions with the housing association since the incident which outlined the time it had taken to get the issue rectified. The local councillor had written to the housing association but did not receive a response. She had to repair her living room walls and ceiling herself at a cost of £400, but other issues remained.

Resident Testimony 3

5.16 The resident showed paint flakes falling from the kitchen ceiling following a leak. Work was halted in April 2021 to allow the leak to dry up but it led to paint falling onto kitchen surfaces.

Resident Testimony 4

5.17 The resident showed a large leak coming through his wall which had led to paint coming away. The resident had to use a bucket to collect leaking water.

5.18 The Chair then invited Mick O'Sullivan and Terry Harper, Committee Members of the Social Housing Action Campaign (SHAC) to give a short verbal presentation. The main points from the presentation are outlined below.

5.19 SHAC was a network of tenants, residents, workers and activists in housing associations and cooperatives. It campaigns to improve the experiences of those who live in housing association properties and to reduce the commercialisation of the sector.

5.20 Increasingly for larger housing associations profits were prioritised over the living conditions of tenants. The surpluses generated by their operating activity lies at somewhere between £4.7 to 4.9 billion per year which had increased since the pandemic as they were unable to carry out cyclical maintenance.

5.21 In 2016 the government implemented a rent directive requiring housing associations to reduce social rents by 1% annually for four years. However, in 2020 the government set the social rent cap at CPI +1% which meant rent increases of 10% or more (CPI was at 9.1% in June 2022 and trending upwards).

5.22 The cost of living crisis meant that people were already struggling to manage rents, with RPI inflation at 11.7% in May 2022 and rising. Moreover, there was no cap for service charges which were paid by some tenants as an additional payment. These charges increased a differing percentages across the country in 2021/22, with some housing associations increasing them as much as 100% in a single year.

5.23 A third of housing association households had their rents and service charges covered by Universal Credit. This meant that the rises would create a further direct transfer of taxpayers' money into housing association surpluses. In 2020/21 housing associations were paid a total of £7.7 billion in respect of the Housing Benefit element of Universal Credit, compared to £4.6 billion to councils and £5 billion to private sector housing.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

5.24 *A Commission Member asked what support the Social Housing Action Campaign felt that Hackney Council could provide to housing association tenants to improve their experience of social housing and how they could hold housing associations to account.*

5.25 In response, a SHAC Committee Member highlighted that Hackney Council could use its planning processes to ensure that housing associations operating within the borough fulfilled their planning obligations. Hackney Council could also collaborate

with nearby boroughs to draw up a criteria for housing associations that want to work within the borough that secures affordable and decent housing for residents.

5.26 A SHAC Committee Member explained that Islington Council gives a space to housing activists to meet on a monthly basis and that Hackney Council could consider doing so too.

5.27 A Commission Member asked whether they felt that housing associations needed to improve their customer service offer to ensure that tenants were able to report problems easily, and that repairs were dealt with in a timely manner.

5.28 A SHAC Committee Member responded by explaining that in cases of damp, housing associations needed to firstly look at the structural issues that may have caused the issue and, if that does not lead to any answers they should look at overcrowding, ventilation or inappropriate use of facilities.

5.29 Reporting an issue seemed to be a barrier to most housing association tenants with properties in disrepair and, once an issue is reported, it was often difficult to get the housing association to take timely action. He felt that more resources needed to be put into the customer service offer to simplify this process.

5.30 A Commission Member asked the Social Housing Action Campaign to elaborate on its work to campaign for the decommercialisation of the housing sector and how Hackney Council could support this work.

5.31 In response, a SHAC Committee Member explained that the Social Housing Action Campaign Group had advocated for a number of measures to make housing associations more accountable to their tenants. This included making housing associations smaller and regionally based and ensuring that there was tenant and local authority representation on housing association boards.

6 Implementation of the Charter for Social Housing Residents - Housing Associations (7.40pm)

6.1 The Chair opened the item by explaining that this section of the discussion would focus on how local housing associations had responded to and were implementing the seven commitments outlined in the Charter for Social Housing Residents - Social Housing White Paper November 2020.

6.2 Representing Sanctuary Housing Association

- Stephanie Turton, Regional Housing Director - London and South East
- Tom Forty, Director of Customer Experience

6.3 Representing One Housing

- Richard Hill, Group Chief Executive Officer
- Chyrel Brown, Chief Operating Officer

6.4 Representing Shian Housing Association

- Aaron Whitaker, Chair, Shian Management Board
- Minara Sultana, Operations Director

- Leslie Laniyan, Managing Director

6.5 Apologies had been received the attendees listed below.

6.6 Representing Peabody

- Veronica Kirwan, Managing Director - South London & Hackney

6.7 Representing Agudas Israel Housing Association

- Chaya Spitz, Chief Executive

6.8 The Chair invited Stephanie Turton and Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, to give a short verbal presentation. The main points from the presentation are outlined below.

6.9 Sanctuary Housing Association had led a resident-led self-assessment against the Social Housing White Paper completed by the Sanctuary Housing Association National Resident Scrutiny Panel (NRSP).

6.10 Residents had identified 108 recommendations, from which a 32 point action plan had been developed. The implementation of the actions plan would be monitored and scrutinised by the NRSP, and the approach had been supported by the Regulator for Social Housing.

6.11 There had been continued investment and operational focus by Sanctuary Housing Association on ensuring tenants were safe in their home. There was a Building Safety Programme which focused on remediation and the end-to-end approach to building safety, which was audited to ensure it was appropriate and robust.

6.12 A Primary Authority Partnership with Hampshire Fire and Rescue had been agreed to ensure ongoing expert advice and guidance along with the recruitment of Building Safety Managers and fire safety expertise.

6.13 Sanctuary Housing Association had signed up to a seven year Asset Investment Strategy that would increase investment in capital properties. This would be monitored and scrutinised by the NRSP.

6.14 It was also investing in technology through the One Property Programme to ensure it could support trade operatives and repair staff to carry out their roles effectively and be more customer focused.

6.15 Sanctuary Housing Association had been working towards being more transparent and accountable to its tenants. This had involved agreeing the financial information and value for money information that tenants wanted to see, and redeveloping its approach to annual reports to residents.

6.16 A 'Residents Academy' had been developed to deliver CiH accredited courses to tenants involved in the NRSP to empower them to be involved in decision making and encourage informed scrutiny.

6.17 A customer experience dashboard had also been developed to give an insight into a customer's journey so that each stage of the journey could be improved as needed. The metrics for the dashboard had been set in consultation with tenants.

6.18 Sanctuary Housing Association were also reviewing resident involvement in its governance arrangements to increase the strength of the resident voice.

Sanctuary Housing Association had adopted the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and an annual review of its approach to the Code was completed by the Complaints Community of Interest.

6.19 A specific review of the complaints process had also been undertaken with over 150 tenants taking part in the process and holding Sanctuary Housing Association to account for the delivery of the resultant action plan.

6.20 This had led to improvements in access and the ease of making a complaint and the implementation of an improved system to monitor and track complaints.

6.21 Sanctuary Housing Association had developed a new resident engagement strategy for the next three years. It was hoped that this would increase the ease and ways in which tenants could provide feedback, increase resident involvement in governance and improving local communications.

6.22 It had also developed the 'Housing 360' initiative which would target residents who had reported disrepair or were at risk of disrepair, recognising the impact that disrepair had on tenants' lives. It was hoped that this approach would foster relationships with tenants and help identify issues at an early stage.

6.23 The Chair then invited Chyrel Brown and Richard Hill, representing One Housing, to give a short verbal presentation. The main points from the presentation are outlined below.

6.24 One Housing had been on a continuous improvement journey over the last five years which included responses to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Social Housing Green Paper, the Social Housing White Paper, the National Housing Federation's 'Together with tenants' initiative and the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

6.25 There was a strong corporate focus on fire and building safety and resident engagement. This involved an electrical safety programme, smoke and carbon monoxide alarms being checked and replaced in necessary and regular health safety inspections in communal areas.

6.26 Regular resident meetings were undertaken with people living in social housing to explain what works were being undertaken, why they were being undertaken and to understand how tenants may feel more secure and comfortable in their homes.

6.27 One Housing had been working with tenants to identify the information that they wanted. This information was published in newsletters and on its website, and breakdowns of spending were now provided in annual reports.

6.28 Its Complaints Policy had been reviewed to include the revised Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and a strategic and operational relationship with the Ombudsman was maintained to ensure delivery against this.

6.29 Measures such as a webchat had been introduced as an additional channel to raise complaints, and the My One Housing portal could be used to track complaints. Since the introduction of these measures 90% Stage 1 complaints had been answered in target.

6.30 A Customer Experience Strategy was in place with a strong focus on improving customer experience efficiently and effectively while meeting diverse needs and hearing the customer voice. Progress against this was regularly reported to the One Housing Board and Committees.

6.31 A new Resident Engagement Strategy had also been developed to improve the resident engagement offer and enable resident-led scrutiny of services. The strategy was developed in consultation with 2000 residents, and customer voice surveys would capture live feedback on progress against it.

6.32 The Chair then invited Aaron Whitaker, Minara Sultana and Leslie Laniyan, representing Shian Housing Association, to give a short verbal presentation. The main points from the presentation are outlined below.

6.33 Shian Housing Association had an ongoing roll-on programme in carrying out health and safety inspections such as Annual Gas Safety Checks, Fire Safety Risk Assessments and Periodical Electrical Safety Checks.

6.34 It reviewed its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) data with Shian Housing Association Scrutiny Panel members and regularly published the KPIs data in newsletters, its annual report and on its website.

6.35 Complaints were handled in line with its Complaints Procedures and the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. Complaints KPIs were discussed in Management Board meetings as well as with Scrutiny Panel members, and complaints reports and feedback were reported to residents in newsletters and the annual report.

6.36 Shian Housing Association carried out independent customer satisfaction surveys as well as in-house satisfaction surveys for both the repairs service and customer contact.

6.37 Feedback from satisfaction surveys were reviewed by the Senior Management Team and improvements were made where needed. Customer satisfaction survey feedback was also reported to the Management Board, Scrutiny Panel members and to all residents through newsletters and the annual report.

6.38 Where major works such as bathroom and kitchen replacements were carried out, resident feedback is actively sought to continuously improve the service.

6.39 It invests over £1 million in its housing stock per year, and recently completed a kitchen and bathroom replacement programme.

6.40 A roll-on programme for the upgrade of electrical consumer units, windows and door replacements was also underway, and there was an ongoing programme over five years for electrical safety inspection for properties.

Shian Housing Association offered homes across a range of different tenures to ensure social housing could support people to take their first step into ownership, such as shared ownership and the intermediate rented housing scheme.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

6.41 *A Commission Member asked to what extent housing associations were open and transparent about their performance, especially in relation to repairs and were how far they were willing to go in improving their performance.*

6.42 Aaron Whitaker, representing Shian Housing Association, spoke of the importance of high standards of repair and maintenance being achieved by housing associations. Much of this was down to prompt and high quality repairs, and also enabling tenants to report repairs easily.

6.43 Stephanie Turton, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that social housing services were looking to be more localised to ensure high standards of repairs and an understanding of local need.

6.44 One large Sanctuary Housing Association estate in Hackney had a pop-up repair surgery where tenants were able to report repairs and local operatives would assess the issue and seek to solve the problem immediately.

6.45 Richard Hill, representing One Housing, recognised that repairs were a large indicator of customer satisfaction. One Housing had invested not only in ensuring operatives were able to carry out their roles effectively, but also in ensuring that the necessary systems were in place to allow tenants to report and track their repairs easily.

6.46 *A Commission Member asked whether the housing associations in attendance had plans for further house building in Hackney over the next five years, and how much of the tenure mix would be put aside for social housing.*

6.47 Richard Hill, representing One Housing, explained that One Housing planned to build around 2.5k homes in London and the South East over the next five years.

6.48 Two thirds of this was planned to be affordable housing and discussions would take place with local authorities about social housing needs on individual developments.

6.49 *A Commission Member asked how easy it was for tenants to receive specific information about their service charges, recognising that service charges differed from home to home, and sometimes even between homes within the same building.*

6.50 Richard Hill, representing One Housing, explained that a booklet was shared with tenants each year outlining what the service charges had been and how the service charge had been decided.

6.51 When proposing to change service charges, One Housing would undertake a consultation with tenants and give tenants a choice in whether or not they receive a service where possible.

6.52 The costs of service charges to housing associations had risen in recent years and there were a range of inflationary pressures to account for this, for example paying employees the London Living Wage.

6.53 Chyrel Brown, representing One Housing, explained that One Housing engaged tenants annually in developing its booklet outlining service charges, for example by holding resident surgeries to go through service charges and receive resident feedback on what services they required.

6.54 Where mistakes in regard to service charges were made, it worked quickly to identify them and refund tenants where needed. It undertook internal audits to ensure that mistakes were identified and rectified quickly.

6.55 Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that Sanctuary Housing Association aimed to be transparent about rent increases and have honest conversations with tenants to ensure it was making the right decisions in the interest of tenants.

6.56 A Commission Member asked what the housing associations in attendance were doing to ensure tenants were aware of their rights and felt empowered to have their voice heard by their landlord.

6.57 Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that Sanctuary Housing Association had a number of active residents' associations on its estates in Hackney, and had a resident engagement team that actively supported those residents' associations to bring tenants together to ensure that it was providing a high standard of service.

6.58 Stephanie Turton, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, highlighted the transfer of community halls to residents on estates in Hackney as an example of working with tenants to make the most of their community through projects and social groups.

6.59 A Commission Member asked whether the housing associations in attendance had considered the creation of a Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) which would allow housing associations to manage their repairs and maintenance internally.

6.60 Aaron Whitaker, representing Shian Housing Association, explained that all of its contractors were based in Hackney and the majority were Black and Global Majority contractors. This allowed them to be more responsive to the needs of their tenants.

6.61 Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that Sanctuary Housing Association had a DLO in London which delivered around 70% of its repairs which consisted of local employees with knowledge of their local communities.

6.62 Whilst the aspiration was for the DLO to deliver more of its repairs, it had to be conscious that it may need to use external contractors for some specialisms and to ensure value for money in some cases.

6.63 A Commission Member asked whether the relationship between the housing associations in attendance and its repairs workers was positive, and whether the relationship had any impact on the quality of repairs undertaken.

6.64 Stephanie Turton, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that the relationship between the housing association and its repairs staff was positive despite ongoing pressures due to staffing across London, and high vacancy rates in particular.

6.65 It worked hard to maintain a positive relationship with the repairs team and support it through what had been a difficult time.

6.66 A Commission Member asked what Sanctuary Housing was doing to localise its services, and ensure local resident voice was being listened to and learned from.

6.67 In response, Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, recognised that more work needed to be done to improve resident engagement at a local level.

6.68 It had teams in Hackney that engaged with residents regularly, and the relationships between the housing association and residents was particularly strong on estates.

6.69 There had been an increase in feedback from resident associations on performance on estates, but there was difficulty in engaging with those residents who did not wish to be part of a resident association.

6.70 *A Commission Member asked how Sanctuary Housing Association focused on customer satisfaction whilst its business model seemed to be at odds with such an approach (being a large and commercial organisation).*

6.71 Tom Forty, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that the organisation was trying to move away from a data driven approach to customer satisfaction, but to an approach in which the individual experiences of residents were listened to and acted upon.

6.72 Resident mentoring had been developed where local residents had mentoring relationships with members of the senior leadership team so that the leadership team had an insight into what was going on in local areas.

6.73 This involved members of the senior leadership team accompanying residents on inspections of social housing across the country.

6.74 Richard Hill, representing One Housing, explained that One Housing had not been seeing the same level of surpluses as it had in previous years because most of its surpluses were being directed towards building safety.

6.75 It also directed much of its surpluses to its care and support work which included supporting people who are homeless, living in temporary accommodation or who are at risk of being homeless.

6.76 Its surpluses also went towards building new, affordable housing stock to meet housing needs within London. It did not aim to make profit but to continue to grow and provide more homes.

6.77 *A Commission Member asked Sanctuary Housing whether issues in regards to repairs, complaints and safety was simply down to a lack of investment.*

6.78 Stephanie Turton, representing Sanctuary Housing Association, explained that there were specific problems in London that were affecting the level of service housing associations were able to provide to residents.

6.79 There was a labour shortage in London that had led to high vacancy rates, meaning that less operatives were available to carry out repairs and maintenance.

7 Living in Hackney Work Programme 2022/23 (9.05pm)

7.1 This item would cover the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission work programme for the 2022/23 municipal year.

7.2 Any suggestions from Commission Members this evening, as well as suggestions made in the public survey, by officers and by Cabinet Members would be collated into a shortlist and presented at the next meeting for agreement.

7.3 After the Commission had agreed the items for the work programme, the Chair and Vice Chair would update the Scrutiny Panel with the proposed work programme for the Commission.

7.4 The Chair then invited Commission Members to make any comments or suggestions for the 2022/23 work programme.

7.5 Commission Members supported the suggestion to explore and advise on existing models and develop new ways to build affordable and accessible homes in Hackney.

7.6 Commission Members supported the suggestion to look at how drug crime was policed in Hackney including stop and search and what happens to people when they were found with illegal substances.

7.7 A Commission Member supported the suggestion to look at the impact of the changes to the Housing Register and Lettings Policy on residents.

7.8 A Commission Member supported the suggestion to look at the arrangements in place in Hackney to provide temporary accommodation to residents in priority need.

7.9 Commission Members then suggested additional work programme items as outlined below.

7.10 To look at urban farming in Hackney as a means of promoting sustainable communities, including urban beekeeping.

7.11 To look at flood planning in Hackney, particularly the risks faced, the impact of flooding and measures taken to manage risks and reduce potential damage and destruction.

7.12 To look at the Council's work to meet its net zero carbon target in relation to retrofitting buildings in the borough.

7.13 To look at the Council's work to revitalise high streets and town centres. However, as this would sit within the economic regeneration department it would therefore fall outside of the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission.

8 Minutes of the Meeting

8.1 The minutes of the previous meetings held on 17th January and 7th March 2022 would follow in the next meeting agenda.

8.2 The draft minutes of the previous meetings held on 24th February 2022 and 13th December 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

9 Any Other Business

9.1 None.

Duration of the meeting: 7.00 - 9.43 pm

This page is intentionally left blank