

Response Of The Board Of Homes For Haringey To The Proposal To Bring Homes For Haringey Services Under Direct Control Of The Council

Introduction

Homes for Haringey (HfH) Board discussed its view on the proposal to transfer housing services back to Haringey Council at a strategy day on 12 June 2021. It has subsequently participated in a Council-run focus group on the issue and held separate discussions inside and outside formal meetings. This response is based on these deliberations.

The Board believes strongly that the Council is entitled to review the model for housing delivery at any time. Our role is to support the Council to achieve the best possible outcomes through whatever model the Council chooses.

The Board has been responsible for running these services for over 15 years and is currently overseeing a comprehensive programme of improvements. We believe we have an important contribution to make to this process.

Recommendations of the Board of Homes for Haringey

The success of a transfer will depend on a clear plan for the structure, governance and delivery model for housing services.

The Council put forward four reasons for the proposal: clear accountability, value for money, joined-up services and service improvement. In order to achieve these aims we recommend that the Council satisfies itself that its proposed model:

1. Retains or improves clear **accountability to residents** by ensuring they have at least as much influence as now over strategy, design of services and scrutiny.
2. **Maintains the value for money achievements** of HfH in overall expenditure, homelessness, domestic abuse services and social value.
3. Ensures the essential improvements in **joined-up housing services** are supported and enhanced.
4. Ensures the recently recruited leadership team and our **valued staff are retained** so that services continue to improve.

Clear Accountability

The Council states that it is the legal landlord for council homes, and as it takes this role seriously it wants to take direct control of landlord services. That is a reasonable decision for the Council to take, subject to the need to consult residents.

In recent years, HfH's Board and Audit and Risk Committee have identified risks to resident safety and vulnerable people, and issues of value for money and probity. They have overseen the response to these issues towards a successful resolution. The Council will need to ensure that its new governance model provides the same rigorous level of accountability.

It is also essential to maintain accountability to residents themselves. Under the current model residents are involved in shaping strategy, designing service delivery and scrutinising performance. They do this through their role on the Board (the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee is a

resident), the Resident Scrutiny Panel (whose recommendations are monitored rigorously at Board-level) and the frequently refreshed resident engagement strategy.

Resident voice in housing management is a huge challenge nationally. Following the fire at Grenfell, changes in regulation reinforce the need to enhance and improve resident engagement at decision-making level. The Board believes that the Council must commit to consolidating and strengthening this aspect of accountability. The Council should set out (at least in high-level detail) how it proposes to do so before making the final decision on the future of housing services. Otherwise, there is a very real chance that the transfer of services will lead to a reduction of accountability to the residents themselves.

Value for Money

Value for money (VFM) is a high priority for the Board. It has ensured that VFM is key feature of the transformation programme that commenced in 2020. In recent years it has absorbed unbudgeted pressures and delivered efficiency savings. For example, in the financial year 2020/2021 the company budget made an efficiency saving of £871,000 and absorbed unbudgeted costs of over £880,000. This is the equivalent of 4.5% of the Housing Revenue Account management fee paid by the Council, despite the unique pressures of that year.

Our homelessness and domestic abuse services deliver prevention outcomes that are known to be among the very best in the country. This leads to very significant General Fund savings and better outcomes for residents. We have achieved this by integrating homelessness services with other housing functions. For example, our repairs operatives make a significant contribution to the excellent domestic abuse outcomes that were acknowledged by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) when it accredited our services in 2020. Our repairs and income recovery services support the temporary accommodation functions.

Social value is a high priority for the Board, and we want HfH's achievements to be maintained as a key part of our legacy. This includes the amazing partnership work on employment and training led by Project 2020, the commitment to apprenticeships in craft and office jobs, and our initiative in employing apprentices with learning disabilities and autism.

It is essential that the model for delivering housing services retains the integration of homelessness and other housing functions and builds on HfH's strong record on social value.

Joined-up Services

The aim of providing joined-up services is fully supported by the Board. HfH has a strong record of collaboration with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors, for example in homelessness services, fire safety, employment, crime prevention and debt management. We will use our experience to support the Council to improve integration with other public services. This must not, however, be at the expense of joined-up housing services.

The risk of diluting the housing function in the wider council in a complex and changing environment is very considerable. The new model will need to allow for strong professional leadership and integrated working practices across housing management, property services and housing demand.

Following the tragic death of one of our residents, the Board received an independent report in 2020 that exposed weaknesses in our joined-up approach to property and tenancy management. Although the report and subsequent inquest did not find HfH responsible, the tragic event contributed to the Board's decision to launch a transformation programme that aims to join up

housing services around residents, improve the culture and processes to support closer collaboration, and hold the services to account against these principles.

The achievements of the corporate approach to preventing homelessness and improving temporary accommodation referred to above also highlight the importance of joined-up housing services.

Service Improvements

HfH's transformation activity over the last 12 months has led to reorganisation and strengthened leadership in every part of the organisation, and significant IT developments. These have often been at the cost of short-term disruption as we deal with the legacy of under-performance and practices that lead to low customer satisfaction. A new model for service delivery must maintain the momentum created under HfH and consolidate the progress made.

For example, following an independent review in 2020, we have created almost an entirely new leadership team in Property Services. High-calibre leaders have already brought a long legacy of poor property compliance to an end. They are now modernizing the repairs service, improving the delivery of major works and strengthening our capacity to improve Broadwater Farm. We have recruited people at a significant level of expertise because we believe HfH residents should benefit from the best leaders in the market. There are similar examples in all other parts of HfH.

ALMO mergers demonstrate a significant risk that senior leaders and other key staff will leave if they are uncertain of a secure and valued position in a new model. The Council must mitigate this risk by ensuring no loss of status, authority, autonomy or capacity to deliver. The depth of expertise and focus on housing outcomes that is now possible must be preserved.

If not, there is a significant risk that the gains in property compliance, building safety, estate services and tenancy management will be lost, and services will decline rather than improve.

Conclusion and recommendations

The strengths of the ALMO model have been evident in the activity of the Board in recent years, and the Board is grateful for the opportunity to play a role in improving Haringey's housing services. There are, however, many examples of services transferring back to the parent council and thriving. If the Council proceeds with its proposal, we will do our best to assist a successful transfer that leads to improvements. We believe our recommendations, based on real experience, will help the Council to make the improvements it is so clearly committed to achieving.

Madeleine Forster – Chair

Sean McLaughlin- Managing Director

On behalf of the Board of Homes for Haringey

15 October 2021