

FAIRNESS COMMISSION

6.00pm 18 FEBRUARY 2016

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, SHIP STREET, BRIGHTON

NOTES OF MEETING

Present : Bill Randall (Chair) (Writer, Journalist and Housing Consultant); Martin Harris (Managing Director, Brighton & Hove Bus and Coach Company), Ann Hickey (General Manager, East Sussex Credit Union); Sally Polanski (Chief Executive, Brighton & Hove Community Works); Dan Shelley (Vice Principal, Sussex Coast College Hastings); Rachel Verdin (Organiser, GMB)

Apologies: Vic Rayner (Chair, CEO, SITRA); Wednesday Croft (Youth Mayor); Dr. Rhidian Hughes (CEO, Voluntary Organisations Disability Group), Imran Hussain (Director of Policy, Rights & Advocacy, Child Poverty Action Group); Dr. Katie Stead (GP and Clinical Lead for Public Health and for Locally Commissioned Services and Quality for Primary Care) and David Wolff (Director, Community University Partnership Programme).

1 EVIDENCE TO THE FAIRNESS COMMISSION 18 FEBRUARY 2016

1a Chair's Introduction

- 1.1 The Chair for the meeting, Bill Randall opened the meeting and invited his fellow Commissioners to introduce themselves. He explained that the Commissioners had received an evidence pack relating to Housing and the Greater Brighton city region. Presentations relating to this theme would be given as set out on the circulated agenda. Housing was an issue which had been identified as one of particular concern to residents in view of the high level of private rented accommodation and lower than average level of home ownership when compared with the other parts of the country. Rental levels were high and there was a dearth of affordable accommodation, for those of limited means and a need to provide quality housing for future generations.
- 1.2 The Chair went on to explain that at his discretion Ree had been invited to speak briefly on behalf of "Love Activists" who had presented a petition to Full Council on 28 January 2016, setting out solution based proposals to end homelessness.

2 Solution Based Proposals to end Homelessness

- 2.1 Ree spoke in support of "Love Activists" who had presented a petition to Council on – in the following terms.

"We the undersigned petition Brighton & Hove Council to support the following solution based proposals, to end homelessness.

1. Every homeless person is vulnerable and should therefore be considered in priority need, including those in temporary accommodation.
 2. The Housing First model should be expanded to offer housing to all of the city's homeless people, offering adequate support to suit each individual's needs.
 3. The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) should be activated immediately, in any weather which threatens rough sleepers' health, particularly the wet.
 4. The council should activate the Extended Winter Provision of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol immediately. The emergency shelters should be opened every night, over the winter and beyond.
 5. Affordable social rents should be imposed on private landlords and property investors, prioritising the provision of permanent homes until everyone is securely housed.
 6. Reform the LASPO act, to make squatting empty properties safe and equitable for property owners and otherwise homeless people.
 7. Because of the so-called 'first mover loses' phenomenon, it will be necessary for local authorities around the country to work together, in order to implement these measures nationally.”
- 2.2 The Chair, thanked Ree for her submission, the contents of which were noted. All of the evidence received and submissions made would be considered by the Commissioners when putting considering their recommendations and putting together their final report.

3. Housing Associations

- 3.1 Victoria Moffett was in attendance in her capacity as External Affairs Manager for the National Housing Federation of which the countries Housing Associations were members. Ms Moffett submitted evidence to the Commission setting out details of the number of new houses required in the South East and then went on to outline the situation with specific reference to Brighton and Hove.
- 3.2 Across the South East 19, 180 fewer homes had been built than were needed from 2014-2015, there would be 819,000 new households by 2037. Across Brighton and Hove these problems were in even sharper focus given that the cost of housing was very high when compared with lower average earnings than elsewhere across the region and nationally. In Brighton and Hove in 2014 the average cost of a house was 12.4 times the average salary (£26, 718) the average private rent was £1,103 per month and 27.5% of housing benefit claimants were in work.
- 3.3 It was explained that housing associations provided homes across all tenures and provided housing for 5 million people and invested both in communities and properties having built 50,000, the previous year, 40% of all homes and they aimed to do more as for every £1 invested by the taxpayer, housing associations put in £6 of their own funds.

- 3.4 Across Brighton and Hove, Housing Associations provided 7,446 homes, contributed £28m to the local economy and provided the equivalent of 537 full time jobs in the area.
- 3.5 Finally, Ms Moffett referred to the challenges and opportunities resulting from the current political environment and what this meant for low cost housing.

Challenges were:

- Cuts to social rents;
- Extension of Local Housing Allowance to social housing providers;
- The recent ruling by the Office of National Statistics.

Opportunities were:

- Funding for shared ownership properties – 4bn for 135,000;
- Funding for 100,00 homes at “affordable rent” and “rent to buy”;
- Public land to be released for building of 160,000.

- 3.6 The National Housing Federation’s recommendation to the Commission was that the local authority work with housing associations as strategic partners.
- 3.7 The Commission thanked Ms Moffett for her evidence and responses to questions.

4 Community Land Trusts

- 4.1 Stephen Hill, a Chartered Planning and Development was in attendance to submit evidence to the Commission on behalf of the UK Cohousing Network National CLT Network. They worked to provide collective custom builds for the co-production of homes and neighbourhoods. Mr Hill outlined the RICS vision for London the ethos of which was to empower people and communities to deliver their needs. The Mayor should build on existing work to support individuals and communities wishing to build their own homes by creating a “Community and Self-Build Support Hub.” The purpose of this was to bring together information, support and professional advice, as well as funding for self/ custom build, Co-operatives, CLTs and Cohousing. Most importantly it was considered that the Mayor should actively and publicly promote these options by planning for and allocating public land to them, identifying funding options, and providing support for planning and development via the Hub.
- 4.2 Mr Hill stated that this represented an innovative approach which could provide homes that people could afford and would always be able to afford, homes which were genuinely affordable to rent or buy, based on what people actually earned in an area, and would remain affordable for this and future generations. Mr Hill went on to explain that Community Land Trusts were able to create housing opportunities and could win over local people who would otherwise be opposed to new housing and could bring forward land that would not otherwise be developed for housing.
- 4.3 Cohousing provided a flexible and innovative approach which as well as new build encompassed renovation of existing property, different legal models and different forms of ownership and renting. Critically, a CLT had to ensure that any profits from its activities were used to benefit the local community. Individuals who lived or worked

within the specified area had the opportunity to become members of the trust, others could also become members, the members of a trust controlled it. Mr Hill gave examples of Cohousing schemes and concluded by stressing that CLT's were important in creating a resilient house building industry, as small/medium sized providers of housing who were able to take innovative approaches to raising finance and engaging people in housing and had an important role to play in re-democratising housing.

4.4 The Commission thanked Mr Hill for his evidence and responses to questions.

5 Community Self-Build

5.1 Levant Kerimol was present and submitted evidence to the Commission on behalf of "Our London" who worked to provide community commissioned neighbourhoods through self-build schemes. He explained that they acted as facilitators working with boroughs, landowners and groups of people to help them jointly develop their own housing. They covered such areas as, community engagement, project management, planning, regeneration, design strategy and housing architecture.

5.2 Mr Kerimol stated when engaging with interested residents it was important to communicate clearly, to understand ambitions and capacity to bring the works to fruition. An import and part of that process was to explore the delivery options available. There were many different models and definitions and which would be appropriate different in different cases. It was important to structure models to suit particular project priorities and to establish the right conditions to enable development to take place. This required a bold approach in adopting policies which required:

- Land to be allocated for group self-build,
- Housing being prioritised which was affordable over which there was community control;
- Facilitator support being given to enable groups to craft support which was suitable for them.

5.3 In closing Mr Kerimol urged the Commission to consider ways in which the Council could adopt a similar innovative in response to its housing needs.

5.4 The Commission thanked Mr Kerimol for his evidence and responses given to questions.

6. Gold Standard in Housing Options

6.1 Katie Dawkins was in attendance from the Royal Borough of Greenwich to submit evidence to the Commission and to explain how the Borough had applied for and achieved the gold standard under the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS). It was explained that the NPSS had been set up specifically to develop and administer a framework for providing continuous improvement in front line housing services. The gold standard represented a diagnostic peer review which sought to address 10 local challenges. In Greenwich the Borough had sought to improve the quality of its available housing stock, promote access to housing, foster affordability, discharge its homeless duty into the private rented sector (PRS), support clients' needs, support PRS landlords and support PRS tenants. Measures had been implemented to remove duplication and

to provide a joined up service and had been led by a strong corporate commitment to tackle poverty and promote economic growth. The Borough's anti-poverty strategy included a focus on seeking to prevent homelessness and to improve PRS standards. Four key objectives had been identified in their homelessness strategy including the need to increase the supply of good quality private rented sector accommodation available to people at risk of homelessness.

- 6.2 The Government's welfare reforms had had a massive impact on affordability, particularly in the private sector. In response to this a dedicated Welfare Reform Team based within the Housing Options and Support Service provided a range of advice including a "Job on a Plate" scheme fixed term employment for a year in entry level posts within the council, e.g., refuse collection, this had been very successful in helping to break cycles of worklessness and in assisting individuals back into work. It was recognised within the borough that one of the longer term solutions to homelessness lay in secure employment and a regular income.
- 6.3 A "carrot and stick" approach had been adopted in seeking to improve the quality of PRS stock available, grants for improvements to empty in return for agreement to let to HOSS clients. Access had also been facilitated to Landlord Accreditation Schemes including the National Landlord Association (NLA) and the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme (LLAS), to date 224 landlords had been accredited. In parallel with these encouragements a PRS Enforcement Project had also been set up inspecting and enforcing standards on poor quality PRS focusing particularly on HMOs and rogue landlords. Cross borough/agency cooperation had taken place in order to identify rogue landlords and coordinate enforcement activity.
- 6.3 An access scheme (HACTRAC), was open at different levels to all homeless clients. High priority clients had property procured for them or were supported to find their own PRS property and would negotiate in respect of a bond/deposit/incentive. Low priority clients received support in finding their own PRS letting (within the LHA limit) and were provided with a deposit guarantee, this included those who were intentionally homeless and non-priority single people. PRS procurement schemes had been commissioned for non-priority clients with support needs and the Housing Options Pack was available for all clients, with the landlord/agent list updated regularly. Non-priority clients were also advised and assisted to access budgeting loans or emergency support schemes to fund deposits, letters of introduction were also provided for clients to take to landlords.
- 6.4 The support offered to landlords was aimed at assisting PRS landlords with information and the "tools" to provide their offer more effectively which was in their interests and those of their tenants. A key change which had worked very successfully had been that that housing advice, housing options and assessment and housing support had all been combined into one service, in consequence, there was one approach, one assessment, with specialist teams all working with one set of key forms and one shared database ensuring that all germane information was shared.
- 6.5 The Commission thanked Ms Dawkins for her submission of evidence and responses to questions.

7. Fuel Poverty & Community Energy

- 7.1 Kayla Ente was in attendance and submitted evidence to the Commission in her capacity as founder and CEO of the Brighton & Hove Energy Services Co-operative (BHESCo) and gave a brief presentation explaining what the organisation was and how it was able to work in collaboration with the Council. BHESCo was a not for profit co-operative which sought to work with residents and businesses to lower their energy bills. This took the form of exploring renewable energy sources and a longer term strategy of helping individuals to switch to tariffs which were more affordable. Over the past year they had been instrumental in helping individuals to save over £12,000. This was important as it was anticipated that whilst energy prices had been stable for a while it was likely that they would rise over coming years and it key to assist people in helping to mitigate against the negative impact of continued increases. Available figures indicated that 130 people had died from winter cold in 2013 alone and one of the main aims of the group was to prevent/reduce that figure.
- 7.2 The Group provided simple energy solutions, advice on switching energy providers, guidance on gas and heating bills and affordable alternatives to relying on major energy providers. Information was available on energy efficiency measures (keeping people warm); Energy savings/monitoring (saving people money); energy bills (saving people time and money) and renewable energy generation (solar, wind, CHP and biomass.
- 7.3 To set this work into context it was estimated that 12% of households in Brighton & Hove (15,000), people were in fuel poverty and for them it was often a regular choice between eating or heating. Also of concern was the fact that fuel poverty was increasing by 10% per year and that it was estimated that 75% of people paid too much for their energy because they were on old tariffs, issues caused due to pre-payment metres on which charges were calibrated at a very high rate also represented a growing and very serious problem. Those who were elderly, had on-going health issues or who were trying to raise children on a very limited income were particularly vulnerable . The group operated a referral service and sought to find solutions by collaboration with government and private industry, by means of a referral service, frontline worker training and providing an affordable energy assessment and installation service. The group were also pledged to help to reduce carbon emissions and to encourage renewable energy heat and electricity and energy efficiency. They had helped to facilitate the fitting of solar panels in the North Laine. It was anticipated that these would generate 10% of the electricity requirement during February and by the summer it was estimated they would generate most of the electricity consumed. Practical examples were cited of assistance which had been given. Anyone who owed £500.00 was unable to switch provider and could find themselves weighed down by worry about their level of debt and the high cost of their energy. Measures were in place to try and work with clients to address these problems.
- 7.4 They also worked pro-actively with those designing new homes to ensure that they were designed in an energy efficient manner. Community Energy Groups could work with the Council and other investors to provide a revenue stream which could in turn be used to build more homes and the city's own micro grid over the next 15 years. The Group was currently working with Your Energy Sussex and the Council to compile a business plan to carry this forward. The Chair commended this approach, which provided local homes for local people and employment opportunities as well. Such initiatives gave people greater control over their own lives and finances and also helped to relieve pressure on the NHS.

7.5 The Commission thanked Ms Ente for her evidence and responses to questions.

8. CHAIR'S CLOSING REMARKS AND SUMMARY

8.1 The Chair thanked all of those present for their contributions and in summary of the session made the following points:

- The points made in relation to homelessness/rough sleeping were fully acknowledged, the high cost of housing in the city lack of supply and means that were critical.
- Community Land Trusts, use of a “revolving fund” was worthy of further exploration. The importance of consulting those living in an area where land was purchased in this way was key in ascertaining their needs and securing “buy in”. Noted that this option had been used successfully in Scotland.
- Community Self Build, as a means of providing low cost durable housing, it could provide housing at a significantly reduced cost, also, provided the opportunity to design in lower energy costs. The Acting Executive Director of Economic Development, Environment & Housing confirmed that studies had been undertaken and that work was on-going with neighbouring authorities. The existing Shoreham Harbour/Shoreham Power Station schemes were examples of good business models.
- Need for a multi-agency approach and more joined up approach. Streamlining, use one form as part of an interlinked multi-agency approach.
- More partnership working to publicise energy advice etc., available.
- Exploration of harnessing cheaper/self-sufficient energy and pressure to curtail practices by some landlords/letting agents providing high cost metered energy.
- Partnership with private sector landlord – recognised that the absence of an association/body and input through this was a key issue to be addressed.
- Ways of encouraging and working with landlords to promote best practice and to have greater resiliency to deal with rogue landlords robustly.
- Creation of employment at the core was the need to tackle employability and worklessness and to facilitate employment opportunities.

The meeting concluded at 9.10pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of