

## **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**6 FEBRUARY 2018**

### **SCRUTINY OF PARTNERS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN ISLINGTON**

A Partners tenant has drafted the appended note on Partners' resident scrutiny arrangements. The Committee has previously heard from Partners tenants who consider the organisation's resident scrutiny arrangements to be insufficient.

The Chair has asked that the note be circulated to members of the Housing Scrutiny Committee to inform discussion at the meeting.

---

# London Borough of Islington Street Property Residents' Forum.

## What is wanted

### A Robust Forum

- Accessible, Accountable and Transparent. To empower all Islington's street property council tenants.
- Enabling tenants to hold councillors, council officers and the council's managing agents to account.
- Enabling tenants to collectively participate in planning and housing consultations, in so far as they are pertinent to them.
- Enabling tenants to demonstrate that, in so far as forum members purport to represent them, that they are held accountable by the wider body of tenants.

(Partners for Improvement in Islington's web site lists by way of getting involved, an Engagement Register, Focus Groups, Mystery Shopping and Scrutiny – all of which currently lack both accountability and transparency.)

## The development pains that we went through.

### Membership

The Forum had a fixed membership, recruited afresh every two years by advertisement to all tenants through Partners for Improvement in Islington's (Pfiil) "Gazette". The terms of the selection process included the promise of a formal election should in excess of 30 volunteers come forward. Typically the numbers coming forward were in the teens and those subsequently attending each meeting were typically a dozen.

A request was made that the trigger-point for forcing an election be reduced to 15 in order that by holding elections the wider body of tenants could actively hold members to account. Unfortunately this was never achieved. At the time the excuse given was one of cost but perhaps Pfiil did not want the wider body of tenants to be seen to be holding members of the Forum to account as this would make the Forum more difficult to ignore.

When the membership was large enough it acted as a primary source for recruits to the scrutiny panel that carried out 4 scrutiny projects.

### Minutes

Early meetings were plagued with prolonged questioning of the minutes, often because of alleged omissions. Pfiil's [REDACTED] who took the minutes, quite admirably, adjusted her way of working to the point that we were typically presented with as many as a dozen pages that could be approved almost without discussion.

Having thorough minutes meant that there was no longer any reason why issues of concern should be lost sight of. Attendees, whether 'members' or observers, could appreciate that the time that they had taken to attend and raise the issues had not been wasted.

Tenants can not be expected to attend meetings if they are not meaningful and they are not rewarded with the satisfaction that they have evidence that they have been listened to and have answers to their comments.

Residents who had not attended could read the minutes on-line and gain valuable information. The conduct of the management of our housing was being put on record.

## **Venue**

Early meetings were held in the board room of Pflil's Colebrook Place office. This venue barely accommodated the membership that we had achieved and could not possibly accommodate more than the occasional observer in addition. We badgered Pflil relentlessly and as a result were delighted when they relented and agreed that all future meetings were when possible to be held in Islington Town Hall. This meant that the venue was where everyone could find the meetings and be accommodated, whether they were members of the Forum or so-called observers. Attendance increased. On one occasion so many attended that we had to move from Committee room 6 into the council chamber because some people otherwise had to stand outside the door.

## **The Meetings**

Attendance typically included a dozen members of the Forum, four or five observers, three or four members of Pflil's staff and a single member of the London Borough of Islington's housing clienting team. On rare occasions a councillor would attend.

The agenda for the meetings was almost entirely taken up with matters immediately concerning housing management and never included mention of consultation other than that concerning pflil directly.

Each time a scrutiny panel completed a project its report was presented to the Forum so that the Forum was able to call the scrutiny panel to account.

Some attendees on occasion expressed concern that discussion became heated and even political – not party political - but political. Perhaps following Grenfell there is a more widespread understanding of the serious nature of housing management.

## **The current Forum**

Meetings are still held in Islington Town Hall which is good. There is no pre-announced agenda and notes as opposed to minutes are produced.

There is no formal membership and consequently attendees do not share that sense of commitment that will bring them back meeting after meeting to pursue issues to satisfactory conclusions.

Typically only three long term regular attendees are present and total attendance is often only a half dozen.

## **What brought about the downgrading of the Forum?**

Partners for Improvement in Islington (Pflil) are in theory paid according to performance. The contract specifies an "availability standard" and to get remuneration at the full rate Pflil have to report to the London Borough of Islington that individual properties meet that "availability standard". A member of the clienting team was quizzed by a member of the Forum as to whether a property would be deemed to meet the Standard if at a particular time a gas safety certificate could not be issued for it. The clienting team was being held to account. No answer was forthcoming nor promised. The geni was out of the bottle. The Borough's clienting team was being held to account by a mere tenant and the clienting team forthwith put into operation the review of the Forum's operation that led to its downgrading.

We should not lose sight of the seriousness of the issue around which this incident hinged. Whilst we are not concerned with tower blocks the maximum number of floors is probably five there are rarely alternative means of escape and no sprinklers. Gas safety is paramount with regard to fire safety. Fortunately the issue has not thus far proven to be a matter of life and death but only a matter of whether monies paid to the Borough's housing managing agent is being properly monitored.

## **Consequential benefit of achieving accountable representation for tenants.**

Following the Grenfell Tower fire Communities Secretary Sajid Javid confirmed that he would bring forward a Green Paper on social housing in England. As well as safety issues the green paper will also explore the quality of social homes, the rights of tenants, service management, tackling homelessness, tackling illegal sub-letting and the wider issues of community and the local economy.

"The green paper will be the most substantial report of its kind for a generation." Mr Javid said. "It will kick off a nationwide conversation on social housing."

When Islington's council tenants & residents associations were members of the Federation of Islington Tenants' Associations (FITA), a properly constituted federation they not only had a voice in the borough that could be respected but as members of the London Tenant Federation (LTF) they had a voice in London. At best there were meetings between the Regional Tenants Federations at which tenants views from across the nation were shared. The London Tenant Federation still functions but without borough wide accountable representation for Islington's Tenants they lack a robust connection to London's tenants, and any voice for tenants nationally.

Just who will Sajid Javid be consulting with? Is he only going to gather the views of landlords?

### **What should be done?**

**Reinstate the Forum to its former status.**

**Three suggested improvements would be**

1. To instigate a trigger point whereby when in excess of fifteen residents coming forward that there should then be an election.
2. That councillors should nominate one of their number and a deputy so that always one of them one of them would attend Forum meetings on behalf of the council.
3. That Partners for Improvement in Islington be asked to include as a standard item on Forum Agendas notification of any current consultations.