

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 February 2017 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Tunde Ojetola, Jane Potheary and Joycelyn Redsell
- Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative - Co-Opted Member
- In attendance:** Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
John Knight, Head of Housing
Julie Curtis, HRA and Development Accountant
Stefanie Seff, Corporate Procurement Strategy Delivery Manager
Kenna-Victoria Martin, Senior Democratic Services Officer
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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

24. Minutes

The Minutes of Cabinet, held on 13 December 2016, were approved as a correct record.

25. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

26. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

27. Procurement of Housing Capital Programme Delivery

The Head of Housing presented the item by explaining the report set out the proposals for the re-procurement of the Housing Capital Programme, which was part of the Transforming Homes programme.

He continued to inform Members that the programme would bring significant improvement to the long term viability of Council housing and to the living conditions of residents and ensured the Council fulfilled its duty to provide warm homes with modern facilities. Members were notified the feedback from residents was positive with 82% of residents rating the contractor as good or excellent and 84% of residents rating the overall delivery of the programme as good or excellent.

It was stated that once out for advertisement, the Council's current contractors, were also entitled to bid for the contract along with other suppliers.

The Chair of the Committee enquired as to the financial impact of the government's 1% rent reduction. Officers explained that following the government's announcement £2.5 million would be removed from the housing budget.

Members sought as to how the key principals noted with the report were to be achieved. The Head of Housing informed the Committee that the second principal was to be accomplished with the support of a third party and the first would be achieved by monitoring the programme, working with the Liaison Officers and making visits to ensure that the process was explained to all tenants.

It was further queried as to who made the decision to continue with two main refurbishment packages. The Corporate Procurement Strategy Delivery Manager advised that it was recommended that the Council continue with two contractors, as the competition between the two would keep works to a high standard and should the work of one contractor begin to lack, work could be given to the other.

During discussions the Committee were advised that any feedback rated under 'fair' was not satisfactory, only ratings of good or excellent were considered a 'pass' under Key Performance Indicators and Officers were able to see comments left by residents, which could be used to improve the service.

The Housing Tenant Representative commented that at her complex many of the contractors could not speak English, which for the elderly and vulnerable people living there made them uncomfortable and they would often not allow them into their homes. She continued by stating the manager did a good job at assisting residents. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health, stated all contractors' especially those visiting elderly or vulnerable people were required to wear ID badges and speak English as a basic need.

It was finally enquired as to why void properties within the borough were being left, for at times up to a year. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health explained that the Council had a 30 to 40 day turn around period for void properties. He continued by commenting if a property had been left then it could mean that substantial work was required or the property could be privately owned.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were recommended to comment on the proposed process and contract package as set out in the report for re-procurement of the refurbishment and strategic cost management elements of the Housing Capital Programme.

28. HRA Business Plan and Budgets 2017/18

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health introduced the report and in doing, so advised Members the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had been redeveloped due to the government's announcement of the 1% rent reduction and was to be presented to Cabinet on Wednesday 8 February 2017.

It was explained that Officers had also taken into account additional costs such as repairs and the 3 Capital Programmes and were now facing the decision on how to generate an income or charge for services.

The Head of Housing informed the Committee that following the last meeting where Members raised concerns on the suggested service charges and the announcement of the 1% reduction Officers had relooked at the HRA. He continued by explaining the Council were still awaiting the Housing Whitepaper, which was to be announced immanently.

Members were notified that following their concerns at the previous meeting, Officers had come to the conclusion to offer satisfactory services to tenants and invest into the HRA, to complete this the phased extension of service charges was thought to be the most appropriate means of generating the required additional revenue.

The Chair of the Committee commented he felt the consultation with residents was important, however the Sheltered Service Charge of £15 per week was unacceptable. He continued by stating that people living in Sheltered Housing would rather complete certain tasks such as grass cutting themselves, than to have to pay for the services they received.

The Housing Tenant Representative agreed with the Chair stating that tenants did not want to pay for services that they did not receive. She further mentioned that she checked the lights, in her own complex and when informing the manager of lights which were not working, was informed to call the repair team herself.

Members were advised by the Head of Housing that the Council was the landlord for sheltered housing residents, which meant repairs were up to the Council to complete. He further mentioned in relation to a question about garages in the borough, that issues were to be picked up with the relevant service and he accepted that improvements were required.

It was discussed that the Council were commissioning a Stock Survey, following which they would be able to create a potential management plan with regards to garages.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health mentioned that he had visited all but 3 Sheltered Housing Complexes in the Borough. He notified the Committee that 70% of sheltered housing tenants were on full or partial

housing benefit and assured the Committee that all affected residents would be included within the consultation.

During discussions, Councillor Potheary stated that she was against the Sheltered Service charges. She queried as to who the Council was charging for heating, as this was subject to a 3% increase. It was explained that the 3% heating charge, came from the fees and charges policy.

Councillor Ojetola commented that he had concerns with Thurrock's vulnerable residents paying additional costs, when living in sheltered housing. The Head of Housing explained that the HRA budget was ring fenced and that the Council was currently charging some residents and not others for the services they were receiving.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health advised that all Local Authorities would be having the same conversations and looking at ways to contribute to the HRA budgets and so were also considering charging tenants for services offered.

It was queried as to whether the service charges would mean that an improved service would be offered to residents. Officers advised that the service charges would allow the Council to maintain the services currently provided.

Members were notified that all tenants affected would receive an advice letter, informing them of the consultation, which was to be undertaken via telephone, email or online. The Head of Housing advised the consultation would start at the end of February and would finish at the end of March.

The Chair of Committee suggested a new recommendation which was seconded by Councillor C Baker:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that no new charge of £15 per week be introduced for sheltered housing tenants and that following the Council's consultation, any such charge will apply to new tenants only.

Members voted on the suggested recommendation as follows:

For: Councillors G Rice, C Baker, J Baker, J Potheary and J Redsell.

Against: Councillor T Ojetola.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health explained that a report was to be presented at the February meeting of Cabinet, then the consultation would begin, after which a report would be presented to Cabinet in April for a final decision.

RESOLVED:

1. That the assumptions included in the HRA Business Plan be noted.
2. That the budgets for 2017/18 be noted.
3. That the HRA New Build programme maximises the use of Right to Buy (RTB) Receipts in place of Homes and Communities Agency funding.
4. That growth for revenue repairs and capital investment is noted.
5. That a 3% increase to all existing tenant charges is noted in line with the Council's increases to Fees and Charges.
6. That tenants receiving certain housing management services be consulted on the phased introduction of service charges, which are currently only levied on leaseholders, with a final report back to Cabinet in April.
7. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that no new charge of £15 per week be introduced for sheltered housing tenants and that following the Council's consultation, any such charge will apply to new tenants only.

Councillor Potheary declared that she was against recommendations 1.5 and 1.6.

29. Fees and Charges Pricing Strategy 2017/18

The Chair of the Committee introduced the report commenting that it was self-explanatory, he enquired if Members had any questions. There were no questions from any Member on the report.

RESOLVED That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Note the revised fees and charges proposals including those no longer applicable;
2. Commented on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.

30. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members discussed the Work Programme. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health sought if the Committee would be happy for an extraordinary meeting to be arranged for March 2017, as there were a number of reports, which Officers wished to present to Members before presenting to Cabinet in April.

It was enquired by Members if a report on Garages, could be brought to a March meeting. Officers explained that it might not be possible to present a report at an agreed March meeting, however confirmed a report would be presented at the first meeting of the Committee in the new Municipal Year.

Members further requested a report on the Review of Gatekeeping be presented to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme be updated in line with Members discussions and an extraordinary meeting be arranged for March 2017.

The meeting finished at 8.40 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**