

**MINUTES of the meeting of Housing Services Overview and Scrutiny
Committee held on 12 June 2013 at 7:00pm**

Present: Councillors Steve Liddiard (Chair), Rob Gledhill, Charles Curtis (substitute for Councillor Clare Baldwin) Oliver Gerrish, Andrew Roast

Apologies: Councillors Diana Hale and Clare Baldwin

In attendance: Ms G Riddles – Co-opted Member
Ms B Brownlee – Director of Housing
Ms K Adedeji – Head of Housing (Investment and Development)
Mr R Parkin – Head of Housing
Ms E Sheridan – Electoral & Democratic Services Officer
Councillor W Curtis

The Chair informed those present that the meeting was audio recorded.

23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Baldwin and D Hale.

24 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 13 March 2013, were approved as a correct record.

25 ADDITIONAL ITEMS

The Chair confirmed he had not agreed to the consideration of any additional items.

26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

**27 HOUSING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME EMPTY HOMES FUNDING
ROUND TWO**

The Director of Housing introduced the report which outlined the Housing departments response to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) call for bids for grant support for proposals under Round Two of the Empty Homes Fund. Members were informed that the deadline for submission of bids was 25 March 2013 and it was taken to Cabinet in March 2013 for approval. The department has not received notification of the formal outcome but the HCA

has toured the borough and was impressed with the proposed probation scheme. The formal response is expected at the end of June 2013.

The Director of Housing confirmed that they had not been chosen yet , the bid was submitted on a unit price basis and properties would be chosen if successful.

Following questions, the Director of Housing confirmed that the bid did not require them to specify the exact properties to be refurbished but was based on a unit price, a proposal to work with the Probation service and delivery costs. Members were also informed that working with the probation service would involve working with the whole family.

Members highlighted the proximity of the borough to London and the premium for refurbishment which should be captured within the bid.

In response to a question about the first round bid, the Director of Housing outlined the details of funding held by Essex County Council (ECC) and the differences between the first and second round bids.

Members questioned the nature of wider empty property work within the department and were informed of work being undertaken to identify empty properties including cleansing the council tax database to ensure it is accurate. Members and officers debated the number of empty properties, the statistics on the database and the number of properties to be brought in by the bid. Officers assured members that the official figure for empty properties within Thurrock would be lower in 13/14 than 12/13.

In response to a question on New Homes Bonus, the Director of Housing confirmed that the funding was not ring fenced and would go to the general fund.

Members asked if there was a possibility to share the service with other authorities and were informed that the work currently undertaken is not an additional cost to the service and this is not a consideration at present.

Members debated the merits of the probation service bid and the potential outcomes. The department is working closely with the HCA and hope to prove they can deliver so that Thurrock will be able to bid for future funding schemes.

The recommendation contained within the report was approved by the Chair and seconded by Councillor Gledhill with an additional recommendation as outlined

RESOLVED that the Committee

- a) note the bid for capital grant funding through the HCA's Empty Homes Fund to take forward the proposals set out in the report.

- b) Consider allocation of unringfenced funding from new homes bonus to contribute to the empty property strategy.

28 VOIDS PROGRESS

The Head of Housing (Investment and Development) introduced the report which provided members with a summary of key improvements made to the management of void properties along with an outline of current performance on void turnaround and loss. Members were informed of key operational changes that had contributed to streamlining and improving the overall process for managing voids which included the creation of a centralised team. Three decisions taken by the Council over the last year have affected voids:

- The Cabinet decision in February 2013 for five year capital investment programme which raised the standard for all void refurbishment.
- The Allocations policy which prioritises existing tenants over external applicants which means we have more voids.
- The downsizing policy which is encouraging residents to move home.

The charts provided within the reports were discussed and explained. Members were informed that when benchmarking void data across authorities, comparative calculations are needed and Thurrock does calculate voids in the same way as all other councils.

Value for money was also a key factor and members were informed that Thurrock have achieved a cost reduction of 50% on kitchen and bathroom replacements in 2013 by retendering the work. refurbishment Previously the average refurbishment cost for a void property was £15,000. This has been reduced on average to £8,000.

Members questioned the actual number of void properties and the officer clarified that at any one time there are approximately 200 empty council properties of which 2-3% had long term issues with extensive time frames. Members queried the Key Performance Issues (KPI's) and if voids were tracked as a KPI. The Head of Housing confirmed that figures can be provided for members and both turnaround times, costs, rent loss and actual are all recorded and kept at the departmental level.

Members acknowledged that the gold standard refurbishment was impressive but raised concerns about properties that had been re-let as bronze standard. The Head of Housing confirmed that it is a balancing act to accommodate the level of demand and the impact on occupied properties. It is not possible to take all voids up to a gold standard immediately. Members were asked to supply addresses about individual properties of particular concern.

The co-opted member debated that the void information should be supplied to residents and provided in plain English. The Director of Housing and members debated that a resident KPI Report could be provided for the residents. The

Director of Housing agreed to discuss this with the panel to evaluate the information required.

Void rent loss was discussed and members were informed by the Head of Housing that the figure last year was £1.2million. Year to date in 2013 the figure is £231,000.

Councillor W Curtis was invited to contribute to the meeting and commented that she had inspected two gold standard properties and was impressed by the standard of refurbishment but raised a concern about maintenance schedules to adjoining flats. The officer responded by informing members that they had agreed a planned maintenance programme for a proactive management of housing stock.

Members debated the need to be more open and transparent about longer term void properties. The Head of Housing responded that the exact properties are identifiable and the properties have significant structural issues. Last year, the proportion of voids unlet for more than 100 days would have been 40%. This figure is currently less than 10%

The co-opted member highlighted concerns of residents on a waiting list for 10 years and their view of empty properties. The Director of Housing clarified that individual queries on addresses can be passed to the service to look at but reminded members that the allocation policy was agreed by Council, which prioritised transfers, not new allocations.

Members debated the recharge system and the Head of Housing confirmed that the system is now operational. In instances of neglect and damage invoices are being raised. The potential for recovering the recharge and prosecuting for criminal damage in serious cases was confirmed although it was also explained that this is a difficult issue to prove.

In response to member's questions and debate regarding the success of the void team, the Director of Housing confirmed it was a success story but it was early days and although a great improvement it would improve further. The Director of Housing confirmed that informing residents of voids in their area would be possible and could be part of the Neighbourhood Plan.

The recommendation in the report was agreed with additional requests and action points.

RESOLVED that the Committee

- a) note the contents of the report**
- b) ask officers to work with the resident panel to agree a set of resident KPI's**
- c) ask the co-opted member to be invited to the Housing Investment Forum.**

The meeting finished at 8.35pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail esheridan@thurrock.gov.uk**