

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 January 2015 at 7.00 pm**

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- Present:** Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Barry Johnson (Vice-Chair), Chris Baker, Clare Baldwin and Susan Little
- Apologies:** Councillors Sue Gray
- In attendance:** Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing - Thurrock Council  
Kathryn Adedeji, Head of Housing, Investment and Development  
Mike Jones, Management Accountant  
Leanna McPherson, 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.

### **12. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 10 December 2014, were approved as a correct record.

In response to a question, the Director of Housing advised that clarification had been sought regarding the family connection criteria as requested at the last meeting. Members would be updated in due course.

### **13. Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items of business

### **14. Declaration of Interests**

No interests were declared.

### **15. Housing Revenue Accounts Base Estimates 2015/16**

The Management Accountant introduced and explained in detail a report to Members which set out the provisional assumptions regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Base Estimates 2015/16.

Members attention was drawn to the forecast out-turn 2014/15, as detailed in the report, and it was noted following questions that the loss of dwelling rent was an approximation and a natural shortfall from right to buy properties. It was further noted that it was not due from loss in relation to voids or non-payment.

In response to questions regarding the cost of utilities remaining the same, Members were advised that in the past not enough money had been placed into the budget to cover this cost therefore despite introducing energy saving efficiencies into the service, it was prudent to ensure the Council could cover its utilities costs. The Committee requested information from the Director of Housing on how many streetlamps were now energy efficient within the Housing remit.

The Committee raised questions as to why the insurance policy had increased when they were advised it would be reduced due to the link with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. In response the Management Accountant advised the Committee that the staff from Europa had come back to the Council and therefore this had increased the Council's insurance costs.

The Committee were concerned that the garage review was still ongoing and were advised that the review started approximately a year ago with each garage individually inspected and the waiting list reduced following consultation with those who were still requesting garage. Members were further advised that the tender contract for replacing the doors closed on 14 January 2015 and work would be able to take place once a contractor had been appointed.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That it be noted the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is estimated to generate a net surplus of £0.617m from operational and financing for the 2014/15 financial year.**
- 2. That the projected movement on the HRA reserves (Para 3.2 Table 3) be noted.**
- 3. That the provisional base estimates for 2015/16 for inclusion in the overall rent setting strategy for the HRA be noted.**

**16. Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy**

The Director of Housing introduced the report to Members which considered a number of proposals for the revisions to Thurrock Council's Housing Repairs Policy.

Members were advised that the policy had already been considered and approved by Cabinet, however it was brought before Members to provide the Committee with an update on progress.

The Director of Housing further advised the Committee that following the previous meeting where this policy had been considered, changes had been made to shift the balance of responsibility to provide more help for the vulnerable and elderly and to encourage those who were considered to be young and healthy to become more responsible for themselves, following property modernisation.

The Chair asked how the Council was dealing with mould issues around the Borough within the Council's own housing stock and the Head of Housing – Investment and Development advised Members that officers were working to identify the cause of damp and mould issues and taking appropriate remedial action as necessary, with the intention of eradicating the issue.

In response to a question regarding the higher demand for repairs within properties in the Borough compared to the national average, Members were advised that this was due to the age of the stock. It was also noted that Thurrock Council had a comprehensive approach to repairs and maintenance and therefore went beyond other Councils and the standard for decent homes in terms of the nature of repairs that were undertaken for residents.

Members raised concerns at the level of responsibility that the Council expected tenants to take on under the new policy and were advised that only items considered within paragraph 3.15 page 25 of the agenda were to be introduced. Furthermore, Members were informed that the responsibility fell to the residents once the transforming homes programme had been undertaken and therefore it was considered that residents would have to maintain the property and specifically listed items to the standard set by the Transforming Homes programme.

Concerns were also raised by Members with regard to fence panel replacements and it was noted that the planned programme of replacement would still be taking place, however the responsive repairs service would be undertaken on a case by case basis depending on the vulnerability of the resident.

Finally, Members expressed their dismay that the policy had already been to and been approved by Cabinet before it could be considered by the housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, however did note that this was an exceptional circumstance due to the pre election period held in late 2014.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the introduction of an enhanced service provision for vulnerable residents as outlined in Appendix A be noted.**
- 2. That a reframing of shared responsibility for maintenance of internal property elements post-Transforming Homes, and for other elements specified, be noted.**
- 3. That the shift of non-urgent repairs as specified in Appendix A from responsive to planned programme thus increasing the council ability to deliver an efficient responsive service, be noted.**

## **17. Recharging Tenants Audit - Update**

The Head of Housing - Investment and Development introduced the report to Members which provided an update response to the Re-Charging Tenants Internal Audit Report of February 2013. There were two key areas to the report, a revised recharge policy and governance & processes implementation.

The Chair questioned the Head of Housing - Investment and Development as to why the collection rates were not higher. In response, the Committee were advised that there were several reasons, which included residents moving out of the Borough and payment plans which the Courts may put in place for residents.

Members considered that an insurance policy could be taken out to assist the Council in instances such as this. The Director of Housing advised this would be looked into.

**RESOLVED: To note the contents of the report.**

## **18. Managing Damp & Mould - Update on Housing Investment & Development Actions**

The Head of Housing - Investment and Development introduced the report to Members, briefly outlining the update on the progress of a number of programmes implemented to tackle issues of damp and mould in Thurrock Council housing stock.

Members were concerned that there was a significant amount of properties across the Borough that had issues with damp and mould and there had been reports of properties having remedial action undertaken and then having contractors needing to return to the properties to undertake further works.

The Committee were advised that due to the age of the Council's housing stock, there were issues across the Borough of damp and mould occurring. Remedial works were being undertaken according to the programme and if contractors were required to return to a property following remedial works, there would be no charge to the Council. Furthermore, Members were advised that the current programme was targeted, with the least efficient properties being considered first.

The problem of damp and mould within properties needed to be tackled on an ongoing basis and the Chair noted that there were many issues with condensation causing mould, rather than damp. Members' attention was drawn to Appendix A of the report which was a leaflet providing advice of how to reduce condensation within the home which had been distributed to residents of the Borough.

The Committee were further advised by the Head of Housing – Investment and Development, that additional funding, approximately £0.5m, would enable

to Council to irradiate the problem, however this would need to be approved through the appropriate channels.

Democratic Services advised the Committee that they did not have the delegated authority to approve such funding, however they could include a recommendation to support the Director of Housing to ensure the scheme is finished if required. The Chair moved and it was seconded that an additional recommendation be included within the report to show the Committees support for the programme to be completed.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the programmes being undertaken to address issues of damp & mould, as described in this report, be noted.**
- 2. That the Committee support the move to a more planned, efficient and effective means of asset management.**
- 3. That the Committee supports the Director of Housing in ensuring the programme to deal with damp and mould issues within the Councils Housing Stock is completed and would recommend support from Cabinet to obtain additional funding if required.**

**19. Programme Update for the Transforming Homes Programme**

The Head of Housing – Investment and Development – introduced the report to the Committee, updating Members on one of the Council’s key strategic housing programmes – Transforming Homes.

The report demonstrated progress in:

- Accessing and utilising external funding sources in furthering improving thermal efficiency;
- Developing and progressing programmes which address damp, mould and condensation issues;
- The continued and expanding delivery of tangible benefits to the local economy and community;
- Meeting headline performance indicators in the Transforming Homes programme – which met its Year 1 targets and continues to perform well during the first three quarters of Year 2.

The Committee were concerned that they had received reports from residents that works had not been undertaken properly. In response, Members were advised that every property that had gone through the programme was signed off by a Council Officer who had visited the property. Retentions monies for contractors were in place and were released one year after the works to the property had been completed. If tenants were not happy with the works undertaken then they should contact the Council and a resolution would be sought.

## **RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the progress of the Transforming Homes programme be noted.**
  - 2. That the progress in meeting key targets across a range of programme measures be noted.**
  - 3. That the success in maximising connections with and benefits to the local community be noted.**
  - 4. That the success of the Housing Service in accessing available funding in order to best protect and develop Council homes be noted.**
- 20. Progress on Gloriana - Proposed Development of St Chad's site, Tilbury and Belmont Road site, Grays**

The Director of Housing introduced the report to Members concerning an update of the proposals for Gloriana to develop St Chad's Road site in Tilbury and Belmont Road in Grays. Members were informed that subject to planning permission, contractors would be onsite at St Chad's in April.

The governance arrangements for Gloriana provided for a series of Gateway approvals which broadly followed scheme progress. The St Chad's site was now at Gateway 2 where the scheme was progressing through to planning and receipt of construction tenders. Belmont Road was at Gateway 1, initial feasibility, and would progress through to development of the design for planning submission and preparation of more detailed scheme costs.

Members were pleased to see the report before them, however noted that there still parking issues that needed to be resolved at the Belmont Road site.

In response to a question regarding the purchase of houses, Members were advised that whilst some local authorities were purchasing houses within their boundaries due to the lack of sites to build on, this would not be appropriate currently in Thurrock due to the age of the housing stock and the damp problems that many properties, including private, were facing. However, if the need did arise and the market conditions were correct, then the Council would consider purchases properties.

In response to further questions, Members were advised that the new build properties would not contain drying rooms and would be built to Code Level 4. Properties would also be orientated to the South and have decent sized gardens to enable the drying of linen.

The Committee were concerned that some of the report had been redacted and therefore the cost of building the homes was not available at the meeting. The Chair requested that the redacted information contained within the report

be circulated to Members of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon as possible.

**RESOLVED:**

1. **Note the Partnering Board's recommendations that Cabinet has supported Gloriana in taking forward:**
  - **St Chad's site in Tilbury through Gateway 2 to receipt of planning approval and construction tenders; and**
  - **Belmont Rd site in Grays through Gateway 1 to development of scheme design in readiness for planning submission, including incurring design fees, at risk, on Gloriana's behalf until approval to commit the schemes is given at Gateway 3.**

**21. Work Programme**

Members noted the next items on the work programme.

**RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted.**

**The meeting finished at 8.59 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

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