

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 November 2015 at 7.00 pm

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**Present:** Councillors Cathy Kent (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Tunde Ojetola, Steve Liddiard (substitute for Clare Baldwin) and Joycelyn Redsell (substitute for Sue MacPherson)

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

**Apologies:** Councillors Clare Baldwin and Sue MacPherson

**In attendance:** Councillor Lynn Worrall, Cabinet Member for Housing  
Councillor Graham Snell, Group Leader for UKIP  
Kathryn Adedeji, Head of Housing - Investment and Development  
Richard Parkin, Head of Housing - Community & Needs  
Dermot Moloney, Strategic Lead Housing  
Matthew Boulter, Principal Democratic Services Officer  
Jenny Shade, 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.

### 17. Minutes

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 2 September 2015, were approved as a correct record.

The Officer provided the following feedback from the Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2010-15 Report, Recommendation 6:

A confirmation of the number of failed new tenancies for Care Leavers that can be shared with Committee members are:

Year	New Tenancies	Failures	% of Failures
2013-14	17	3	17%
2014-15	20	0	0%
2015-16 (to date)	24	1	4%

Housing and Children's Services are committed to preventing the loss of such tenancies where ever possible. There is a joint working protocol in place to identify remedial action as it arises and ensures that the appropriate support workers are involved.

## **18. Urgent Items**

There were no items of urgent business.

## **19. Declaration of Interests**

There were no interests declared.

## **20. Call In to Cabinet Decision 01104415 - Housing Estate Regeneration**

The Chair invited Councillor Ojetola to introduce the Call-In and asked him to briefly introduce the reasons for the Call-In. The Call-In referred to Cabinet Decision 01104415 – Housing Estate Regeneration. Councillor Ojetola stated that the Cabinet Decision failed to take into account how the Council would find £6 million to maintain the tower blocks at 'decent home' standard. Councillor Ojetola also questioned why the council was proposing to undertake more consultation if the majority of residents already expressed a view to regenerate the area.

The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Worrall, to respond to the Call-In and advise the committee of any points that were relevant. Councillor Worrall outlined her reasoning for proposing the original decision stating that the consultation sat within the wider work of the South Grays master plan and it was clear that residents had requested more information on what future regeneration would look like before they gave a final opinion on the future of the tower blocks. Therefore more consultation was required. Councillor Worrall added that 40 per cent of residents did not want to see the tower blocks go and this was a significant amount of people for the Council to take note. The consultation had been of good quality and there would be no funding gap as the improvements to the flats had already been factored into the Transforming Homes Programme. Those residents wishing to move away from the tower blocks had the opportunity to move to a new development nearby called The Echoes.

The Chair invited comments from third parties. Three residents who had previously spoke at the Cabinet meeting were asked to make further representations and each took this opportunity, some in favour of keeping the tower blocks and some keen to start regeneration. Those that spoke were:

- Ms Rachel Low – Seabrook Rise Resident. In favour of demolishing Butler, Davall and Greenwood High Rise blocks in Grays

Ms Low read out her statement to the Committee which she had made previously to Thurrock Council Cabinet on 14 October 2015.

The committee received a written statement prior to the meeting.

- Mr Gerry Calder – Seabrook Rise Residents Steering Group. Against the demolishing of Butler, Davall and Greenwood High Rise blocks in Grays

Mr Calder handed out to the Committee his statement made to Thurrock Council Cabinet on 14 October 2015 and emphasised that it was wrong that residents should not be able to speak out about other developments. Residents receiving offers of a new home only raised the aspirations and hopes of young families.

Mr Calder stated that there was no good reason to knock down the youngest block of flats in Grays.

Mr Calder finished his statement made by previous Director of Housing that the land was a valuable piece of land in Grays.

- Ms Marian Harries – Seabrook Rise Resident. Against the demolishing of Butler, Davall and Greenwood High Rise blocks in Grays

Ms Harries explained to the Committee that a survey undertaken independently resulted in 64 per cent of residents were against the demolishing, this survey was undertaken with no harassment to residents. Concluding that it should be the people who live in the flats should have their say.

Ms Harries also stated the building was still structurally sound and that nobody had actually said how much it would cost to pull down and rebuild.

Ms Harries further explained to the committee that residents do not want to be housed outside the borough and that The Echoes was not suitable for all as there was only one lift, which would not be ideal for the disabled or mums with prams.

Ms Harries finished her statement by asking the Councillors how many of them would like to be in her position.

The Chair invited Councillor Snell, as Group Leader for UKIP, the opportunity to speak. Councillor Snell stated that there had been plenty of opportunity for Conservatives or other Councillors to ask questions at the Cabinet meeting in October. Councillor Snell felt there was a win-win situation as those who wanted to stay could and those residents that wished to leave the blocks had the opportunity to move to The Echoes.

The Chair asked Councillor Ojetola to summarise the Call-In and that he stated that simply wanted long term certainty for the residents.

The Chair asked Committee Members for questions and debate. The Members discussed the lifespan of the tower blocks and some councillors felt there should not have been a consultation if there were still decades of longevity left in the tower blocks. Officers clarified the use of a thirty year appraisal was not a comment on the lifespan of the blocks but for the purpose of measuring financial costs of demolition verses maintaining the flats to decent homes standard.

A recorded vote then took place:

Accept : Councillors Redsell and Ojetola (2)

Reject: Councillors C. Kent, C Baker, Jan Baker and Liddiard (4)

The Chair confirmed that the results of the vote were in favour to reject the Call-In with four votes to two with the prevailing viewpoint that Cabinet had made a sound decision with the information available at its October meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee reject the call-in for the reasons that the committee were satisfied that the cabinet made the sound decision based on the information available to them at the October Committee.**

**21. Local Lettings Plan - Seabrooke Rise and Derry Avenue**

Revised copies of the Appendix were distributed to Members prior to the start of the Committee.

The Officer introduced the report and informed Members that Thurrock Council had a statutory duty to publish a scheme which outlined how social housing was allocated within the borough.

Thurrock Council's current Housing Allocation Scheme was agreed by Cabinet in November 2012 and was subsequently reviewed by Cabinet in January 2014 when a number of minor amendments were approved.

One of the amendments was to allow "Local Lettings" plan to be implemented on a case by case basis for new developments sites with Housing Overview & Scrutiny agreement.

The Council have developed new build properties at Seabrooke Rise in Grays and Derry Avenue in South Ockendon. These builds were due for completion in January and November 2015 respectively.

The Officer confirmed that the report would provide Members with the following information:

- The properties which the local lettings plan would apply to.
- How new tenants would be prioritised.

- The criteria which new tenants would need to meet in order to qualify for an allocation.
- The process for allocating properties.

The officer explained the allocation process to the members which clarified that 75 per cent of first lettings will be for current Thurrock Council tenants who meet a set criteria and the remaining 25 per cent will be allocated via the Council's Housing allocations scheme.

Councillor Redsell asked the Officer if the one bedroom apartments in Derry Avenue were designed for elderly residents. The Officer confirmed that the apartments can be adapted round the needs of tenants and follow the same guidance as of Sheltered Housing.

Councillor Ojetola asked the Officer for confirmation on how residents will know if they have the right to apply. The Officer confirmed properties were clearly advertised and eligible to Thurrock Council tenants. The Officer explained that residents would register an expression of interest where the allocations team will consider within a set timescale.

Councillor Liddiard asked if any consultation has been undertaken and if so, why had Tilbury not been included in that consultation. The Officer confirmed that 78 per cent that took part in the consultation were in favour of prioritising new build properties for people who already lived in the area. The Officer also confirmed that due to geographical locations Tilbury was not included in this consultation Applicants across the borough will be able to bid on the remaining 25% allocated via the Council's usual processes.

Councillor Ojetola asked what the guidelines were for the exit strategy. The Officer confirmed that the local lettings plan only applies to first lets and as such will have a restricted life span.

Councillor Worrall stated that to allow local letting plans for new development sites would be determined on a case by case basis and would come to Housing Overview and Scrutiny for agreement.

Councillor Redsell commented that areas currently being looked at were Elizabeth Gardens and those tenants should stay within their own community.

Lynn Mansfield asked how the 75 per cent will be informed. The Officer explained that tenants will be informed directly by letter once details were available. There will also be promotions, meetings with local groups and open days and Members will be informed.

The Chair asked for reassurance from the Officers that those unable to bid on-line would have the opportunity to speak to an officer at the council offices. The Officer reassured the Chair that this was already in place and the options available will be discussed in a later report.

## **RESOLVED:**

- 1.1 That the powers within Thurrock Council's Housing Allocations Scheme to agree a local lettings plan for the new build properties in Seabrooke Rise and Derry Avenue as outlined within this report;**
- 1.2 That the said local lettings plan allows 75 per cent of first lets to be made to eligible Thurrock Council tenants, who were living within the "applicable boundary" and who were managing their tenancies correctly, as outlined within this report;**
- 1.3 That the applicable boundary for the Seabrooke Rise development;**
- 1.4 That the road boundary as outline in the report at 3.8 be the applicable boundary to be used for the Derry Avenue development.**
- 1.5 Agree that the remaining 25 per cent of first lets, and any subsequent relets, were allocated in line with Thurrock Council's Housing Allocations scheme and usual allocations processes.**
- 1.6 Agree that where a tenant has been living at more than one property within the applicable boundary, the combined time will count, provided they have lived within the applicable boundary continuously, leading up to their current tenancy.**

## **22. Implications Welfare Reform Bill 2015 on HRA Business Plan**

The Officer presented the report which provided the Committee with an update on the budget announcements made in July 2015 which introduced key policy changes that will have financial implications on the Council's Housing Review Account (HRA) Business Plan. The key issues that will impact on HRA business plan were as follows:

- 1 per cent reduction in social rents for four years from 1 April 2016
- "Pay to Stay" proposals from 2017/18
- A requirement for local authorities to finance the cost of the expansion of the Right to Buy and associated discount to tenants in Housing Association Homes.

The Officer clarified each key issue and explained the comparable tables that illustrated the difference of the impact by location of the setting affordable levels at 80, 70 and 60 per cent.

The Officer also clarified the cumulative benefits to tenants by year tables and explained the calculations for the benefit of the Members.

The Officer explained the number of principles for addressing the estimated gap that is likely to be created should the proposals in the Housing and Planning Bill and Welfare Reform Bill 2015 be agreed.

Councillor Liddiard asked the Officer if there were sufficient flexibility to meet any future reductions in rent. The Officer confirmed that any future developments would be returned to Housing Overview & Scrutiny for discussion

Councillor Ojetola asked the Officers who made the final decision. The Officer confirmed that the report went to Cabinet in November 2015 asking to approval an application to the Secretary of State. After tonight's Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee if members approve the recommendations the report will be returned to Cabinet in December 2015, thereafter the Full Council will have the final decision.

A discussion amongst Officers and Members took place on what the process would be if the Secretary of State did not approve the application. The Officer confirmed that should the application for exemption for the need to apply the full one per cent in Thurrock not be granted by the Secretary of State further reductions in the current affordable home building programme may need to take place.

Councillor Worrall stated the importance of ensuring that rent that were set were affordable to residents.

The Committee agreed the following recommendations although one Member, Councillor Ojetola, abstained from voting on recommendation 3.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the application to the Secretary of State for an exemption of the 1 per cent reduction, or part therefore, to allow the continuation of our current, mature and much needed affordable housing programme.**
- 2. That the setting affordable rents for Seabrooke Rise and Derry Avenue as at 70 per cent of market rent, to support the continuation of the current HRA affordable homes programme.**
- 3. That the proposed revisions to the current published timetable for the Transforming Homes programme, extending internal improvements by up to 1 year (1,000 homes) and external improvements by up to 3 years (5,000 homes), where the asset supports delayed completion.**
- 4. That the HRA revenue cost savings and efficiencies plan equating to £500k per annum or £2m over the four-year period from 1 April 2016 will be delivered to support the continuation of the HRA affordable homes programme.**

### **23. Thurrock Choice Homes - Newspaper Advertising**

The Officer presented the report which provided the Committee with an overview of the Thurrock Choice Home (TCH) system that is used by Housing to allocate void properties, both Thurrock Council and Thurrock registered Provider (RP) properties with nomination agreements.

Currently the Housing Allocations Policy states that properties will be advertised in the local newspaper and therefore this would be a change to the allocations policy which will require cabinet approval.

The Officer explained that an amendment to the report should be noted that the change would not need to be referred back to Cabinet for approval as the change constitutes a minor amendment; instead the report will be delegated to the Director of Housing.

The report identified that properties were currently advertised electronically on the Council and TCH websites, and on the TCH mobile site. Properties are also advertised in Thurrock Gazette at a cost of £35,000 per year.

It had been identified that less than 1 per cent of applications only view adverts through the newspaper and the report states that the Housing Directorate now wishes to remove newspaper advertising.

The Officer confirmed that a consultation had been undertaken with representative groups to identify ways of mitigating the impacts on residents and briefing explained these to Members.

A discussion between Members and Officers took place to identify what options were available to those residents who did not have any means of using IT equipment. The Officer confirmed that residents could use the telephone, local libraries and hubs, support from housing officers, support from support workers, and ask family members or friends to assist. The officer also outlined the different means of assisted bidding that are already in place and are currently being provided to applicants.

Councillor Ojetola asked Officers if the scheme had been run as a pilot and was texting an option for residents to use. The Officer confirmed that the supported measures to assist with bidding are already in place and can be extended to those requiring assistance. The officer confirmed that texting already exists.

Councillor Redsell left the committee room at 21.15.

Councillor Liddiard asked how the 0.7 per cent that used the newspapers advert to view properties will be kept up to date of properties. The Officer confirmed that property information can be either emailed or posted to them.

Standing Orders were called at 21.20 and agreed by all members.



**RESOLVED:**

**That the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered and commented on the proposed changes to advertising set out in the Housing Allocations Policy and noted the proposed mitigations.**

**24. Work Programme**

Since the publication of the agenda a number of amendments to the work programme had been proposed and agreed earlier in the meeting, included:

- That the item on Improving Energy Efficiency Report be moved on the work programme from 6 January 2016 to 17 February 2016.
- That the item on Housing Services Performance Update be removed from the work programme.
- That an item on Right to Move will be removed from the work programme and members supplied with a briefing update at the 6 January 2016 committee.
- That an Item on Extra Care Service Charges be included on the work programme for January 2016.
- That an item on Housing Strategy Action Plan be moved on the work programme from 6 January 2016 to 16 March 2016.

Members were in agreement with the proposed changes to the work programme, following which the Chair requested that an updated work programme be circulated to the Committee and officers following the meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the work programme be noted, subject to the amendments detailed above.**

**The meeting finished at 9.28 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)