

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 6 January 2016 at 7.00 pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Cathy Kent (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Clare Baldwin, Sue MacPherson and Tunde Ojetola

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

**In attendance:** Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health  
Richard Parkin, Head of Housing and Interim Head of Environment  
Dermot Moloney, Strategic Lead Housing  
Dawn Shepherd, Strategy Manager, Housing, Business Improvement  
Julie Curtis, Corporate Finance  
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.

The Chair wished everyone a Happy New Year and welcomed Roger Harris the Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health to the Committee.

### **25. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on the 30 November 2015, were approved as a correct record.

### **26. Urgent Items**

There were no items of urgent business.

### **27. Declaration of Interests**

There were no interests declared.

### **28. Changes to the Fees and Charges 2016/17**

The Officer briefly presented the report and explained that similar Fees and Charges Reports were being presented to all overview and scrutiny committees and referred Members to the Appendix 1, the Fees and Charges Booklet. The Appendix identified the proposed changes to charges.

Lynn Mansfield asked Officers who the fee for the Communal Hall Hire would be applicable to. The Officer needed to clarify this point and will inform the Committee once known.

The Chair asked the Officers why only a £2 increase had been made to the Housing None Statutory Work. The Officer confirmed that this was a standard charge which had been set nationally.

Councillor Ojetola asked Officers what the reasons were for the increase in the Sheltered Housing Visitor's Room and why this increase had not been tapered in over the forthcoming years. The Officer confirmed that this was benchmarked nationally against other authorities in Essex. The increase to £12 was still considered to be a reasonable cost.

Councillor MacPherson asked Officers how many houses in Multiple Occupation Mandatory Licences (MOML) there were in Thurrock. The Officer confirmed that after an assessment undertaken last year on three storey properties with five bedrooms or more he can confirm there were five MOML Licences. Although with new guidelines in the pipeline this could have an effect on over 400 licences if regulations dropped to two storey properties.

The Officer confirmed that the proposal by Councillor Worrall to look at two storeys MOML was still under consultation and feedback would be provided to the Committee once available.

Councillor Ojetola questioned Officers on the Thurrock Charging Policy, particularly when considering charges, services that will consider the level of demand for this service and why had this not been done this year. The Officer needed to clarify this point and will inform the Committee once known.

Councillor Ojetola asked Officers if Right to Rent checks on immigrants was the responsibility of the Council and could this be a means of raising funds. The Officer confirmed this was not currently being undertaken and would be the Landlord responsibility. The Officer agreed to look into this suggestion and report back to the committee.

Members agreed that the wording to the recommendation should be changed to read "That the committee consider the proposed charges as detailed in the Fees and Charges Booklet Appendix and provide feedback to Cabinet".

## **RESOLVED**

**That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the proposed charges as detailed in the Fees and Charges Booklet Appendix and provide feedback to Cabinet.**

### **29. Housing Revenue Account Base Budgets and Rent Setting 2016/17**

The Officer introduced the report and informed Members of the proposals to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) base budgets for 2016/17. The report

also identified the changes between 2015/16 and 2016/17 and that any growth or loss of income within the budgets will be funded through savings and efficiencies identified elsewhere.

The Officer confirmed that they had secured a meeting with the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to discuss any possible exemption.

Richard Parkin thanked the Officer for the complex report but explained that the recommendations in the report were for note only and the report would go to Full Council Budget meeting.

The Officer confirmed that even if the exemption of the 1 per cent reduction was agreed, residents would still have to pay the same rent; Rent statements will be issued in March 2016 to all tenants.

Councillor Baldwin asked for clarification from Officers that the Rent Table was correct in the report. The Officer confirmed that at the time of print the table was correct but will need to be updated for Cabinet.

Councillor Ojetola and MacPherson both agreed that although the report was very complex it could be made more clear and comprehensive. The Officer provided further information and clarification on the tables throughout the report and agreed to provide an additional Appendix 'Summary of HRA Budget' for the Cabinet report.

Lynn Mansfield asked Officers that when schedules were sent out, they were made clearer as to where and what monies had been spent. The Officer noted this comment.

Councillor MacPherson asked the Officer what percentage of residents on the Traveller's Sites received housing benefit. The Officer confirmed that there were none. The Officer explained that the travellers site under housing benefit rules were not classed as Housing.

Lynn Mansfield stated that only approximately 50 per cent of tenants understand the rent statement and more should be done to make it user friendly and explained better. The Officer noted the comments made.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the changes included in the base budget for 2016/17 be noted.**
- 2. That the 1% rent reduction outlined in the Summer Budget be noted.**
- 3. That the 1% increase in de-pooled service charges for 2016/17 be noted.**

4. That the 2.5% increase in garage rents for 2016/17 be noted.
5. That the 1.5% increase in to central heating charges in 2016/17 be noted.
6. That the 2.5% increase in traveller's sites rents be noted.
7. That the Officer to provide an additional Appendix - 'Summary of HRA Budget' for the Cabinet report.

*Julie Curtis left the Committee Room at 7:50.*

### **30. Housing Allocations Scheme - Second Year Review**

The Officer presented the report to Officers and stated that a review of the Housing Allocations Scheme had taken place in 2014 following the introduction of the new statutory guidance and legislation. A further review has now been undertaken following the review and further amendments were recommended for noting by the Committee for approval and implementation by Cabinet in February and implementation for 1 April 2016.

The Officer presented each Issue of the report individually to members.

#### Procedural Changes for Advertising Properties

The Officer further clarified:

More flexibility around advertising dates – properties would still be advertised for the same amount of time but start and end dates would vary.

The bidding process would not change and that the Assisted Bidding option would still be available.

#### Local Lettings Plan

The Officer clarified that the process was consistent throughout the borough and that the allocation of properties would be 75 per cent allocated to existing tenants and 25 per cent be allocated in line with the Council's usual allocation process.

#### Pre-Tenancy Training

The Officer clarified that the training would only be mandatory to all new applicants.

A discussion took place between Members and Officers on the purpose and the process of the training and how the training was to be conducted. Councillor MacPherson expressed her concern that there was not a certain level to pass the training.

Councillor Ojetola stated that he supported this training initiative but should not be tagged as training and recommended that the title should be toned down and not say the word Training.

Lynn Mansfield asked for further clarification on the survey and how this was distributed. The Officer confirmed that this was sent out to all those on the waiting or transfer lists, encouraging applicants to go on-line to the Thurrock Choice Home Page to find the link to the survey which was available via the Council Consultancy Portal. Lynn Mansfield stated her concern for those that were not IT literate.

The Chair stated that residents should be made aware of what is expected from them to ensure that this training is completed.

The Members agreed that the recommendation should be reworded to that pre-tenancy information sessions were mandatory for all new tenants.

#### Sheltered or Extra Care 2 bedroom properties

Councillor Ojetola asked for clarification on costs on 2 bedroom rent if offered to a single person. The Officer confirmed that the cost would be at a 2 bedroom rate and that tenants would need to be made aware of this.

#### Discretionary power to award a welfare banding for homeless prevention

A discussion took place between the Members and Officers. The Officers confirmed that there were no specific numbers available on how many tenants this would affect but residents would be encouraged to talk to the council earlier and that the process would need to be conducted carefully.

#### Annual Review of financial qualification

Councillor MacPherson asked the Officers how many 4 bedroom housing were being built in Thurrock. The Officer confirmed approximately 6.

#### Options for older owner occupiers

The Officer confirmed that the leasing scheme would be for a minimum of five years. If the owner of the property were to decease, that lease would come to an end and a clause would need to be added to reflect this.

Members would be keen to see results of any pilot before agreeing to recommendations.

Members agreed that the recommendation should be reworded to that the financial qualification be removed for sheltered and extra care applicants who lease their properties back to the Council to allow a pilot scheme to run for one year.

The Chair stated this would have an effect on resident's finances as they would be liable for tax and could also affect pensions. The Officer confirmed that yes this would be the case and that residents would be advised to seek advice from independent financial advisors.

## **RESOLVED**

**That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend the following changes in this report to Cabinet for approval and implementation from April 2016.**

- 1. That the bidding cycles were no longer limited to weekly but may be continuous on the property advert.**
- 2. That the Appendix 1 to the Local Lettings Plan be recommended for all new developments within existing Council estates.**
- 3. That the pre-tenancy information sessions were mandatory for all new tenants.**
- 4. That 2 bedroom properties can be offered to a couple or single person subject to there being no waiting applicants meeting the criteria for a 2 bedroom properties which were specifically designed for older people.**
- 5. That the welfare priority band 3 is awarded at the discretion of the Housing management panel on the condition that the applicant is able to remain in the current or an alternative home, following intervention by the Housing solutions team, for at least 6 months.**
- 6. That the financial qualification criteria were updated for 2016-17.**
- 7. That a pilot scheme is recommended whereby the financial qualification is removed for sheltered applicants who lease their properties back to the Council. The pilot scheme would be for one year.**

### **31. Fixed Term Tenancies**

Revised copies of the Fixed Term Tenancies Report were distributed to Members prior to the start of the Committee.

The Officers introduced the report which detailed the advantages and disadvantages of introducing fixed term tenancies in order for them to be reconsidered for introduction at a future date.

The Officer gave a further update to the report that just before Christmas 2015 the Housing Planning Bill introduced the fixed term tenancies as mandatory. This was currently with the Planning Minister going through Parliament. The

Officer would bring this report back to Committee once further information was available.

Councillor Ojetola asked the Officer how flexible this new law was. The Officer confirmed that there was no particular flexibility available but this is not fully known at this time.

The Officer confirmed that this would not affect current tenancies but would affect tenants seeking to succeed to a tenancy where a fixed term would likely apply.

The Chair asked the Officer if a court order would need to be granted for the eviction of tenants. The Officer confirmed that this was the case and that the judge would be guided by the law and the circumstances of the individual case.

The Chair asked the Officer what the costs to administer these tenancies were. The Officer confirmed that this was not known at present and there were no benchmarking examples for fixed term tenancies were available with other authorities as yet. Benchmarking for similar processes being introduced showed that such costs may prove to be considerable. The change to the IT system may have impact on the way the processes are managed which may reduce the administration tasks.

Lynn Mansfield asked Officers would residents of larger or adopted properties not suitable to their needs to be asked to leave. The Officer confirmed that this would be the case and that suitable offers would be made.

Councillor MacPherson asked Officer for clarification if tenants who were evicted be offered this tenancies. The Officer confirmed that if the eviction was intentionally the residents would not be rehoused.

Councillor Ojetola asked Officers what the impact of this would be on the homelessness. The Officer confirmed that this would need to be managed by the authority on a one-to-one case basis.

The Chair stated that this may impact on sustainable ownership if only short term tenancies were offered and how this could affect the community.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee note this report and made any comments necessary.**
- 2. That the Fixed Term Tenancies be added to the work programme when further information was available.**

## **32. Work Programme**

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

- That an item on Rent Setting be Brief Only on the work programme for 17 February 2016 Committee.
- That an item on Housing Strategy and Homelessness Prevention Strategy for the 16 March 2016 Committee be combined into one report.
- That an item on Fixed Term Tenancies be brought back to Committee when further details were available.

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 Chair referred Members to the Right to Move Brief that had been tabled for this committee and asked if there were any further comments or questions. There were none.

**The meeting finished at 9.07 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

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Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**