

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

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**Present:** Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Jane Potheary and Joycelyn Redsell

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

**In attendance:** Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health  
Richard Birchett, Interim Head of Housing  
Susan Cardozo, Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager  
Dawn Shepherd, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager  
Charlotte Raper, 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 informed Members that, since publication of the Agenda, Councillor MacPherson had been appointed as a Cabinet Member and so was no longer permitted to sit on an Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

### **8. Minutes**

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 21 July 2016 were approved as a correct record.

### **9. Urgent Items**

There were no items of urgent business.

### **10. Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **11. Update on the Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2015-2016**

The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager presented the report which gave the Committee an update one year into the five year Homelessness Prevention Strategy adopted in October 2015. The report outlined plans to prevent homelessness and to secure accommodation for residents in need within 28 days as well as the action plan which had been devised. Members also heard that a Homelessness Forum had been established to drive this action plan forward. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager highlighted that there had been an increase in homelessness both within the Borough and on a National scale, but there had been a shift in the major cause of homelessness within Thurrock due to the ending of assured short hold tenancies within privately

rented properties. Many residents also faced difficulty as private rents had increased greatly whilst the Local Housing Allowance had remained at the same level, which presented monthly shortfalls for many tenants.

The Chair asked, to offer some context, how many were currently on the Council's waiting list for housing. The Committee was advised that, including transfers, there were currently around 7000 people on the waiting list. The Chair proceeded to seek clarification whether individuals in need were predominantly placed into properties within the Private Sector and Members heard that the majority of tenants were placed within social housing rather than privately rented accommodation.

Councillor Potheary asked the Officers for a response to reports within the Thurrock Gazette which accused Thurrock Council of "Gatekeeping" and reports of a leaflet having been distributed which advised people how to survive on the streets. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing & Health assured Members that these reports had been thoroughly investigated and there had been no leaflet published or distributed by Thurrock Council and the advice mentioned within the Gazette was not given by Council Staff. Councillor Potheary continued to question whether the internal investigation was ongoing. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing & Health insisted that he would use the word "review" rather than "investigation", but there was a review underway which hoped to improve front door services. Councillor Potheary asked whether it would be possible for a report to come to the Committee and it was agreed that a report would be brought back, however possibly not in time for the next meeting.

The Housing Tenant Representative asked whether, in special circumstances, the Council would advance "key money" for tenants being housed within privately rented properties. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager confirmed that in some cases the Council would pay these advanced sums to private landlords and explained that it was part of the landlord incentive. The Housing Tenant Representative continued to highlight that people were generally unaware that this was an option. She admitted it may have been included on the Council's website but the website itself was difficult to navigate and as such it might be helpful to make people aware. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager reminded the Committee that this option was not offered in every case. Anyone who registered with the Housing Department as homeless would be assessed and it was only offered in certain cases as a result.

Councillor Redsell referred to comments within the report around London Borough's using properties within Thurrock and asked whether the Housing Strategy & Quality Manager could elaborate. The Committee heard that there had been instances of London Borough's having contacted private landlords within Thurrock and to offer huge incentives of £3-4,000 if they were to house residents. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager admitted that it was understood that London Boroughs were facing huge problems, but there were already problems within Thurrock and their actions merely pushed rent in Thurrock up. Thurrock Council had contacted these Boroughs to remind them

that they had a legal duty to inform Thurrock Council of any individuals to be housed within Thurrock to highlight the issues. There was evidence that the numbers being placed within Thurrock from other Boroughs had begun to fall but the likelihood was it was as a result of rising rental rates within Thurrock, which meant there was no longer any saving to those Boroughs.

Councillor Potheary asked Officers to clarify that, whilst these Boroughs had a legal duty to inform the Council of anyone being housed within Thurrock, there was no mechanism which would allow Thurrock to say they could not do so. Members were advised that this was correct.

## **RESOLVED:**

### **1) The Committee notes the updates in the Homelessness Prevention Strategy Action Plan**

## **12. Transforming Homes Update**

The Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager presented the report which gave an update on the programme which was now in year 4 of 8. The Committee heard that the aim of the programme was to bring Council properties up to Decent Homes standard and that the report gave updates on the key elements of the programme such as increased governance and challenge towards contractors, increased customer satisfaction and a decrease in complaints and the added social value which provided benefits to the local community and economy. Members were advised that Officers were awaiting news of the Government's new scheme regarding energy efficiency funding which would be due to be implemented in April. Damp and mould had been a key issue throughout the programme and the works carried out under this programme sought to tackle the root cause such as structure and ventilation as well as increasing resident education.

The Spending Review 2015 had reduced Council rents by 1% a year for the next four years; this meant that there would be a financial deficit by the end of year 8, which would be tackled in the HRA business plan, which would be presented to the Committee in December. The plan moving forward would be to maintain the resident focused position of the programme, continued engagement with both tenants and lease holders, strict governance of contractors and maintained improved performance. The next year would also see the commencement of procurement for arrangements to deliver years 5-8 of the programme.

Councillor Potheary noted that the presentation as a whole had been very positive but raised concerns that whilst officers reported positive feedback this was not being reflected in the emails Councillors received from residents within their wards. There were often complaints of customer service issues, lack of response, work not having been done, tradesmen not having arrived or having arrived at unscheduled times and tradesmen not having ID cards on them. She asked how officers hoped to ensure good practice on every

occasion since there were still a large number of complaints being made to Councillors about fairly simple issues. Councillor Potheary then raised the issue of the security entrance to blocks in Seabrook Rise. Installation should have taken place in June and had still not been completed, with the doors forced to be permanently open since.

The Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager assured Members that there had been significant investment in resident liaison and whilst there had been a decrease in complaints officers would urge residents to contact the Council immediately if and when there were issues. The department was getting better at addressing issues and turning situations around so that even if there were a problem, by the end of the process residents would have a positive opinion of their experience. In order to address the issue of workmen without ID cards the department had undertaken random audits and many contractors had introduced systems to ensure that their staff were always carrying identification.

The installation of the new door entry system at Seabrook Rise was a part of the planned programme of works and did not come under the Transforming Homes programme and as such the Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager, though she was aware of the situation, did not have all of the information to hand and assured Councillor Potheary she would liaise with her outside of the meeting.

Councillor Redsell echoed Councillor Potheary's concerns that the report did not match feedback Councillors were receiving directly from residents. Referring to damp and mould, Councillor Redsell deemed that though it was right to educate residents the issues were not necessarily their fault, as many of the properties were simply no longer fit for purpose. She was concerned that the Council continued to spend good money after bad as there had been cases where cladding had been fitted over mould, rather than eradicating the issue beforehand. Councillor Redsell suggested there had been issues with MEARS having employed a contractor who in turn employed a further sub-contractor and she believed this was worsening situations; she quoted a situation whereby tradesmen had informed residents that they could repair a door if they were to light matches and put them in the holes, which was obviously very poor practice.

The Chair reminded the Committee that it could not discuss specific cases in detail per se, however if Councillors were concerned they could approach officers outside of the meeting and the matter could be discussed more clearly. He agreed that certain contractors seemed to have strange ideas and that quite possibly a lot of the concerns did not reach the ears of Directors or Heads of Service as residents felt exasperated and so gave up and contacted Councillors instead. The Chair continued to raise concern that some of the housing stock was simply in such a poor condition, such as Ruskin Road in Chadwell-St-Mary, that it would need a great deal of work. He had heard that there had been an incident whereby MEARS had come to apply emulsion on the walls but had only applied it to patches, at which point the tenant lost their calm and cases like this created friction because, after all, these properties

are the tenants' homes. He agreed that all Councillors seemed to have stories from residents.

Councillor Jan Baker interjected that she recalled problems being raised two years before and now other Councillors were seemingly reporting similar issues, which was a concern.

Councillor Redsell stated she had only received such complaints within the past two years, and Councillors were being contacted as a last resort as residents felt there was no one else to turn to. She admitted that it was very difficult to contact the Housing Department through the Council's telephone system and this was probably part of the reason residents were turning away and contacting their Councillors instead.

The Chair asked officers how they planned to tackle these issues. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing & Health assured Councillor Redsell that he was aware of the three blocks within her ward that required attention. The Committee heard that officers would need to think of a longer-term plan as there were clearly some fundamental issues that would not be easy or quick to resolve. There would be a review of the HRA Business Plan but the options of new builds, estate regeneration and maintenance and repairs would need to be weighed up and the HRA was having to be completely recast due to rent reductions. He continued that these facts did not excuse poor performance, which evidently had not been simply about money but the poor quality of work, and he assured Members that the feedback had reached officers too. There had been regular meetings with all major contractors and the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council had both taken a personal interest in improving the service, though changes could not be made overnight. Although the service was still not where it should be there had been some improvements particularly given the new manager of MEARS and the improved relationship between the Council and MEARS. There were a whole series of issues which would need to be assessed with certain estates needing long-term work, a need to review customer care and to hold contractors more tightly to account. The Committee heard that Officers were aware and that there would need to be a fundamental review of the service.

Councillor Redsell insisted that on a positive note MEARS had been very good recently and that the issues seemed to arise when contractors and sub-contractors were brought in, so MEARS could not watch everything. She recalled that inspectors used to go out to properties and assess the work carried out, but that seemingly was no longer the case, and many of the tradesmen did not carry ID or could not speak English well. MEARS themselves seemed to be doing well, but were falling foul of subcontractors.

The Vice-Chair reiterated the concerns regarding the work carried out by some of the tradesmen and that many residents had been unhappy with tradesmen with whom they were unable to communicate due to a lack of English. He was particularly concerned that these issues might cause elderly residents stress and anxiety. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and

Health agreed that he would take the feedback on board and discuss it with MEARS.

The Housing Tenant Representative informed the Committee that she had just gone through the Transforming Home process and had had a very positive experience with no problems. She did raise concerns that the door closers which had been put on fire doors in their complex were too strong and too quick; particularly for the elderly residents, she had attempted to go through the kitchen door to test it and had been hit as it shut on her. As a member of the Excellence Panel she felt the Panel was not being used to its full potential as they had previously been consulted prior to work taking place and now they were not brought in until the work had been carried out. With regards to damp and mould she asked whether there might be a clause put into the tenancy agreement which could prevent residents covering their airbricks, as many residents did so but this increased the problem.

The Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager thanked the Housing Tenant Representative for her feedback and added that it was interesting, particularly regarding the fire door safety closers which, though necessary to comply with regulations, were available in different types and some were slower than others so officers would look into what types had been used and how these could be improved or adjusted, particularly within sheltered accommodation. She continued that the matter of residents blocking air bricks was a very good point. Members heard that there was to be a specialist damp and mould team set up within the housing department who would work to improve education as this was a continuing problem, and similarly some residents were insistent that they did not want fans installed in their kitchens though these were necessary to increase air circulation and prevent damp and mould.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health agreed that at present the Council was not making the most of an asset such as the Excellence Panel but that the Leader of the Council had shown a keen interest in attending meetings himself and hoped to bring reports to the Panel so as to utilise them to their true potential.

The Chair returned to the Thermal Efficiency programme and asked whether elderly residents, either in sheltered or general needs accommodation, would have to wait for the programme or whether the Council would be targeting elderly residents to improve their homes. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health advised the Committee that the department could not continue to divert from the scheduled sequence of events and as such elderly residents would have to wait for the programme to reach them, they would not be targeted specifically. The Chair clarified his question, asking whether those residents whose repairs had already been completed, with new boilers and such, would be contacted. He asked whether it would be possible, even if the Council could not afford the insulation, to direct elderly tenants to other options such as SAGA, or the energy companies as it seemed silly to improve the boiler and heating without improving the insulation on their homes. He insisted that elderly residents should at least be given some direction as to

where they can go to improve the insulation within their homes if the Council could not do so. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health assured Members that this would at least be on the department's radar moving forward.

The Chair referred to the recommendations and outlined that the Committee did take the comments that there had been improvements however the issue of the language barrier many residents had faced would need to be addressed, it was unacceptable for groups of tradesmen to go into a residents home without at least one of them being able to speak English to communicate with the Resident. Councillor Redsell agreed and added that it seemed to affect elderly residents more as there was simply no one to ask what was being done. The Housing Tenant Representative added that in her experience, although the tradesmen had not been particularly fluent in English their manager was and had been easily contactable. The Chair continued that though the experience of the Housing Tenant Representative had been good, there were some instances where this had not been the case and it was very important.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) The Committee noted the progress with the Transforming Homes programme and the key benefits that will be delivered through year for of the programme for 2016/17**

**13. Sheltered Housing Decommissioning - Update**

The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager presented the report which outlined the progress so far with the Sheltered Housing Decommissioning programme and plans for the remainder of the programme. Members heard that there were three options for empty properties as they arose: allocation to general needs tenants, for empty properties to remain empty until the end of the decommissioning process, and allocation to general needs tenants in a sensitive manner such as only to tenants aged 50 and above.

Councillor Redsell thanked the Housing Strategy & Quality Manager for her report and added that she could understand letting empty properties to over 50s. She added that young people with drug issues and similar caused immense stress to elderly residents and mixing tenants did not always work. She reiterated she could see it working with general needs tenants over the age of 50, or perhaps with younger, single tenants who were working might prove to be better. She was concerned at the risk of hurting residents who opted to stay in their property with introducing tenants with issues such as drug abuse, which was a big problem within the Borough.

The Housing Tenant Representative referred to comments surrounding the decommissioning of the scheme in Alexandra Road, Tilbury and asked when the process would begin. She also asked whether residents had been notified. Members were informed that the process had not yet begun, and the

reality was the programme was only just moving into phase two so residents had not yet been advised of the date.

The Housing Tenant Representative agreed with the proposal to allocate properties as they emptied to over 50s, but questioned if the process would take a period of time whether it would mean that over 50s might jump the queue on the waiting list for accommodation. She also asked whether the properties would always be for residents over 50 or if younger residents would follow. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager reminded the Committee that once the Sheltered Housing Decommissioning programme was complete the properties were always intended for general use tenants, and added that people could be anti-social at any age. Members were assured that officers' priority was to be very sensitive to elderly residents during the process rather than blindly allocating the properties to anyone so long as they were aged 50 or above.

Councillor Potheary highlighted that it was very difficult as there were some younger individuals that would relish that kind of property and would not bring the kinds of issues mentioned but understood the need to balance their need with the needs of the elderly residents. She asked whether option 3 could be coordinated into part of a downsizing campaign as she was conscious that there was a chance that some properties might remain empty. Councillor Potheary sought clarity as to whether this would just be during the decommissioning phase or permanently as it would be a real concern to have empty properties while people within the borough were still homeless and awaiting accommodation. She also asked whether there was any resident feedback surrounding the mobile sheltered housing service.

The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager apologised that she could not provide feedback presently regarding the mobile service but could find out and respond outside of the meeting. Members were assured that it was not intended that properties would remain empty any longer than necessary, the options only referred to the decommissioning period when residents would be making their decisions and might be waiting for the completion of the new development in Calcutta Road.

Councillor Potheary asked Officers to confirm that for any residents who opted to stay past the decommissioning period it would be made very clear that there could be younger tenants living alongside them in the future. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager reassured the Committee that it would have to be made abundantly clear to residents making their decisions.

The Chair asked for confirmation that the units in question were not part of a traditional sheltered living complex. Members heard that they did not open onto a shared courtyard like traditional complexes but had always been used, to her knowledge, for sheltered accommodation.

The Chair agreed that he would be quite happy for the option to be general needs tenants from the age of 50 as it seemed sensitive to the existing tenants but was cautious that the department should not let that criteria slide



and create friction. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health stressed their plan was “careful management” as there were some incredible instances of anti-social behaviour within sheltered accommodation while other younger individuals caused no concerns whatsoever so it would be essential to be sensitive in the selection process. He suggested the Committee include the over 50s clause in their recommendation to Cabinet.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) The Committee noted the report and endorse the approach to further decommissioning of the remaining units/schemes identified in the February 2015 review.**
- 2) Members considered the options for using void properties during the decommissioning period and agreed the sensitive allocation approach.**

**14. Fixed Term Secure Tenancies**

The Chair introduced the Agenda Item and proposed giving the Cabinet a steer towards a ten year tenancy and that the Committee might amend the recommendations to reflect this.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health advised Members that a version of the report would be presented to Cabinet in November and that the report had been prompted by a change in legislation, with much of the guidance to follow hence a level of uncertainty surrounding some issues. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager presented the report which outlined that lifetime tenancies could no longer be issued under the new Act. This change would not be enforced retrospectively but all new tenants would be issued with tenancies for a fixed period of time.

The Chair asked Officers to clarify whether if someone were to transfer it would result in a new tenancy being created. It was confirmed that this would be the case. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager continued to inform the Committee that Councils would have some discretion as to the duration of this fixed term, though it must be no less than two and no more than ten years with the exception of households with children under the age of 19. Criteria used to determine the initial length and outcomes of a fixed term tenancy would need to be included within the Council’s Policy, and so it would need to be rewritten.

The Chair asked whether Travellers’ sites would be included. Members heard that such sites did not have a tenancy but a licence and as such would not be affected.

Councillor Potheary asked for clarity surrounding tenancies running until a child reached 19 when the tenancy would be reassessed and what impact children at university would have, as she did not want families to feel their children could not attend university for fear of losing their tenancy. The

Housing Strategy & Quality Manager assured Members that children at university would be counted as part of the household.

The Housing Tenant Representative asked whether those elderly tenants being moved as part of the decommissioning programme would be affected and if there was a risk they might lose their lifetime tenancy. The Committee was reminded that this change would not apply retrospectively. If individuals chose to move they would receive a new tenancy however at the point of review, it would be unlikely that there would be changes to an elderly tenant within sheltered accommodation's circumstances so it would be quite possible that a further ten year tenancy would be issued. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health felt it was important to reiterate that it would not be the case that the end of a tenancy period was final, circumstances would be reassessed and then a further tenancy may be issued. The Housing Tenant Representative highlighted the difficulty faced by elderly residents given the decommissioning programme, that they would lose lifetime tenancies if they changed property. It would bring a lot of uncertainty, which was very unfair. The Committee was reminded that there had been a change in legislation, not Council Policy, with a maximum term to be given of ten years and Officers reiterated that it would be unlikely for circumstances to change and thus repeat tenancies would be issued. The Chair asked whether, as the Council would be decanting tenants, it would be possible to re-issue their lifetime tenancy. Members heard that the outcome would depend upon the regulations which had not yet been issued by the Government. If the Council were given the discretion to do so that would definitely be considered, however the discretionary powers were as yet unclear.

Councillor Redsell insisted there had to be something in place for the elderly, but agreed it should be the case that rather than worrying tenants at this point in time it should be reviewed once all the information had been made available. She echoed the Chair that it should be a ten year tenancy, as this was the only hope Thurrock had of reducing the housing waiting list, it would be the only way to move people on who no longer required their property while another family was desperate, but at the same time it would be long enough to give people a chance to save and feel secure. There was a need to free up properties with only one tenant to prevent the overcrowded situations that were arising.

The Chair agreed that the Committee would recommend a tenancy period of ten years to Cabinet and stated that the Council would have to make more of Gloriana so that there would be more projects as a way to be a responsible Council and move people along. He added that it would need to be looked at when the remaining details were issued in November, as the 7000 waiting list was not isolated to Thurrock but was replicated nationwide.

Councillor Potheary asked Officers to confirm that the Council had to provide a figure for fixed term tenancies. It was confirmed that this was the case and if the Overview and Scrutiny Committee did not make suggestions it would fall to the Officers to make recommendations to Cabinet. Councillor Potheary

gave her support for the recommendation of a figure of ten years, to offer residents some form of stability as one of the biggest problems faced by individuals renting within the private sector, as previously mentioned, was the complete lack of stability.

The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health emphasised the point that this would require a change to the Council's existing Policy with clear criteria and justification to prevent challenges to decisions. Councillor Potheary confirmed that her recommendation would be a fixed term tenancy of ten years for all cases within the matrix at 3.3.2 bar those with special circumstances. The Chair clarified that in all other cases the Committee's recommendation for a fixed term tenancy was ten years.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) The Committee provided recommendations to Cabinet on the issue of fixed term tenancies for the groups outlined within the matrix at 3.3.4 and supported a ten year tenancy option.**

**15. Work Programme**

The Chair asked for an update on the Sheltered Accommodation Wardens to be brought to the Committee in December. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health advised that the Allocations Policy Review would be deferred until February 2017 and a review of the HRA Business Plan would be brought to the Committee at the December meeting. Councillor Potheary reiterated her earlier request for a review of the Gazette allegations regarding homelessness be added to the work programme. There would also be an update of the Housing review once the regulations had all been made available.

**RESOLVED:**

**Members noted the Work Programme including the amendments.**

The Housing Tenant Representative requested to ask a question that did not relate to the Agenda, which a member of the public had put to her before the meeting following an article in the newspaper. She asked why Thurrock Council had paid £50,000 or something similar to Swindon Council. The Vice-Chair interjected that it was linked to Solar Power. Officers advised that it was another directorate and as such an answer would have to follow outside of the meeting.

**The meeting finished at 8.46 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)**