

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20 February 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Luke Spillman (Chair), John Allen, Jane Potheary and Joycelyn Redsell

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillors Gerard Rice (Vice-Chair) and Terry Piccolo

In attendance: John Knight, Assistant Director of Housing
Wendy Le, Democratic Services Officer

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.

23. Apologies

Apologies were received from:

- Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health, Roger Harris, who was attending a meeting related to Health and Wellbeing;
- Councillor Terry Piccolo;
- Councillor Gerard Rice; and
- Councillor Oliver Gerrish, who had been Councillor Rice's substitute.

24. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 December 2017 were approved as a correct record.

25. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

26. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

27. Review of Garages

Presented by the Assistant Director of Housing (ADH), John Knight, the report outlined the Council's current garage stock. Out of the 2505 garages, 637 were void although 85 of this was now fit to let. Appearance and usage of the garages needed to be addressed and funding was needed to fix the most derelict garages.

There was a potential proposal to allocate funds to fix garages in the next financial year. The garages needed improvement to make them more acceptable to the public and encourage use of them. As there was a small sum of money currently available, the ADH invited the Committee to suggest the most derelict garages in need of immediate repair and decoration.

Councillor Redsell welcomed the report as it had been long awaited and stated that some garages just needed a coat of paint to improve its appearance. She questioned why Baily Garner had been used to gather the information provided and what the company did. The ADH explained that Baily Garner had been used to perform the Stock Condition Survey of the Council's housing stock which had been presented at the last Committee meeting. Garages had been included the survey and the data had been extrapolated for maintenance and repair works.

As non-Council tenants were charged a higher rate than Council tenants for the use of garages, Councillor Redsell queried the reason for this. The ADH answered VAT was charged to non-Council tenants and social landlords would generally offer a lower price to Council tenants. Thurrock Council was a commercial council and would look to generate revenue where it was reasonable to do so. Council tenants were charged lower as they had a commitment to council properties and were stakeholders in the community.

Councillor Redsell was concerned on what was stored within garages and suggested letting garages to residents within the Borough and not outside of the Borough. She said there needed to be a way to check what was stored in garages. Understanding her concern, the ADH replied that some of the plots were no longer council owned as they had been sold. In the lease agreements, the service would need to notify the occupier of an intention to go into the garages if necessary. If reports of substances or concerns of contents inside were called in, the service would investigate. The service did not require occupiers to issue what contents were stored inside and could not make the assumption that people outside the Borough would use the garages any different to how someone within the Borough would. Referring back to charges of garage use, the ADH suggested the service could look into separate rates for a Thurrock resident, non-Thurrock resident and a Thurrock Council tenant.

Referring to the council's housing stock, Councillor Allen commented that with the 10,000 stock of houses and 2,000 stock of garages, that would mean a quarter of the garages could only be supplied to households. Possibly less as 22% of the garages were not fit for purpose. Regarding Councillor Redsell's earlier comment, he went on to say that there should be a degree of confidentiality on what was stored inside garages as long as there was nothing illegal. Agreeing with the ADH's comment on Thurrock Council being a commercial council, Councillor Allen posed the suggestion of purchasing a new set of garages and whether it would make a good return of revenue.

In response, the ADH said there was a need to intervene in the use of garages if anything illegal was stored. He acknowledged that the garages were not fit for parking due to the small space and that car parking was an issue within the Borough. There had not been the consideration of purchasing a new set of garages but he would take this suggestion back to the service. Councillor Allen commented on the need to renew the current void stock of garages that were rotting away and unfit to be let especially as some were over 40 years old. A new set of garages would be worthwhile as they would have at least a 50 year lifespan.

Adding to this, the Chair suggested this could be something the Prudential Fund could look in to investing. Regarding the amount of void garages, the ADH stated that this number had reduced so the number unfit for letting was now lower. The works would be done on those that could still be let and would look at options for each one.

Councillor Potheary raised the following questions:

1. Did the garages pay for themselves?
2. If funds were invested into the garages, would that cover the costs of maintenance and repair that was required? She was concerned there was a chance they would fall back into disrepair after. She mentioned fees and charges that had been placed on tenants before and was concerned on feedback from people awaiting repairs, new kitchens and bathrooms on the Transforming Homes programme. There needed to be a clear business case into investing money into garages and whether any funds from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was being spent on garages.
3. Instead of putting funds in to fix the garages, would it be better to knock them down and invest in building car parks? This would be more useful as people did not tend to park cars in garages. She mentioned the need to build more homes within the Borough which may not be wise to invest money in garages.

The ADH responded that there was no proposal within the report to charge tenants more for the use of garages. An unallocated budget had been left to spend on improving garages and a balance had to be struck on the work to be done although it may not yield any revenue. The work to be done would be more decorative in terms of a coat of paint to maintain the garages. New build homes could be constructed with garages as it was the standard to include new builds with parking spaces. The current garages did pay for themselves which was just under £1 million.

Referring to the 85 void garages that were fit for let, the Chair said there was more supply than demand. Referencing the four P's of business – price, place, product and promotion, the Chair thought the price was good but there seemed to be no demand for the garages. He queried whether the garages were placed in the wrong place, if the condition was too poor or if they were just not being promoted enough. The ADH stated that people were able to register their interest in a garage online but there was a culture of waiting for

the one they wanted. In answer to promotion, the ADH explained that the service could contact interested parties about garages outside of their specified areas so they were aware and encouraged customers outside the Borough to be more flexible in their choice of garage. The Chair went on to say that the service had to be careful of increasing garage rental prices as it could result in less people renting. The ADH replied the service would look to phase this in and that benchmarking would be carried out beforehand.

Councillor Redsell made the suggestion of turning the garages into houses. Councillor Allen also suggested a large site by Prince Phillip Avenue in Stifford Clays that could be utilised for new garages and homes.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the information in the report, and on the options and forward actions described.**

28. Repairs Policy

The report was introduced by the ADH which gave an update of the proposed changes to the Repairs Policy upon review. The overarching aim was to ensure the policy remained fit for purpose whilst addressing all the current statutory requirements. It should empower council tenants where possible through access to information and enable them to be involved in the maintenance of their homes.

This policy did not include leaseholders as a separate document would be drawn up for them. The policy had certain sections added in such as damp and mould which was a big issue and other sections were reworded for clarity. Referring to the Housing Repairs FAQs in appendix C, the ADH invited the Committee to provide feedback and suggestions on the clarity of the FAQs.

In reference to paragraph 2.12, Councillor Allen mentioned that many tenants took pride in taking on their own repairs. He questioned if it was fair for them to ask for permission to remove wallpaper as this sometimes resulted in damage to the plaster wall. The ADH explained decorative processes could result in damage to the property which would fall to the Council to repair and be charged back to the tenant. There was an expectation that council tenants should look after the property.

Councillor Allen continued by referring to a case which had blown windows and another that had a broken window that was not the fault of the tenant who needed a crime reference number in order for the Council to repair it without cost. This had been due to a window fail. He asked what tenants had to do in order for repairs to take place without the need of a crime reference number.

In response, the ADH explained that if the broken window had been faulty, there would need to be several reports from the same street to identify a faulty batch. A crime reference number was needed in order to prove the damage

had not been done by the tenant. He listed certain criterias of repairs that was listed within the policy and said that the service would use the stock condition data to take a more planned programme towards repairs.

Echoing Councillor Allen's comments, the Chair added that a blown double glazed window would lose its efficacy and would cause damp and mould to the property. Attempting to raise this as a responsive repair with the Council, tenants would be told the repair was not a responsive repair which was frustrating. Understanding the point made, the ADH answered that damp and mould was a responsive repair and potentially, the blown window would be part of the works to address this. If a blown window did not cause any damp and mould, it would still be secure and a tenant could still see out of it so would not be a responsive repair. The Chair went on to say that this was not always the case. He felt the new system should be more responsive and less rigid. In response, the ADH said that exceptions were made and the policy was set aside when needed. The service hoped to have a programme to ensure serious deteriorations did not occur and to consider repairs where necessary. There needed to be a more strategic and planned approach towards repairs and this was not just for windows. The Stock Condition Survey had shown people were not always reporting defects and this had to be done in order for the service to take full ownership of their assets. This would enable them to roll out cost effective programmes and value for money programmes to maintain their stock. Funds were being used effectively in most needed areas such as single glazed windows and damp and mould. The service needed to find a balance between the findings within the Stock Condition Survey and tenants' needs along with the overall responsibilities of a social landlord which the service was trying to do.

Councillor Redsell commented on the exterior state of certain properties she had seen and felt tenants should take care of their gardens as well as the interior of their homes. She had seen how unattractive some shared gardens were as well and said tenants needed to be encouraged to take better care of gardens. The ADH stated that a performance report would be brought to the Committee in which one of the priorities was to encourage people to take better care of their gardens. The service wished to put together a Tenants Representative Association to generate a greater sense of pride with the desire to foster the spirit of participation. He went on to mention that there were various issues in the tenancy agreement which could be enforced but the service wanted to take a softer approach via conversations.

Responding to this, Councillor Redsell agreed a softer approach was good as officers could encourage tenants to look after their gardens. One house with a poorly looked after garden in a row of houses could bring the area down, same as a garage in a bad condition. The ADH said that it was not always council tenants as the service had found many leaseholders were also not maintaining the best standards of appearance on their properties.

In regards to the FAQs, Councillor Potheary posed the following questions:

1. Referring to the wording on the 24 hour timeframe for emergency appointments, she asked if the wording could be stronger for clarity e.g. stating tenants 'may need to wait 24 hours but not more than 24 hours'.
2. She expressed concern on the 24 hour timeframe when it came to certain issues of smoke detectors or faulty windows on higher floors where children could be living. She asked if certain repairs could be prioritised as higher due to safety issues.
3. Could carbon monoxide alarms be installed in properties? She suggested installing a certain model that could be more cost effective.

The ADH agreed that the wording of 24 hours in an emergency appointment could be better worded and the scripting would be looked at. He felt Councillor Potheary's second question was an interesting point and said he envisaged a database to show certain criterias to judge the priority of a repair. In regards to carbon monoxide alarms, it was not standard to have these installed whereas smoke alarms were. The service was looking at carbon monoxide alarms and the costs to have these installed through a company.

Referring to council tenancy agreements, Councillor Allen sought clarification on whether gardens were included. Confirming this was the case, the ADH said that it was an obligation of the tenant and came under the law. Adding to this, the Housing Tenant Representative (HTR), Lynn Mansfield, mentioned that she had noticed the state of some gardens during an inspection. She went on to say she had seen a housing officer accompanied by an anti-social behaviour officer speaking with tenants and felt that was not a soft approach as discussed earlier. The ADH explained that this may have happened as the tenant in question could have had a warning flagged up on their database. Otherwise, it was not usually the case to have two officers speak with a tenant.

The Chair ended the item by congratulating the ADH and service department on the improvements in service which could be seen from data table within the report.

RESOLVED:

1. **That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the report and the current operation of the repairs function.**
2. **That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposed changes to the published repairs policy and the other proposals for improvement which are set out in the report.**

28. Homelessness Reduction Act Update

The report was presented by the ADH which provided the Committee with an update on the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17). This followed on from the original report brought to the Committee in October 2017. Since then, the service had remodelled services and

reconfigured teams, ready to meet the new Act requirements. Thurrock Council had received a total sum allocation of £242,544 from the new burdens funding which would be split over the three years. The first year's allocation of £81,700 would be used to hire two new specialist officers and on a bespoke system titled 'Jigsaw'.

The service had been visited by a representative from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government which had resulted in a positive visit. There would be a Homelessness Forum on 5th March in which Thurrock would share their preparations with partners. The aim was to be one of the best Boroughs to successfully implement the requirements of the HRA17.

Welcoming this update and the HRA17, the Chair felt it was the little things that made a big difference. He went on to say the demand did not seem to be so high considering the ratio of the number of people coming into the service per officer. The ADH agreed with this comment.

Referring to paragraph 3.2, Councillor Potheary sought clarification that the current statutory notice period of 28 days would be extended to 56 days. The ADH confirmed this was the case and would be in line with the Assured Shorthold Tenancy in the private sector. However, the service currently did not wait until the end of the notice; instead, they would allocate the case immediately to an Options Officer. Most boroughs, including Thurrock, were already carrying out best practices in general.

Councillor Potheary welcomed this as it was a big issue. She felt paragraph 3.2 needed rewording for clarity regarding the 28 days and 56 days framework. She sought clarification on the wording of paragraph 3.5 which the ADH clarified it referred to families with children and not the children themselves that were made intentionally homeless. It was the parents that were the subject of intention for homelessness and the unfortunate impact was on the children. He went on to state the paragraph focused on the strengthened partnership between housing and children's services. This was a part of the ethos of the new Act which highlighted and encouraged successful partnerships.

Referring to the funding, Councillor Potheary expressed concern over the funding of £81,700 in the first year which would already be used up by the two specialist officers. Whilst this placed new duties on the Council which she felt was right, she was concerned on the lack of resources, such as available properties and discretionary payments, the Council had to fulfil these duties. The ADH agreed the new legislation could not change anything and did not create new housing options. The funding allocated had been based on demand statistics and would be used up fairly quickly but there should be no need for more new staff after the first year. The Act did bring in a lot of new legal duties which councils would be bound to but the service would look to use the funding effectively. Regarding this, the Chair queried if this provided a more accurate picture of homelessness as many had not been recorded in the statistics of local authorities.

Agreeing with this, the ADH continued by saying that there would now be a new statutory return called the H-Click which would be used to inform government of the returns. It would capture customers on every return which would be in Thurrock Council's best interest as it would capture every customer and provide a more accurate level of the demand within Thurrock. This could be used to lobby central government for more resources to meet demands. The ADH also added that the service was doing a separate piece of work called 'Demand and Delivery' which looked at data within the Borough in regards to housing needs and options. This related back to the new Act.

With the new HRA17 requirements, Councillor Allen felt this would improve Thurrock's duty of care towards homelessness. He congratulated the service on the work done so far.

A revised version of the report has been added to this agenda in light of Member comments.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the information provided on the introduction of the Act and the continued work of the Housing Solutions Service in preparing for implementation.**

30. Work Programme

The Committee agreed to cancel the scheduled Housing Overview and Scrutiny meeting on the 24th April 2018 due to there being insufficient business during the pre-election period.

The Chair thanked the Committee for their support during his time as Chair.

The meeting finished at 8.48 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**