

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 February 2019 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Steve Liddiard, Jane Potheary
Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative
- Apologies:** Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Luke Spillman (Vice-Chair), James Baker, Claire Baldwin, and Andrew Jefferies
- In attendance:** Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Roger Harris, Corporate Director Adults, Housing and Health
Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director Housing
Alistair Wood, Technical Services Delivery Manager
Lucy Tricker, 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.

26. Election of Chair for the Meeting

As Councillors Rice and Spillman had sent their apologies, it was agreed that a stand-in chair would be elected for the duration of the meeting. Councillor Redsell was nominated by Councillor Potheary, and Councillor Liddiard seconded this nomination. Therefore, Councillor Redsell was elected Chair for the duration of the meeting.

27. Minutes

As Councillors Rice and Spillman had sent their apologies, the minutes from the meeting held on 18 December 2018 could not be agreed.

28. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

29. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

30. Garages Review - Phase 1 progress report

The Corporate Director Adults Housing and Health introduced the report and stated that this was a progress report on a piece of work that had come before

the committee twelve months ago. He outlined the progress that had been made, as detailed at point 2.3 of the report, and used the examples of finding £200,000 in the HRA budget for urgent repairs; undertaking an initial condition survey; liaising with the Community Payback Team; reviewing tenancy agreements; and filing up-to-date records and registers. He stated that due to the poor condition of some garages, some may have to be demolished and pulled down, but that the garages project team was meeting later on in the week to discuss these types of issues. He discussed the fact that a small amount of funding had been found in the HRA budget, and once this had been agreed by Cabinet, urgent remedial works could begin. He summarised by stating his team's commitment to improving the condition of garages in the borough.

Councillor Redsell opened the debate by commenting that many of the borough's garages were reaching the end of their life, and it was important to find out who owned them. The Corporate Director replied that records had not been in a good enough state, and described how Thurrock were going to undertake a full record and audit to be able to identify the owners of garages. The Assistant Director Housing added that she would be leading the garages project team to ensure targets were met and it remained focussed on issues.

Councillor Potheary stated that she was pleased to see that progress had been made, and added that when garages fell into disrepair it often led to an increase in anti-social behaviour, which caused concern for all councillors. She asked if the urgent, remedial work on the garages would always rely on a subsidy from the HRA, or if in future the maintenance of garages could be self-sustaining. The Corporate Director clarified that work on garages was a part of the HRA, which contained a small repair budget. He added that extra money had been found from within the HRA to fund the repair of garages, but this could not come from the capital receipts budget. He also commented that although the council received income from garages, there was a high void level and demand across the borough varied significantly.

The Housing Tenant Representative continued the debate and mentioned the fact that some garages were unsuitable for large cars. She then asked if applications for garages were renewed every year. The Assistant Director Housing responded that it was understood that people rarely used their garages for cars anymore, and used them as extra storage space instead. She commented that the council were going to review tenancy agreements with the legal team, as the change of use could affect issues such as insurance. She clarified that when a resident applied for a garage, they remain on the waiting list.

Councillor Redsell added that she felt the council should focus on finding out the ownership of garages, and upgrading them as many were now too small because they had been built in the 1970s. Councillor Liddiard mentioned that as last the review had been 2009, another review should take place to decide whether to repair or demolish garages. The Corporate Director highlighted the timescales of the project to the committee and stated that the recommendations may not be implemented very soon, as housekeeping work

had to be undertaken before the project could begin, such as structural surveys and record collecting. Councillor Redsell added that she had received feedback from residents which stated the appearance of the garages was in a poor state and asked if the youth offending teams could paint the garage doors. She also asked if the table included in the report could be broken down to differentiate between privately owned garages and housing stock. The Corporate Director replied that another report on this subject would come back to committee at the end of the calendar year, but the project would be actioned before the report comes back to committee. The Assistant Director Housing clarified that the Community Payback Team could not start work on the garages until the summer months, due to the weather.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee commented on the information in this report and the next steps described.

31. Homelessness Prevention Strategy Review

The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager introduced the report and stated this was a review of the approach to homelessness in the borough. He elaborated that this was a statutory duty that the council had to undertake every five years, and the current strategy was coming to the end of its life. He stated that this was compounded by new government legislation which would affect the borough. He discussed how the strategy was divided into two sections, the first being a strategic analysis in the context of Thurrock, and the second being the consultation phase with key partners and stakeholders, such as Youth Cabinet, and Members. He stated that the first stage analysis would begin in February 2019 and run until April 2019, with the second consultation phase running from May 2019 until August 2019.

Councillor Redsell began the debate by stating she felt homelessness was a problem across Essex, such as in Southend, Basildon and Brentwood. She asked which stakeholders would be consulted with at the consultation phase. The Corporate Director replied that although homelessness was a problem, the number of street homeless had been declining in Thurrock, and there were currently only 140-150 people living in temporary accommodation across the borough. He added that people staying in bed and breakfasts were only there for a short time, and compared this to other boroughs, which had significant numbers of people in bed and breakfasts and temporary accommodation. He then commented that people placed out of borough had also been decreasing. He felt that there was more work to be done to tackle the issue, but that the council had a robust policy and could implement it well. He finally stated that the team would be consulting with key stakeholders, and people who work with the homeless on a day to day basis.

Councillor Liddiard felt that there had been a change in the past four to five years in the reasons for homelessness, as it used to be primarily divorce, loss of employment or health issues; but felt now homelessness was often due to

tenants being evicted by landlords and given a Section 21 notice. He mentioned that he had also heard that London borough councils were offering landlords significant reward to take their tenants, and wanted the council to find out from London boroughs why this was happening and how many people from outside Thurrock were being housed. He then gave the personal example in his Tilbury ward of a block of flats which was being used to house Newham residents. The Assistant Director Housing replied that as the cost of renting was increasing and benefits were decreasing, more landlords were giving out Section 21 notices. She stated that the council were working with landlords and tenants to solve problems, and added that there was a dedicated financial inclusion officer in the housing team who specifically helped those residents. She clarified that some London boroughs did offer rewards to landlords to house their tenants, but this was happening in all boroughs which bordered London. She then commented that Newham Council had roughly 5000 people living in temporary accommodation compared to only 140-150 in Thurrock. The Assistant Director Housing summarised and stated that the Leaders of every council in Essex had written to all London boroughs to raise this issue and try to solve the problem.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether Thurrock Council could negotiate directly with developers to purchase houses and flats. The Assistant Director Housing replied that developers did not want to sell to the council, and the council did not want to buy, as the houses built could be of poor quality due to the fact they were built to rent. She added that if the council brought these properties there would be a high maintenance cost due to their poor construction. She commented that the council could rent them and were talking to developers to be able to do this. Councillor Redsell added that the housing team and planning team should consider more linked-up working to be able to solve this issue. The Corporate Director commented that the council were open to conversations and had been in contact with developers, although most flats and houses were outside of the council's price range. He clarified that Essex Leaders had written to the London Councils and GLA, although there were no statutory powers in place to stop London boroughs placing their tenants in neighbouring boroughs. Councillor Redsell added that placing Newham residents in Thurrock had a knock-on effect for Thurrock residents as it increased rent prices and therefore increased the number of homeless people.

Councillor Potheary thanked the team for their report and felt it was a positive strategy with some good ideas. She asked if the council were going to contact Shelter during the consultation phase, as they were an important frontline service. She also asked if the council could approach developers to ask for the 35% social housing which they were required to build, as then more residents could be housed through the council. She then drew the Committee's attention to point 3.21 and stated she felt private rent was too high, so more houses needed to be built and the council could take control of social housing. The Corporate Director replied that the council were looking for permanent accommodation solutions and were open to conversations with developers regarding increasing stock, although the council did not have large capital resources to be able to buy. He added that the team were also looking

into currently vacant houses to use as temporary accommodation and social housing.

Councillor Liddiard began a discussion around benefits and rent, during which the Assistant Director Housing stated that due to welfare reforms there was a limit to the amount of benefits a person could get to use on housing. It was also clarified that people who were single and under 35 would be on the average house-share rate, even if they had children or family who stayed with them. The Housing Tenant Representative stated that in her personal experience of running a food bank, it was often used more during school holidays, and asked if this was because people on benefits had to look after their children returning from university. The Assistant Director Housing responded that this was mainly due to families not receiving school meals for their children during the holidays.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted the contents of the report, and commented on the proposal to develop a new homelessness strategy. In particular, commented on the consultation proposals set out in section 5.

32. Housing Allocations Policy Review 2018 - Financial Qualification

The Corporate Director introduced the report and stated that this had gone to Cabinet following discussion at Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee, with some amendments based on the committee's comments, such as the introduction of a Sheltered Housing Register. He commented that this was being sent back to the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee to consider the financial qualifications. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager elaborated that the financial qualification used an affordability ratio, which was the national guideline of housing costing 1/3rd of a person's net income. He continued that the council then looked at property size to determine affordability and used the 30th percentile as the affordable benchmark to rent and buy. He commented that the calculation worked out a person's net salary affordability for both renting and buying, and then used the more expensive of the two figures to set the threshold. He drew the Committee's attention to page 27 of the agenda, and the table at 3.7 which set out the five thresholds and rationale behind them. He stated that the majority of thresholds used renting as it was the highest value, other than three and four bedroom properties, where it was more expensive to purchase. He summarised by stating that the council then used local earning salaries which were below the thresholds to work out how much money residents bought home, and how much they would need to earn to qualify for council housing.

Councillor Redsell asked if there were people what didn't qualify for council housing as they earned too much, but were earning too less to afford to rent and buy. The Assistant Director Housing replied that Cabinet had believed this because section 5 of the report had originally used net incomes rather than gross incomes, which made the figures look lower. The Corporate

Director clarified that Cabinet had asked the Committee to consider whether they felt the threshold should be higher, and stated that the more detailed analysis had shown there were very few people who could not afford to rent or buy, but earned too much for social housing.

Councillor Potheary stated that she felt concerned as the threshold had been set using the 30th percentile, and asked whether the 50th percentile would have been more representative. The Housing Strategy & Quality Manager confirmed that the threshold used the more expensive figure of either buying or renting depending on property size, which ensured the figure was representative. Councillor Liddiard then drew the Committee's attention to the problem of residents over 55 who could afford mortgages, but the banks would not allow them. Councillor Potheary asked when the threshold would be reviewed as it was a good idea to do this every year, and the Corporate Director replied it would be every year, although the review may not be as detailed as the report in the agenda. Councillor Redsell summarised by stating this was a comprehensive report and felt it would be good to see the review next year.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted the contents of the report and advise Cabinet of the findings.

33. Fire Safety update including a Review of Fire Suppressant (Sprinkler) System

The Technical Services Delivery Manager introduced the report and stated it focussed on the whole portfolio, rather than just tower blocks. He gave some context to the report and stated it had come before committee due to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower and the government review on fire safety, which the MHCLG were currently working on, and although recommendations had not yet been published, the council were being proactive. He commented that in March 2019 a fire risk assessment from the chartered institute would be carried out, although the council were already upgrading fire doors. He stated that to install a suppression system in all tower blocks across the borough would cost £3.3million, and although Essex Fire and Rescue would give the council £10,000 per block, it would not be enough money to install them. He summarised and discussed how during a fire in a block of flats in Chadwell St Mary, the compartmentalisation system had worked, so no one was injured and only a small number of properties were damaged.

Councillor Redsell opened the debate and stated that the Chadwell St Mary tower block fire had shown that the systems in place were working as the fire had remained in one flat. She asked if the Essex Fire and Rescue policy of staying inside your homes if there was a fire was also followed by Thurrock Council. The Technical Services Delivery Manager replied that the 'stay put' policy was supported by Thurrock Council and was in place in all tower blocks. He stated this was the most effective way of keeping a fire from

spreading as residents did not impede firefighter's in stairwells and kept the fire from spreading as doors remained closed.

Councillor Liddiard questioned if the council was replacing front doors on flats, or communal doors, and it was confirmed that front doors on flats were being replaced, although it was felt some communal doors might also require upgrading. Councillor Potheary then stated she felt there were problems in tower blocks of communal fire doors being left open, and asked if the council could communicate with residents the importance of keeping them shut for their safety. The Technical Services Delivery Manager replied he would look into this, and stated that as communal doors were used most, they were the doors which needed replacing more often. He stated that officers undertook monthly walk-throughs in flats to identify issues, and CCTV was in place to identify residents who were abusing fire doors, and tackle the source of the problem. The Assistant Director Housing added that she chaired the monthly fire safety meeting, during which officers shared pictures of problems in communal flat blocks so issues could be solved.

Councillor Potheary expressed her concern with residents smoking in lifts, as this was anti-social behaviour as well as being a safety concern. She stated she felt glad there was CCTV and asked if this could be checked regularly, to which the Technical Services Delivery Manager replied affirmatively. Councillor Redsell agreed with Councillor Potheary's point regarding keeping communal fire doors open, as it allowed non-residents to access areas they were not allowed in, which could cause a safety concern.

Councillor Potheary then questioned whether the extra money which was needed to fund the sprinkler system could come from the HRA or the general fund. The Assistant Director Housing replied that both budgets were ring-fenced, so no money could be taken from the general fund, and there was no money in the HRA. Councillor Redsell asked if the council knew who lived in its high-rise flats, as one of the problems in Grenfell had been firefighters being unable to identify residents. The Assistant Director Housing replied that on any given night, it would be difficult to know exactly who was in the block of flats, as people might have friends over or may have gone on holiday. She stated that many properties had been sold under the right to buy scheme and then been rented out, so the council were unaware of who was living in those properties. She added that the council knew the tenants of the flats, and the members of their household. She also clarified that plans of the building and a list of all vulnerable residents was kept in a secure box at the base of the block of flats, so if residents did need to be evacuated, the fire service knew which houses had vulnerable people living in them.

Councillor Liddiard then asked on policies regarding low-rise blocks, as some of these had wooden rather than concrete floors, and asked if they should follow the 'stay put' policy. The Assistant Director Housing replied that she would look into this.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. **Commented on the contents of the report and ongoing fire safety work undertaken by the housing service to ensure all council owned property is safe.**

34. Work Programme

Members stated that this was the last meeting of the municipal year, so there was nothing to add to the Work Programme.

The meeting finished at 8.25 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