

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1 October 2019 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Lynn Worrall (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Colin Churchman and Joycelyn Redsell
- Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative
- Apologies:** Councillors Andrew Jefferies, Councillor Barry Johnson, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health/Interim Director of Children's Service
- In attendance:** Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Lorrita Johnson, Housing Solutions Manager
Mike Jones, Strategic Resources Accountant
Kenna-Victoria Healey, 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.

9. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 June 2019 were approved as a correct record.

10. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

11. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

12. HRA Rent and Service Charges

The Strategic Resources Accountant addressed Members informing them the 2019/20 financial year was the fourth and final year of the governments rent reduction policy. From 2020/21 Local Authorities and registered providers would have the ability to increase social and affordable rents in line with the newly issued Rent Standard.

Member further head how the majority of properties within the HRA were charged a social rent, however, the newly developed units were based on affordable rents. The assumption had been made that the usual rate for CPI would be 2.2%, however this was to be confirmed at the end of September

2019 and on that basis, the rent would be increased by 3.2% compared to the 2019/2020 level.

The Strategic Resources Accountant continued to advise the Committee the Committee, the rent setting process for the existing affordable rent properties would follow the same guidance as applied to the properties within the HRA that were charged a social rent. In addition to the existing affordable rent properties currently within the HRA, it would be required to calculate the rent levels for the HRA new build schemes that will complete in the near future this included Topps clubs and Claudian Way.

Members were then notified that service charges for both tenants and leaseholders were based on the actual costs of providing services and were set on the basis of full cost recovery. It was explained that Councils were entitled to recover the costs of these services from all users for example leaseholders and tenants. The cost of providing the services was reviewed annually as part of the budget setting process and the charges were then set accordingly.

Details of the service charges for the current financial year, were within the report, Officers explained it had been estimated that in order to ensure the cost of service delivery was fully recovered, charges would be likely to increase in line with rents at 3.2%. The full details of any increases to the service charge would form part of the HRA budget estimates for 2020/21.

It was further outlined how HRA rents compared to other levels of charges, it was explained that whilst there was a requirement and recommendation to increase the current rents level in line with the government's proposals, social rent levels were still significantly lower than those of the local housing allowance and market rents.

Councillor Abbas thanked Officers for the report and enquired as to how the consultation with residents was to be completed. The Strategic Resources Accountant confirmed consultation with residents would take place, along with officers working with the Tenants Excellence panel and the tenant representative groups. He commented that consultations would be towards the end of October.

The Chair of the Committee, Councillor Worrall, followed up asking what if residents didn't want an increase in charges. The Assistant Director explained this was the first report it was due to come back to the Committee before being presented to Cabinet in the New Year for the final say.

The Housing Tenant Representative enquired how the consultation was to be held. It was explained the consultation would include meeting with residents and giving a presentation following with a discussion to answer any questions residents may have. It was further confirmed that Officers would also be at the October Excellence Panel.

Councillor Worrall stated, she felt the committee should have been given more options to consider, as a complete raise of 3% didn't feel right. The Assistant Director of Housing informed Members this was the first version of the report, it was possible to make amendments following the Committees discussion and a report would be presented back to eh Committee.

During the discussion, it was queried as to the service charges for the Piggs Corner Complex. The Assistant Director explained the service was contacted out so this included staff costs. She further explained that this was to ensure that shift patterns and annual leave were covered; Members were advised this was only the case at the flat blocks which had a concierge service provided.

The Committee continued to discuss the possibility of there being a service charge increase. It was stated that Officers had hoped to know the CPI before publication of the agenda, unfortunately this was not the case and it was now expected to be released in the next few weeks. Officers assured the Committee they would receive an update as soon as the figures were known.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee comment on the proposal for rent and service charge increases within the Housing Revenue Account

13. Housing Solutions Customer Excellence Programme - External Review Findings

The Housing Solutions Manager presented the report which outlined the Housing Solutions Customer Excellence Programme following an external review. It was explained that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was implemented on 3 April 2018, the Act had brought notable changes to the delivery of homeless services. The requirement to provide services to everyone who is 'eligible' and 'homeless', regardless of 'priority need' and 'intentional homelessness' had resulted in more people being provided with assistance.

It was explained that in considering a service redesign, the Housing Solutions Service had undertaken a programme of customer service improvement. The service also commissioned the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) and Shelter to conduct a full review of the service focusing on key areas which impacts on the customer experience. The main aim of the review was to seek an external view on how Thurrock was performing against the new legislative functions introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and how well the service was working with residents and partners in making the correct decisions and providing the right advice in line with the law on homelessness.

Members were then taken through the outcomes of the external review, of which the website, Hostels and customer interview observations were touched

on. The Committee were notified that overall Thurrock scored of 56% which was a high average in comparison with the other authorities reviewed.

During discussions Councillor Redsell queried that the report didn't mention the armed forces were maybe homeless in Thurrock. She further commented that there was one gentleman who slept rough but didn't want any assistance from the Council. It was suggested that it maybe time that the Veterans Charter be reviewed.

Councillor Abbas thanked Officers for the report and stated that he was concerned as to the rating the Council received. He continued to enquire as to the failed rating for resident's cases. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that with the change in legislation all Local Authorities were struggling with no one meeting the pass rate of 60%. She further stated that Thurrock had received 56% and although there was still improvement to be made this was a good score compared with the other Authorities. In addition it was explained that the Council had a high turnover of staff within the department meaning that it wasn't always the same officer who completed a case.

The Chair of the Committee directed the discussion to the rough sleepers in the Borough, she highlighted the use of the soup kitchen in Grays, who helped as many as 20 people on a Friday evening. She stated that services needed to work together as there were more than 8 rough sleepers as mentioned within the report. The Housing Solutions Manager, explained that St Mungos were contracted to undertake outreach work which equated to 3 days a week. She continued to inform Members that although they were not to work with the soup kitchen discussions had been had with St Mungos, to attend the soup kitchen as part of their outreach work.

Following an enquiry from Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee, Members heard to ensure the same level of service was given to all residents, regardless to which officer was handling the case training plans had been put into place, to guarantee consistency. This included a 2 weekly case session where officers would meet with managers, where feedback and advice could be given.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee comment on the information provided on the implementation of the Act and take note of the findings of the reviews and the continued work of the Housing Solutions Service to meet the service demands whilst providing an excellent service to applicants.

14. Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Report

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager introduced the report to the Committee, in doing so, Members were notified there was a statutory duty on every Local Authority to have a Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy which set out the Local Authority's plans for the prevention

of homelessness and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support be, available for people who become homeless or who are at risk of becoming so. Members heard the current homelessness strategy was adopted in Thurrock in 2015.

It was mentioned that between February 2014 and February 2019 the average house price had increased by 50%, from £199,666 to £298,694. Whilst the average house price in Thurrock remained lower than in the neighbouring South Essex boroughs.

Officers commented a series of stakeholder meetings had taken place in order to understand the issues affecting homelessness in the borough. Following these meetings the first theme identified focused on partnerships and collaboration, not only between Council services but also with public organisations such as the NHS, Police and homelessness charities.

Councillor Redsell thanked Officers for the report. She queried it mentioned Friends of Essex within the report and asked who they were. The Chair of the Committee, commented that they were a charity group who put up a gazebo on a Friday night in Grays and provide hot food and clothes for those sleeping rough or those who were homeless, not to mention sleeping bags, tents and blankets etc.

Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee further commented that it was important to get all parties on board with the Homeless Partnership and to engage together and with those who were homeless. The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager agreed that it was important to form a partnership. He further commented that the consultation period was near to an end.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of this report, and comment on the themes identified to develop a new homelessness prevention and rough sleeping strategy.

Councillor Worrall, the Chair sought the Committees agreement to suspend standing orders. During the discussion it was explained, following Full Council on Wednesday 25 September 2019, it was suggested that there be an extraordinary meeting of the Committee.

The Chair then enquired as to whether the Committee would be happy to defer the remaining items to the extraordinary meeting. Members agreed to take item 8 then defer the remaining items 7, 9 and the work programme to the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee agreed to defer Item 7 Housing Strategy Timetable and Item 9 Garage Project Update to the Extraordinary Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

15. Local Lettings Plans

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager presented the report to Members explaining Thurrock Council's current Housing Allocations Policy, was agreed by Cabinet back in January 2019 and it included provisions for the Council to set Local Lettings Plans on a case-by-case basis, for example where new-build development had taken place or if there was a specific strategic requirement for additional flexibility around qualification criteria in certain circumstances.

Officers continued to advise the Committee the Council was developing new-build properties at Tops Club in Grays, with handover currently scheduled between January and February 2020, and in Claudian Way in Chadwell St. Mary, where handover for the majority of properties was anticipated to be in March 2020.

Members heard how the development at Tops Club in Grays was situated beside the Seabrooke Rise estate. It comprises of 29 properties over five floors in single block, with property types broken down as 1 and 2 bedroom flats, and 3 bedroom maisonettes. It was explained there were no specifically adapted properties at this development; as such all properties would be included in the Local Lettings Plan.

It was then highlighted the development at Claudian Way in Chadwell St. Mary was to include 53 properties which were a mixture of houses and bungalows, as well as flats within two low-rise blocks. The property types included 1 and 2 bedroom flats, 1 and 2 bedroom bungalows, 2 and 3 bedroom wheelchair adapted bungalows and 3 bedroom houses.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager explained 75% of the first lettings would be for current Thurrock Council tenants who met the criteria set out in section 3.6 of the report, with the remaining 25% of the first lettings being allocated in line with the usual processes as set out in the Housing Allocations Policy.

Members were notified Elizabeth Gardens was a purpose built extra care scheme for older people in Long Lane, Grays. There were 65 flats and the Council had nomination rights to 47 of these. It was explained the scheme was managed by Anchor Hanover Housing Association and nominations were required from the Council within 5 working days of a property being available to let. Should the Council be unable to supply nominees within this timescale then Anchor Hanover were able to select people from their own waiting list.

Councillor Redsell, welcomed the report and in doing so stated that when Elizabeth Gardens was first build it was a good scheme. She further commented she felt the properties should be for Thurrock residents.

The Chair remarked that she was very pleased and supported the report. She continued to mention the scheme had worked well previously.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of this report, and comment on the proposed Local Lettings Plans.

The meeting finished at 9.12pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk