

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 June 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Lynn Worrall (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Joycelyn Redsell and Terry Piccolo (Substitute) (substitute for James Halden)

Apologies: Councillors Colin Churchman, James Halden and Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative.

In attendance: Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
David Moore, Interim Assistant Director of Place Delivery
Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager
Susan Cardozo, Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager
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.

1. Minutes

Referring to page 12, the Chair said that the Committee had not received the figures from officers for the number of complaints upheld on housing performance. She asked if these could be covered within item 5.

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 February 2020 was approved as a true and correct record.

2. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Housing KPI Performance (2019/2020)

Presented by Carol Hinvest, she gave an outline of the report on pages 15 – 22 of the Agenda which highlighted a strong year of performance within the

Housing service and that overall, levels of satisfaction with the service had increased in 2019-2020 compared to what the data showed from 7 years ago.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield were read out by Democratic Services:

- Why were voids increasing, these needed to be looked at as these were far too high. Lynn was aware there was a standard but these should be all the same.
- The full consultation that was undertaken was good.
- Lynn noted that there was no mention of Local Area Co-ordinators (LACs) who should be mentioned as the work they undertook was just as good as what Inclusion Officers did, so well done to LACs as well.

Carol Hinvest explained that the voids were not increasing and that the number of days to turn around standard and capital voids. Regarding LACs, these were unrelated to housing performance and had focused on the Financial Inclusion Officers who had been able to collect 98.5% of rents despite the challenges in the current climate of welfare reforms that resulted in an increasing number of residents on Universal Credit. Support from the LACs were appreciated when they were involved but not all residents required a LAC in financial difficulties.

Referring to paragraph 3.4 on page 19 of the Agenda, Councillor Abbas sought clarification on the increase of 47% in tenants claiming Universal Credit. Carol Hinvest explained that the increase was due to a tenant's change in circumstances such as a change in jobs or moving homes so resulted in a move from their old benefits and onto Universal Credit. She went on to say that the government's reform was to move working age adults from benefits and onto Universal Credit. She explained that the service's officers had visited these affected 47% tenants (which amounted to 1390) and had secured discretionary housing payments for 55% of those tenants who had submitted an individual application for this. This had been the result of it being a 53 week rent year which occurred every 6 – 7 years but many social landlords along with other lobbying organisations, had been asking the government to change the rules regarding Universal Credit as it currently took into account 52 weeks being in a rent year.

Referring to the lists of measures shown on pages 16 – 18 of the Agenda, the Chair questioned if these were the full lists of performance indicators for the service and whether a more detailed breakdown of the indicators (such as separating housing statistics into sheltered housing, low rise flats etc) could be given to the Committee if requested. Carol Hinvest explained that the lists showed the corporate performance indicators that were reported to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Within the service, there were other indicators used to measure the service's performance but these were reported together and not broken down into flats and houses or into sheltered and general housing needs. The Chair thought an alternative approach could be undertaken through looking at a breakdown of services such as caretaking services in flats as houses did not receive this same service.

Referring to KP107 on page 16 of the Agenda, the Chair asked whether these families were still residing in a Bed and Breakfast and if they were in Borough placements. Carol Hinvest answered that none of those families were still in a Bed and Breakfast but would find out if they were in Borough placements.

The Chair asked how many complaints there had the service received in the year (2019/2020) and how many of those were upheld. Chris Seman answered that 547 complaints had been received in the last year and 37% of those had been upheld. The Chair went on to question whether there was a trend identified in the complaints. Chris Seman explained that there was no trend but that some areas of the service received more complaints than others due to the nature of the service such as repairs which had more transactions than other services.

The Chair noted that 31,000 repairs were undertaken last year but only 2,679 tenants were surveyed and sought clarification on why this had been the case. Chris Seman explained the aim was to undertake a survey using a sample of 10% of those tenants who had repairs done. The 2,679 tenants surveyed was just under the 10% as not all tenants in that sample had responded to the survey that the service's market research organisation had carried out. The Chair queried whether this was a market marker and if other councils undertook the same approach. Officers answered that the 10% sample was a reasonable representative sample and that the volumes varied between social landlords as it was dependent on the number of social properties that a social landlord had and in some cases, there were multiple repairs undertaken. When undertaking market research, the aim was to not survey the same tenants in a 6 month period as it led to 'tenant fatigue' with constant surveys and explained why sometimes tenants did not respond to surveys which resulted in a dip in the representative sample.

Giving compliments to the good report, the Chair went on to ask for a figure on the number of tenants on Universal Credit currently. Officers responded that the figure was higher than last year as it had increased sharply in April 2020 but the numbers had now returned to normal. It was explained that the 47% figure in the report indicated an increase and not 47% number of tenants on Universal Credit. It was estimated that around 2,500 tenants were on Universal Credit, 1,500 tenants on benefits, some housing benefits were paid directly to the council and other tenants paid their own rents.

Regarding discretionary housing payments, the Chair asked which budgets these were paid out of. Officers explained that the service received a grant from central government for discretionary housing payments which had steadily decreased over the last few years. The grant was used to cover a range of payments including tenants who had a loss in income as well as addressing a number of welfare reforms but had more recently been used to cover gaps such as the 52/53 weeks in a year issue as mentioned earlier. The discretionary housing payments were used to cover a short term period where a tenant experienced financial difficulty or fell foul of issues such as the 52/53 week problem but it was not to be used as a permanent rent subsidy. The

grant was almost spent in one year but every year, the service would look at the criteria. The Chair and Officers discussed that the grant was used for young people in Houses of Multiple Occupancies (HMOs) in which it was to be used as a temporary subsidy to enable young people to have more time in finding the affordable housing they needed.

The Chair questioned whether bailiffs had been needed for housing rent issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and what measures had been in place to help tenants who had fallen behind on rent payments. Carol Hinvest explained that bailiffs had not been used and that since the lockdown restrictions had been put in place, no tenants had been evicted as no evictions had been going through the courts. Currently, the service was also not serving notices seeking possession and if there had been any, no cases would be going to court until October. The service had been working with tenants in financial difficulties and using a system called Rent Sense to prioritise cases to deal with and have been trialling a text messaging service from the same provider. Following the success of the text messaging the service would be entering into a contract for this system.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

5. Tenant and Leaseholder Satisfaction Monitoring

Presented by Chris Seman, the report set out the details on the service's current approach to measuring tenant and leaseholder satisfaction including detail on the current methodology and frameworks used to collect satisfaction data and calculate satisfaction rates. The report also set out the current programme of satisfaction monitoring for 2020/21 to enable the service to gain a much broader understanding of tenants and leaseholders views on services and to better understand their needs.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative were read out by Democratic Services:

- The idea of the postal survey was brilliant.
- On the diagram on page 25, 3.4, a different response should have been given for the ratings of dissatisfaction between 'fairly dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'. Response choices was not clear or good.
- In 3.5, it was not clear and Lynn asked for more clarification on how the satisfaction rates were calculated.
- On page 27's diagram, Lynn thought the percentage results were low and needed to be looked at in terms of how these could be improved, particularly the last 3.
- In 5.4, Lynn asked for clarification on the 2 questionnaires that was to be sent out, were both of these postal, if so, why were 2 questionnaires needed.

Officers explained that the second mailing of the questionnaire would only be sent out to tenants who had not completed the questionnaire yet. The questionnaires were managed by KWEST and the completed questionnaires were sent to them and the results that came back to the council were anonymous. Regarding 3.4, the owners of the methodology, Housemark, had consulted with landlords and 13,000 tenants and had found the resulting methodology was a better method in expressing responses. Some responses before such as the term 'fair' was misunderstood as some took it to mean reasonably good but the service viewed this response as a measure of dissatisfaction. 'Neither satisfied or dissatisfied' was seen to be a much clearer response. The consultation had shown that tenants wished to see the 5 responses chosen to continue as it gave a wider range of responses to express their response. On how the satisfaction rates were calculated, 'Very Satisfied' and 'Fairly Satisfied' were included into the satisfaction percentage figure. Regarding the diagram on page 27, Officers explained that a full postal survey would give more data as it would ask more questions that would enable the service to look deeper into the gathered data. Although the figures appeared low, these were good figures when compared to other local authorities and some were over 90%. A quarterly benchmarking exercise was suggested where the service would compare their gathered data against Housemark's gathered data from similar local authorities of size to Thurrock Council.

Councillor Abbas questioned how tenant satisfaction rates were measured and what feedback was given regarding repairs and contractors. Carol Hinvest explained that a monthly Satisfaction survey was undertaken which asked residents about their experiences with the repair work that had been undertaken in their homes. A range of questions were asked that included whether tenants were satisfied with their repairs; if the repairs were carried out right the first time; whether contractors had shown ID and if contractors they had cleaned up after the repair. Regular meetings were also held with contractors where the service discussed satisfaction results gathered by contractors and Mears would speak with residents where comments were not understood. The service's engineers also carried out post inspections on 10% of the repairs undertaken particularly on the Transforming Homes Programme.

Councillor Abbas sought further detail on the low percentages shown on the diagram on page 27. Referring back to the earlier response given to same question from Lynn Mansfield, Officers added that the full postal survey asked more detailed questions that looked into other areas such as anti-social behaviour. This gave the service a broader understanding of their tenants satisfaction rates in how their cases were handled.

Referring to paragraph 3.5, the Chair questioned why only the top two satisfaction rates of 'Very Satisfied' and 'Fairly Satisfied' was used to calculate satisfaction rates when there were 5 responses. Officers explained that 'Very' and 'Fairly Satisfied' expressed that clearly that tenants were satisfied whereas the other responses expressed a neutral or a clearly dissatisfied response. The information gathered from each response was taken into

account by the service but for the purposes of the report before the Committee, the level of satisfaction rates had been separated into two categories of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The service mostly focused on the dissatisfaction responses to understand what had gone wrong to and what could be done to ensure the same issue did not arise again. Officers went on to say that improvements within the service could be seen from the report in item 5 of the Agenda in terms of overall satisfaction.

The Chair questioned the number of surveys taken in a year and in a month. Chris Seman answered that around 200 satisfaction surveys were undertaken each month with the same amount for repair satisfaction surveys and around 15 – 20 new tenant satisfaction surveys which totalled roughly 500 surveys per month. The Chair asked if the data gathered from the full postal survey mentioned earlier could be formulated into a report and brought back to Committee at a later date.

(Councillor Redsell joined the meeting at 7.57pm.)

(At the Chair's discretion, she allowed Councillor Redsell to ask a question that related to item 5. Councillor Redsell sought clarification on the key drivers for dissatisfaction. Officers explained that responses from residents highlighted factors of engagement and communication with the service and repairs through the Transforming Homes Programme such as windows.)

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

6. Housing Development Programme Update

Presented by David Moore, the report provided an update on the progress of the Housing Delivery Programme. He referred Members to the added site of River View and said that the site was in Chadwell St Mary and not Corringham as the report stated.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield were read out by Democratic Services:

- The River View site was a welcome addition and Chadwell St Mary had the right infrastructure.
- Lynn Mansfield was pleased to see the removal of the 5 sites.
- Regarding Broxburn Drive in the site options list in appendix B, Lynn Mansfield asked what type of dwellings would be on site. The site was small and would be difficult to fit 60 dwellings into the site. Would the dwellings be flats and would these be high rise or low rise flats? She also asked the type of dwellings that would be on other sites as well.

Officers answered that the number of the dwellings assigned to each site in appendix B were only indications and had not been finalised yet. The type of dwellings would be a mix of low rise flats and houses.

Referring to the Broxburn Drive site, the Vice-Chair sought clarification on whether the site proposed was where the garages were. Keith Andrews confirmed that there were garages that ran parallel to the railway line and the site had potential for development, in fill or an extension of the existing blocks of flats. The site had not gone out to consultation yet.

Councillor Redsell asked if remaining sites had been through the community engagement process yet. David Moore confirmed that these had been through the early investigatory works, and with River View, the site list was now 16 sites. Once each site was fully investigated, these would then go out to consultation which was currently delayed due to the government guidelines in place for COVID-19.

Referring to paragraph 3.3, Councillor Abbas asked if the final total of homes to be delivered would be 703. David Moore pointed to paragraph 3.4 and said that the final number of homes would be up to 708 but that if more sites were identified, these would be reported to the Committee. He went on to say that there were housing targets to reach and that as part of the consultation process, Members and residents were made aware of the identified sites and that their comments and objections were taken into account. These helped the service in the process of identifying suitable sites.

Noting the locations of the identified sites in appendix B, Councillor Abbas asked why these had all been identified in the west side of the Borough and not the east side. David Moore explained that the sites had been identified from different sources, as explained in the November 2019 paper to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, but the choice of sites were influenced by the Local Plan as the east side of the Borough was mainly Green Belt which could not be built on.

Councillor Piccolo questioned if the stage of involving residents at the start of the process of identifying and confirm suitable sites was new as residents had not been involved in this process before. David Moore confirmed that it was and that the service was aiming for a more transparent process which would give residents the opportunity to comment on potential sites. It enabled the service to look deeper into the sites and to decide if the site should be removed after hearing comments from residents. This helped the service to save on time and costs before too much investment was made into the site. Councillor Piccolo commented that this new stage in the process had given residents the assumption that the sites were already confirmed for development to which officers confirmed that sites were identified at that stage.

Noting the removal of the 5 sites mentioned in the report, the Chair queried whether the sites would return at a later date. David Moore confirmed that the 5 sites had been removed from the current list and would not return to the same list.

Referring to 3.1, the Chair asked what the criteria was for the removal of sites and noted that the council's criteria was that open and green spaces would not be used for development sites. She went on to mention that Enborne Green was similar to the other 5 sites that had been removed. David Moore said that Enborne Green had not been a part of the consultation process with the 5 sites that were removed. It had been the Portfolio Holder for Housing's decision to remove those 5 sites from the list and the process in place did allow for sites to be taken on and off the list. There was a criteria that enabled the service to look at how sites were currently being used and whether the space there was being used. Residents were consulted as a part of this process.

Referring to 3.10 in appendix A, the Chair sought clarification on the process for taking sites on and off the long list of sites for development as some sites that remained on were similar to those taken off. David Moore pointed to 3.9 in appendix A and explained that significant changes were made in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing which were reported back to the Committee. Comments from residents through the consultation process were taken into consideration as well. The Chair did not feel the process was followed very well.

Referring to the site list on appendix B, the Chair questioned how many homes would be for social housing and how many of the sites would be managed under Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL). Keith Andrews answered that the general principle adopted was that land that was on the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA), homes developed on this land would be for social housing. If the land was within the General Fund, it was expected that the land would be offered to TRL and that the Council's planning policy would expect 35% of those to be affordable homes which was the same expectation from other private developers. An estimated number could be calculated through these assumed general principles. The Chair felt an estimated calculation was needed to give the Committee assurance that there would be social housing available from these sites. Keith Andrews said that the proportion of homes from TRL would be 35% as this was within the Council's planning policy. For other sites, the service could only make the assumption based on the land position within the General Fund and HRA. However it was to be noted that other factors could affect this and that TRL had its own decision making board.

The Chair questioned what the current position was with the Culver Centre site. Keith Andrews said that the transfer of the site was currently with the Secretary of State but the expectation was that it would be agreed. As for the valuation of the land, it would come to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee for it to be agreed before it was moved onto Cabinet for approval. The Chair thought the decision would be for Full Council to make as it was a transfer of land. Officers would confirm if the decision would go to Full Council or Cabinet.

Regarding potential sites, the Chair commented that the service could speak with residents and Ward Members who may have potential sites for

development in mind. She felt this would provide a more fully open and transparent step to the process of identifying sites for development. David Moore said that Members were welcome to let the service know of potential sites for development which could be looked at against the criteria. Sites would need to be filtered through the consultation process so that resources could be managed effectively as there were not staff to check every potential site.

Referring to appendix B, the Chair pointed out site number 12 – Manor Way, and said that the site was Elm Road Park, not Manor Way. She went on to say that the site was well used and that it was an open space. She also pointed to site number 13 – Bridge Road and said that it was Richmond Road. Officers noted the Chair's points and would amend the names of the sites.

The Chair asked if there were any sites that would go out to consultation before the next Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting and if any of the sites were in the process of going through a planning application. Keith Andrews said that the Culver Centre and Field site was the closest to go to the planning application stage as it had gone through two stages of consultation already. The Whiteacre site was also on a similar trajectory.

Referring to the CO1 (Civic Offices) site, the Chair questioned if this was dependent on the Council selling this site. David Moore explained that with the extension of CO2 in the Council's Civic Offices, CO1 would become redundant as council staff would move from there to CO2. The plan was to demolish CO1 and to be redeveloped as housing. The Chair sought further detail on what funds would be used to develop the houses on the site and if some of the funds would be sought from the funds that was being used to develop the extension of CO2. David Moore explained that there was a team in place that was developing the extension of the CO2 and the team for CO1 was currently looking at funding options for the site. There had been suggestions of putting the site into the Future High Street Funding bid to develop it as housing but it had not yet been decided, nor had there been any decision as to whether the site would be developed by TRL.

There was further discussion on encouraging Officers to include Members in the consultation process and to ensure names of the sites were accurately named. The Chair noted the list of sites and stated that she still did not agree on the green spaces such as Enborne Green being included in the sites list for housing development and would continue to voice this concern throughout the consultation and planning stages.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1.1 Noted progress on the list of housing development sites to be taken forward for further detailed work, involving engagement with stakeholders and communities.**

- 1.2 Commented on the proposal to add the site known as River View to the site options list agreed in February 2020.**
- 1.3 Noted the removal of sites at Callan Grove, Ridgwell Avenue, Derry Avenue, Garron Lane/Humber Avenue and Springhouse Road from the sites option list.**

7. Housing Development Consultation Process

Presented by David Moore, the report outlined the framework and process for the Council's Housing Development Programme and set out how the consultation process would be brought forward to include Councillors and local residents on sites.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield were read out by Democratic Services:

- Appendix A was good but the process would be too long and may be difficult to keep the interest from others there.
- Appendix B's process would be sufficient. Once the consultation process was over, Lynn Mansfield asked how long it would take before building works would commence. She thought leaflets were good but having more drop-in sessions would be a better idea.

Keith Andrews explained that there were two different consultation processes proposed because the one to be used would be dependent on the size and complexity of each site. For example, the Culver Centre and Field would benefit from using the consultation process in appendix A. Each site had different timescales and projects. Once the consultation process ended, building works could take 12 – 18 months as it would depend on the planning process and the size of the site. This timescale varied across sites.

The Committee discussed whether the COVID-19 pandemic had caused a delay in the timescales of the sites. Officers confirmed that there was an impact on 6 of the sites as the consultation process had been delayed. The Committee queried how consultation would take place and felt there should be some face to face interaction once the pandemic was over and not wholly digital. Officers said that letters could be sent out to residents, with the possibility of accompanying grid sheets for reference and officers or consultants could then discuss with residents over the phone. This method was more labour intensive but some local authorities were using this method. The Committee welcomed the idea of the two different consultation processes and agreed that complex sites required more time.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee commented on the proposed consultation process.

8. Housing Social Value Framework

Presented by Susan Cardozo, the report set out the principles applied when procuring works or services for Housing.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield were read out by Democratic Services:

- Page 57 - were the apprentices from Thurrock? Were they brought in from other areas outside of Thurrock?
- The training given on procurement and tender was excellent as Lynn Mansfield had attended this herself.
- Regarding Wates, could the Tenants Excellence Panel be provided with a report that detailed the works and programmes run by Wates and other providers? It was ideal for the Residents Association to know of these works and programmes so they are up to date on what took place within their community as they were not informed of these.

Susan Cardozo said that the apprentices were from Thurrock and that this was a requirement. Regarding Wates, the Tenants Excellence Panel could invite Wates or any other provider to give a report to the panel.

Councillor Redsell commented that it was good to see a number of apprenticeships working in Thurrock. She went on to say that more detail was needed as to where the sites mentioned in the report were within the Borough.

The Chair felt that a lot of good work was put into social value but was often unnoticed. She questioned whether social value could be added up financially. Susan Cardozo explained that there was no specific method to measure social value and contractors used different models to measure. Some of these included adding the costs of the money spent, costs of the hours put in and the costs of the equipment used. She went on to say that the service was feeding into the Corporate Social Value Framework with the Corporate Team to ensure a consistent method of measuring social value. Councillor Redsell commented that feedback could be sought from other wards on the social value work that was being undertaken and these could be heard from community groups.

The Chair questioned whether more apprenticeships could be acquired through procurement contracts. Susan Cardozo explained that some contracts were not long enough for an apprenticeship but would be requesting for more apprenticeships in contract requirements. The service was also looking into work experience in contracts and said that some apprenticeships came from trade schools. The Chair encouraged the service to find ways to incorporate conditions of social values whether it was through projects with other partners or with colleges to ensure positive outcomes. She praised the service for the good work of social value. Councillor Redsell suggested that the service look into small businesses to secure apprenticeships.

Regarding the Transforming Homes Programme, the Chair suggested that more Thurrock suppliers could be acquired here and to encourage local spending.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny members:

- 1.1 Noted the approach taken to commissioning the Housing investment contracts to secure social value outcomes.**
- 1.2 Noted the recent performance and community benefit projects achieved.**

(Suspending orders were agreed at 9.15pm to allow Members to continue until the end of the Agenda.)

9. Housing Service COVID-19 Response

Presented by Carol Hinvest, the report set out the actions that had been taken by the Housing service due to the challenges which had been faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questions and comments provided by Lynn Mansfield were read out by Democratic Services:

- The service had been excellent in handling the COVID-19 crisis but there had been some reports at the start from elderly residents - workers had been going into homes of the vulnerable to undertake maintenance checks. However, following on from reporting these to the Council, this had now stopped and Lynn Mansfield thanked the service for resolving this quickly.
- At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, Lynn Mansfield had received her letter stating she was vulnerable and to follow shielding guidelines and also offered a food package. However, they were supposed to receive a phone call but there had been none. She said that vulnerable residents should have received a phone call to check on how they were and whether their situation had changed or if more food packages were needed. There should be some aftercare in place.

Carol Hinvest explained that the Housing service did not organise the food packages as it was managed by another team. Those who had been identified as vulnerable had been offered contact and the service had called them. Those in sheltered housing had been contacted by their Sheltered Housing Officer at least twice a week with most tenants being contacted on a daily basis. For those who had not requested a call would have still had a phone call at least to check on them. The service had received the list of those who were shielded.

Councillor Redsell said that she had received some good feedback from residents. However agreed that Lynn Mansfield had a good point on an aftercare package as some residents who were shielded were elderly and were likely to be feeling lonely. She went on to say that some residents did not have the technology and it was important that residents received a phone call to ensure they were checked on. Officers gave assurance that contact with shielded residents would not stop. The service's shielding list had started off with 3,000 and was now over 10,000 and these were classified as critical risk which had been cross referenced with the Social Care Team. The food package support from government should continue until the end of July and after this ended, it would be for the Council to continue the support. When a person was identified as vulnerable, volunteers aimed to make contact within two hours.

Councillor Redsell mentioned that Councillor Piccolo had sent letters and medals out to thank those who had been helping in the COVID-19 pandemic. Councillor Abbas echoed this thanks and also thanked the service for all the hard work they had done in these times. He was pleased to see the service had delivered on their promise regarding rough sleepers and in preventing homelessness. He went on to raise concerns where a few private landlords had been evicting tenants and questioned what process the service had in place to prevent this. Carol Hinvest said that the government's prohibition on eviction for those who had tenancy agreements were clear and those without one but lived with someone or their landlord may be on a licence agreement which did not offer the same protection. The latter may present themselves to the service as homeless although there had been few representations made recently. If the service was aware of an eviction threat, the service could intervene. She asked Councillor Abbas to send any details over that he had and would ask the Private Housing Officers to investigate. The Council did not intend for people to return to the streets. Currently the service had 33 households that had been identified through the government approach to homelessness. 10 people in these households were over 35 so a bulk of these would be placed in shared housing unless they were earning their own income. Two of these people had no recourse to public funds so they would need to be able to support themselves or regulate their immigration status. The remainder of the people in those households would be allocated housing according to their needs and those with higher needs would be provided support.

Councillor Piccolo said that he was happy in sending the thank you letters out as mentioned earlier. He went on to say that he had received some feedback from those letters where volunteers said they had not been able to help as much as they could as the help was not needed. He suggested that the TCCA volunteers could be used to help with phone calls to shielded residents. Roger Harris said that the 'Stronger Together' group had been looking at how volunteers could be utilised in these times and would let the team know of Councillor Piccolo's suggestion.

The Chair echoed the praises to the service and congratulated the service on their hard work particularly where there had been issues in sheltered

accommodation that had been resolved quickly. She went on to ask if the service was working with private landlords on rent issues. Carol Hinvest explained that the service had a dedicated team that worked with landlords to find suitable homes and the team was currently working on a press release to encourage private landlords to work with the service as it was one of the ways to provide housing to those who needed it. The Chair went on to question if the rent issues through private housing had affected the service's budget. Carol Hinvest reminded the Committee of the increase in Universal Credit had resulted in some arrears but the collection rate was 86% which was still considered good. The service had been communicating with tenants and had Financial Inclusion Officers as well as the St Mungos organisation to advise tenants where needed. The last 10 weeks of the current financial year had seen the debit amount of £10,766,00 and collection rate of 95.93% which was good as there had been no arrears letters sent out and no court actions either. The service had been monitoring circumstances of tenants and had been encouraging a move away from the use of payment methods that required physical contact or going out e.g. paypoint. Instead methods such as direct debits and standing orders were being encouraged.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the contents of this report which sets out the response of the Housing service in relation to the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. Work Programme

The following reports would be pushed back from September's meeting for 6 months as the Homelessness Group had been unable to meet for discussion:

- Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy – Action Plan.
- Housing Strategy Update.

The following report was added:

- Private Sector Stock Condition Survey to 19 January 2021.

The meeting finished at 9.46 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