

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 January 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Luke Spillman (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Joycelyn Redsell and Lynn Worrall

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance:

Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Ian Wake, Director of Public Health
Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
David Moore, Interim Assistant Director of Place Delivery
Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Mike Jones, Strategic Lead, Finance
Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager
Alastair Wood, Technical Services Delivery Manager, Housing – Technical Services
Wendy Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed and recorded, with the video recording to be made available on the Council's website.

30. Minutes

Councillor Redsell said that she had mentioned sponsorship on the 'Automatic Gates' item (Clerk's note – within paragraph 12 of the 'Automatic Gates' item and amended to highlight Councillor Redsell's suggestion). Councillor Worrall asked for an update and whether comments had been passed to the Portfolio Holder. Carol Hinvest said that once consultation was completed on the sites mentioned in that report, this would then be fed back to the Portfolio Holder.

The Chair brought up a question from Councillor Fraser Massey (Ward Councillor for East Tilbury) who had asked about the boundaries of licensing for HMOs. The Chair said that Councillor Massey had pointed out that everyone paid council tax so the conditions and protection of HMO licensing should be the same across the Borough. Carol Hinvest answered that when the service had consulted on licensing, central government had set out a strict criteria for licensing on where licensing could be introduced. At that time, East Tilbury did not qualify as there had not been enough HMOs in that area due to density issues and the types of problems reported. The service would be consulting on selective licensing and property identification exercise and private stock condition survey would be undertaken to see whether the private rented sector had changed. This would identify what areas could have

selective licensing. A written response in regards to East Tilbury would be provided to Councillor Massey.

Subject to those amendments, the minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 November 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

31. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

32. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

33. Tenant Satisfaction Survey Results and Initial Action Plan Report

The report on pages 17 – 26 was presented by Chris Seman.

Members thought the response rate of the survey was good and commended the service on this. On Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Councillor Redsell questioned why it was the complainant that had to keep a log of ASB incidences. She was concerned that this would cause issues for the complainant and also questioned whether the Council's contracts with tenants needed updating. She also mentioned that there were fly tipping issues and untidy gardens and that tenants needed to look after their properties. Carol Hinvest said that residents were required to bring forward issues of ASB with evidence to enable enforcement action to be taken. She explained that the service had standard agreements in contracts with tenants and that terms and conditions for tenants were also available online for all to view. Councillor Redsell requested to discuss individual cases of ASB offline.

Councillor Worrall commented that the survey was good and in-depth and that the service needed to target themselves to do better. She thought people would wish to see actions arising from the survey and asked whether the survey would be undertaken annually. She suggested that once lockdown restrictions eased, Officers engage with Ward Councillors to narrow down where ASB hotspots were so the service could look to do better to improve the quality of neighbourhoods. She said that parking permits would not always resolve parking issues as most roads were not ideal to hold two/three bedroom houses and that smaller roads were backed up with cars parking on kerbs. She asked whether the service could look at more cuttings or more hardstandings and if this could come from the HRA or another budget that was needed.

Carol Hinvest answered that the service had been around the Borough to view ASB hotspots and could engage with Ward Councillors on this. She stated that the service worked with the police and other organisations to tackle ASB including more serious ASB such as drug offences and that the

Neighbourhood Officers also patrolled the Borough to identify issues in areas which they then reported to the relevant department e.g. most recently, a sinkhole issue. They also monitored the quality of the neighbourhoods particularly in areas where there were no caretaking services. It was hoped that the survey would be undertaken annually but a sample survey would be taken the next time round to ensure statistically relevant results where progress could be measured. She said that benchmarking helped the Council to identify places that were better than Thurrock and how Thurrock could learn from these places to enable Thurrock to become better.

Noting the figures on Repairs and Maintenance, Councillor Abbas asked what the service was learning from these figures and how the service could improve. He also mentioned that he had heard from tenants that some repairs were not handled well. Carol Hinvest explained that a survey was undertaken each time a repair was completed and that monthly meetings were held with contractors particularly more with Mears as the service's biggest contractor. Where there were dissatisfied tenants, contractors would follow up with these tenants and the service would undertake Learning Action Plans with contractors. It was identified that communication was where most of the issues arose from. She went on to say that the survey results from this report related to general repairs and that the survey undertaken after a repair was completed was different with higher figures as a result. From this survey, the service would learn from the results to identify what learning was needed and whether processes needed to be changed.

Members suggested that a working group could be set up with Mears as Members would be able to help resolve issues. It was said that it would be good for Members to see Mears in action. Officers said that the service could arrange for visits to Mears and Members to meet the General Manager of Mears. Officers would consider options for Members to interact with Mears.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

34. Housing KPI Performance Report (April to November 2020-21)

The report on pages 27 – 38 was presented by Chris Seman. Carol Hinvest stated that Environmental Health Officers were not going out during the lockdown restrictions which would have an impact on the figures in the report.

Referring to paragraph 3.5, Councillor Abbas noted that dissatisfaction levels were very high and asked how services could be delivered to tenants if the service could not understand tenants' needs. Carol Hinvest pointed out that paragraph 3.5 were the results of tenants who were dissatisfied with the service overall and the report broke down what was driving the dissatisfaction in dissatisfied tenants. She explained that the work undertaken from the previous report would link in with the work within this report and that some of the work was already underway such as keeping tenants informed and trying

to understand tenants' views and needs. These would benefit from focus groups once lockdown restrictions were eased.

Councillor Worrall questioned how many repairs were carried out in a year to which Chris Seman answered that Mears alone undertook between 25,000 to 30,000 repairs a year. Councillor Worrall noted that only a small sample of tenants (2,372) were canvassed from 25,000 repairs which was not enough as it also included dissatisfaction responses so the number of satisfied people was quite low. She suggested that some of this work could be incorporated into the service's wider surveys. She also sought more detail on paragraph 3.14 and how this would impact the HRA if £1 million had to be written off as she noted that the finance report highlighted that this would have significant implications. Carol Hinvest explained that the 9.54% reduction in the income from housing benefit did not mean that the service had not recovered that £1 million, it was a reduction and housing benefit was paid directly to the landlord whereas Universal Credit was not. Universal Credit was paid to the tenant and it was for the tenant to pay their rent with this. Despite the Universal Credit claims increase and the reduction in the income from housing benefit, the service was still on target with rent collection. The financial implications of this was that the service had to set aside a budget for bad debts in the HRA and it was assumed that rent arrears would arise despite there being no evictions. There would be no cuts and the bad debt was there as a provision but did not mean that the service would need it. Mike Jones confirmed that as rent arrears increased, so did the bad debt provision. He said that the entire rent income collection was assessed and a provision would be made against any unrecoverable income. Where anything was written off, it would come from the bad debt provision.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

35. Procurement Of Housing Capital Programme Delivery

The report on pages 39 – 48 was presented by Alastair Wood.

The Chair commented that the heating provisions were good as bills would be cheaper and homes would be more energy efficient although it would be a while before all storage heaters were removed from homes. He went on to say that the initiative was good and that the work in regards to the non-traditional homes gave people and the Council a better value for money.

Referring to paragraph 3.3, Councillor Worrall was pleased to see that it was acknowledged that mould and condensation was not a result of people's lifestyles. She questioned how many council flats still had storage heaters and if funding was obtained for the Chadwell flats, she asked whether that funding could be used to upgrade the heating systems in other tower blocks of flats as there was money allocated for the Chadwell flats. She also asked whether lower blocks of flats had storage heaters. Alastair Wood explained that out of the 15 council blocks of flats, Chadwell was the only block to have storage

heaters that were 30 years old and asset data showed that blocks in Grays and Blackshots had storage heaters that were 12 – 15 years old and the blocks in Tilbury were 15 – 20 years old. However, these could be reviewed for upgrade as well. Chadwell's block would be the pilot scheme and potential funding for this could be £1 million. If Chadwell was successful, the service would look to acquire additional funding for the heating systems in the Council's other tower blocks. He added that the Council had some lower blocks of flats that were sporadically placed and had no gas heating.

Councillor Redsell pointed out that the tower blocks in Blackshots were built in the 1960s. She went on to agree that it was not lifestyle's that caused mould and condensation as flats did not have drying rooms and that people could not be expected to open windows on higher floors where some windows were wide enough for a child to fall out of. She was pleased with the heating proposals for the Chadwell blocks and hoped that the Ward Councillor had been informed to which Carol Hinvest confirmed that they had.

Councillor Worrall questioned the financial limit that a Director could approve up to which Roger Harris confirmed was £750,000 but would need to go to Cabinet. Members were informed that this report would be going to Cabinet for approval.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny members were requested to:

- 1.1 Comment on the proposal to procure two new contracts for major works delivery programmes**
- 1.2 Comment on the proposal to delegate authority for award of the above contracts to the Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

36. Annual Allocations Report - 2019-20

The report on pages 49 – 60 was presented by Ryan Farmer.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on whether there was a Band 5 as she thought this had been removed. She also questioned if there were still people being added to the Council's housing list and the number of people on that list. Carol Hinvest explained that the report related to the 2019/20 financial year and Band 5 was abolished in April 2020. Ryan Farmer added that from April 2019, no new applications had been accepted for Band 5 and explained that Band 5 had been there to identify those who had no housing need. Band 5 applicants were still accepted for sheltered housing and most of the Band 5 applicants housed were sheltered housing applicants. However, Band 5 applicants for general needs were no longer acceptable in April 2019. In regards to the housing list, he said that anyone could apply for housing but they needed to meet the criteria to be accepted and added onto the housing list. The criteria had changed to ensure that people with the greatest needs

were prioritised. The report stated 9,000 people on the Council's waiting list which was correct at the time of the report but it was currently around 7,000 people.

Councillor Worrall asked whether the dining room in parlour type houses were allocated as a bedroom or if tenants could still have it as a dining room. Noting the removal of Band 5, she sought clarification on the options for adult children who still lived at home but were not on the housing list in the case of a succession. Ryan Farmer answered that properties were assessed on an individual basis by the relevant team.

In regards to Councillor Worrall's succession case query, Carol Hinvest explained that where there was a joint tenancy, the tenancy would go to the other surviving tenant. Each case was assessed individually and there had been cases where adult children were found to be earning above the one bed net income in the housing register so would not qualify for the housing list and would be expected to have the means to find housing of their own. Where adult children qualified for the housing list, the service would aim to help them but they would not succeed the same property.

Councillor Worrall commented that Thurrock had 8 HMOs and that there was a demand for one bedroom properties and that the service needed to be led by demand. She questioned whether the housing needs were addressed as she noted that there was a proposal for five 3 bedroom houses on Loewen Road and suggested that eight 2 bedroom houses be proposed instead. She also said more two bedroom properties could be built to enable people to downsize when relevant. Carol Hinvest explained that the one bed demand was for sheltered housing and there were a lot of voids in sheltered housing that the service had difficulty in letting. She said that turnover had to be considered and there was a lot of turnover in one bed and two bed properties compared to three bed properties. In addition, the percentage of bids on properties had to be considered. She went on to say that the proposals for developments on sites were based on what was suitable for that site and that there a lot of enquiries for three bedroom properties. She mentioned that the Council had an incentive scheme for downsizing. In regards to HMOs, she said that the Council would not be looking to buy and manage HMOs as it was not a growth area for the service although Councillor Worrall pointed out that it was a need area as people had been housed in hotels since March 2020. Carol Hinvest explained that most of the people housed in the hotels had been moved on and that others would be offered places.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note and comment on the contents of this annual housing allocations report.

37. Housing Service COVID-19 Update

The report on pages 61 – 66 was presented by Ryan Farmer.

Carol Hinvest informed Members that the government had updated guidance for this lockdown which was different from the first. This time, lettings were allowed to continue following guidance and a lot more services could continue to be delivered. The Chair commented that the pandemic had enabled the Council to apply a housing first principle in terms of housing people first and getting people treatments and he hoped that this would be a new way forward. He said that there had been incredible work across the country and congratulated the service on their hard work.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on whether there were still homeless people on the streets. She asked if any of them were ex-servicemen. Carol Hinvest answered that there were still a few homeless people on the streets and that the service had been trying to engage with them but they had no interest in being housed. The service had to activate their emergency weather initiative where they managed to temporarily house some of the homeless people but there remained a few on the streets. She was unsure whether any of the homeless were ex-servicemen but would check.

Referring to evictions, Councillor Worrall questioned whether the service knew how many evictions there would be and if the service were prepared for any of these evicted people that would become homeless. Carol Hinvest explained that there was an ongoing eviction ban from the first lockdown and that the service had heard of issues between private landlords and tenants. It was not known on the number of eviction cases as tenants had only been served a notice which was information between the landlord and tenant. She said that the guidance was clear on six month notices for tenants particularly where rents arrears had occurred during the pandemic. It was also clear that landlords needed to provide evidence to show that they had worked with the tenant particularly where rent arrears had occurred as a result of the pandemic. She went on to say that it was hard for the service to prepare for an unknown situation although they were aware. However, the service had been working to reduce caseloads by housing people so that the number of caseloads would be at a lower number.

Councillor Worrall asked whether the Homeless Reduction Grant covered the service's overall homelessness budget. She also sought clarification on the cold weather fund. Carol Hinvest explained that the cold weather fund was from the government which was for the Council's severe weather emergency protocol to enable rough sleepers to be housed. She said that the Homelessness Reduction Grant was within the General Fund as the homelessness service fell under this. Mike Jones explained that the grant was allocated to the homelessness budget did not cover the whole cost of the homelessness budget and additional funding was always needed from the General Fund to support the homelessness service. There would be an increase next year on the general homelessness budget which would help.

The Chair sought clarification on whether people had been evicted who hadn't been accepted on full license agreements. Carol Hinvest answered that not many had been evicted and that there were a number of decisions made for some that the service no longer needed to accommodate although a number

was still being accommodated. She went on to say that the guidance was opaque in some areas and due to the eviction ban, there was a limited number of accommodation available.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note and comment on the contents of this update report.

38. Housing Revenue Account - Business Plan and Budgets 2021-22

The report on pages 67 – 76 was presented by Mike Jones.

The Chair commented that people did not like to see bills increasing but it would not be sustainably financial to not increase rents as the Council needed to meet costs. He said that this was not always clear to tenants and that it would be difficult for some during the pandemic. He questioned how Officers would be communicating this to residents and what the alternative would be if rents were not increased. Mike Jones answered that the Council would look to reduce services as an alternative and there was very little discretionary available in the HRA. The rent reduction in past years had significant impacts on the HRA Business Plan and it had been a case of looking at what costs could be cut to maintain the existing level of service. Without a rent increase, inflation would take over the budget and a review of the costs within the HRA would be considered and certain works that were not statutory obligations could be reduced such as improving properties for residents.

The Chair sought reassurances that the service had considered the HRA in detail and that there was no significant amount of 'waste' where cost savings could be made without affecting services. Carol Hinvest assured that there was no 'waste' and that there was also not a lot of discretionary spend within the HRA. This was spent on the services needed for the Council's tenants which was identified from the survey results. Roger Harris added that there had been 4 years of rent reduction and that the service had stripped down significant savings in that period. The Chair supported the increases which was needed and it was a moderate increase. He highlighted the importance of communicating the increases clearly to tenants in a sensitive manner.

Councillor Redsell sought more detail on parking areas and garages. Mike Jones explained that the parking areas referred to hardstanding areas and that the maintenance of these. Carol Hinvest added that there were also garage plots that people could rent and build a garage on. In regards to garages, the service would be spending within the budget and the Garage Project Officer had been identifying potential sites for housing or to turn into hardstanding parking spaces.

Councillor Abbas commented that keeping a balanced budget was the priority as well as keeping an income coming in but he felt that with the current pandemic, he would support a 0.5% increase and not the proposed 1.5% increase for rent. He also supported the garage rent increase but not service

charges as residents complained that they did not receive all these services. Carol Hinvest highlighted that only 50% of residents paid the service charges and that residents could raise an enquiry if they felt that the service that they were paying for was not value for money. The Chair felt that service charges were controversial and commented that the other option would be to increase rents and wondered whether Members had other viable alternatives to put forward.

Councillor Worrall noted that 457 people had visited the portal and she asked if all 457 had completed the questionnaire. Ryan Farmer answered that 453 people had visited the portal and although he did not have the number of people who completed the questionnaire, he said that everyone was able to access the site and information there. Councillor Worrall asked that the data on the number of people who completed the questionnaire be sent to her.

Councillor Worrall went on to say that a letter had been sent out informing residents that face-to-face consultations were not taking place. She questioned why the information about the rent increases and service charges could not have been posted out in a half page letter as a way to consult residents instead. This would have ensured that all residents were able to take part in the consultation as not everyone had access to a computer. She also said that the portal was not easy to use and required people to register to use it. Carol Hinvest explained that the information would not have fitted into half a page and that there was a lot of information. She said that the portal enabled better presentation of the information which was more interactive and that she would feed the comments about the accessibility of the portal back to the Consultation Team.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders until 10pm.

Councillor Worrall said that the report did not highlight if residents agreed to the rent increase and that this was a decision for Cabinet, not for scrutiny. As she had been Portfolio Holder in the past, she understood how bad cuts were. She said that the Transforming Homes programme was needed as well as replacing heating systems along with other works ongoing within the service. She agreed with the 1.5% rent increase but she was not supportive of the service charges particularly the 3.90% increase for caretaking service or the 3.48% increase to the concierge service at Piggs Corner as pensioners there were having a more difficult year than usual. She also pointed out that the survey had showed that residents did not feel that service charges were value for money. She felt service charges were too expensive and had never been given a good reason to agree with these. She sought clarification on whether new builds included service charges to which Carol Hinvest confirmed that it was.

Councillor Redsell commented that where there some flats being charged service charges, some tenants were able to maintain those services themselves so service charges should looked at in a different context. She gave the example of the grounds maintenance charge from a few years ago

and said that a lot of younger people were capable of cutting the grass themselves.

RESOLVED:

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the committee consider the base budget for 2021/22**
- 1.2 That the Committee consider and comment on an increase in domestic rent of 1.50%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan from 5 April 2021**
- 1.3 That the Committee consider and comment on an increase in service charges to reflect the costs of running each service in line with the 30-year HRA business plan from 5 April 2021 (detailed in Tables 4 & 5)**
- 1.4 That the Committee consider and comment on the changes to garage rents detailed in para 3.10**

39. Housing Development Programme Update

The report on pages 77 – 86 was presented by David Moore. He updated that Elm Road Park had been removed from the Site Options List.

Councillor Abbas sought more detail on Richmond Road. David Moore answered that the service was not involved in the TACC and was looking at the site only if the TACC was to be removed. The Education Department was looking at other options for the TACC. Roger Harris added that TACC had said that the site was unsuitable for the TACC.

Councillor Worrall welcomed the removal of Elm Road Park as it was the resident's green space. She sought clarification on whether a planning application for the Culver Centre site had been submitted yet to which David Moore confirmed that it had been submitted in December 2020. She went on to say as if there were more sites to come onto the list. David Moore explained that the Housing Delivery Approach paper was due to go to Cabinet and had over 200 potential sites identified but had not made it onto the list yet.

The Vice-Chair was pleased to see the Broxburn Drive site on the list and said that there were issues of cars being abandoned there, garages not being used properly and rubbish dumped along the railway fencing.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to:

- 1.1 **Note progress on the list of housing development sites to be taken forward for further detailed work, involving engagement with stakeholders and communities.**
- 1.2 **Note the amendment to the proposed development area at Broxburn Drive.**

40. Work Programme

The following items were added for the next meeting:

- Leaseholder Survey Results.
- Housing Service Covid-19 Update.
- Head Start Housing Update.

The following items were moved to the next municipal year as these would not be ready for the next meeting:

- Housing Strategy Update
- Private Sector Stock Condition Survey

As this meeting would be Roger Harris' and Carol Hinvest's last meeting for Housing O&S, the Committee thanked them for their hard work and support. The Committee looked forward to working with Ian Wake who would be taking over Roger Harris' position in the interim.

The meeting finished at 9.58 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**