

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 November 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Lynn Worrall (Chair), Augustine Ononaji (Vice-Chair), Mike Fletcher, Maureen Pearce, Joycelyn Redsell and David Van Day

Carol Purser, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance: Councillor Martin Kerin, Ward Councillor for Grays Riverside
Dulal Ahmed, Housing Enforcement Manager
Susan Cardozo, Housing Asset Investment & Delivery Manager
Peter Doherty, Strategic Lead - Housing Operations
Kelly Myers, Housing Development Project Manager
Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director of Housing
Ian Wake, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Julian Wain, Strategic Place Advisor
Grace Le, Senior 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.

The Chair stated that as this meeting was being held in The Beehive instead of the Council Chamber, there was a time limit for the use of this venue which is until 9.30pm. If the items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and recommence at the next Housing O&S meeting.

The Chair stated that she had accepted Councillor Kerin's request to attend tonight's meeting for the Housing Development Programme Update item as he wished to contribute on this item in regards to Seabrooke Rise which was in his ward.

17. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2021 (postponed meeting of 21 September 2021) were approved as a true and correct record.

18. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

The Committee confirmed that they had received and read the Briefing Note - Void Numbers and Process Followed which was circulated on 26 October 2021.

19. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

20. Housing Development Programme Update

The report was presented by Julian Wain.

The Chair invited Councillor Kerin to speak.

Councillor Kerin noted that the report had not referred to the Portfolio Holder (PFH) for Housing's recent announcement in regards to the proposed building of 86 flats on the CO1 side of the Civic Offices. He said that the PFH had mentioned a viable financial model and sought further detail. He also asked when a full report on this would be brought forward. Julian Wain answered that a report would be brought to committee in January 2022 and that work on the proposal was still in progress so further details would be unveiled in that report.

Councillor Kerin requested to attend the committee in January 2022 to hear the report and the Chair agreed. He went on to ask whether parking and other mitigation measures would be considered to make the development sustainable as he was concerned of the impact that the development would have on Seabrooke Rise which was within his ward. Julian Wain said that these would be considered.

Councillor Kerin thanked the committee for allowing him to ask his questions and left the meeting.

Councillor Redsell asked whether the designs of the housing development Loewen Road could be shared with the Committee. She also asked how the houses would be allocated to residents. Kelly Myers answered that the designs of the properties were in keeping with the character of the houses on the street and met planning and parking standards. She said that the application was due for consideration at Planning Committee on 2 December 2021 and that she would share the development designs with the committee. Regarding housing allocations, Ewelina Sorbjan said that the properties would be prioritised for local residents through the Local Lettings Plan.

Councillor Fletcher asked whether the properties on Loewen Road were affordable housing or social housing. Ewelina Sorbjan answered that she would look into the details of this.

Referring to 3.4 of the report, Councillor Fletcher said that the proposal of the revised process was good but it did not give an indication of the number of social homes planned or the issues in delivering these. He felt that the Committee needed to know these details. Julian Wain explained that the service was working on the wider strategy and was a work in progress which could end up as a 5 to 10 year strategy. He said that the service aimed to

bring a report to the Committee on the strategy in January 2022 or March 2022.

Referring to 3.12 of the report, Councillor Ononaji asked whether there was a solution for the antisocial behaviour (ASB) mentioned. Ewelina Sorbjan said that ASB Teams were investigating the complaints and regularly visiting the area. She explained that the best solution in tackling ASB was to focus on growing a strong community.

The Chair said that the process on the Site Options List needed to be refreshed with an agreement on which sites should be on that list to ensure that there was no deviation from it. She felt the old list should no longer be used. She sought assurance that other council departments were communicating with each other as she had experienced a recent issue in regards to Richmond Road. She also pointed out that new homes needed to be Thurrock affordable and of a good quality. Julian Wain said that Members would be updated on sites. He went on to say that the aim of the strategy was to provide a clear process and a clear pipeline of sites.

The Committee asked that future reports needed to have more 'meat on the bone' as some Members felt the report was not detailed enough.

RESOLVED:

Commented on the revised approach to consider the suitability of Council owned sites for redevelopment of new Council housing involving engagement with Councillors, stakeholders and communities.

21. Fees and Charges Pricing Strategy 2022-23

The report was presented by Dulal Ahmed.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on where the 212 HMOs were and said that Ward Councillors needed to be made aware of these in their ward as there were a number of concerns with HMOs. Referring to page 25, she pointed out that the traveller site on Gammon Field was moving 100 yards away from its current site and not 'elsewhere in the borough' as the report stated. Dulal Ahmed answered that the Council's website highlighted where HMOs were. He advised that concerns with HMOs should be emailed to officers and for the Planning department to be notified. The Chair requested that the link be included in the minutes ([Register of licensed HMOs | Houses in multiple occupation | Thurrock Council](#)).

The Chair asked if the service was aware of any hidden HMOs in Thurrock. Dulal Ahmed answered that the service was investigating up to 2,500 unlicensed HMOs. There had been a delay in this due to Covid-19 but was now reinstated.

Councillor Ononaji sought clarification on what were considered discretionary charges. He also asked whether a consultation took place for these. Dulal

Ahmed explained that these were services that the Council provided such as Housing Enforcement Notices as it required time to carry out and a reasonable charge for the cost incurred was allowed. He said that before a notice was served, the service consulted with the landlord and gave time for the landlord to resolve the issue. A number of considerations were taken into account and enforcement was usually served as a last resort to ensure that residents were not at risk of harm.

Councillor Pearce asked if the service benchmarked their fees against neighbouring authorities. Dulal Ahmed answered that the service compared and regularly reviewed their fees against neighbouring authorities to ensure that the service was not expensive.

The Chair questioned what the penalty charge for energy efficiency on paragraph 9 was. Dulal Ahmed explained that the law had changed so that properties with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) that had a rating lower than E could not be let. The service had identified properties with an EPC lower than E and had notified these properties. If these properties continued to be let with an E EPC, the service would need to take enforcement action but landlords were given the opportunity to improve their EPC rating to ensure that it could be legally let.

The Chair asked why discretionary charges had increased by 10%. Dulal Ahmed explained that there had been an increase in the amount of time that staff spent in removing hazards with part 1 actions. There was an increase in complaints from tenants living in poor homes with hazards of damp and mould, structure, sanitation and pest problems. The charges had increased to meet demand and the money was ring-fenced to the Private Housing Team.

The Chair mentioned that at last year's Fees and Charges report, Members had been informed that carbon monoxide alarms would be installed in all council homes by this year's Fees and Charges report. She sought confirmation of this. Susan Cardozo confirmed that this had been done.

Councillor Fletcher noted the increased charge for the 'Sheltered Housing Visitor's Room' in the appendix and queried why this had increased by 25%. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that this fee did not fall within the remit of the Fees and Charges report for Housing O&S and would look into this. The Committee said that they did not agree with the increase in this charge.

Councillor Redsell highlighted concerns of a doorbell entry charge on Jesmond Road and Springfield Road. She would email this information to officers to look into.

RESOLVED:

That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees, including those no longer applicable, and that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee comment on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.

22. Damp and Mould in Council Housing Properties

The report was presented by Susan Cardozo.

Councillor Redsell said that damp and mould would reappear after a paint job. She pointed out that flats in Blackshots were not built for dryers and that there was nowhere for clothes to dry. She said that the problem was persistent and tenants were moved out but new tenants would also move in and face the same issues. She referred to 3.4 and said that damp and mould could be identified as 'no area to dry clothes' and that people could not be blamed.

Councillor Fletcher commented that the service was not explaining the issue to residents properly. He referred to 4.6 and noted that over 500 homes had a reoccurrence of damp and mould. He asked how long a treatment to damp and mould lasted for. He also noted that mould reoccurred in a third of the properties after two years.

Susan Cardozo said that damp and mould issues were identified from repairs data but did not indicate how damp and mould occurred. She said that the consultation for the Blackshots flats was due to end soon. Regarding damp and mould complaints to the service, she said that scripts had been revised to help call centre staff understand the complaints. Training had been provided to Quality Assurance and Tenancy Officers on fuel poverty as well. She went on to say that some properties were older and required more maintenance and the aim was to improve thermal efficiency of buildings that was affordable. Regarding treatments for damp and mould, this was dependent on the cause so the length of time that each one lasted differed but the service needed to address the problem and stop the mould from spreading. Referring to section 5, she said that 4.46% of the housing stock had two or more reoccurrences of mould which was quite low although Councillor Fletcher felt that this was high. She said that the service was focussing on the underlying problems for those properties.

The Chair noted that planning permission had been granted for the cladding to be replaced in some of the Council's flats and felt that this was 'a waste' as the flats could be 'pulled down'. Susan Cardozo explained that if the consultation was positive, then minimum repair would be carried out before the flats were decanted. She stated that the cladding needed replacing as well as the roofs which were leaking to ensure that residents in the flats were safe.

Councillor Pearce queried the Council's partner for the ECO. Susan Cardozo explained that there were a number of grants available that the Council could bid on and the Council had bid on the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. She said that there would be another round of funding for ECO in the new year.

The Chair commented that services in the Council were not 'linking up' and that more needed to be done. She sought more detail on the new heating system for flats in Chadwell. Susan Cardozo explained that Cabinet had

granted approval in March and the system design had taken place since then. The tender process was due to end next week and work would begin as soon as possible. She stated that residents needed to report any repair issues with current storage heaters in the meantime as the new system would not be up and running this winter.

Councillor Fletcher commented that there were issues with cavity wall insulation that had not been carried out well in the past. He asked whether engineers were more experienced in this work now. Susan Cardozo explained that technology had improved since then. She said that where the service was replacing windows in properties now, these included trickle vents for improved ventilation. She said that the service had also started to roll out an external painting programme and were also looking at further external wall insulation programmes to make use of any available eco funding. She also advised the committee that the report had now been released by the Housing Ombudsman on this subject with a number of recommendations and the Housing Service were assessing the current position against these. She offered to bring a report back next year to update on this.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to comment on the Council's approach and performance in relation to the management of damp and mould within the housing portfolio.

23. Garage Project Update

The report was presented by Peter Doherty.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on when the garages would be painted and which garages had been painted. Peter Doherty answered that the garages have had the doors replaced with some painted. He would find out which garages had been painted so far.

The Chair questioned why a consultant was needed to look into the condition of the garages. She also sought more detail on renovating garages into bungalows. Susan Cardozo answered that the stock condition survey had highlighted issues with some of the garages and required a specialist structural engineer to assess the best solution for these. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that the service was checking which garages would be viable as a bungalow. Delargy Close had been a pilot scheme which had received positive reactions and would have an ongoing review to assess how habitable it was.

Councillor Redsell pointed out that most of the garages were not faulty but needed to look aesthetically good. The Chair sought clarification on the legal implications. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that the Council's legal team were advising that each asset had a purpose and that a process was needed to change this purpose such as the case of converting a garage into a bungalow.

Councillor Pearce questioned whether garage plots would be needed in 2030 as petrol cars could be phased out by then and electric cars would be in use. Peter Doherty answered that the service would need to review their provision in the future if this happened.

Councillor Redsell asked whether a survey could be conducted to look into whether garages were used for cars or storage. She mentioned that Claire Harvey had been looking into this before. Peter Doherty explained that this could not be verified as garages were rented out for private use but would look into this. He commented that a large number was likely used for storage purposes as the garages were small for today's large cars.

RESOLVED:

It was recommended that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive this report for information and comment.

The Committee raised concerns over the recommendations of reports and felt that many were still for 'noting' following on from the Scrutiny Review Project of last year. They felt that recommendations needed to show actions and outcomes as discussed in the project's workshop. They stated that comments from scrutiny committees were not added into Cabinet reports. Grace Le answered that she would look into this with her team.

24. Work Programme

The following reports were added:

- Housing Development Strategy – 11 January 2022.
- Garage Project Update – next municipal year.
- Damp and Mould Ombudsman Feedback – June 2022.
- Council Stock Condition Survey – next municipal year.

The meeting finished at 9.15 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**

