

Thurrock - An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The meeting will be held at **7.00 pm** on **10 January 2023**

Committee Room 2, Civic Offices, New Road, Grays, Essex RM17 6SL

Membership:

Councillors Allen Mayes (Chair), Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard, Shane Hebb, Joycelyn Redsell and Lynn Worrall

Carol Purser, Housing Tenant Representative

Substitutes:

Councillors Adam Carter, John Kent, Georgette Polley, Elizabeth Rigby and Lee Watson

Agenda

Open to Public and Press

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To approve as a correct record the minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 21 November 2022.	
3 Urgent Items	
To receive additional items that the Chair is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency, in accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972. To agree any relevant briefing notes submitted to the Committee.	
4 Declaration of Interests	
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Queries regarding this Agenda or notification of apologies:

Please contact Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer by sending an email to Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk

Agenda published on: **30 December 2022**

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DECLARING INTERESTS FLOWCHART – QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Breaching those parts identified as a pecuniary interest is potentially a criminal offence

Helpful Reminders for Members

- *Is your register of interests up to date?*
- *In particular have you declared to the Monitoring Officer all disclosable pecuniary interests?*
- *Have you checked the register to ensure that they have been recorded correctly?*

When should you declare an interest at a meeting?

- **What matters are being discussed at the meeting?** (including Council, Cabinet, Committees, Subs, Joint Committees and Joint Subs); or
- If you are a Cabinet Member making decisions other than in Cabinet **what matter is before you for single member decision?**



Does the business to be transacted at the meeting

- relate to; or
- likely to affect

any of your registered interests and in particular any of your Disclosable Pecuniary Interests?

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests shall include your interests or those of:

- your spouse or civil partner's
- a person you are living with as husband/ wife
- a person you are living with as if you were civil partners

where you are aware that this other person has the interest.

A detailed description of a disclosable pecuniary interest is included in the Members Code of Conduct at Chapter 7 of the Constitution. **Please seek advice from the Monitoring Officer about disclosable pecuniary interests.**

What is a Non-Pecuniary interest? – this is an interest which is not pecuniary (as defined) but is nonetheless so significant that a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard to be so significant that it would materially impact upon your judgement of the public interest.

Pecuniary

If the interest is not already in the register you must (unless the interest has been agreed by the Monitoring Officer to be sensitive) disclose the existence and nature of the interest to the meeting

If the Interest is not entered in the register and is not the subject of a pending notification you must within 28 days notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest for inclusion in the register

Unless you have received dispensation upon previous application from the Monitoring Officer, you must:

- **Not participate or participate further in any discussion of the matter at a meeting;**
- **Not participate in any vote or further vote taken at the meeting; and**
- **leave the room while the item is being considered/voted upon**

If you are a Cabinet Member you may make arrangements for the matter to be dealt with by a third person but take no further steps

Non- pecuniary

Declare the nature and extent of your interest including enough detail to allow a member of the public to understand its nature



You may participate and vote in the usual way but you should seek advice on Predetermination and Bias from the Monitoring Officer.

Our Vision and Priorities for Thurrock

An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.

1. **People** – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay
 - High quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
 - Build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
 - Communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together
2. **Place** – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future
 - Roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
 - Clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
 - Fewer public buildings with better services
3. **Prosperity** – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations
 - Attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
 - Vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
 - Commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21 November 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Allen Mayes (Chair), Steve Liddiard, Shane Hebb, Joycelyn Redsell and Lynn Worrall

Carol Purser, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillor Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair)

In attendance: Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director Housing
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager
Mohammed Ullah, Repairs & Planned Maintenance Manager, Adults, Housing & Health
Julian Wain, Strategic Place Advisor
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

13. Minutes

The minutes of the 29 September 2022 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were approved as a correct record.

14. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items of business.

15. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Redsell made a non-pecuniary interest in relation to Item 8 – Blackshots Estate – Proposals for the Way Forward – as she was a ward councillor for Little Thurrock Blackshots.

16. Fees & Charges Pricing Strategy 2023/24

The report presented set out the fees and charges in relation to services within the remit of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee with charges taking effect from 1 April 2023, unless otherwise stated. In preparation the proposed fees and charges, directorates had worked within the charging framework and commercial principles set out in section three of this report. Also taken into account were the effect that the increase in interest rates and the cost-of-living crisis had on the local economy, our services and the continued implications from Covid. Further Director delegated authority would be sought via cabinet to allow fees and charges to be varied within

financial year in response to changes in government legislation, all other changes in year would be brought back to Cabinet via the service director for transparency. Members were referred to the full list of proposed charges in Appendix 1, and the proposed removal of current fees and charges detailed in Appendix 2 to this report.

Councillor Redsell stated the general public would not necessarily understand the spreadsheets and that an explanation on how it worked would be a good idea. Dulal Ahmed thanked Councillor Redsell for the feedback and the format and structure had been looked at on how best to present the information. It was agreed that for next year's report an explanation of the tables should be included. Councillor Mayes agreed this would be a good ideal going forward.

Councillor Hebb agreed the spreadsheets presented a lack of clarity on who the targeted audience would be and questioned whether the fees and charges set out on the two appendices were targeted towards landlords and not private housing users to which he was informed they were.

Councillor Hebb stated the report did not overly contextualise the volume of use and that it was not clear what the actual total income per fee line and what the total number of transactions per fee line were, as these had not been set out in any context. Dulal Ahmed stated he did not have the broken transaction lines to hand but in terms of HMO licence fees, £80,000 had been generated in 20/21, £31,000 in 21/22 and in 22/23 to date was £23,000. The average licence fee was just over £1300. What had been seen over the last three years was a decline in the number of licensed application forms. However, what we had seen was the number of landlords that were being detecting as unlicensed had increased therefore the CPN income had gone up as a result. Also, in terms of improvement notices, in 20/21 17 notices had been served, 21/22 36 notices and in 22/23 at the end of October only 10 had been served. In terms of housing enforcement, it had seen an increase in the number of complaints made to the team, therefore more education and more enforcement action had to be undertaken as a result of the number of landlords not carrying out works within specified times.

Councillor Hebb referred to paragraph 5.3 of the report and questioned what would not be reasonable to recover to which Dulal Ahmed stated this would be relation to the officer time that was unrelated to that activity, the council would not be able to generate extra income and charge unreasonable fees.

Councillor Worrall questioned whether there was a landlord group that would be consulted with on the increases as she had concerns that these costs would go straight to the people that were renting rooms in those HMOs. Dulal Ahmed stated a landlord forum event had taken place prior to the report being produced, the new charges were showcased during that event so there had been an element of discussion with the landlords that attended. In future, engagement will be made closely with the national resident landlord association which would cover a range of housing issues in relation to landlord engagement, fees and charges and HMO licencing. Councillor Worrell stated that probably then not a lot of landlords know the 11% increase

would be coming their way. Dulal Ahmed stated a second event had been planned for December which would be aimed and designed at HMO landlords.

Councillor Worrall questioned how many unlicensed HMO there were to which she was informed approximately 630. Councillor Worrall stated at a previous meeting it had been agreed that officers were targeted to increase the number that were licensed and questioned what was being undertaken to sort this and was the council improving year on the year the amounts that were licensed. Dulal Ahmed stated that in terms of the last two years, there had been a decrease in the number of license application forms, part of that reason was there had been a decrease in the staffing who carried out the licensing function. There had been an increase in the number of unlicensed properties that had been detected and civil penalties had been served for failing to license voluntarily. That this was ongoing, but work was currently being undertaken to detect unlicensed HMOs through a programme that checked electoral records, council tax and housing waiting list application for those registered under shared accommodation. There was also a campaign of reported unlicensed HMOs.

Councillor Worrall questioned if the team were still short staffed to which she was informed the team were one officer short.

Councillor Worrall referred to recommendation 1.1 – including those no longer applicable – and questioned whether these were no longer applicable or had just been moved across. Dulal Ahmed stated the accredited landlord fee had been removed which was now one fee which was clearer to landlords and reduced any confusion.

Councillor Redsell stated members need to know where the HMOs were in their wards to which Dulal Ahmed stated there was a public register that contained the list of all HMOs and addresses and agreed to populate that information and send to all members. Members were informed that the unlicensed information could not be shared as these were currently under investigation by the team. Councillor Redsell stated having 630 unlicensed HMOs in Thurrock was worrying and staffing needed to be addressed within the team.

Councillor Redsell referred to the 3-year license and stated this was too long as a lot could happen within that time and questioned whether this figure had been set by the government or the council. Dulal Ahmed referred to the 630 unlicensed and stated that a number of those properties would be exempt from licensing because they fell under the support care environment. The plan was to work closely with supported housing to ensure those care homes were properly managed and had the proper property standards within the dwellings in place.

Councillor Redsell stated the 3-year license felt wrong to be left open for that length of time especially when you have young people living in them, she recommended a 1-year license should be provided. Dulal Ahmed noted

Councillor Redsell's comments and stated government recommended a 5-year license with Thurrock recommending a 3-year license. If a 1-year license was to be introduced, which was within Thurrock's gift to do so, there would not be sufficient admin resource to manage that process.

Councillor Mayes agreed with the comments made and that discretion should be used if there were concerns. With the move to the 1-year license being looked into regardless of capacity for the safety of residents, this had to be a priority. Councillor Mayes recommended that a recommendation be added to have a 1-year option not necessarily used as default, but certainly have it there, not just a blanket 3-year because that was very concerning.

Councillor Hebb requested that a report on the HMO strategy be added to the work programme.

Councillor Hebb questioned how long it would take to process a single application to which he was informed the whole admin process would take approximately 10 hours. Councillor Hebb stated with the current trajectory it would take 102 weeks to get through the potential backlog. Dulal Ahmed stated there would be a program of inquiries, with follow ups as well as doing physical checks. There were a number of back-office checks that would need to be carried out to make sure that it was a licensable HMO, or it fitted under additional licensing schemes. Having officers undertake 630 visits was not a good use of staff time as there were other ways to eliminate a number of properties and that process which was already being undertaken.

Councillor Liddiard referred to the 630 unlicensed premises and questioned what that meant in terms of lost revenue. Dulal Ahmed stated that 630 x the cost of a licence fee would result in £800,000 of lost revenue. Councillor Liddiard questioned whether this was over three years to which he was informed the license fee had to be paid in advance with a two-part payment.

Councillor Worrall referred to the removed list and questioned why the sheltered housing visitor rooms had been removed. Ewelina Sorbjan stated this was HRA element that will go into the HRA rent setting report.

The chair thanked members for the comments.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees, including those no longer applicable, and that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.**
- 2. That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that Director delegated authority would be sought via Cabinet to allow fees and charges to be varied within a financial year in response to legal and regulatory requirements.**

3. **That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted in regard to HMO an additional recommendation to grant a 1-year licence option, not necessarily default, but to have in place.**
4. **A report on the HMO strategy be added to the work programme.**

17. Housing Ombudsman Report: Spotlight on Damp and Mould

This report presented provided an update on how the Council was addressing the management of damp and mould within its housing stock in the context of the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight on Damp and Mould Report published in October 2021. The Ombudsman's report had identified 26 recommendations across four main themes to assist social landlords with the management of damp and mould within its housing stock. The Committee had received two reports in June and November 2021 which had set out the Council's approach to managing damp and mould within its housing stock. Since the publication of the Ombudsman's report, Thurrock had made progress in adopting a number of service improvements and measures in managing damp and mould within its properties which were consistent with the Ombudsman's recommendations. There remained some further progress in some areas, which were highlighted in the report. Members were reminded that the report had been written prior to the tragic event in Rochdale with key learnings coming out of the coroner's report which the council were reviewing in light of their own approach and practices. Ewelina Sorbjan stated the coroner's findings would be taken very seriously and that the council already had a very proactive approach. A task and finish group had already been put in place to look at wider partners and other housing associations that operate within the borough.

Councillor Redsell stated she had been fighting this for the last 20 years but still people were being placed in properties they should not be in, some of those buildings had been built a long time ago and were falling apart. Councillor Redsell referred to "reasonable state of repair" and stated this should be "good repair".

Councillor Worrall referred to the 18 properties that were known to have on-going issues with damp and mould and stated these were quite high numbers where it was known of reoccurring issues of damp and mould. Councillor Worrall questioned officers if they were confident there were no houses in the state of repair with mould across the ceiling, kitchen and bedrooms, confident that there were no children living in bedrooms with bronchitis and whether there were any medical cases or any live court cases against the council because of the conditions they were in. Mohammed Ullah referred to the legal disrepair cases, the live cases, and stated he received a weekly report of live disrepair cases and would be attending weekly meetings to review the current track of properties where residents had sought legal recourse. Efforts were being made to resolve those cases with those properties being reinspected, resurveyed, treated and matters resolved before they go to a tribunal hearing. That delays with communications with legal representations may occur but would communicate with residents. There was a live repair tracker of live

cases that would be reviewed on a weekly basis as part of the council's practice. Councillor Worrall noted that some government decarbonation fund had been applied for and questioned when this would be known if successful and whether this would be for a specific program. Ewelina Sorbjan stated the bid submission date was last week with government making announcements early next year as the conditions of delivery of the works under bid would start next April and hoped to hear by January.

Councillor Worrall referred to the heat pumps and questioned whether these were in place to ensure the flats at Chadwell would be warmer this year and questioned whether the Gray's Tower had now been finished. Ewelina Sorbjan stated the heat pump programme would run until the end of March with the programme being on track. Ewelina Sorbjan referred to Gray's Tower where all the insulation had been installed, windows were being replaced and finishing works on individual flats being completed. With feedback already from residents that the insulation having made a huge difference to temperatures.

Councillor Liddiard referred to the ombudsman's recommendations of four key themes and questioned whether this would be adopted as the council's policy. Councillor Liddiard also questioned how the council knew that they were getting to everybody who was living with damp and mould. Mohammed Ullah stated the council was already proactively adopting ombudsman's four themes in the council's own policy. That working with residents, providing information, guidance and support when necessary, addressing the structure of the building and all external elements and communicating with residents to get works programmed and actioned.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether damp and mould would be a priority and how much money had been put aside in financial terms to get the job done properly. Mohammed Ullah stated this had always been a priority and listed as a key objective within the housing asset management strategy. Working alongside residents was crucial by giving them the necessary information to help them report back any issues. In terms of finance, budgets were healthy, with HRA in good shape and set to deliver on damp and mould and all the asset management activities that were taking place.

Councillor Mayes stated that listening to residents was vital and that residents may have felt, in the initial stages, that they were to blame. Councillor Mayes agreed that the inferring from blame to take responsibility was really important. That residents should not have to live nor suffer from damp and mould when the council had the power to help.

Councillor Hebb referred to page 34, paragraph 4.8, The Housing Repairs Quality Assurance, and questioned there should be some form of independence in that team, potentially between the council and collaborators. That by creating a degree of independence would create trust into the system and provide an impartial view. Councillor Hebb also questioned how organisations and the quality of their work was validated and whether spot checks would be undertaken following the work being undertaken.

Mohammed Ullah highlighted members to the report where a trial had been undertaken on some of the most prevalent properties, with surveys being sent and contact had been made with residents questioning whether there had been any reoccurrences after three or six months after the work had been undertaken. Ewelina Sorbjan thanked Councillor Hebb for the challenge and would take this away. Councillor Hebb stated with the agreement of the committee to add this as an additional recommendation.

Councillor Redsell thanked Mears for the meetings they had with councillors and stated that sometimes the council were asking them to do things which were not always possible.

Councillor Mayes stated the council had to be open and honest and it was very sad that it had taken the death of a young child to spearhead this, with national news and members across all parties fighting for the issue to be resolved for many years. Councillor Mayes stated that councils and other bodies being on notice by the Minister was a tragedy, but also a good thing to ensure residents get the service that they desperately need.

Councillor Worrall referred to the proposed damp and mould survey to be sent out properties and suggested this could be posted with rent letters.

Councillor Worrall also stated there were a lot of housing stock in Thurrock with no damp and mould issues.

Members requested the housing stock data be presented to them in the form a briefing note.

RESOLVED

- 1. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the Council's progress on the management of damp and mould within the housing portfolio in relation to the Ombudsman's Spotlight report on Damp and Mould.**
- 2. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the Council's measures that were still in development on the management of damp and mould.**
- 3. That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended the appointment of an independent body to effectively quality assure on the work being undertaken and to give residents confidence.**
- 4. That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that all council tenants be wrote to regarding the completion of a survey at the next possible opportunity.**

18. Allocations Policy Update 2022-23

The report outlined the reasons why local authorities were required to have an up-to-date Housing Allocations Policy. Further detail within the report would set out the context surrounding several areas of existing policy where engagement feedback indicated needed updating. The report recommended changes that the council should make to the Housing Allocations Policy which would ensure that the document adapts, remained fit for purpose, meet the needs of residents seeking to access the Housing Register and supported the delivery of the aims, objectives and principles of the housing service and wider organisation. Members were referred to the appendix which was a draft working document.

Councillor Mayes thanked officers for the report. Councillor Mayes agreed to reducing the age criteria for sheltered houses but stated he felt this should not go any lower than 55. He was also mindful that some residents needed more help than others and residents should not be charged for items they do not need or use. Ryan Farmer commented that the concept of sheltering housing was less about the age of those that lived in them and more around those that needed housing related support.

Councillor Redsell referred to “Band 5 – No Housing Needs” and questioned why these were still required as there was no need for them. Ryan Farmer stated when the policy had been last updated, no applicants would be accepted into Band 5 except for those who had been within the age criteria for sheltered housing at that point in time. A strategic decision had been made that if residents wanted to move to sheltered housing and benefit from the support even if there was no housing need, they would continue to be supported. The renaming of this band could be considered to prevent any confusion. Councillor Redsell referred to the “Stay Put Policy” and stated residents needed to know more about this policy to which Ryan Farmer stated the high-rise blocks were built with compartmentalisation in mind and designed to be that way to keep people safe and also those tackling the fires. He stated this was the advice given and shared with residents and there remained a need to inform residents. Officers shared handy leaflets and lots of guidance to residents and also took time to talk to residents about what they would need to do in the case of fire.

Councillor Liddiard referred to page 103, paragraph 1.1.1 and questioned whether this was true that the sheltered housing officer makes courtesy calls to every tenant each morning. Stated that warden duties were different dependent on who the warden was and more needed to be done. Councillor Liddiard referred to page 105, paragraph 6.1.1 and asked for clarification that those applicants with rent arrears on a current tenancy or council tenancy within the last six years would not get onto any band. Ryan Farmer stated sometimes the best thing to do for those people was to help them to move, sometimes into a smaller property where they would pay less and have access to benefits, they would be entitled to. There were some rules in the policy where discretion could be used to do the right thing. Councillor Liddiard referred to the housing strategy and the model of sheltered housing and how this could look very different in the future. There was an aspiration in the

strategy to look at this provision, what it meant, what was required, and this was currently a piece of work that was being explored and were committed to.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether some sheltered housing scooter recharging facilities could be made available to which Ryan Farmer stated he had been managed to look at this type of facility to ensure there was a good consistent approach as this could be a lifeline for some people.

Councillor Hebb referred to page 104, paragraph 5 of the report and questioned what the figure were of people in terms of High-Rise Allocations and Band 4 Cumulative Need. Ryan Farmer referred to Band 4 stated this was very difficult to tell as circumstances changed all the time, the information recorded at that point in time was only accurate at that point in time. The work had been ongoing with the tenancy management office visiting every property of high-rise residents to ask questions about what people would need to evacuate their property. Councillor Hebb requested whether this information could be supplied to members through a briefing note.

Councillor Hebb referred to page 106, paragraph 7 of the report, Identify and Eligibility Verification, and questioned what safeguards were in place for someone professionally verifying someone's details. Ryan Farmer stated this would come down to truth, professional accountability and responsibility and anyone found in breach of that accountability the appropriate action would be taken.

Councillor Hebb referred to narrative on extra care on page 108, paragraph 11 of the report and questioned whether this would be a change of policy or change in infrastructure and questioned how long this had been a concern. Ryan Farmer stated this had been a challenge for some time. This had been addressed the last time the work had been undertaken and the time before that. That consideration for need would be made at that point and were learning with every development with schemes built by the council, who would be responsible for the reactive and responsive needs of residents.

Councillor Hebb referred to foster carers and questioned how a foster carer's status was being continually reviewed to validate that exemption, to which Ryan Farmer stated detailed reporting was being undertaken and could be produced to identify anyone with a priority. With this group being a small cohort of people, it would be quite easy to track.

Councillor Worrall referred to the number of applicants on the housing list and stated she thought there were a lot of people out there that needed housing following the clear out of Band 5. It was important to recognise succession in resident's situations and how unfair this approach was. There was also a need to build the right houses for the right people that were coming forward. Ryan Farmer stated succession was a very difficult situation but was proud of the direction it was taking with the person-centred approach. Where there was opportunity to do the right thing for residents, discretion could be used by colleagues looking to do the right thing for them. The needs would be reviewed when new developments were proposed.

Councillor Worrall congratulated Ryan Farmer for the good piece of work.

Councillor Liddiard referred to foster carers who take in children, who would be moved to a new house and then six months down the road the child moved on, they don't take any more children and stated that could not be right and was there anything that could prevent this from happening. Ryan Farmer stated this was a difficult situation, when someone had been awarded a tenancy unless that tenancy came with particular grounds to end, there was currently nothing that could be done in that situation.

Councillor Mayes stated that if a house was provided to someone for a specific reason such as foster care, why the tenancy would not be time limited and whether this would be something that could be put in place. Ryan Farmer stated that tenancies offered were not time limited and work had been explored around flexible tenancies and fixed term tenancies which had been halted by cabinet. Ewelina Sorbján stated that nationally there had been a move away from debating the sort of fixed term tenancies which had been the direction of travel that the council was getting from government.

Councillor Redsell questioned whether "downsize policy" had completely gone or because there were still people living in homes that were too big for them. Councillor Redsell also asked for the current status of that policy to which Ryan Farmer stated the policy had not stopped, there was an officer within the team dedicated to downsizing which had been very proactive. There were some households who may be interested in downsizing, and they were being reached out to. A good package of support, financial support and logistical support would also be provided.

Councillor Mayes stated he understood the broader strategic view and the sense of not necessarily wanting to add time limits onto tenancies but those two, three or four-bedroom houses with only one person living there would be far more beneficial to a family. Councillor Mayes questioned whether any data was available on how many of those two, three and four bedroom homes only had one person in them.

Councillor Mayes thanked Ryan Farmer for the report and thanked members for their comments.

RESOLVED

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the recommended changes to the Housing Allocations Policy as set out in sections 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, 9.2, 10.2, 11.2, 12.2 and 13.2.

19. Blackshots Estate - Proposals for the Way Forward

Members were briefed on the report that sought approval for the development of the proposals for the Blackshots estate for consultation with residents.

Councillor Mayes thanked Julian Wain for the report.

Councillor Redsell stated with some frustration that the development proposals were not moving quickly enough as she had been fighting for this for nearly 20 years and wanted to see this come to fruition. Councillor Redsell questioned why Chapel Farm, land south of Stanford Road and Horndon recreation ground had been identified as potential options. Referred to the land around the flats and the 56 acres of fields that should be included into the specification. That it was not right to let these three buildings remain which were not fit for purpose and which the council had said were not fit for purpose. The survey confirmed that residents liked where they lived, they just did not like what they lived in. Julian Wain stated the intention of the report was about clarifying the principle of demolition and starting at the beginning of the process. Members were informed there had been a number of council sites examined but to date no consideration had been made of private sites. This was partly because of location and redeveloping the local area. It was also not wise to add the cost of purchasing private land to the cost of the scheme. In terms of the Fields in Trust land, should replacement be necessary all suggestions were welcome.

Councillor Liddiard asked for clarification that the aim was to repair and upgrade the high-rise blocks and then put a redevelopment plan in place to knock the flats down and put those tenants into new buildings. Julian Wain stated rather than spending large amounts of money on doing that, a scheme would be developed for knocking the flats down and replacing them with the housing department committed in the short term to maintaining them.

Councillor Liddiard suggested that some high-level discussions take place to discuss the project plan and finances that the whole council could agree to, not just this committee. That a decision should not be made until discussions had taken place with planning, the leader and all members. Julian Wain stated this report would go to cabinet for a decision and stated that whatever development was agreed would also go to Cabinet and would be subject to planning permission.

Councillor Mayes stated the reason for the report was to move forward and although this was a cabinet decision all members wanted the best for their residents.

Councillor Hebb stated the high-rise flats were a failed post war experiment that did not work in Thurrock or nationally. Councillor Hebb suggested that members visited and looked at some of the issues first hand which would be helpful to understand. The report contained a strong indication of viewpoints and was relatively balanced so there was a will but questioned was the skill in the Council. Councillor Hebb stated members needed some assurances that this project would be different to other projects embarked on by the council that had not always gone to plan. Julian Wain stated that the Council would build a team for the development, appoint advisors to undertake design, independent tenant advisors to help tenants through the process in terms of being comfortable with the specification and in terms of movement, decanting

in and out of buildings and having advisors in terms of managing the project. The delivery of the scheme would require a good quality project plan and a good property program. Ewelina Sorbjan stated that the sum of £200,000 was required in order to buy in expertise to help the project be delivered and for the shaping of the scheme. Councillor Hebb reiterated that assurances were required to ensure this was done right and needed proper ownership and capability.

Councillor Hebb referred to the five-week consultation starting in winter 2022 which would be looking for a cabinet decision by the middle of March 2023 and questioned whether that was sufficient time to undertake this consultation. The council was embarking on an ongoing consultation process, not necessarily as a defined period as one of the roles of the independent tenant advisor would be that source of advice and source of relationship with tenants. They would also facilitate and conduit their concerns into the council.

Councillor Worrall stated she was pleased that we had got to this stage and that members wanted to see this happen as soon as possible. Although, it had to be acknowledged that housing development had stalled with no building being undertaken. Concerns that the housing waiting list would be stalled even further due to the families that would need to be decanted from those flats, which in turn could cause a snowball effect on the housing waiting lists. It also had to be acknowledged this was a difficult time for the council to be embarking on this massive redevelopment. Councillor Worrall would like to see the consultation happen but acknowledged this project would not be undertaken next year.

Councillor Redsell stated another survey would just give residents hope, the project had to move forward as residents did not want to live in these flats for another year.

Councillor Liddiard stated that lessons could be learnt from other authorities who had undertaken similar projects and those that were still decanting residents.

RESOLVED

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on:

- 1.1 The proposed approach to developing proposals for the future of the Blackshots estate.**
- 1.2 The requirement to carry out essential remedial works to the Blackshots tower blocks.**
- 1.3 The principal of redeveloping the estate to deal with the issues affecting the existing blocks, to provide good quality housing and to enhance the available stock of housing in Thurrock.**

- 1.4 Note that a consultancy budget of £200,000 had been identified from within the existing Housing Revenue Account feasibility reserve to develop proposals for the future of the estate including appointing Independent Tenant Advisers.**
- 1.5 The proposal to commence detailed design and planning for a proposed scheme to consult on with residents and the proposed approach to consultation.**

20. Work Programme

Members made the following comments on the work programme:

Members made the following comments on the work programme:

HMO Strategy report to be added to the 7 March 2023 committee.

Ukrainian Settlement Scheme report to be added to the 7 March 2023 committee.

The role of the Estate Officer report to be added to the 7 March 2023 committee.

The meeting finished at 9.28 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**

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10 January 2023		ITEM: 5
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Housing Revenue Account – Rent Setting and Budgets 2023/24		
Wards and communities affected: All		Key Decision: Key
Report of: Cllr Luke Spillman – Portfolio Holder for Housing		
Accountable Assistant Directors: n/a		
Accountable Directors: Ewelina Sorbjan – Interim Director for Housing, Jonathan Wilson – Interim Director for Finance		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report sets out the base budget position for 2023/24 following the review and update of the 30-year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The Business Plan is a statutory requirement used to assess the ongoing financial viability of the HRA and its ability to deliver the Council's housing priorities.

The Business Plan considers whether the revenue streams from all sources (principally rents and service charges) are sufficient to finance anticipated expenditure on housing stock (both revenue and capital), service delivery, debt management cost and recharges.

Local authorities and registered providers have the ability to increase social and affordable rents in line with the Governments policy statement on Rents for Social Housing 2018. This report sets out the proposed rent increase for 2023/24 and the impact on the HRA.

The government launched a consultation on limiting rent increases in 2023/24 to help tenants with the cost of living. Without a cap, social landlords would have been permitted to increase rents by the consumer price index (CPI) measure of inflation in September 2022 plus 1%, allowing a maximum increase of 11.1%. It has now been announced that rents for 2023/24 will be capped at 7%. As a result, this will be the recommended rent increase within this report.

Whilst this is beneficial to the Housing tenants within Thurrock, the disparity between inflationary pressures and the Councils ability to raise rents accordingly, results in a deficit with the overall budget for 2023/24, and as a result, reductions in expenditure will need to be made. These are detailed in para 3.6.

The Transforming Homes programme, which is intrinsically linked to the stock condition survey has identified the investment required annually across the life of the 30-year Business Plan. Delivery of these works will ensure properties reach and are maintained to the decent homes' standard. Specific capital investment in certain types of dwellings is also needed, namely non-traditional properties. This encompasses internal and external features of residential units (general needs and sheltered) as well as other assets such as communal hallways, parking areas, and garages. The medium-term forecast is shown in **Table 5** of this report.

Table 5 also shows the additional planned investment into the stock, as well as works needed to comply with carbon reduction legislation.

The Housing service is focussed on ensuring that the HRA remains financially sustainable, and that the right priorities are set for capital expenditure to ensure residents have safe and secure accommodation maintained to a good standard of repair.

The proposed changes to rents and service charges are essential to ensure the level of investment identified in the business plan can be fulfilled and the HRA properties are provided to a standard that primarily meets the needs of residents, whilst also delivering the statutory responsibilities of the Council.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed base budget for 2023/24 (as set out in Table 1).**
- 1.2 That the Committee consider and comment on a proposed increase in domestic rent charges of 7%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan, to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**
- 1.3 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed increase in service charges to reflect the cost of running each service in line with the budget estimate from 3 April 2023.**
- 1.4 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed charges for garage rents (para 3.10) to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**
- 1.5 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed increase in Travellers sites rent (para 3.11) to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The proposed Housing Revenue Account budget for 2023/24 is summarised below.

The budget is also part of the wider long term strategy and financial viability of the service, which is the basis of HRA business plan.

- 2.2 **Table 1** shows the main areas of service delivery within the HRA budget.

Table 1: Provisional 2023/24 budget summary

Service	2022/23 Budget	Rent and Income	Bad Debt Provision	Inflation	Borrowing and Capital Financing	Energy and Fuel	Total Adjustment	2023/24 Budget
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Rent and Income	(52,700)	(2,974)	583				(2,391)	(55,091)
Financing and Recharges	25,232			0	1,855		1,855	27,087
Operational Services	14,575			624		259	883	15,458
Repairs and Maintenance	12,893			948			948	13,841
Grand Total	(0)	(2,974)	583	1,572	1,855	259	1,295	1,295

Rent and Income

- 2.3 Income raised through tenants' rents and service charges is ring-fenced and cannot be used to fund expenditure outside of the HRA.
- 2.4 By applying the full 7.0% rent increase, the HRA will generate additional revenue of £2.974m. This additional resource is required to finance increased costs in the existing level of services, and to provide further mitigation against bad debt and tenants rent arrears. This will also allow the service to maintain its investment commitment to the HRA Capital Programme and ensure the Council complies with all of its statutory duties.

The rent budget includes an allowance for forecast right to buy sales and void loss to reflect income that the HRA will not receive. This represents 1.65% of the total gross income budget

Bad Debt Provision

- 2.5 An allowance has been made to increase the level of bad debt provision that the HRA holds for bad debts. This has been increased to reflect the additional income that the HRA expects to receive

Inflation

- 2.6 An allowance has been made on the existing budgets to allow for projection inflation in the forthcoming financial year. Nationally, the level of inflation that needs to be applied is significantly higher than in previous year in order to ensure that the expenditure is set at a realistic level.

Inflation has been as set follows:

Pay	4.00%
Increments	1.80%
R&M Contracts	9.70%
Capital Programme	9.70%
Bad Debt Provision	2.00%
Mears Contract	6.00%
Fuel	50.00%
Utilities	50.00%

Borrowing and Capital Financing

- 2.7 The HRA is required to make a revenue contribution to the capital budget each year in order to finance expenditure to meet the decent homes standard. This has been increased by £0.451m for 2023/24.

Furthermore, the HRA also need to invest further into its existing stock to meet legislative requirements and long term improvements.

The current financial year has seen a significant increase in the costs of borrowing, and this is forecast to remain in the next financial year. The forecast rate of borrowing has been set at 4.5%

Energy and Fuel

- 2.8 An inflationary uplift of 50% has been made on the energy and fuel budgets. This will address the increase in costs which have been incurred during the current financial year and allow for additional energy cost rises in 2023/24.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

Rent Charges

- 3.1 The proposed rent increase has been carefully considered. The recommendation is that a 7.0% uplift applied to both rent and service charges for 2023/24. It is imperative that this is implements to ensure that the HRA can mitigate some of the inflationary cost pressures which are projected in the forthcoming financial year.

- 3.2 The majority of properties within the HRA are charged at social rent. However, there are also a small proportion of newly developed units which are based on an affordable rent level (meaning it cannot exceed 80% of the equivalent market rent). This ensures these properties generate sufficient revenue to offset their ongoing associated costs without a wider impact financial on the HRA.
- 3.3 Based on the overall average of the stock, the impact on properties based on the average rent per number of bedrooms this is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Social Rent properties

Number of Dwellings by Bedroom	Number of Properties	Average 2022/23 Actual Rent	Average 7% uplift 2023/24	Average 2023/24 Actual Rent	2023/24 Annual Rent Yield
0	238	£64.32	£4.50	£68.83	£851,791
1	2734	£77.14	£5.40	£82.54	£11,734,409
2	2154	£84.52	£5.92	£90.44	£10,130,182
3	4048	£104.95	£7.35	£112.30	£23,638,916
4	247	£117.54	£8.23	£125.77	£1,615,371
5	10	£121.35	£8.49	£129.85	£67,520
6	3	£129.13	£9.04	£138.17	£21,555
Total / Average	9,434	£91.56	£6.41	£97.97	£48,059,744

Affordable Rents

- 3.4 The rent setting process for the existing affordable rent properties will follow the same guidance as applied to the properties within the HRA that are charged a social rent. The Council has ensured that no rent exceeds the Local Housing Allowance level. The impact of a 7% rent increase is shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Affordable Rent properties

Number of Dwellings by Bedroom	Number of Properties	Average 2022/23 Actual Rent	Average 7% uplift 2023/24	Average 2023/24 Actual Rent	2023/24 Annual Rent Yield
0	1	£ 137	£ 10	£ 147	£ 7,646
1	94	£ 131	£ 9	£ 140	£ 685,604
2	111	£ 154	£ 11	£ 165	£ 949,692
3	39	£ 197	£ 14	£ 211	£ 427,345
4	2	£ 239	£ 17	£ 255	£ 26,561
5	1	£ 243	£ 17	£ 261	£ 13,547
Total / Average	248	£152.94	£10.71	£163.65	£ 2,110,395

- 3.5 The definition of rent for affordable housing (inclusive of service charges) must not exceed 80% of gross market rent. Gross market rent means the rent (inclusive of any applicable service charges) for which the accommodation might reasonably be expected to be let in the private rented sector. Property size, location type and service provision must be taken into account when determining what gross market rent a property might achieve if let in the private rented sector.

Budget deficit and mitigation

- 3.6 After the application of the rent recommended rent increase, and inflationary cost pressures, there is a resulting budget deficit of £1.408m for the HRA in 2023/24. There is a statutory requirement to set a balance budget, and therefore this deficit needed to be mitigated.

In order to minimise the impact on tenants and avoid significant deterioration in the condition of the stock, the following as the proposed savings that will need to be made in order to finance the overall budget:

1. Application of a 5% vacancy factor within the staffing budget £0.547m

This will mean holding post which are currently or become vacant during the year open before being recruited to. This also extends to not covering the post with temporary or agency staff in order to realise the saving, unless it is absolutely essential and will otherwise cause significant detriment to tenants.

There are currently number of vacant posts within the HRA, it is envisaged that this will cause minimum disruption to key front line services. Furthermore, by applying a vacant factor, it eliminates the need from staff redundancies which will have a negative impact on the services, as well as incurring additional expenditure.

This savings can be reviewed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting exercise, when there is greater certainty around the economic climate

2. Pausing of the assisted decorating programme £0.634m

The assisted decorating programme was re-introduced into the budget as part of the 2020/21 budget setting process.

It is recommended that this is halved for 2023/24, and the resulting saving used to mitigate the budget deficit.

This has been identified as a potential savings on the basis that it has the least impact on the majority tenants, although it is acknowledged that this will impact a specific cohort of residents,

3. Increase in service charges £0.114m

The recommendation to increase service charges in line with rent increases at 7% generated an additional £0.258m, which is included in the base budget shown in **Table 1**.

However, service charges should be set to ensure that they recover the full cost of providing the service. There is currently a differential between the level of charge which tenants receive, and the income which the Council recovers.

Therefore, in light of the decision by Central government to limit the amount by which Councils can raise dwelling rents, it is proposed that service charges are increased by 10.1% for 2023/24, which was the September 2022 CPI. This will yield an additional £0.111m. Increases to service charges did not form part of the government's consultation nor the decision.

The alternative rent scenarios of a 5% and 3% increase the deficit by £0.949m and £1.899m respectively. To put this into context, this would result in having to consider a reduction in the planned maintenance programme of between 18% to 35%. It is therefore felt that these are not viable options when considering the impact it would have on service delivery.

Service Charges

- 3.7 In order to ensure that the HRA recovers the cost of providing services to tenants which are specific to their tenancies, an increase to the current charge will need to be applied. For 2023/24 in accordance with **Table 4** below.

Table 4: Increases to service charges in line with increased costs

Service	2022/23 Weekly Charge (50 weeks)	2023/24 Weekly Charge (50 weeks)
	£	£
Lift Maintenance	£3.47	£3.71
Door Entry	£3.66	£3.92
Communal Electricity	£1.63	£1.74
Bruyns Court Electricity	£3.66	£3.92
Caretaking - Bronze Sheltered	£0.66	£0.71
Caretaking - Bronze Standard	£3.05	£3.26
Caretaking - Silver	£8.64	£9.24
Caretaking - Silver Enhanced	£10.13	£10.84
Caretaking - Gold	£14.39	£15.40
Caretaking - Gold Enhanced	£15.89	£17.00
Caretaking - Beaconsfield	£15.67	£16.77

Concierge	£36.37	£38.92
Concierge - Piggs Corner	£39.22	£41.97
Sheltered Housing Service	£11.04	£11.81
Heating - Sheltered Complex	£6.34	£6.78
Heating - Helford Court	£10.10	£10.81
SCH	£30.00	£32.10
Emergency Lighting	£0.20	£0.21
Enhanced Tenancy Management	£44.70	£47.83

- 3.8 Service charges are not subject to the prescribed rental increase which related to Dwellings rents but are based on full cost recovery.

However, the recommendation is to not to increase service charges at the same level as dwelling rent for 2023/24, which would be an increase of 7%.

There remains a disparity between the level of the current charge and the cost of the service provision. This will need to be taken into account in future service charge considerations in order to ensure that the costs are fully recovered. As the forecast inflationary costs pressures are currently at the level they are, it has been decided to defer any additional increases until future years.

As detailed in savings option 3, under para 3.6, it is further recommended to increase the service by 10.1% to reflect the September 2022 CPI rate. This proposal will result in service charges being at the level detailed below

Table 4a: Increases to service charges in line with September 2022 CPI

Service	2022/23 Weekly Charge (50 weeks)	2023/24 Weekly Charge (50 weeks)
	£	
Lift Maintenance	£3.47	£3.82
Door Entry	£3.66	£4.03
Communal Electricity	£1.63	£1.79
Bruyns Court Electricity	£3.66	£4.03
Caretaking - Bronze Sheltered	£0.66	£0.73
Caretaking - Bronze Standard	£3.05	£3.36
Caretaking - Silver	£8.64	£9.51
Caretaking - Silver Enhanced	£10.13	£11.15
Caretaking - Gold	£14.39	£15.84
Caretaking - Gold Enhanced	£15.89	£17.49

Caretaking - Beaconsfield	£15.67	£17.25
Concierge	£36.37	£40.04
Concierge - Piggs Corner	£39.22	£43.18
Sheltered Housing Service	£11.04	£12.16
Heating - Sheltered Complex	£6.34	£6.98
Heating - Helford Court	£10.10	£11.12
SCH	£30.00	£33.03
Emergency Lighting	£0.20	£0.22
Enhanced Tenancy Management	£44.70	£49.21

Tenants Engagement

- 3.9 Due to the fact that the proposed increase to rents has been through a formal government consultation, whereby tenants and tenants' representative bodies were able to take part, and the government instruction to cap the housing rent increases at 7%, no further engagement has been undertaken with tenants.

Garage Rents

- 3.10 The current weekly charge for garage rent for council residents is £11.10 per week. It is recommended that charges are increased in 2023/24 to £12.10, to ensure that there is a sufficient level of income to support the provision of garages within the HRA

Travellers' sites

- 3.11 The current weekly charge for rent on travellers' sites plots is £91.62 per week. It is proposed to increase these charges by 4% to £95.28

Sheltered Housing Visitors Rooms

- 3.12 The current charge is £15 per person per night. It is proposed that the charge is increase by 10% to £16.50 per person, per night.

Capital Programme and Priorities

- 3.13 The medium term (next five years) review of the capital investment requirement into existing stock is shown in Table 5 below:

Table 5 – Five Year HRA Capital Programme

Investment in Existing Stock	2023/24 Base Budget £'000	2024/25 Base Budget £'000	2025/26 Base Budget £'000	2026/27 Base Budget £'000	2027/28 Base Budget £'000
Transforming Homes	10,046	11,307	11,574	11,847	11,847
Major / Disabled Adaptations	219	200	200	200	200
Fire Safety Works	1,494	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
Tower Block Refurbishment	9,903	0	0	0	0
Non Traditional Refurbishment	2,921	0	0	0	0
HRA Garages	548	500	500	500	500
Heating Replacement Programme	658	600	600	0	0
Lifts Refurbishment	209	190	190	190	190
Door Entry Installation	549	500	500	500	500
Water Mains	176	160	160	160	160
Staffing Costs Capital Programme	176	160	160	160	160
Highways and Lighting	439	300	300	300	300
Electrical infrastructure Testing	274	250	0	0	0
Total Capital Programme	27,612	15,167	15,184	14,857	14,857
<u>Carbon Reduction Programme</u>					
<u>Project 1</u>					
Capital cost for social homes (excluding non-infill measures)	1,874	1,874			
A&A costs	328	328			
<u>Project 2</u>					
Capital cost for social homes (excluding non-infill measures)	3,185	3,185			
A&A costs	494	494			
Further Carbon reduction works			5,895	5,895	5,895
	5,881	5,881	5,895	5,895	5,895
Total Capital Budget	33,493	21,048	21,079	20,752	20,752
<u>Financed By:</u>					
Revenue Contribution	(11,169)	(11,307)	(11,574)	(11,847)	(11,847)
Grant Funding	(2,232)	(2,232)			
Borrowing Requirement	20,092	7,509	9,505	8,905	8,905
Borrowing Cost @ 4.5% interest	904	338	428	401	401
<u>Cumulative Interest Cost</u>	2,179	2,517	428	2,918	3,319

- 3.14 Through the use of prudential borrowing, revenue contributions and government grants, the HRA is able to finance the cost of the proposed five year capital programme. This will ensure that the Council is able meet the cost of existing statutory compliance works, continue with the transforming

homes programme as well as implementing the regulations set out in the Building Safety bill.

- 3.15 As shown in the **Table 1**, Capital financing costs will increase by £1.968m in 2023/24. The inflationary cost impact of any capital works remains a significant risk to delivery at present, and this will be closely monitored throughout the year
- 3.16 It is essential the identified works are completed within the medium term, and the funding identified within the budget is used to finance the prudential borrowing costs and is not used to mitigate any other cost pressures or subsidise rents. The maximum number of tenants will receive a tangible benefit from investment to the existing HRA dwellings, as well as there being a financial benefit to the business plan by reducing the level of voids, re-let times, and increased long term sustainability.
- 3.17 A strategic decision has been taken to address the carbon reduction need as part of the medium-term capital programme. This will ensure a greater financial viability benefit in the long, as well as contributing to a safer environment for residents. External government grant funding is being sought to support the implementation of these initiatives.

4. Reserves

- 4.1 The estimated level of useable reserve for 2023/24 are detailed in **Table 6** below. Funding within the development reserve is earmarked against the cost of the HRA new building programme, and the housing zones funding supports the development of identified sites for regeneration of additional housing.
- 4.2 The HRA is required to maintain a level of general balances, which currently amounts to £2.175m. This balance will be maintained in the current financial year and will be assessed on an annual basis to ensure that it remains sufficient. In addition, there is £1.659m within the financial contingency reserve. As the HRA moves toward a more ambitious capital and development programme, it is essential that this is maintained to add further resilience to the business plan.

Table 6: Reserves

Reserve	Forecast Opening Balance 2023/24 £000's
<u>General Reserves</u>	
Balances (HRA)	(3,321)
Financial contingency reserve	(2,000)
HRA De-cant reserve	(2,600)
<u>Ear-marked to support capital</u>	
Housing Zones Funding (HRA)	(1,274)
Capital Reserve - Existing Stock (HRA)	(744)
RTB Attributable Debt	(42)
RTB Buy Backs	(737)
Grand Total	(10,719)

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 The report sets out the 2023/24 HRA budget implications following the update of the HRA business plan. The proposals put forward have been calculated and assessed in terms of affordability. It is a legal and operational requirement that a balanced budget is set for the HRA.

The detailed proposed budget for 2023/24 is shown in **Table 7** below:

Table 7 – Detailed Budget breakdown

Service	HRA Statement Detail	2023/24 Provisional Budget
Rent and Income	Gross Rent From Dwellings	(49,917,745)
	Tenants Water Charges Income	(5,679,000)
	Tenant Service Charges	(4,225,060)
	Leaseholder Charges	(935,614)
	Garage Rents	(879,000)
	Premises Income	(50,000)
	Central Heating Charges	(44,900)
	Movement in the Allowance for Bad Debts	961,195
	Tenants Water Charges Expenditure	5,679,000
Rent and Income Total		(55,091,124)
Financing and Recharges	Revenue Contribution to Capital Expenditure	11,169,475
	Interest Payable and Similar Charges	8,937,454
	Recharges	5,655,664
	Lease Payments	617,960
	Debt Management Charges	419,900
	Pension Contributions	223,600
	Rents, Rates, Taxes and Other Charges	62,940
Financing and Recharges Total		27,086,993
Operational Service Delivery	Estate Action Teams	2,712,945
	Housing Operations East and West	1,748,183
	Sheltered Housing	1,578,463
	Grounds Maintenance	1,211,400
	CCTV and Concierge	1,086,338
	Technical Services Team	1,029,968
	Communal Estate Costs	854,201
	Business Improvement	696,036
	Housing Asset Delivery - Revenue Team	663,047
	Rent Collection	640,393
	Housing Asset Delivery - Capital Team	635,747
	Management and Strategy	536,423
	Anti-Social Behaviour	519,469
	Lettings and Allocations	513,472
	Development and Regeneration	273,096
	Homeownership Services	237,906
	Investment Planning and Performance Team	232,634
	Voids Team	183,268
	Neighbourhood Action Plan	104,900
Operational Service Delivery Total		15,457,889
Repairs and Maintenance	Responsive Repairs	6,757,037
	Planned Programme Work	5,320,119
	Void Repairs	1,764,049
Repairs and Maintenance Total		13,841,205
Grand Total		1,294,963

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were presented with the report on 11 January 2022.

7. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 7.1 The management and operation of the HRA strives to support vulnerable residents. The 30 year business plan sets out to ensure there is value for money within the Housing Service. The service is committed to the delivery of decent homes for its tenants, and compliance with legislation.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Joanne Freeman**
Strategic Lead - Corporate Finance

The report is in relation to the setting of the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2023/24. Therefore, the financial implications are within the body of the report.

Following consideration of the report and recommendations by the Committee, the report will be presented to Cabinet on 8 February 2023.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Gina Clarke**
Corporate Governance Lawyer & Deputy Monitoring Officer

Section 76 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 imposes a duty on local housing authorities to prevent debit balances arising in their Housing Revenue Account ("the HRA"). The HRA is a record of revenue expenditure and income in relation to an authority's own housing stock.

The principal statutory provision governing the fixing of rent for Council property is contained in section 24 of the Housing Act 1985, which provides that authorities may "make such reasonable charges...as they may determine." Further, it requires the local authority, from time to time, to review rents and other charges and make such changes, as circumstances may require.

In exercising its functions under this section, the Council is required to have regard to any relevant standards issued under section 197 of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. The Council is required to set and increase rent in

accordance with the Rent Standard 2020 issued by the Social Housing Regulator.

The 2020 Standard sets out the formula to be applied to social and affordable rents for existing tenants, to fair rents and for tenants moving between different types of rent. To ensure that providers of social housing use the correct annual percentage increase to set rent, the government has issued a limit on annual rent increases for 2023/24 of 7.0%.

The Council's duties in relation to the consultation of tenants on matters of housing management, as set out in section 105 of the Act, do not apply to rent setting, nor to charges for services or facilities provided by the Council. However, the Council has consulted with the tenants before seeking to change rent and other charges. The main body of the report indicates that tenants been consulted.

Section 103 of the Housing Act 1985 require the Council to serve a notice of variation on its tenants if it wishes to vary the terms of tenancies. The notice of variation must be served at least four weeks before it is to take effect. Section 103(2) requires a preliminary notice to be served on tenants which gives tenants the opportunity to comment. However, this requirement does not apply to a variation of the rent, or of payments in respect of services or facilities provided by the landlord. Further to the extent that the variation of the terms of tenancies relates to rent or to payments in respect of services provided by the council as landlord; the variation must be in accordance with any provision in the agreement creating the tenancy.

In considering whether to agree the recommendations set out in the report the Cabinet must ensure that it has due regard to the council's equalities duties set out in the Equalities Act 2010. In particular whether the proposed increase in rent and charges will have a negative impact of any of the equality groups protected by the 2010 Act and what steps can be taken to mitigate any disadvantage.

8.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**
Team Manager – Community Development and Equalities, Adults, Housing & Health

The Councils Housing Revenue Account works to reflect the Council's policy in relation to the provision of social housing with particular regard to the use of its own stock. In addition to the provision of general housing, it incorporates a number of budgetary provisions aimed at providing assistance to disadvantaged groups including adaptations to the stock for residents with disabilities.

A Community Equality Impact Assessment will be completed for this proposal before the report is taken to Cabinet.

- 9. Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

- 10. Appendices to the report**

None

Report Author:

Mike Jones

Strategic Lead, Corporate Finance

10 January 2023		ITEM: 6
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Update on Voids Management Policy		
Wards and communities affected: ALL		Key Decision: Non-Key
Report of: Mohammed Saheed Ullah, Housing Repairs and Planned Maintenance Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: n/a		
Accountable Director: Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director for Housing		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report is being presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide an update on the Council's management of void properties within its housing stock.

The Current Voids Policy has been reviewed and updated from March 2022. The new policy and voids process has been implemented by the Housing Directorate.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Voids Management Policy.**
- 1.2 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Fit to Let standard.**
- 1.3 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Voids Recharge Policy.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 Voids are unoccupied properties which often require repairs before being ready for let to new occupants. The Council's objective is to make void properties available for letting as quickly as possible, minimising rent loss and maximising the housing available, whilst enabling our tenants to know that their home will be clean, safe, secure and comply with the Council's fit to let**

standard. The policy applies to all properties held by the Council within its Housing Revenue Account and is triggered by a tenancy ending.

- 2.2 The draft Void Policy ensures consistency of the standard of properties that we let to our tenants, working alongside the Housing Strategy and Asset Management Strategy. The policy will enable the Council to ensure its housing voids process, functions effectively by ensuring that all properties are available to our tenants at an acceptable standard, in line with the voids fit to let standard, by meeting the Council's legal obligations and the terms of the Tenancy Agreement.
- 2.3 The draft void policy had been drafted in accordance with the latest statutory and regulatory requirements and best practice. The policy confirms the aim of 'delivering a clean, safe and secure property to incoming tenants, within our targets for turnaround times, standards and cost'. It therefore a high-level commitment to meeting resident expectations and the Council meeting challenging but realistic turnaround times between vacancies.
- 2.4 As part of the void fit to let standard the Council carries out any essential routine repairs and/or health & safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time with a "repair and safety check" process. In the past two years some additional elements have been added to the scope of works for the fit to let standard which include roof insulation, internal fire door replacement and installation of LD1 fire detection systems.
- 2.5 Void properties with a history of damp and mould issues will have a specialist damp and mould survey undertaken. Any required repairs carried out to rectify, this could include damp treatment, building works or improvements made to the thermal efficiency of the property.
- 2.6 The Council manages approximately 9840 rented homes of which an average of approximately 5.7% (558 properties) become vacant each year. The Council's Void Team (CVT) re-let target for standard voids is currently set at 28 calendar days and 60 calendar days for major capital voids.
- 2.7 Standard voids are generally carried out by the repairs and maintenance contractor (Mears) with major voids for the replacement of major elements within the property such as kitchens, bathrooms, roofing etc being undertaken by Wates.
- 2.8 Sheltered Housing

Void sheltered housing properties will undergo all repair works identified during void specifications in line with the general fit to let standard. Additional work to these properties may be undertaken when identified, with the property being fully redecorated in order to ensure our elderly and vulnerable residents have a smooth transition into their new property.

2.9 Void Rent Loss Data 2020 to 2022.

The table below provided rent loss data and average turn-around times for standard and major voids.

VOID			
	2020/2021	2021/2022	Apr-Oct 2022/23
Voids Value	£1,654,583	£1,660,338	£1,445,951
Number of Voids	595	545	405
Average Turnaround (Standard)	47.5	35.1	31.7*
Average Turnaround (Capital)	79.8	82.7	76.5
Total Rental Loss £ (Without “Leased Back Rent” - PHI)	£403,894	£433,852	£227,449
Total Rental Loss £ (With “Leased Back Rent” - PHI)	£405,844	£590,269	£237,044
Average Price Per Void	£2,780	£3,046	£3,570

2.10 The average price per void between 2020 to 2022 has increased by 28%. Recent regulatory changes for fire and building safety have added addition scope requirements to the void process to ensure vacant properties are compliant with current regulations. These regulation changes have added to the cost of completing void works such upgrading fire safety systems to include LD1/LD2 smoke detection alarms. These changes have brought additional pressures to the end-to-end void process requiring coordination between the different suppliers and teams as well add to lead in times for specialist materials and supplies.

2.11 The above average costs have been compared against similar sized authorities in southeast region and London as provided by Housemark. Housemark is a leading data and insight company for the UK housing sector and is jointly owned by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute for Housing. In total between 22 and 25 authorities returned data from our request to Housemark for their average void costs and completion times between 2018/19 – 2020/21. At the time of the request the average cost data for 2021 was pending. However average cost increase for voids between 2018 and 2020 from the sample group of authorities was 23%.

Year	2018/19	2019/2020	2020/21
Sample Size	22	25	23
Av. Cost for standard void £	3833.17	4749.51	tbc
Av calendar days to complete standard void	23.75	30.10	24.15

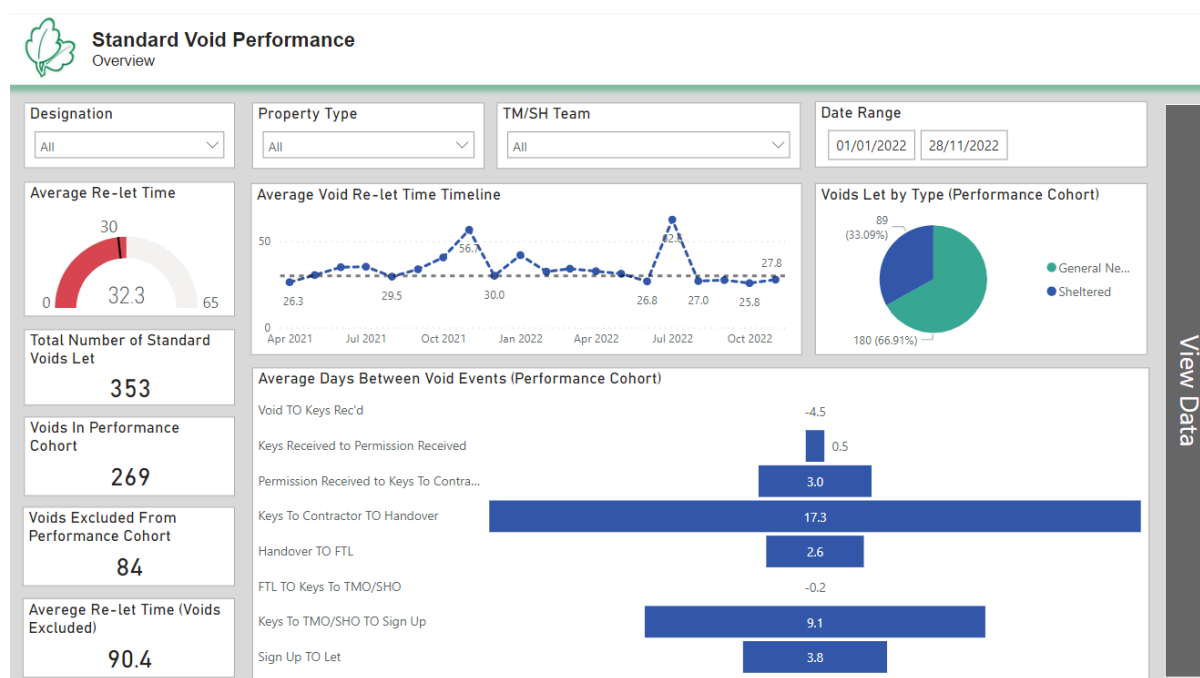
2.12 As part of the new Voids policy improved processes and reporting have been implemented with the void process mapped end-to-end across the different functions and services. Monthly Voids management meetings are held with

relevant services (Repairs, Housing Options, and Tenancy Services) to address any issues. Monthly tracker reports are generated to provide progress on works, timescales and lettings. This has enabled an improved collaborative and cross-team working ethos and approach in the management of voids. The current average turnaround times as of 30th Nov 2022 is 25.8 days for standard voids. This is a positive improvement since the beginning of the year.

- 2.13 Tenancy Management officers are engaged in the voids process to support tenants in meeting terms and conditions of their tenancy agreement by ensuring the minimum period of four weeks' notice is served by the tenant and the property is returned in a reasonable condition, including removal of rubbish. Work will also be undertaken to better capture the reasons for tenancies ending, allowing analysis to identify issues that the Council may be able to act upon to prevent properties becoming void.
- 2.14 Prior to the property keys being returned a joint inspection takes place with the Void Officer, Tenancy Management Officer and the tenant as part of the Exit Inspection. The Void Officer will endeavour to identify all possible recharges at this point and discuss possible solutions with both the tenant and Tenancy Management Officer. All recharges and agreed solutions will be noted in the Exit Inspection paperwork.
- 2.15 The fit to let standard (attached as Appendix Two) provides clear guidance for Council Officers and new tenants on the offer for tenants at the start of their tenancy. The fit to let standard ensures consistency in the standard of properties that the Council lets to our tenants. All void properties are inspected upon completion to ensure it meets the fit to let standard.
- 2.16 The Draft Recharges Policy (attached as Appendix Three) has been developed to ensure:
- recharges are issued fairly and consistently
 - tenants are provided with the necessary support to meet recharge payments
 - future incidents that would result in a recharge are prevented
 - legal action is used fairly and within reason
 - best practice is always sought and adhered to.
- 2.17 When a rechargeable repair remains unpaid it is the HRA fund which ensures the repair and the wider property is left in a safe condition until a solution can be reached. This policy will create a robust approach in tackling recharges and therefore ensure the HRA is protected, meaning monies can be spent in line with the 30-year Business Plan.
- 2.18 In the financial year ending in March 2022, a total of 283 individual recharges were recorded amounting to a final total of £51,712.57. This is in relation to both tenanted and void properties.
- 2.19 Performance Standards for Voids Process.

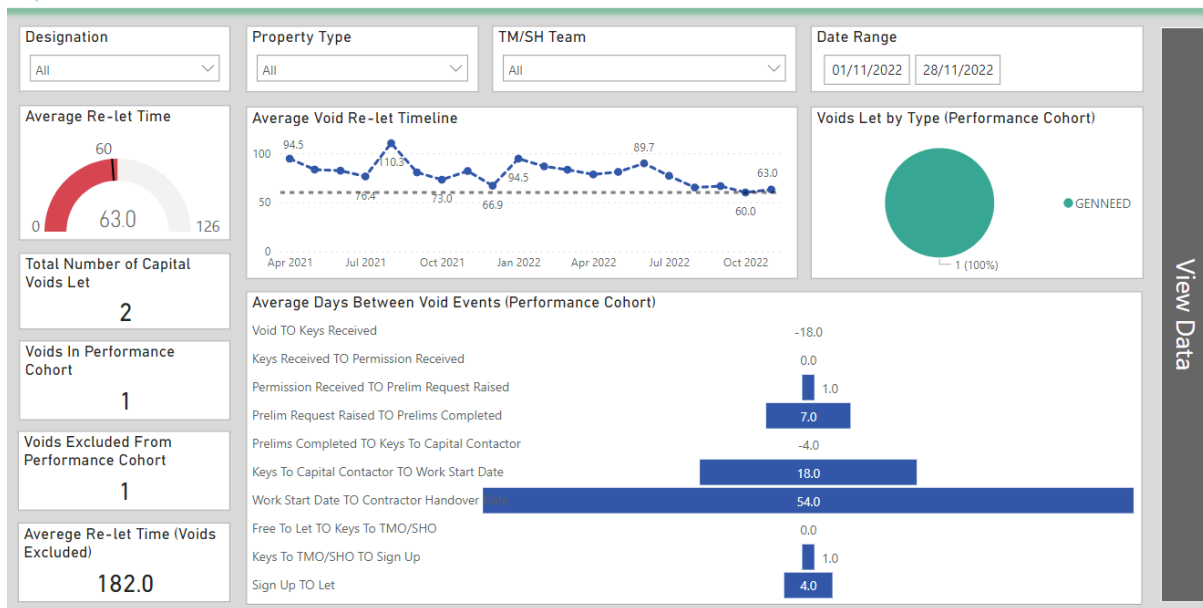
Satisfaction surveys undertaken on behalf of the Housing service are conducted following Housemark STAR methodology where possible, which is the leading satisfaction framework for the UK Housing sector. Performance targets are agreed annually with the Housing Management Team / Director of Housing along with the Housing Intelligence and Performance Manager. Performance reports are presented to voids performance meetings with officers and stakeholders (VIRG). KPI's will include satisfaction with the standard of property when re-let, average days to re-let, % re-let within target time, number of refusals and reasons, tenancy sustainability, termination reasons, and income lost due to voids.

2.20 The performance graphics below are drawn from the Housing Power BI Data Analytic dashboards for voids performance between 1st Jan 2022 and 28th oct 2022.





Capital Void Performance Overview



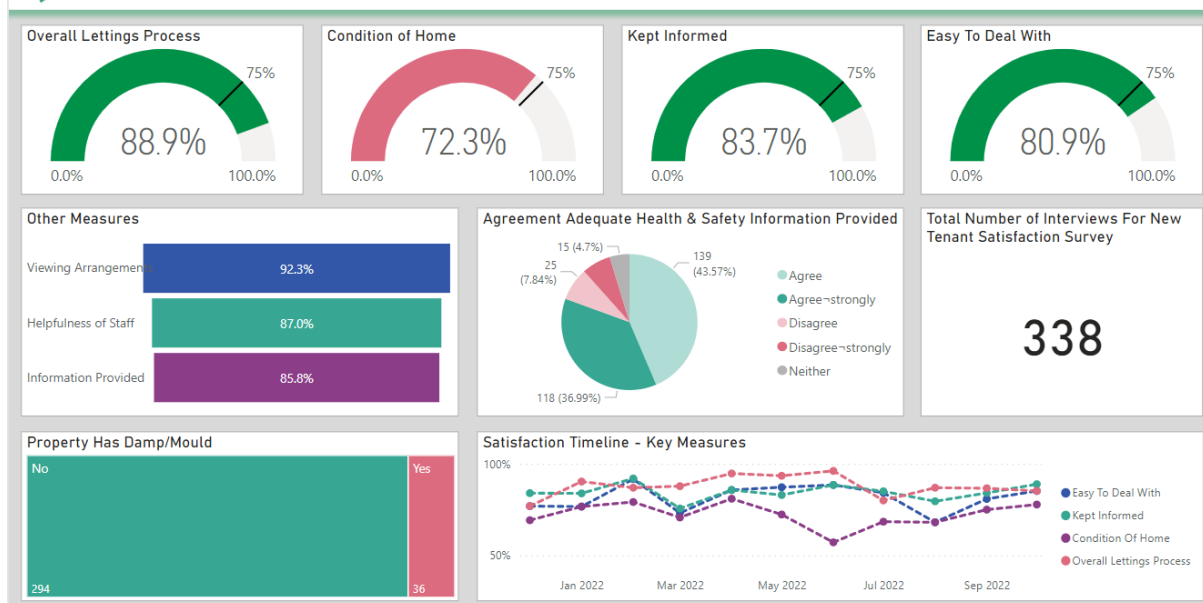
New tenant satisfaction performance data have been presented in the dashboard below for the period between 1st Jan 2022 and 1st Oct 2022.



New Tenant Satisfaction Overview

Date Range

01/01/2022 01/10/2022



3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 There are two options that can be considered: Option 1 - Do nothing. This would entail the Council continue in the same way with no void policy or approved re-let standard in place. This is not advised as there are no

perceived benefits of doing so and imposes a greater risk of poor performance.

- 3.2 Option 2 which is the recommended option is for the Council to continue with its implementation of the new draft void policy and continue with the current fit to let policy to enable the Council to meet its commitments under the Asset Management Strategy.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 The Void Policy provides clear guidance to:

- Reduce turnaround times to a minimum so that potential tenants can access properties within agreed timescales
- Minimise rental loss by minimising void periods through good management; and
- Ensure void works provide a safe and secure home for tenants.

- 4.2 The draft void policy has been drafted in accordance with latest statutory & regulatory requirements, and best practice within the sector (attached as Appendix One). It confirms the overall policy aim of “delivering a clean, safe and secure property to incoming tenants, within our targets for turnaround times, standard, and cost” and is a high-level commitment to meeting the Council’s commitments under the Asset Management strategy.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Internal consultation has been undertaken with all teams involved in the end-to-end management of void properties.
- 5.2 The draft void policy and fit to let standard has been presented to the Residents Excellence Panel to invite comment. The Resident Excellence Panel members are invited to regular visits to void properties that are in progress with works to view the standards of delivery and related issues. A representative of the Residents Excellence Panel is also a standing member of the Core Group meetings with Mears which is part of the governance structure of the repairs and maintenance contract with Mears.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 The ongoing investment, maintenance and improvement of the Council’s void properties stock supports the Council’s key strategic priorities as articulated through the Housing Asset Management Strategy through the provision of quality housing and estates people are proud to live on.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead - Corporate Finance –
Resources and Place Delivery

All expenditure pertaining to the void works will be contained within the ring-fenced housing revenue account. The completion of void works are essential to minimise the rent loss to the HRA. The report has set out the cost comparisons with similar housing providers for these works which seem reasonable within context of the challenging cost conditions within the housing sector.

The voids repairs budget for 2022/23 is set at £1.589m, increasing, subject to approval of the 2023/24 budget, to £1.684m in 2023/24.

The 2023/24 dwelling rent income budget has been set to include a £0.500m loss of rent due to voids. This will provide a prudent starting point, and any improvements in voids performance will subsequently increase the dwelling rent income yield, providing additional financial resources to the Housing Revenue account in the year. Additionally, a reduction in the level of rent loss through voids will also be taken into account in the medium term financial planning for the HRA, which have a positive benefit.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Deirdre Collins**
Principal Barrister, Prosecution,
Litigation and Housing

As set out in this report the Council has a responsibility under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 as amended by the Housing (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act and Fire Safe Regulations to ensure that their property is fit for human habitation at the beginning of the tenancy and for the duration of the tenancy; and where a landlord fails to do so, the tenant has the right to take action in the courts for against the Council breach of contract on the grounds that the property is unfit for human habitation.

To address this duty the council needs to have a planned voids and maintenance programme with periodic inspections and an effective responsive repairs service.

As this report is an information item inviting comment there are no direct legal implications.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer

The turnaround of void properties is essential to ensure residents from the housing waiting list can move into their first homes. There are no diversity implications arising from this report.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 - Void Management Policy March 2022
Appendix 2 - Fit To Let Standard
Appendix 3 - Draft Recharges Policy

Report Author:

Mohammed Saheed Ullah

Housing Repairs and Planned Maintenance Manager

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APPENDIX 1

Void Policy – Housing

Thurrock Council

November 2022

DRAFT

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Aims

Thurrock Council is committed to providing high quality homes for our tenants. The purpose of the Void Policy is to make void properties available for letting as quickly as possible, minimising rent loss and maximising the housing available, whilst enabling our tenants to know what they can expect from their home: that it will be clean, safe, secure, and comply with any legal requirements.

This Policy ensures consistency of the standard of properties that we let to our tenants, working alongside the Housing Strategy and Asset Management Strategy and in doing so, it supports the Council's Corporate Plan.

The Policy will enable the Council to ensure its housing voids process, functions effectively by ensuring that all properties are available to our tenants at an acceptable standard, in line with the voids fit to let standard, by meeting the Council's legal obligations and the terms of the Tenancy Agreement.

This policy will:

- confirm how the council's void policy will work to reduce homelessness
- confirm the minimum standards our tenants can expect when they move into a property, ensuring consistency throughout the standard of every property we let.
- explain how the Council will maintain its housing stock and preserve its value.
- ensure that the Council let its properties quickly and efficiently to ensure we meet housing demand and that we don't lose valuable rent.
- set out appropriate standards to measure performance delivery and ensures that no unnecessary expenditure is incurred in meeting these standards.
- to ensure tenants are aware of their end of tenancy obligations

This Policy applies to all properties held by the Council within its Housing Revenue Account and is triggered by a tenancy ending.

This document applies to all tenure and occupancy types and Council staff involved in void management functions including contractors and sub-contractors used on the Council's behalf.

Corporate Context

Thurrock Council's vision and corporate priorities, adopted in January 2018, underpin this Housing Resident Engagement Strategy. The Council's vision is for Thurrock to be **an ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.**

Sitting alongside the vision are the three corporate priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.

People – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay.

This means:

- high quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
- build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
- communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together

The Housing Void Policy outlines the approach which is taken towards void properties and rehousing tenants in suitable timescales. The policy identifies the support and communication which tenants will need and can expect throughout the void process.

Place – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future.

This means:

- roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
- clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
- fewer public buildings with better services

When repairs and investment are identified as being necessary to improve or maintain a specific property, the council will work in line with the Fit to Let standard ensuring that a property is in good repair for its residents.

Prosperity – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations.

This means:

- attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
- vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
- commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

This policy supports the corporate aims by ensuring the council's properties provide well-maintained quality homes suitable for residents needs and in which they are proud to live.

Delivering high-quality housing across all tenures is central to ensuring positive health and wellbeing outcomes for residents. The council will ensure that services represent value for money, going over and above statutory duties, with high levels of customer satisfaction.

Legislation, Regulation and Best Practice Framework

Thurrock Council carries out repairs in line with legal and statutory obligations, to safeguard the health, safety and security of tenants, other occupants or visitors and to safeguard the building and environment.

This Policy will ensure compliance with current legislation, promote good practice and has regard to:

- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, 2005
- The Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Equality Act 2010
- Construction Design and Management Regulations (CDM 2015)
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998
- The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
- The Housing Act 2004
- Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018
- Regulator for Social Housing: Homes Standard
- The Water Supply regulation 2018
- The Energy Efficiency (private rented property) (England and Wales) regulation 2015
- Control of Asbestos regulation 2012

Local Context

On 20th March 2019, a new law came into force which required rented houses and flats to be 'fit for human habitation', meaning that they are safe, healthy, and free from things that could cause serious harm.

This required all councils to ensure that void standard must oblige the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act to prevent avoidable legal action.¹

The management of void properties and re-letting of housing stock is a core function of the Council and must have an effective and efficient void process in place.

There are several reasons that lead to the initiation of the void process, these are outlined below:

- Termination - The tenant supplies formal written notice
- Death of tenant - The tenant dies and there is no successor to the tenancy
- Transfer - The tenant moves to another property owned by Thurrock Council
- Abandonment - The tenant has vacated the property without prior notice
- Eviction - The Council has completed court action and obtained authority to evict the tenant/s
- Decants - The tenant is being rehoused following plans to demolish housing stock for regeneration purposes

The council want its residents to take pride in their homes and enjoy being part of a thriving community, where residents enjoy living and working.

The council will ensure an effective Voids process that maintains our properties are in good standard whilst achieving a high level of resident satisfaction.

The council have a fit to let standard of which all homes should be brought up to, before being re-let. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation.

Thurrock Voids Team will carry out any essential routine repairs and Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the Void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time. It is a "repair and safety check" process only.

The pre-void inspection form completed during the notice period will provide further detail and specific instructions for each property.

Properties will be re-let in accordance with our allocations policy. The use of choice-based lettings and advertising properties will also help to minimise void periods.

This Void Policy is intended to be consistent with and complement other policies and procedures in particular the Asset Management Strategy, Housing Strategy, Gas Safety Policy², Allocations Policy and **Tenancy Management Policy**.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homes-fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018/guide-for-landlords-homes-fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018>

² <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A5664152/document/versions/latest>

The Void Policy must also operate in conjunction with Procurement Policy, Corporate Complaints Policy, Adaptations and Equality and Diversity.

Both mutual exchanges and direct lets for housing management reasons are outside the scope of the policy, although appropriate landlord compliance checks are carried out in relation to these functions.

Glossary of Terms

Void: A property for which there is a current rent account, but for which no current tenancy exists. A void period is the period which commences the first day there is no rent debit and ends on the day a new debit is raised.

Choice-based letting: A way of allocating council housing which requires people on the housing register to select and bid for available properties, rather than waiting for the council to offer them a home.

Decant: a temporary/Permanent move to another property while improvements or major repairs are carried out to the normal home.

Housing Allocation Scheme: explains the options available for those looking for a home in the Borough and in particular sets out which groups of people are priorities for Council assistance.

Tenancy Management Policy: All local authorities will be required to publish and maintain a tenancy management policy. This will set out objectives that should be taken into account by individual social landlords when considering granting or reissuing a tenancy.

Purpose

This document outlines Thurrock Council's Voids policy for the management of our empty homes (voids) and supports both the Council's Housing Strategy and Asset Management Strategy, focussing on making the best use of existing stock, and our mission of 'High Quality Services for People, Homes and Communities. This document also considers our statutory and regulatory responsibilities.

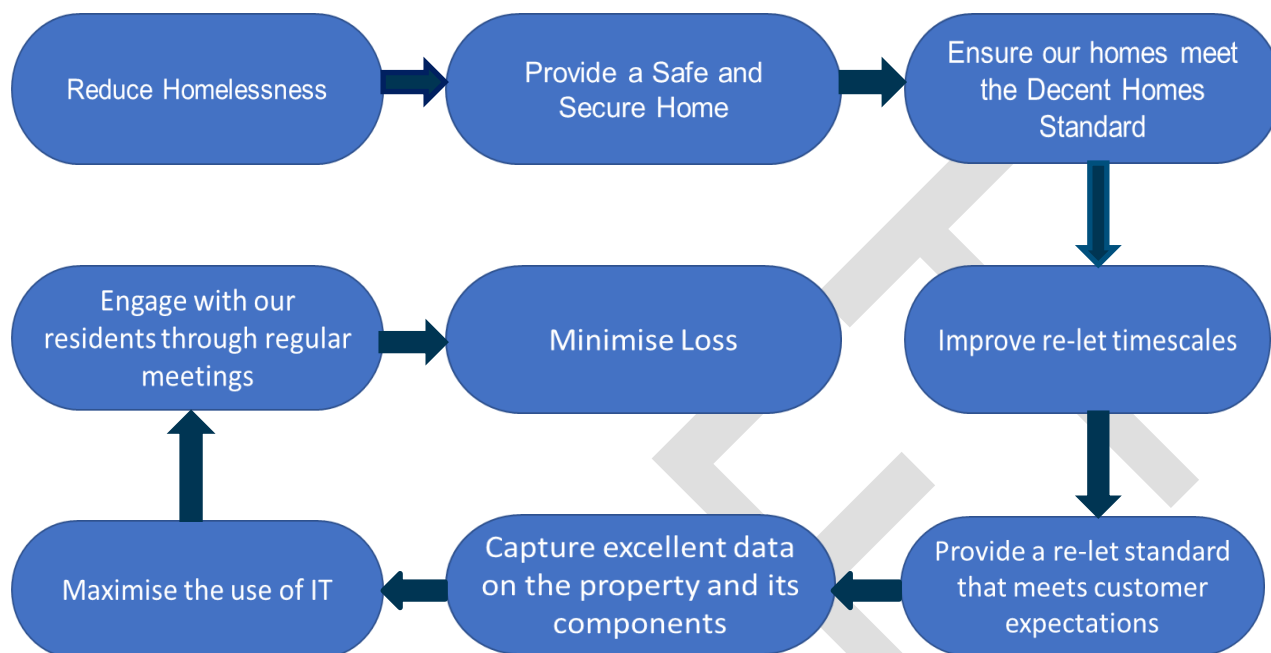
To meet the purposes of the policy, the Council agrees to minimise loss to the Council through the efficient letting of homes at the right time to the required standard by ensuring the following:

- a. Reduce Homelessness - you may be homeless if you're sleeping rough, don't have rights to stay where you are or you live in unsuitable housing
- b. Minimise loss – this includes rent loss; Council Tax charges; avoiding expensive nightly paid accommodation due to lack of temporary accommodation; avoiding refusals; and avoiding tenancies starting with a poor experience that leads to failure
- c. Efficient letting – taking into account: void turnaround times; void expenditure; balancing major works against doing the minimum required; avoiding refusals
- d. Right time – working to consistent timescales and delivering to the targets given
- e. Required standard – meeting the Council's Fit to Let Standard³, including cleanliness, and meeting all landlord statutory requirements

³ <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A7245379/document/versions/latest>

Priorities

This policy will ensure that a number of key priorities are undertaken during the void process. These include:



Void Standards

i. General Voids

This is the minimum standard to which all homes should be brought up to before being re-let. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the councils Fit to Let Standard.

The council will carry out any essential routine repairs and Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the Void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time. It is a “repair and safety check” process only.

The pre-void inspection form completed during the notice period provides full detail and specific instructions for each property.

The Council continues to invest in our properties so that standards are maintained. We will do this:

- through annual improvement and maintenance programmes
- by having a minimum standard for the properties once they become void

When elements of a property have been considered to have been deliberately damaged by the tenant, or unauthorised alterations have been made, the Tenancy Management Officer will advise

the outgoing tenant at the termination stage of the recharge for works. Refer to end of tenancy link for recharge information.⁴

A recharge will be raised to the outgoing tenant for removal of goods and clearance of gardens to recoup expenditure.

This Policy confirms the following approach in line with the Council's Fit to Let standards:

- Carry out a gas safety check where gas is installed and leave a copy of the certificate at the property.
- Carry out a safety check of the electrical installation.
- Undertake a water hygiene test
- Ensure that an Asbestos Management Certificate is in place for Void properties
- Provide an Energy Performance Certificate (where appropriate)
- Undertake all health and safety repairs
- Complete a site clearance
- Clean the property.
- Re-decorate if deemed required
- Carry out all of the required repairs in line with the Fit to Let standard
- Carry out necessary works to minimise the risk of damp and mould and maintain energy efficiency

Where non-standard tenant improvements are in place and meet statutory and regulatory requirements, the re-let will be done with the following confirmed to the new tenant in writing:

- The improvement is gifted to the incoming tenant
- The Council does not accept any responsibility for the maintenance of the improvement
- If the improvement is not maintained to a reasonable standard by tenant and/or it reaches the end of its lifespan, the Council will remove it and undertake remedial works to restore the property to the Council's standard, and that this will be at no cost to the incoming tenant
- If the white goods are in good condition, undertake a PAT test and gift to new tenants.
- If the incoming tenant refuses the improvement, it will be removed, and remedial works will be carried out.

Void properties identifying a history of damp and mould issues, will have a specialist damp and mould survey undertaken. Any required repairs carried out to rectify, this could include damp treatment, building works or improvements made to the thermal efficiency of the property.

Where there is no gas mains supply, the Council will undertake an options appraisal considering:

- New efficient storage heaters; or
- Alternative methods including ground and air source heat pumps.

This will be a best value approach based on but not limited to cost, ease of installation, the thermal characteristics of the property, and likely heating costs for future tenants.

⁴ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/end-of-tenancy/step-by-step-guide>

Existing disabled adaptations will be left in place, subject to testing to establish they remain safe and appropriate for the property type. The property will be matched to an applicant with an appropriate long-term housing need.

Medical aids or equipment e.g., walking frames, shower chairs etc. left in properties without a clear indication of ownership (provider labels etc.) will be deemed to be tenant belongings that have been abandoned and will be disposed of in line with the Council's property clearance approach.

The Council will restrict access to lofts in properties, going through the void process, where loft access is deemed unsafe.

The Council will continue to aim to minimise the time a property is unoccupied by carrying out inspections in the tenant's notice period wherever possible.

During void works, applicants who have been offered the property will only be able to undertake a viewing by prior appointment, accompanied by a Tenancy Management Officer, and subject to appropriate risk assessment.

To assist with re-let times the Council may:

- Complete non health & safety repairs repair's once the new tenant has moved in. If this is the case, tenants will be informed of the timescale for their completion.
- Leave work to the garden if this means the property can be let to a new tenant faster. The gardening work will be completed once the property is occupied.

Sheltered Housing

Void sheltered housing properties will undergo all repair works identified during void specifications in line with the general fit to let standard. Additional work to these properties may be undertaken when identified, with the property being fully redecorated in order to ensure our elderly and vulnerable residents have a smooth transition into their new property.

ii. Capital Works Programme

The Council aim is to provide high quality accommodation that demonstrates the benefits of our repairs and capital investment programmes and positively influences the health and wellbeing of our tenants and residents. These works are undertaken where there are significant refurbishment upgrades required in properties.

All void properties refurbished through the capital works programme will align with the agreed fit to let standard, but could also include the following where applicable:

- Structural Works
- Transforming Homes refurbishment
- Fire Damage
- Flood Damage
- Vandalism

iii. Temporary Accommodation

The Council will undertake the fit to let standard to which all temporary accommodation properties should be brought up to before being re-let in line with the Councils temporary accommodation fit to let standard. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the TA FTL Standard document.⁵

Any essential routine repairs and/or Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting will be carried out as per the TA FTL Standard.

iv. Phi Properties

In order to utilise retained RTB receipts, the council entered into a partnership arrangement through a third-party company. The third party would purchase the properties on the Councils behalf and lease them back under certain conditions.

The scheme is known as Phi Leasing. These properties are acquired on a long-term leasing agreement for which the Council has full repairs obligation under the term of the agreement.

The key benefits of the scheme are:

- Ability to provide immediate affordable housing supply
- No capital requirements from local authorities
- The Council retain full control over use, rent and management of the property
- The scheme will be applied to single properties or larger developments
- No procurement issues for the Council
- No transactional abort costs

In line with the agreement, the Council will undertake the minimum standard to which all Phi properties should be brought up to before being let in line with the Councils Phi fit to let standard. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the Phi FTL Standard document. Any essential routine repairs and/or Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting will be carried out as per the Phi FTL Standard.

Performance

Satisfaction surveys undertaken on behalf of the Housing service are conducted following HouseMark STAR methodology where possible, which is the leading satisfaction framework for the UK Housing sector.

The data used to measure satisfaction is collected on the council's behalf over the telephone with residents by a third-party independent research contractor that specialises in conducting satisfaction surveys for the Housing sector.

⁵ <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A4433563/document/versions/latest>

The overall aim is to be within the national top quartile for void performance. Performance will be monitored regularly to help drive up management standards, reduce homelessness, improving efficiency and satisfaction levels and ensure value for money by reducing costs.

The Council acknowledges its stock requires considerable capital investment to improve it to the Decent Homes Standard and has committed ensuring the integrity of the asset is maintained and that the council fulfils its duty to provide residents with affordable warmth in homes with future-proofed facilities there is an ongoing need for capital investment.

The Housing Capital Programme, known as the Transforming Homes Programme, invests in the long-term integrity of the council's assets and brings significant improvements to the health and wellbeing of residents and reducing fuel poverty through improved energy efficiency.

The council are committed to delivering a capital investment programme that achieves at least 85% resident satisfaction.

However, this does mean properties needing re-let works are often identified as requiring capital works. To reflect this, void performance will be managed operationally by reporting monthly using the following categories:

Corporate Performance

Targets are agreed annually with the Assistant Director of Housing and the Housing Intelligence and Performance Manager. We will report on our key performance areas to our Management Team and our Tenants ensuring open transparency.

KPI's will include satisfaction with the standard of property when re-let, average days to re-let, % re-let within target time, number of refusals and reasons, tenancy sustainability, termination reasons, and income lost due to voids.

The void teams re-let target for standard voids is currently set at 28 calendar days and is reviewed annually in line with government guidelines and legislation.

The void teams re-let target for capital voids is currently set at 60 calendar days and is reviewed annually in line with government guidelines and legislation.

Engagement with Residents

The Housing sector continues to see significant changes to the regulatory framework that sets the standard for resident and building safety.

This led to the fundamental changes introduced through the White Paper and the A Charter for Social Housing Residents, these documents aim to place residents back at the heart of building safety and delivers changes to ensure that every social housing resident is safe in their home.

Following the introduction of the white Paper, the council has worked with its residents to develop a Housing Resident Engagement Strategy 2022 – 2027 which will set out the council's plans over three years, focusing on the council's customers and committing to developing greater

opportunities for tenant and feedback, ensuring the strategy is in line with government legislation around buildings and fire safety.

Engaging residents in the requirements of their Tenancy Conditions is also an important priority to ensure resources address lifecycle replacement appropriately and are not diverted to tackle avoidable property damage or rectify unauthorised alterations.

The Council will capture new tenant feedback and use this to inform process and policy improvements in relation to the re-let standard, allocations process, and tenancy sign-up.

The methods of engagement are continually evolving and adapting to the needs of local communities. Current examples of engagement in asset management are:

- a panel of trained residents who assist in the procurement of all asset management works and services contracts
- residents are engaged in the monitoring of major contracts
- a team of residents actively assist and contribute to the 'fit to let' standard of properties through attendance at regular void inspections
- members of the tenants excellent panel attend new voids, handovers and tenancy sign ups
- resident engagement sessions are held ahead of any major improvement projects
- colour and finish choices for major products such as kitchens, worktops, flooring or wall finishes are chosen by the tenant's excellence panel

Monitoring, Measuring and Review

This policy will be reviewed every three years in line with changes in working practices or changes in legislation.

The activities covered under the Void Policy will be subject to performance monitoring with service reviews carried out periodically to ensure that the policy is effective, to ensure the Adults, Housing and Health Directorate provide services which meet residents' needs on a continuing basis.

If any significant issues of concern arise, these will be addressed by the Voids Manager in the first instance, who will report such matters to Asset Manager and the Housing Management Team.

Periodic audits of policy compliance may be conducted by managers and by the Internal Auditor with results being reported as appropriate.

Key areas for audit and review will include:

- Risk management
- Provision of training and / or information to staff
- Compliance with policy and procedure
- Effectiveness of communications about maintenance with contractors and tenants
- Progress towards strategic targets
- Compliance with regulations e.g., Gas, Health & Safety
- Budgetary and expenditure control

- Contract administration and contractor performance
- Customer satisfaction with Property Maintenance

DRAFT

Minimum Fit to Let Standard for Void Properties

This is the minimum standard to which all homes should be brought up to before being re-let. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included below.

We will carry out any essential routine repairs and/or Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the Void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time. It is a “repair and safety check” process only.

Area	Void Standard
Site Clearance	<p>The interior and exterior of the property (including loft space), are to be cleared of all former tenant belongings and debris if and where left including furniture, carpets, laminate flooring, non-approved fixtures and fittings, sheds/stores/greenhouses etc., and general garden rubbish. (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant where left)</p> <p>Carpets and laminate flooring can only be left in the property if they are in a good, clean condition and the Voids Officers have agreed this during the void inspection. Note: The new tenant is to sign a form to accept responsibility for flooring, with a copy to be put in housing file.</p>
Cleaning	<p>Contractors Sparkle Clean is to be carried out (Sparkle cleans Specification at agreed rate....)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dust down and remove all cobwebs • All floors, stairways and steps are to be swept clean and then mopped with disinfectant cleaner to a dry and acceptable finish • Clean down radiators or storage heaters to front and as best to rear where possible • Sinks cleansed, sanitised, dried, and buffed with appropriate cloths • Kitchen units including all work surfaces, cupboards, tiled areas, and drawers cleaned and sanitised inside and out, dried and buffed with appropriate cloths • Dry clean down electrical sockets, light fittings, and switches • Wash down all timber surfaces such as door frames, architraves, side casings, skirting boards etc. • All internal and external doors, frames and side casings are to be cleaned and the immediate area outside the property swept • Clean all internal windows and frames and dry • All storage cupboards are to be swept, mopped, and dried • All bathroom fittings cleaned and sanitised i.e., toilet including back, front and around u-bend etc. • Clean and buff all taps to high standard

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bathroom lime scale to be removed where possible (advise where this is not possible) • Bathroom floor must be swept, mopped, and sanitised • Toilet bands and toilet blocks applied in all instances • Air fresheners to be left in the kitchen, toilet and bathroom, lounge, and hall areas • Front and rear porches to be swept with all cobwebs removed • Wash down walls
Exterior/Cracks	<p>Major structural and dangerous cracks in the external envelope of the building will be identified and notified for technical assessment at specification stage</p> <p>Property is to be left wind and watertight</p>
Garden	<p>Gardens should not be overgrown or untidy and should be clear of rubbish and debris. (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant)</p> <p>If the garden becomes overgrown whilst void it is the responsibility of the void team to maintain, otherwise this will need to be managed by estates staff.</p>
Roofing and guttering	Roofing and guttering repairs carried out as necessary - this is to be identified from visual inspection and internal signs such as water ingress through ceiling and window reveals
Drainage	Gully's, and Acco drains are to be free from debris and /or blockages and manhole covers are to be repaired as necessary and identified from visual inspection
Ponds	All ponds and water features shall be removed; the resulting hole should be filled in to match the surrounding area. The disturbed area should be left level and free from hazard (Please note that this will be rechargeable to the departing tenant)
Fencing, walls and Gates (where applicable)	<p>All existing boundary fencing, and gates should be assessed to confirm that they are in a reasonable condition, and that the perimeter is secure, free of any health and safety security risks and be both serviceable and upright, around the legal boundary.</p> <p>Any dangerous dividing fencing is to be removed and made safe only. Dividing fencing is the tenant's responsibility to repair/replace in line with new repairs policy</p>
Footpaths and steps	<p>All surfaces to be safe and free of obstructions</p> <p>Any unsafe slabs and cracks are to be assessed and considered for repair</p> <p>Concrete aprons and paths are to be free of any trip or slip hazards that could be deemed a health and safety risk</p>

Outbuildings, sheds and greenhouses	<p>Ensure all outbuildings are safe. All doors and locks must be in working order</p> <p>Unauthorised or unsafe outbuildings are to be removed, with reinstatement of disturbed area to match existing surroundings. E.g., unauthorised garage construction, sheds, coal bunkers etc.</p> <p>(Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant where left)</p>
Security	<p>Lock changes to front door, rear door and any outbuilding and storage cupboards</p> <p>Sitex screens will be installed in areas identified as high risk and as instructed by Thurrock Borough Council</p>
Windows	<p>Full window check to be carried out by contractors which will include general operation of window and mechanisms, along with an assessment of the glazing and ventilation.</p> <p>Up to 2 misted units can be considered for replacement as part of the void works, over and above this would be considered for a batch programme</p> <p>Any broken windows are to be repaired. (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant where left.) Window frames must be able to open and close, with catches and restrictors operational and intact. Window restrictors are to be fitted on first floor windows and above where not already in place.</p> <p>All properties will have 5no window keys provided upon sign off.</p> <p>All windows are to be cleaned from the inside -</p> <p>any mould or mildew is to be removed and cleaned thoroughly.</p>
Window openings	<p>Curtain rails and wooden/steel poles to be removed.</p> <p>.</p>
External Doors	<p>All doors are to open and close properly and be fully operational</p>
Internal Doors	<p>Internal doors are to be repaired and maintained and should be fully operational, where missing new flush ply doors are to be installed (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant)</p> <p>Fire doors are to be considered in low rise/high rise flats</p>
Cables	<p>All cables on the external of the building are to be fixed and secure.</p> <p>Temporary or non-compliant cabling to the property or external buildings is to be removed in-line with the NIC EIC certification</p>

Light Fittings	Remove all non-standard light fittings and replace with lighting pendant drops or specialist light fittings within bathroom and kitchen.
External lighting	Any external lighting existing is to be in working order Any faulty or unsafe lighting is to be removed and subsequently replaced if originally provided by Thurrock Borough Council
Door entry intercom	Door entry intercom is to be assessed and passed to relevant service provider should a repair/replacement be required
Ramps and Rails (where applicable)	If external ramps and rails are safe and in good working order and are without rust damage, leave on property.
General Health and Safety	Floorboards are to be repaired or replaced where necessary. Damp and Mould to be identified at specification stage and survey carried out or remedial works identified and added to specification. Any slip, trip or fall hazards will be addressed as part of the overall specification throughout.
Walls and Ceilings	All walls and ceilings are to be assessed and free from any hooks, picture frames or other miscellaneous fittings (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant) Lighting fittings to be secure and clean. Minor plasterworks to be carried out only up to 3m ² per void. Any plasterwork repairs to walls and ceiling are to be made good where damaged (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant)
Polystyrene ceiling tiles and covering	Remove all polystyrene ceiling tiles found in the property and make good the ceiling. Ensure the ceiling is smooth and flat and free from remaining tile adhesive.
Flooring - Wet areas	All kitchens, bathrooms and WCs should have some type of flooring covering such as vinyl and must be in good order. If flooring in these areas is intact and in a good state of repair, only thorough cleaning is required, and is included in sparkle clean.

	Walk in shower floor, if applicable, is to be assessed for condition and ensure falls are adequate for drainage.
Flooring - Other areas	<p>Broken floor tiles will be replaced individually.</p> <p>Where vinyl tiles are damaged around the perimeter of the room, remove loose tiles and damaged tiles, and carry out a latex repair to remove any deviation in the floor level. Where flooring in these areas is ripped, lifting, or is deemed to be a trip hazard, it will need to be removed.</p> <p>Carpet grippers are to be carefully removed by contractor from floors and stairs</p> <p>Damaged asbestos floor tiles are to be removed.</p>
Extractor fans and grills	These are to be left clean and in good working order.
Appliances	Built in appliances such as hobs are to be assessed and either PAT tested or removed as instructed
Gas Installation and Appliances	<p>All Gas to meet certified Standards – at silver standard all gas works are carried out by appointed gas contractor</p> <p>Gas fires to be removed and capped (this will be carried out by appointed gas contractor)</p>
Fireplaces	All fireplaces are to be removed and blocked up with adequate ventilation.
Kitchen and Utility Room Worktops and Units (cupboards and drawers)	<p>Unit repairs to be carried if necessary pre-Capital works programme where possible on a like for like basis or nearest match including individual unit replacement, sink, taps and work surfaces.</p> <p>All worktops are to be secure, clean, and hygienic. They must also be free from chips, deep cuts and burn marks. Worktop trims are to be secured in place and undamaged.</p> <p>All units must be clean inside and out. All surfaces to be safe and free of obstructions.</p> <p>Unit doors and drawers to be in working order. Ensure that drawer runners working efficiently, door hinges are secure and working freely and check that door catches are working. Drawers must be able to fully open without obstruction or defects.</p> <p>Check for missing edges on shelves and ensure brackets are secure. This also applies to walk-in cupboards, wardrobes, and redundant heating cylinder cupboards</p>

	<p>Wall tiling will be a minimum of 300mm and shall include a fully tiled cooker recess providing an easy clean surface</p> <p>All kitchens must be health and safety compliant. Where they do not meet safety standards this must be identified during the specification stage.</p>
Water and Plumbing	<p>Carry out a full check, using the form to be supplied by contractor and in handover pack, of all plumbing, waste, pipework, and isolation valves, taps, shower mixer, showerheads, toilet cisterns and washing machine taps ensuring the installation is sound, serviceable, watertight, free flowing and without defect.</p> <p>Ensure that the installation is accessible for maintenance purposes and that the main stop cock and all valves etc. operate freely.</p> <p>All isolation valves are to be labelled after checks.</p> <p>Toilet seats to be replaced where necessary. As a rule of thumb if seat is free from damage clean and plastic it can remain.</p> <p>Plug and chain to be supplied to sinks and bath if this item is missing or broken (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant)</p> <p>Check for any signs of water penetration from above on ceiling, walls or floor.</p> <p>If the void turnaround prediction is more than 20 days in the winter months or extreme cold weather is reported, or otherwise specified by Thurrock Borough Council, water services will need to be turned off at the mains and the heating system drained down to minimise risks of damage to the fabric of the building. These works are to be carried out by an appointed gas contractor.</p>
Sinks, Washbasins, Baths and Taps	<p>All sinks to be clean and clear of stains. Lime scale to be removed, using domestic cleaner only where possible. (Advise where this is not possible and CVT will decide if a professional descale is required)</p> <p>All sinks and baths are to have both plug and chain intact.</p> <p>All taps are to be in good working order and watertight.</p> <p>Waste and drainage are to be working and odour free.</p> <p>Chips to be repaired where possible</p>

Wall Tiles	Remove and replace cracked or broken tiles, repair damaged grouting and ensure that all tiles are mould free and sealed.
Showers over baths	Shower units over baths to be tested. If in good, safe working order, this is to be left in place. If it is defective, remove and make good
WC (including any external WC)	<p>All sanitary sealants are to be clean and intact, free from mould, mildew and stains and fully operational with plugs and chains.</p> <p>If any sanitary ware item needs to be replaced during the Void period, it should either match the colour of the existing items or be in white.</p>
Roof Space	<p>The roof space will also be inspected to ensure that there are no signs of water penetration and no obvious inherent defects to the roof coverings that could lead to water penetration. Any urgent repairs will be completed whilst the property is void. Further to this, a check will be made to ensure that the fire break is intact</p> <p>All exposed pipe work and water tanks are to be insulated to manage condensation.</p>
Stairs	These are to be in good condition, free from disrepair and structurally sound. Newel posts, handrails, banisters, and spindles are to be secure and intact. Ranch rail design stairs are to be removed or covered over and spindles with a greater distance of 100mm between them to be boxed over.
Joinery	<p>Missing skirting and architraves are to be replaced where necessary (Please note these items are rechargeable to the departing tenant)</p> <p>Missing or damaged panelling are to be repaired or replaced where necessary.</p>
Smoke alarms/Heat detectors	<p>All smoke alarms and heat detectors are to be tested as part of the electrical check and replaced where defective or missing</p> <p>All smoke alarms are to be hard wired, and radio linked</p> <p>LD1 Systems will be installed in all high-rise properties</p> <p>If Tunstall red alert system is installed, then the above is not applicable</p>
Electric Storage Heating	Ensure that the heating system is in good operation, and provide specific operating instructions, where possible. Generic instructions must be provided if specific ones are not available.
Statutory Safety Certificates	A copy of the following certificates must be left in the void property and the property file:

	<p>Electrical Installation Condition Report or Electrical Installation Certificate, (all properties)</p> <p>Gas Safety check Record (where applicable)</p> <p>Asbestos sample record or Asbestos Management Certificate (where applicable)</p> <p>Energy Performance Certificate (when necessary)</p>
Asbestos	<p>Asbestos surveys are carried out on void properties where necessary and works required are added to the specification, any changes are added to the asbestos register.</p>
Decoration	<p>Each property will be assessed on an individual basis; however, a general rule of thumb would be to strip loose and defective wallpaper and make good with mist coat <u>only</u>.</p> <p>Sheltered accommodation Properties may be requested to be decorated, when necessary, this instruction should come from Thurrock prior to specification wherever possible.</p> <p>Where evidence of poor housekeeping or offensive graffiti is present, the wall is to be blocked and mist coated. Please note that this is rechargeable to the departing tenant.</p>
Tenant Alterations	<p>These will remain only if safe and acceptable. Any unauthorised alterations that are non-compliant alterations will be removed Please note this is rechargeable to the departing tenant.</p>
Damp & Mould / Energy efficiency	<p>The following works are carried out where necessary to minimise the risk of damp & mould and maintain energy efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extractor fans installed /overhauled • Trickle vents renewed/overhauled • Loft insulation installed • Replacement of misted units where these are completely obscure • Replacement of windows where there is significant damage – these may be added to a Capital programme if required • Thermal boarding for external walls where cold spots or defects identified • Drill-checks for cavity wall insulation • Energy efficient light bulbs installed • Damp and mould leaflet provided in hand over pack
STANDARD	<p>Will align with the agreed minimum fit to let standard all of the above and can be expected to require the following</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement of individual elements of bathroom suite • External door replacement • Kitchen unit replacements

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal Plastering • External works, paving guttering drainage, walls, fencing where H & S or security issues are identified
CAPITAL	<p>Will align with the agreed minimum fit to let standard all of the above of both Bronze and Silver and could include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural Works • TH refurbishment • Fire Damage • Flood Damage • Vandalism

All voids will be subject to individual inspection and assessment by the Central Voids Team.

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Appendix 3

Recharge Policy

Thurrock Council

Month 2022

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Aims and Purpose

The Recharge policy aims to outline the collaborative approach being undertaken by the Housing department in issuing, processing and collecting recharges made to both current and previous council tenants.

The Housing department aims to work with the following partners to ensure an effective and robust policy:

- Quality Assurance
- Voids
- Tenancy Management
- Sundry Debts
- Relevant repair and maintenance contractors
- Legal
- Complaints

The aims of this policy are to ensure:

- recharges are issued fairly and consistently
- tenants are provided with the necessary support to meet recharge payments
- future incidents that would result in a recharge are prevented
- legal action is used fairly and within reason
- best practice is always sought and adhered to

This policy is written in support of the following key documents:

- [Housing Strategy](#)
- [Housing Repair Policy](#)
- [Tenancy Agreement](#)
- Sundry Debt Recovery and Collection policies and processes

Corporate Context

The Housing department is largely self-funded through the rents paid by Thurrock Council tenants. This money is held in an account referred to as the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and is responsible for either the total or partial payment of:

- repairs and maintenance to properties
- investment and improvement of housing estates
- staff wages
- provision of services

When a rechargeable repair remains unpaid it is the HRA fund which ensures the repair and the wider property is left in a safe condition until a solution can be reached. This policy will create a robust approach in tackling recharges and therefore ensure the HRA is protected, meaning monies can be spent in line with the 30-year Business Plan.

Further to the HRA, when a recharge is passed over to the Sundry Debt team it is considered a legal debt to the Council. When a tenant does not pay the recharge amount, this creates a deficit for the Council's financial accounts. This can be problematic as to ensure both core and surplus services are provided seamlessly, a balanced financial account is key. Similarly to the HRA, the Recharge policy can help ensure the Council's finances are protected and services are still deliverable.

Legislation, Regulation and Best Practice Framework

The Recharge policy has been written in support of the below to ensure lawful best practice is adhered to:

- Housing Act 1985
- Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
- Decent Homes Standard
- Housing and Regeneration Act 2008

National Context

The [Charter for Social Housing Residents](#) clearly sets out landlord responsibility in ensuring tenants feel valued, heard and safe within their homes. The Charter focuses on empowering residents to understand housing service whilst having access to a wider dialogue with their landlord.

Although the Recharge policy is not a direct solution to the above, it does play a key role in ensuring tenants understand how the Housing department makes decisions which will directly impact them, emotionally as well as financially. In addition to this, the Recharge policy will also provide a clear explanation on the rights of tenants during the process of a recharge and what they can expect from the Council as a landlord.

Local Context

Focusing on the financial year ending in 2022, 283 individual recharges were recorded amounting to a final total of £51,712.57. This is in relation to both tenanted and void properties.

From the below chart, it is evident Thurrock largely sees a higher proportion of recharges applied to current tenants as opposed to outgoing tenants. The Housing department can use data such as this to best utilize resources in both preventing and recovering recharges to further protect the HRA.

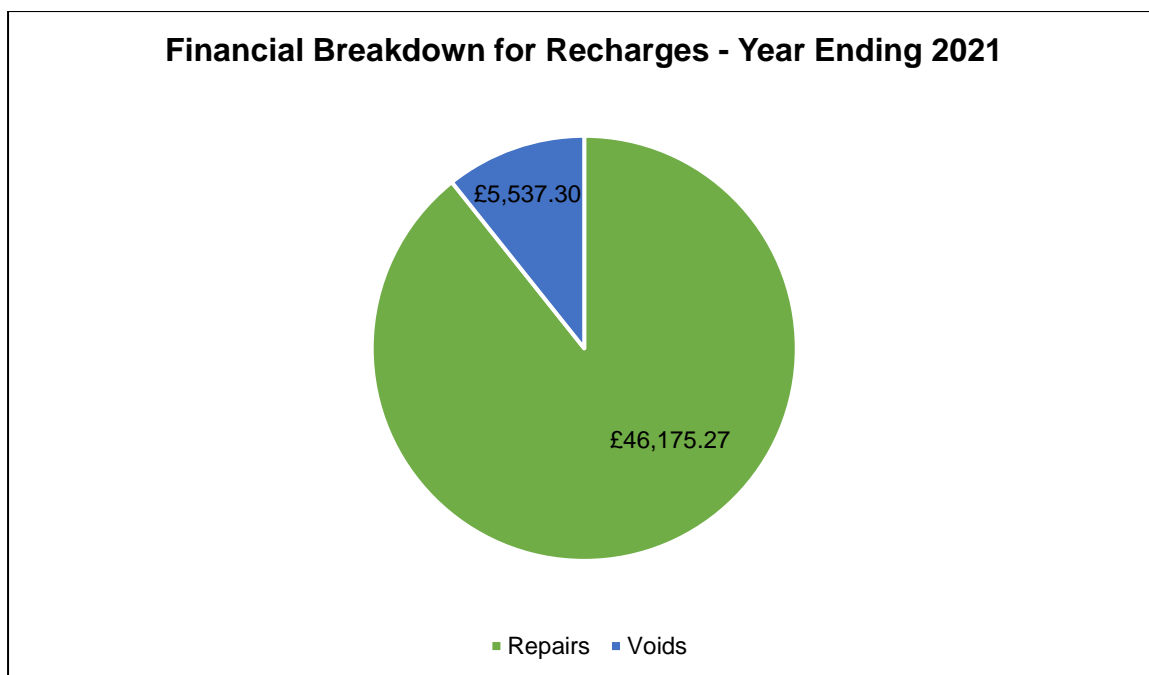


Figure 1 A pie chart to represent the financial breakdown of the current outstanding amount owed to the Council due to recharges.

The cost of living crisis and the potential long-term impacts of this needs to be considered when issuing and recovering recharges within Thurrock. The cost of living crisis references to the steep rise in costs for everyday items such as:

- gas and electric
- food
- petrol and diesel

The cost of living crisis is a cumulation of many factors such as:

- Brexit
- COVID-19
- Russian invasion of Ukraine
- Instability of the national government

To support tenants in meeting payments where recharges have not been preventable, it will be important to consider the wider financial support available to tenants as well as individual affordability.

The council are committed to taking a person-centred approach in issuing and collecting recharges to ensure decisions are made responsibly and with the tenant's best interest at the core.

Definitions

Term	Definition
Recharge	The process whereby a tenant is charged for repairs undertaken to their property by the council
Deficit	The term used to describe a negative financial impact
Void	The term used to refer to an empty property once a tenant has vacated
Professional Judgement	The term used to refer to how a decision is made based on previous experience, investigation, specialist training and context knowledge
Schedule of Rates	An agreed contractual cost for completing a repair
Responsible Landlord	The term used to refer to the approach taken by Thurrock Council in ensuring tenants are happy and safe within their homes

Deciding to Recharge

The council takes a considered approach when deciding to recharge a tenant for repairs to the property. The decision to issue a recharge will usually fall within one of two categories:

Failure to adequately repair

This refers to when a tenant either fails to report a repair within their property which leads to further damage or when a tenant attempts to undertake a repair themselves but then requires council assistance in resolving the repair fully.

However, if a tenant is unaware of a repair being required this will be taken into consideration.

Example

If the kitchen tap is clearly leaking from the pipe but the tenant does not report this and damage is caused to the surrounding cupboard, the repair work would likely be rechargeable. If the tenant attempted to fix the leaking pipe or repair the cupboard causing further damage, then this would likely be rechargeable.

If a pipe was leaking under a floorboard which remains undetected until a stain appears on the below ceiling, then this is likely to not be rechargeable due to the limited ability for the tenant to source and resolve prior to the damage occurring on the ceiling.

Damage caused deliberately, through neglect or vandalism

This refers to when the behaviour of a tenant, guest or pet fails to maintain the condition of the property, whether purposefully or as an indirect result of behaviour and use of the property.

Example

If your child caused damage to the property, such as breaking a window with a ball, this would be considered your responsibility as the tenant and therefore likely to be rechargeable.

Likewise, if your child invited a friend over to play and it was the friend who damaged the window with a ball, this would still be considered your responsibility as the tenant and therefore likely to be rechargeable.

In instances where a tenant claims damage to the property is the result of crime, a Crime Reference Number will need to be obtained by Essex Police and provided to the [Quality Assurance team](#) for consideration. The [Quality Assurance team](#) will work directly with Essex Police to ascertain the details of the incident and whether it would be appropriate to recharge.

Thurrock Council takes a zero-tolerance stance on criminal damage and activity, should a property be damaged as a result of this and a person or persons is prosecuted then the council will seek to recharge the offender.

Other reasons to recharge

There may on occasion be reason for the council to recharge a resident outside of the above. For example, a tenant may be recharged the cost of an emergency call out if they repeatedly make false claims of an emergency repair.

If a tenant is recharged due to a reason not outlined within this policy then full reasoning will be provided alongside the relevant evidence and advice.

Recharge investigation

At the point of a potential recharge being identified, the tenant will be required to sign a Recharge Form by the attending operative. This is to reflect the tenant is aware they may be liable for the cost of the repairs required. If a tenant refuses to sign the form, the operative will make note of this.

Before a recharge is formally issued to the tenant, a thorough investigation is conducted to ensure it is appropriate to do so. Several factors are taken into consideration, such as:

- the type of repair required
- any known tenant vulnerabilities
- the account of how the damage occurred according to the tenant
- professional judgement such as from Essex Police, Contractor Operatives and Housing Officers
- history of the property such as previous repair reports and property photos
- before and after photos on completion of the repair in question

Once the available evidence is considered, a decision will be made whether it would be appropriate to pursue a recharge. A recharge will only be deemed appropriate if the necessary evidence is in place to support the decision.

It is important to note that whilst a repair is being investigated as a recharge the repair will be left safe and secure by a Thurrock Council Contractor Operative until an outcome has been agreed.

If the final recharge amount has a cost of £20 or under then this will be automatically waived by the council. However, if the tenant continues to accrue recharges under this amount then the council will be within their right to pursue any further recharges, irrespective of amount.

Deciding the amount to recharge

All costs relating to recharges are based on an agreed schedule of rates. However, a full recharge cost cannot be confirmed when presenting the Recharge Form due to several factors:

- multiple trades and appointments may be required to resolve the repair, effecting the final recharge cost
- further remedial work may be identified, effecting the final recharge cost
- as above, the Housing department will conduct a full investigation in the first instance to ensure the decision to recharge and the final amount is appropriate

A quote for the rechargeable works will be provided at the earliest opportunity if requested by the tenant. However, the quote may be subject to change due to the above influencing factors. Thurrock Council aims to inform tenants of any final costs in a timely manner, but this will be dependent on the length of time it takes for the repair to be completed and the time taken to fully investigate the recharge.

Example

A leak in the property is caused by an overflowing bath, which has caused damage to the ceiling below and water running through the electrics. Mears attends as an emergency to make safe the electrics. At the point of attendance, it is determined that the overflowing bath was due to a plug being kept in and taps left running. Due to this the repairs are considered rechargeable and a Recharge Form would be presented for signing. However, following this appointment further remedial works would then need to be considered such as:

- potential work to electrics once dried
- potential work to floorboards once dried
- potential work to the below ceiling once dried

It is only once the property has fully dried that a full scope of works can be confirmed and completed, like the above and any other associated costs such as asbestos tests to the ceiling prior to starting work.

Supporting Tenants

Thurrock Council is committed to being a responsible landlord. This means, that although the cost of a recharge is legally passed onto Sundry Debtors to collect, the council still holds a duty to ensure tenants avoid financial hardship where possible.

The Housing department will seek to implement a variety of tools to ensure the recharge payment is adhered to but in a manageable way for the tenant, taking a person-centred approach.

For example, we will provide:

- access to a Financial Inclusion Officer for advice
- signposting to budgeting support and guidance
- advice on how to avoid future recharges

Process for Recharges

Depending on the nature of the recharge there are three ways it can be processed:

Current Tenants

In the instance of a recharge being noted, on the condition the tenant has made no previous attempts to repair the item in question, the tenant will be offered the opportunity to complete the repair themselves. However, the repair undertaken will be subject to approval by a Thurrock Council surveyor and should the repair be deemed as unsuitable, the overall cost of the recharge will be reflective of any corrective repair work the council may need to complete.

If a tenant decides they do not wish to undertake the repair themselves and agree to pay the cost of the recharge, a Recharge Form will need to be signed by the tenant. This form will reflect the tenant accepts responsibility and the overall cost of the repair. Once the repair is complete the tenant will be invoiced to allow payment.

Outgoing Tenants

In the instance of a tenant leaving a property the Voids team will take responsibility for identifying and processing any recharges.

Prior to the property keys being returned a joint inspection will take place with the Void Officer, Tenancy Management Officer and the tenant as part of the Exit Inspection. The Void Officer will endeavour to identify all possible recharges at this point and discuss possible solutions with both the tenant and Tenancy Management Officer. All recharges and agreed solutions will be noted in the Exit Inspection paperwork.

However, once the property has been vacated an additional inspection will be completed. This is to ensure no recharges have been overlooked due to furniture or have occurred between the Exit Inspection and vacating the property. If any recharges are identified these will be communicated with the outgoing tenant as soon as possible and invoiced to allow payment.

As the property has been vacated it will not be possible for the outgoing tenant to remedy themselves.

When an outgoing tenant cannot be traced consideration shall be given to writing off the debt in accordance with financial regulations. When a debt has been written off it will no longer be shown as outstanding in the council's accounts. However, the debt remains due to the council in law and if the outgoing tenant is subsequently traced the debt will be re-instated.

On Request

On occasion and depending on the circumstance, Thurrock Council will agree to undertake repairs to the property that would usually fall under the responsibility of the tenant. This will be on the condition the tenant agrees to pay for the works undertaken as a recharge.

The tenant will still be requested to sign a Recharge Form accepting responsibility and the cost of the repair. Once the repair is complete the tenant will be invoiced to allow payment.

Deceased Tenant

Thurrock Council take a case-by-case approach when resolving a recharge relating to a deceased tenant, whether issued prior to their death or found after passing.

If the deceased tenant had sole tenancy to the property then the council would waive the recharge entirely.

If the deceased tenant held a joint tenancy, has a person who wishes to claim succession or other persons named on their tenancy then the council would work with the people in question to find an agreeable solution.

Failure to Pay

At the point of a recharge being invoiced, the matter is passed over to the Sundry Debts team to progress as necessary. This is due to the recharge becoming a legal debt to the council, meaning it would be inappropriate for the Housing department to handle any further.

If a tenant is unable to repay the amount in full it is recommended they work with Sundry Debts to agree- if possible- a suitable payment plan that ensures the recharge is paid in a timely but manageable way for the tenant.

However, if a payment plan is not adhered to or a tenant refuses to pay for the repair once invoiced, the Sundry Debt team will continue to contact the tenant. If there is no response from the tenant there are two potential outcomes:

- a debt collection will be issued
- a money judgement order will be applied for which if obtained and uncontested, will be passed to a debt collection agency to recover

It is important to note that once the recharge is passed over to the Sundry Debt team or any other subsequent debt collection agency, the policies and processes of that agency supersede that of the Housing department and wider council.

Legal

Once a recharge reaches the stage of legal enforcement, the recharge will be passed to a third party collection agency. Any legal costs occurred through this process will be included with the overall cost of the recharge.

The council will take all reasonable steps to ensure the tenant is aware of this and the new cost payable.

Appeals

Tenants have the right to appeal the council's decision to recharge or the amount specified.

In the first instance, appeals will be managed in the same way as a routine enquiry. Tenants are advised to communicate any concerns at the earliest opportunity to the officer or team responsible for deciding to recharge. For example, all concerns relating to void properties would be re-considered by the Voids team. It is advised tenants follow the below guidance when submitting an appeal:

- submit the appeal in writing if possible, such as email or letter
- clearly state why you disagree with the decision you are appealing
- ensure to provide all evidence such as eyewitness accounts, police reports and photos
- clearly state your preferred outcome
- clearly state how you wish for the outcome to be communicated to you, such as telephone call or in writing
 - a written copy of the decision can always be requested at a later date
- ensure to include all up-to-date contact details such as telephone numbers and email addresses

Tenants are reminded that although an appeal could lead to a recharge amount being reduced or cleared entirely, upon review it may be decided that further costs should have been originally considered and therefore cause the recharge amount to increase.

If following the above a tenant is still dissatisfied with the outcome, a tenant is able to request a formal review through the [Thurrock Council complaints procedure](#).

Preventing Recharges

As a responsible landlord, Thurrock Council will take all reasonable steps to ensure recharges can be prevented.

Support in completing DIY

Thurrock Council have worked with our repair and maintenance contractor to create a [number of videos](#) demonstrating simple repairs tenants may be able to complete themselves.

It is advised tenants should only undertake repair work themselves if they feel confident and able to complete the repair to the expected standard.

Supporting vulnerable tenants

Thurrock Council recognises that not all tenants will be able to reasonably repair and maintain their home for many reasons, such as:

- learning difficulties
- mental health problems
- age
- physical disability or impairment
- sensory impairment
- experiencing temporary or terminal illness

Due to this, when a tenant declares themselves as vulnerable they will be entitled to an enhanced repair service where additional work can be undertaken by the council which would usually be tenant responsibility.

This service does not exempt vulnerable service users from recharges but serves as an additional step to ensure tenants are supported and recharges are either prevented or issued fairly and with consideration.

Monitoring, Measuring and Review

The Housing department are committed to ensuring the Recharge policy remains not only robust in collecting money owed but fair and considerate in how decisions are made.

The below steps will be taken to ensure the policy remains effective and appropriate:

- regular review by relevant senior manager
- close monitoring of all recharges issued to ensure best practice is being adhered to
- regular review of recharges issued to ensure learning is identified at the earliest opportunity
- open communication with tenants through the recharge process to ensure transparency and the opportunity to improve

10 January 2023		ITEM: 7
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Beaconsfield Place/Calcutta Road – Lessons Learnt		
Wards and communities affected: All		Key Decision: None
Report of: Ryan Farmer – Housing Strategy and Quality Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: n/a		
Accountable Director: Ewelina Sorbjan – Interim Director of Housing		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to share the background of the HRA development at Calcutta Road, known as Beaconsfield Place and share the lessons learnt

Following the completion and handover of the scheme and the subsequent first round of lettings at Beaconsfield Place, the Housing service and other appropriate stakeholders undertook a review to identify areas of learning which could inform future new build developments to avoid potential pitfalls and strengthen the likelihood of positive resident experiences of moving to and living in their new homes.

This report presents the findings of this review activity and will help to steer future work.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to review this report and provide feedback on its contents to inform future new build developments delivered by the council.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1. In June 2017, an application for planning permission was approved for a 100% affordable development of 35 homes for people aged over 55 at Calcutta Road, Tilbury, designed with HAPPI (Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation) principles.
- 2.2. This application was the product of a collaborative design process involving both technical professionals and input from council staff from a range of services including Housing Assets and Maintenance, Sheltered Housing,

Property, Planning, Occupational Therapy and other colleagues in Adult Social Care.

- 2.3. Work officially started on site in October 2019; however, the overall construction and development project faced significant levels of disruption due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.4. The development, now called Beaconsfield Place, comprises 31 one-bedroom flats and four two-bedroom duplex flats, indoor communal spaces, private communal gardens for residents, ample parking and mobility scooter storage.
- 2.5. Once the development was handed over to Thurrock Council, the first lettings were completed on 7 March 2022.
- 2.6. The scheme was nominated for a number of regional and national awards. It was shortlisted in the *Best older people's housing development - rural/suburban* category at the Inside Housing Development Awards 2022 and the *Meeting Housing Need* category at the Essex Housing Awards 2022. The scheme won the *Excellence in Development Medium Schemes (26-50 Homes)* award at the Essex Housing Awards 2022.
- 2.7. Following the completion and handover of the scheme and the subsequent first round of lettings at Beaconsfield Place, the Housing service and other appropriate stakeholder undertook a review to identify areas of learning which could inform future new build developments to avoiding potential pitfalls and strengthen the likelihood of positive resident experiences of moving to and living in their new homes. These findings are set out in distinct sections below.

3. Designation of New Build Scheme

- 3.1. As previously outlined, the Calcutta Road development was initially planned to be delivered as a scheme designed for people aged over 55, but not a Sheltered Housing scheme specifically. This development was always intended to provide more specialised accommodation for an identified need in the borough, as adopting HAPPI principles would allow tenants to remain in these homes for longer. The provision of shared communal areas and gardens was intended to provide older residents with a community and support network, allowing them to remain independent and benefit from the supported living the scheme would provide.
- 3.2. In May 2021, a decision was made by Interim Assistant Director of Housing in post at the time to designate the development as Sheltered Housing, partly to support the decommissioning of the nearby Alexandra Court Sheltered Housing complex. The decommissioning of this complex followed an assessment of the access to blocks at the site. This study indicated that the blocks at Alexandra Court did not meet the accessibility standards the council aims to achieve. The nearby construction of Beaconsfield Place, developed using HAPPI principles for older people's housing, provided an opportunity for residents at Alexandra Court to move to a new home within their current community designed with accessibility requirements in mind.

- 3.3. It is expected that there will be overlaps in the cohorts of potential residents of a Sheltered Housing scheme and a housing scheme developed for people over 55. However, the experience from this development project has shown some of the difficulties which can arise when making a change in designation at such a late stage, given that the project was already under construction and substantial amendments to design could not be made.
- 3.4. The design of a new build scheme is decided at a very early stage in the project, setting a clear direction to meet the housing needs of intended future residents. It, therefore, makes it difficult to react effectively when the designation changes towards the end of the development project, potentially resulting in the delivery of a building which is no longer 'purpose built' for its intended residents, which may also risk further complications.
- 3.5. Resident feedback from the new tenant survey for Beaconsfield Place indicates that 75% of those who answered the question about the overall quality of home reported that they were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied.
- 3.6. The learning from this experience is to remain committed to initially agreed project outcomes wherever it is possible and appropriate. Whilst all projects are designed with a degree of future proofing, those projects intended for particular groups of residents should consider an exit strategy at an early stage in design so that they can be easily adapted for alternative needs if the requirement to do so arises in the future.
- 3.7. With regard to the Beaconsfield Place project, the use of a light gauge steel system to reduce the construction period and achieve spend of Right to Buy receipts within their permitted timescale mitigated against this objective. This learning will ensure that the proposed development will be suitable for the needs of the cohorts of residents who would be anticipated to live there in the future.

4. Communal Fixtures and Fittings

- 4.1. In the design of Beaconsfield Place, specific attention was made to ensure that communal areas did not feel sterile and without character or features whilst maintaining a clear and safe environment. Particular attention was paid to providing attractive light fittings in specific communal locations.
- 4.2. From a general caretaking and maintenance perspective, it was identified that whilst there should be an aspiration to design spaces which residents can enjoy as they pass through them, it is also crucial that consideration is paid to the ease and ability to clean such spaces, including any lighting installations.

5. Waste and Waste Collection

- 5.1. Stakeholder engagement highlighted some areas relating to waste and waste collection as particular concerns following the handover of Beaconsfield Place. However, resident feedback from the new tenant survey indicates that two-thirds of those who answered the question about waste disposal and

recycling facilities reported that they were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied.

- 5.2. After residents had moved into the Beaconsfield Place development, there was a delay in waste collection commencing, resulting in a growing backlog. However, this was swiftly dealt with once collections started. Definitive arrangements and early commitments between Housing and Waste Services for when collections will begin for future new build developments would be a positive step and improve the experience for residents moving into new homes.
- 5.3. Building on the detailed engagement already undertaken with colleagues in Waste Services, the general feedback from colleagues involved in the handover of this development has highlighted other benefits this can bring.
- 5.4. New build development can take extended periods to progress from design through to handover, so continued engagement with and from Waste Services is crucial to ensure that the bins which are ultimately provided at a scheme remain fit for purpose and meet the operational requirements at that point in time.
- 5.5. Finally, as a general point for consideration (especially in schemes designed with older people in mind), it should always be ensured that there is good access to bin stores for residents with mobility issues.

6. Caretaking

- 6.1. The reported satisfaction from residents regarding how communal areas are maintained is high, with 80% of those who answered this question on the new tenant survey reporting that they were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with this.
- 6.2. The element to be considered in future developments, and one which has been actively considered in other recent new build developments such as Alma Court, is the planning for and provision of a suitable space for site-based caretakers, where that provision is specifically required or shown to be necessary. In such cases the original brief should specifically require and evidence the need for on-site office provision.

7. Anti-social Behaviour

- 7.1. New tenant feedback for Beaconsfield Place indicates that 75% of those who answered the question about feeling safe in their home reported that they did.
- 7.2. There were significant concerns from officers relating to anti-social behaviour around the Beaconsfield Place development, particularly during and after handover and the first rounds of property lettings.
- 7.3. Reflecting on this period, several suggestions and lessons have been identified for future new build developments. It is important to note that this is not a reflection of activity which did or did not happen for the Beaconsfield

Place development, but instead what has been identified as good practice and reasonable approaches in the future.

- 7.4. The council should consider anti-social behaviour, resident safety, and how people can access a development from the early stages of planning. It should remain an item on the agenda throughout the project. This focus would make perpetrating anti-social behaviour as difficult as possible and would aim to support future residents to feel safe once they are in their new homes. Beaconsfield Place did secure a Gold Standard Secured by Design certification which is a police-accredited approach to designing out crime.
- 7.5. Although the handover of Beaconsfield Place was delayed due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, for future developments, consideration should be given to the timing of handover, especially if located in an area which is particularly vulnerable to anti-social behaviour. Consideration should also be given to any additional resources required to effectively manage handovers at certain times of the year when anti-social behaviour has been observed to be more prevalent, such as during school holidays and exam times.
- 7.6. A further step the council should consider in all new build developments is ensuring planned engagement with the local community during the build and before handover. Such an approach would provide the platform and opportunity to stress the importance of protecting new community assets and keeping communities looking nice and feeling safe. The council and delivery partners should work to encourage and promote positive public opinion for new developments and the benefits they bring to local communities, seeking to minimise the risk to developments during their construction and to residents and their homes after handover.

8. Moving to a New Home

- 8.1. A local lettings plan was implemented for the first lettings of many of the properties at Beaconsfield Place. The local lettings plan included the 31 one-bedroom flats; however, the four two-bedroom duplex flats at this site did not form part of the plan. Properties of this type and size were identified as being able to meet the specific needs of households and applicants across the borough; thus, these were let in line with the council's Housing Allocations Policy.
- 8.2. The first lettings of 75% of the properties covered by the local lettings plan were set aside for residents moving from the Alexandra Court Sheltered Housing complex. This represented 23 properties in total. The remaining 25 % of properties covered by the local lettings plan were let through the usual allocations process (which may also include existing tenants of Thurrock Council living in properties across the borough).
- 8.3. The table below provides a breakdown of the first round of lettings by location of the resident's previous address and whether that resident was already a tenant of Thurrock Council immediately before their move to Beaconsfield Place or not.

Location of Previous Address	Number of transferring Council tenants	Number of new Council tenants	Total
Tilbury	21	3	24
Grays	2	2	4
Chadwell St Mary	2	0	2
South Ockendon	1	0	1
South Stifford	1	0	1
Purfleet	0	1	1
Outside of Thurrock	0	2	2
Total	27	8	35

- 8.4. The properties at Beaconsfield Place are offered at Affordable Rent levels. As such, a significant proportion of the residents who moved into this development and already tenants of the council will likely have moved from a property offered at Social Rent levels.
- 8.5. To better support and prepare transferring residents for this change in future new build developments offered at Affordable Rent levels, proactive engagement and communication around rents with prospective tenants at an earlier stage will help avoid surprise or confusion around potentially higher costs.
- 8.6. Although all properties were successfully let, there were more challenges with the lettings of the two-bed duplex flats at this development. Whilst there is a need in the borough for properties of this type built with HAPPI principles in mind, their inclusion in a development which was later designated as a Sheltered Housing scheme added a layer of complication and extended the time it took to proactively identify suitable applicants.
- 8.7. As previously outlined, the development of Beaconsfield Place was disrupted significantly by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, including impacts on construction staff and the supply and availability of materials. As such, the handover of the development was also delayed and disrupted.
- 8.8. Many residents moved within a relatively narrow timeframe to support tenants to move into their new homes as soon as possible due to the extended wait for their respective properties to be ready.
- 8.9. Those tenants who were being supported to move from Alexandra Court due to decommissioning were offered assistance through a removals service; however, the number of residents moving at similar times meant that not all could be moved in the same week. The consequence was that some tenants had the keys to their new property at Beaconsfield Place and the property they were leaving and therefore were liable for the rent on both.

- 8.10. Although the Housing service ensured that no resident was required to pay rent on both properties simultaneously, the lesson learned here is that phasing should be considered where practically possible in comparable circumstances. Examples include future Sheltered Housing scheme decommissioning activity or in the event of a large number of residents being decanted from a single geographical area. This will allow the process to flow more smoothly, reducing complications by minimising the number of tenants moving or waiting to move between properties on any given day.

9. Reasons for Recommendation

- 9.1. As a social housing developer, the council continues to learn from the experiences of every new build scheme it delivers. This will ensure that future developments can avoid potential pitfalls or complications that affected previous projects, as well as learn from the positive outcomes and successes achieved.
- 9.2. Each new build project is followed on completion by a lessons learnt review identifying not only scheme specific issues but also generic ones that determine the specification of products and design.
- 9.3. More importantly, it ensures that the housing development programme continues to provide high-quality homes and estates that meet Thurrock's residents' needs, where they enjoy living and working and can take pride.

10. Engagement (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 10.1. The engagement for the development of this report included stakeholders from across the range of Housing services responsible and accountable for the design, development, handover and operational management of Beaconsfield Place.
- 10.2. Additionally, a specific new tenant satisfaction survey was undertaken with the residents at Beaconsfield Place to understand their views of their new homes and the experience of moving.

11. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

12. Implications

12.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead - Finance

There are no financial implications directly arising from this reflective report.

12.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Deirdre Collins**
Principal Barrister, Prosecution, Litigation and Housing

There are no direct legal implications as it is a report reflecting on the completion of a development project.

12.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

There are no direct equality and diversity implications arising from this reflective report.

12.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder and Looked After Children

Not applicable

13. Appendices to the report

None

Report Author:

Ryan Farmer

Housing Strategy & Quality Manager

Business Improvement - Housing

10 January 2023		ITEM: 8
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Homelessness Update – 2022		
Wards and communities affected: All		Key Decision: None
Report of: Ben Tovey – Strategic Lead – Housing Solutions		
Accountable Assistant Director: N/A		
Accountable Director: Ewelina Sorbjan – Interim Director of Housing		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

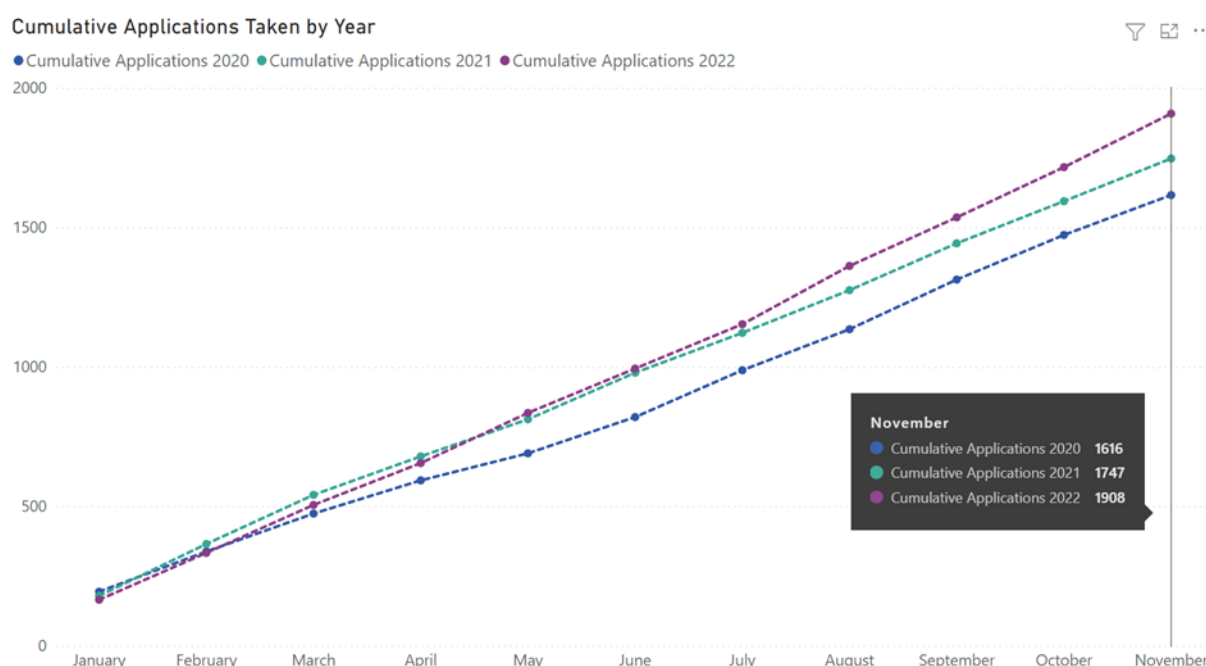
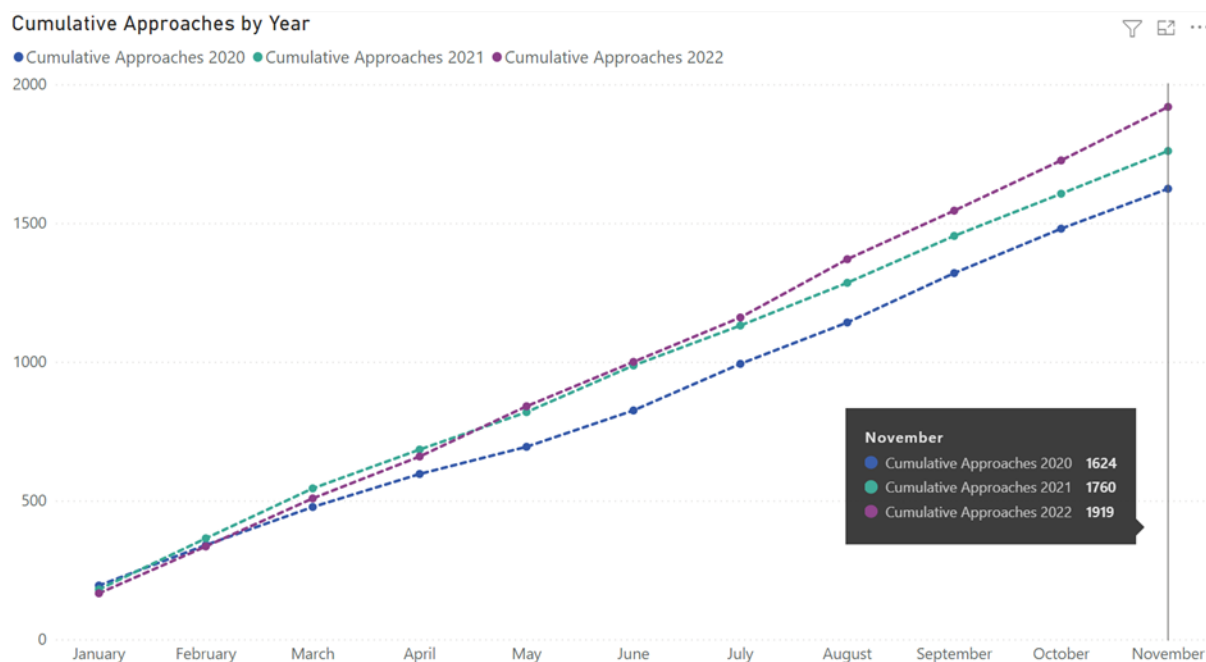
This report provides an update on the Homelessness picture for 2022 with regards to the Housing Solutions service. Huge pressures on the service have been mitigated by the expansion of the Temporary Accommodation portfolio. Recognising Housing as one of the key elements of the Councils 'Human Learning Systems' approach to residents has and will continue to require funding.

1. Recommendation(s)

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

2. Housing Solutions – Homelessness Presentations

- 2.1. We have had a busy year in homelessness. Covid-19 measures relating to the prevention from eviction ended in 2021 but the courts dealing with backlogs processed the cases at different paces with peaks at the beginning of the year and late summer 2022. We're ending the year with cost of living pressures driving up approaches to the service and will end the year with over 2000 approaches in 2022 and a similar number of applications taken.



3. Impact on Temporary Accommodation

- 3.1 We began the year in a good place having moved many of the 'Everyone In' cohort of clients residing in our temporary accommodation (TA) into longer term more secure forms of tenure.

Active Placements by Date and Placement Type

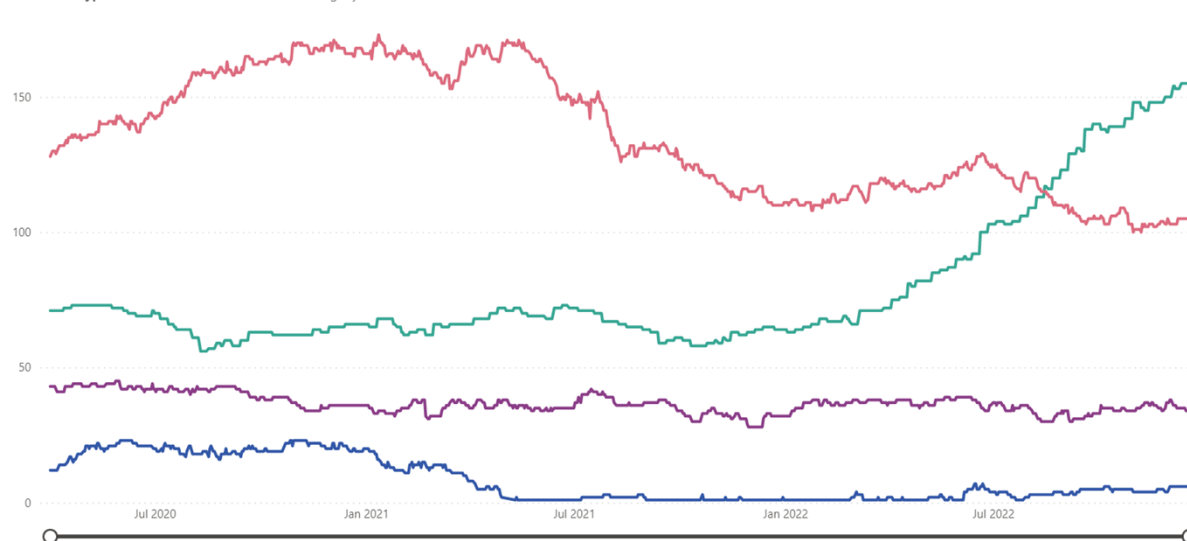


This process was supported by the purchase of new homes utilising 'Right to Buy' receipts, combined with HRA prudential borrowing, to purchase properties on the open market. In 2021 these properties were retained in general needs stock with 'Direct Offers' made to those in TA. In 2022 we utilised purchased properties to increase our Temporary Accommodation portfolio. This decision was taken to reduce cost and increase control over the quality and location of the TA placements.

- 3.2 The visualisations below demonstrates the impact of this exercise with the numbers in TA increasing by 50% during the year while the numbers in private TA have halved over the same period. It also shows a massive reduction in the numbers being placed outside Thurrock when requiring emergency accommodation. Of the 16 external placements 6 were for safety reasons or at the residents behest.

Active Placements by Date and Placement Type

Placement Type ● B&B ● Furnished Let ● Hostel ● Nightly Let



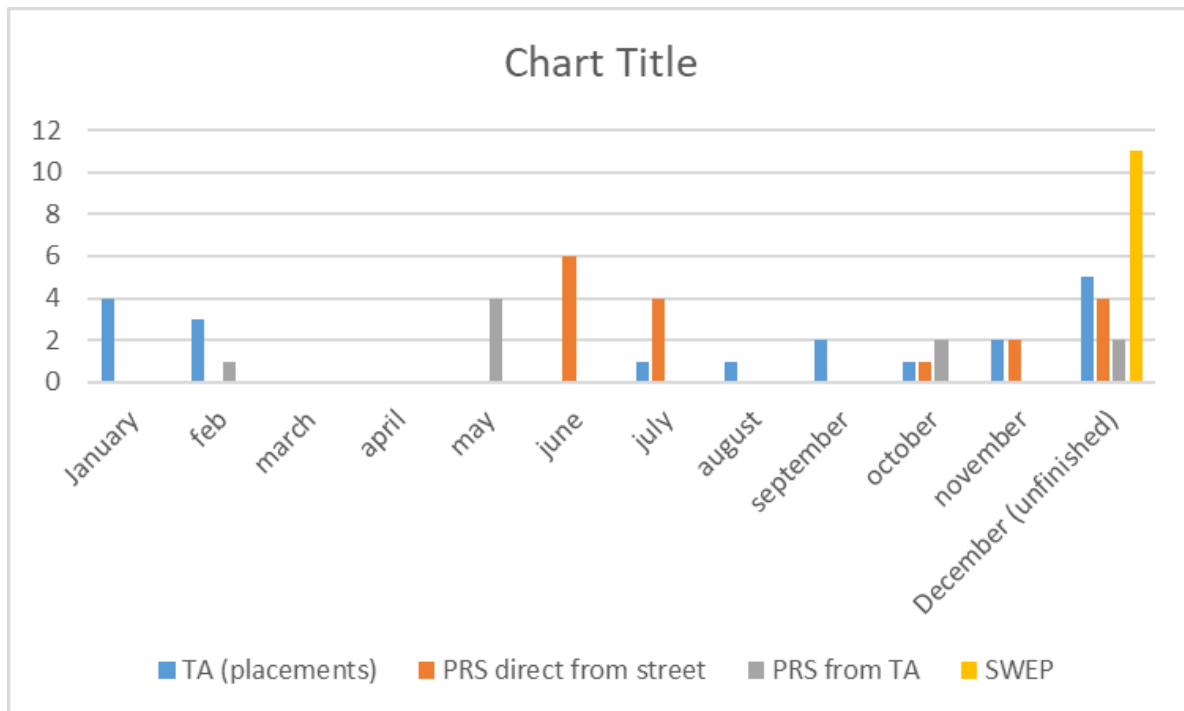
Active Nightly Let Placements by Date and In/Out of Borough

In Thurrock? ● No ● Yes



4. Rough Sleeping

- 4.1 Last year I spoke to members about the success of ‘Everyone In’ and we have attempted to apply the same principles to our Rough Sleepers beyond the end of that scheme. We aim to make a suitable offer of accommodation to anyone who finds themselves roofless regardless of their ability to demonstrate they meet ‘Priority Need’ status. We’ve seen what can be achieved with the right amount of support but we’ve also seen the scale of the challenge and its impact on our resources. We will continue to encourage those with well-established community links to seek assistance within their own areas. At the time of writing we had accommodated 19 Rough Sleepers in to Temporary Accommodation with 6 of these moving on to PRS (with financial assistance provided) and 3 in to Council accommodation, including 1 Housing 1st placement. We housed a record 18 Rough Sleepers directly in to PRS accommodation utilising our Rough Sleeper Initiative grant from DLUHC



- 4.2 We've utilised the Councils comms channels including Social media and continue to use the 'outreach' video our Rough Sleeper Coordinator, assisted by local faith groups, made last year and have seen real engagement from the community in Thurrock in getting support where it is needed.

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/homelessness/if-youre-homeless-or-likely-to-become-homeless> or watch this video about StreetLink and our outreach team: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3MV0aBnD4c>

If you're concerned about someone sleeping rough, you can connect them to local services by sending an alert to StreetLink at:

<https://www.streetlink.org.uk/>, via the StreetLink app or by calling: 0300 500 0914.

5. Human Learning Systems

- 5.1 Increased collaboration between council teams in Adult Social Care, Housing & Health, EPUT and Childrens Social Care have seen us applying a more flexible approach to our remits. Vulnerable adults (including care leavers) who may have a history of failed tenancies or who've moved between increasingly expensive care placements, hospital admissions or the criminal justice system have been offered further housing opportunities, with multidisciplinary teams supporting them.

We've seen huge pressure on Hospital beds with Duty to Refer numbers going up exponentially. Hospital teams have commented on just how many of the general admissions needs have substantial mental health challenges.

The work and successful outcomes of our multidisciplinary teams has led to the creation of a 'Complex Care Team' that will sit within the Adults, Housing & Health service and provide a lead on this work. We will also be expanding our Housing 1st Service to include a specialist area of provision led by a CPN (Community Psychiatric Nurse) for those with serious and enduring Mental Health challenges.

6. **Costs** The preventative work detailed above is aimed at providing an improved quality of life for some of our most vulnerable residents, it will undoubtedly lead to cost avoidance in Health, and Criminal Justice settings as well as Adult & Childrens Social Care budgets but it has and will continue to have an impact on our Housing budget. We have seen a huge increase in rental costs, a national trend exacerbated in Thurrock by London Authorities utilising our PRS market to house their residents. With this and the increased demand for housing assistance we have identified growth within the Housing Solutions budget of £750k.

7. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

8. **Implications**

8.1 **Financial**

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
**Strategic Lead - Corporate Finance –
Resources and Place Delivery**

The increase in the number of approaches from residents in relation to homelessness represents a significant financial risk to the Council.

After careful assessment, growth has been identified within the Councils Medium Term Financial Strategy, and draft budget proposals for the following financial year.

The acquisition of open market properties in order to find permanent accommodation solutions and increase the level of Council owned housing is not available to the Council in the following financial years due to legislative and financial constraints.

Expenditure on temporary housing solutions will continue to be closely monitored, and any realisation of increased expenditure risks reported accordingly.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Deirdre Collins**
Principal Barrister, Prosecutions, Litigation and Housing

All local authorities have a duty under the Housing Act and Homelessness Reduction Act to assist all eligible applicants who present as homeless.

As an update report on action taken, there are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

8.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Smith**
Strategic Lead: Community Development and Equalities

As this report is for information there are no direct diversity implications.

8.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder and Looked After Children

Not applicable

9. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

10. Appendices to the report

None

Report Author:

Ben Tovey

Strategic Lead – Housing Solutions

Housing Solutions

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**Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Work Programme
2022/2023**

Dates of Meetings: 21 June 2022, 29 September 2022, 22 November 2022, 10 January 2023 and 7 March 2023

Topic	Lead Officer	Requested by Officer/Member
21 June 2022		
Housing Strategies 2022-2027	Ryan Farmer	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item
29 September 2022		
Structure of HRA	Mike Jones	Members
Interim report for Stock Condition Survey of Housing Portfolio	Alastair Wood	Officers
Housing Development Programme Update	Julian Wain	Members
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item
22 November 2022		
Fees & Charges Pricing Strategy 2023/24	Dulal Ahmed	Officer
Housing Ombudsman Report: Spotlight on Damp and Mould	Mohammed Saheed Ullah	Members
Blackshots Estate - Proposals for the Way Forward	Julian Wain	Officers
Allocations Policy Update 2022-23	Ryan Farmer	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item
10 January 2023		

Housing Revenue Account – Rent Setting and Budgets 2023/24	Mike Jones	Officers
Homelessness Update - 2022	Ben Tovey	Members
Update on Voids Management Policy	Mohammed Saheed Ullah	Members
Beaconsfield Place / Calcutta Road – Lessons Learnt	Ryan Farmer	Members
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item
7 March 2023		
Portfolio Holder Update Report	Cllr Spillman	Members
Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)	Dulal Ahmed	Members
Homes for Ukraine – management update	Dulal Ahmed	Members
Estate and Tenancy Management – roles and responsibilities	Peter Doherty	Members
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item

Items for 2023/24 Work Programme:

Portfolio Holder Report
Housing Strategy report
CO1 Development Update – Keith Andrews

Briefing Notes

Housing Stock Data – Mohammed Ullah
High Rise Allocations – Ryan Farmer

Clerk: Jenny Shade
Last Updated: November 2022