

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21 November 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors James Halden (Chair), Sue Shinnick (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard, Joycelyn Redsell and Neil Speight
Apologies:	Councillor Maureen Pearce Sue Hodgson, Housing Representative
In attendance:	Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director Housing and Development Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager Mohammed Ullah, Repairs & Planned Maintenance Manager, Adults, Housing & Health Donna Noble

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.

16. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 28 September 2023 were approved as a correct record. It was noted that Cllr Halden and Redsell would like more detailed accounts for accuracy and transparency.

17. Urgent Items

Cllr Speight raised an issue which he would like highlighted again regarding the access to the Town Hall for visitors and members of the public. He shared that prior to the meeting the lights were off and a note was on the door stating the Security Officers were away for 5 minutes, not a welcoming atmosphere for any visitors and should be open for all.

18. Declaration of Interests

Cllr Redsell had an interest in the Blackshots development.

19. Housing Complaints Process, Regulation, Business Intelligence and Performance Report

Ewelina Sorbjan introduced the report and introduced some colleagues from Mears to assist with any questions.

Cllr Redsell asked why there didn't seem to be many complaints regarding garages and why there isn't a plan to refurbish them without reporting.

Ewelina Sorbjan responded that we do fix garages, and there is already work being done which will continue according to the plan.

Cllr Speight highlighted a significant increase in complaints nationally, with an 18.8% YOY increase, was there any particular growth area? Lucas Critchley said they had seen a great increase since the Ombudsman's report, 96% of repairs are completed within the allotted timeframes. 40,000 repairs per year showed a 0.59% return in complaints, most of those were multiple-visit jobs.

Cllr Liddiard asked if there is confidence in tenants knowing how they can complain. Ewelina Sorbjan said the Ombudsman has issued strict guidelines in informing people how to complain and this may be why there are increases in complaints in general.

Cllr Shinnick spoke about transformation of homes said she had seen some bad cases. Ewelina Sorbjan said there is a substantial programme ongoing for transformation and there is a 100% satisfaction record for bathrooms, however the decanting of residents is difficult.

Cllr Halden asked why we seem happy to be in line with national average for maladministration and how we lower that? Ewelina Sorbjan said we are not happy and these have to go through two stages. Every complaint at stage 2 we are in contact with the resident.

Cllr Speight shared his admiration for Officers in Housing but is concerned with the cutting of Contact Centre budgets, removing customer ability to speak with someone. Ewelina Sorbjan highlighted that within Housing they have a ringfenced revenue account, we have our own contact centre and will continue to be able to speak to customers. Lucas Critchley shared his good experience of the Mears call centre and said there will also be a customer app launched soon. There is a dedicated Customer care Officer who has completed Ombudsman training. Cllr Speight said he was reassured about contacts and connections.

RESOLVED

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted, commented on and scrutinised the contents of the report.

20. Blackshots Estate - Update on Demolition and Redevelopment

Ewelina Sorbjan introduced the report. Keith Andrews said this has been running over the Summer months for consultation with stakeholders and been hosting workshops with residents. 28 tenants have moved out and 3 more accepted offers, this is great progress. In relation to design we are awaiting more detailed responses on consultations. We have had a student completing work experience and have plans for a career day with local schools to enhance our social value.

Cllr Shinnick asked how much open spaces are we losing? Keith Andrews said the main area is the sports courts but will provide precise measurements following this meeting.

Cllr Redsell said there were some complaints regarding communications, also highlighted a case where a family is unable to use their heating. Ewelina Sorbjan asked that the detail is passed to her so she can deal with this case as a priority. Keith Andrews highlighted the Decant Officer, who can deal with any queries.

Cllr Liddiard asked how the budget was looking, Keith Andrews said the main concern is capital spend for new homes and demolition, the final business case will set out the costs.

Cllr Speight asked that Fields in Trust will be ringfenced. Keith Andrew gave his absolute assurance.

Cllr Halden asked about dispensation from the Treasury if we are looked at as too successful? Ewelina Sorbjan said work is being led by Steven Mair and a number of other Officers. We have the Commissioner's support to have those conversations with the Treasury.

Cllr Speight was mindful that we are not due to discuss Blackshots again for 2 meetings and asked for a short update in the interim meeting. This was agreed by Officers.

RESOLVED

Noted the progress of the development of the scheme for the proposed redevelopment of the Blackshots tower blocks and commented as appropriate.

21. Housing Strategy - Year One Update

Ryan Farmer introduced the report. This was all agreed in July 2022 prior to intervention. The report sets out the aims, challenges and achievements.

Cllr Liddiard asked what we are unable to achieve. Ryan Farmer said that CO1 has changed and the priority has been put onto delivering services but this has not affected anything in Housing as yet.

Cllr Speight asked about the project run by Basildon Council regarding using sheltered housing as general housing. Ewelina Sorbjan said after looking into this it has been decided not to proceed although this has been done on a smaller scale.

Cllr Speight asked now that Thurrock Regen is being wound up will we ever build again? Ewelina Sorbjan said she is concerned regarding homelessness going up, do we build or refurbish? Temporary housing requests have gone up 22% and we would always advocate to build more.

Cllr Redsell said the feedback from the three blocks in Chadwell is wonderful and this should be shared as a good news story for the Council.

Cllr Halden raised how builds are being changed with modern day requirements such as broadband for home working etc. Ryan Farmer said that he is very impressed with new builds and how they are being planned differently. Cllr Redsell said that she was concerned that home working means more cars at home but there aren't enough spaces.

RESOLVED

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the content of the report.

22. Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023

Ryan Farmer shared the following presentation:

[\(Public Pack\)Item 8 - Introduction to Social Housing \(Regulation\) Act 2023 Presentation Agenda Supplement for Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21/11/2023 19:00 \(thurrock.gov.uk\)](#)

Ewelina Sorbjan shared that consultation had closed for the regulator, fees are about to double for landlords like us, we agree broadly with the consultation.

Cllr Speight asked if this would change the landscape of HMO's. Ryan Farmer stated that although this looked at social housing as HMO landlords are private then no.

Ewelina Sorbjan shared that have attended numerous sessions the Regulator of Social Housing, we are learning from the pilot inspection schemes across five LA's.

RESOLVED

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the contents of the report.

23. Work Programme

Members noted the work programme and made the following comments:

Cllr Speight would like to see detail on report on the South Grays towerblocks and show tenants they are on the radar. Cllr Halden asked that this can be added into stock condition report. Agreed.

Agreed to move the homelessness update to be listed together with the report on homelessness strategy refresh.

The recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:

[Agenda for Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023, 7.00 pm | Thurrock Council](#)

The meeting finished at 9.04 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**