

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21 March 2017 at 7.00 pm

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| Present: | Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Jane Pothecary and Joycelyn Redsell Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative |
| Apologies: | Councillors Tunde Ojetola |
| In attendance: | Councillor James Halden, Cabinet Member for Education and Health Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services Les Billingham, Head of Adult Social Care and Community Development John Knight, Head of Housing Dawn Shepherd, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager Kenna-Victoria Martin, Senior Democratic Services Officer |

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

31. Minutes

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 2 February 2017, were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Pothecary commented that she had asked officers who would be affected by the 3% heating charge and at the time the question wasn't able to be answered. She asked that the answer be circulated.

It was explained by the Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health the Service Charges report would be presented to Cabinet in June and would be brought to the Scrutiny Committee beforehand. He continued to explain the report would include the breakdown of all the service charges and who would be affected.

The Committee raised concerns in relation to the Sheltered Housing Service Charges. Officers explained that the comprehensive consultation finished last week (17 March 2017), so was too soon to bring a report back to the Committee at the present time. Members were further advised that meetings were held at every sheltered housing complex, where officers spoke with many residents and took on board new suggestions which were very helpful.

32. Urgent Items

There were no declarations of interest.

33. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

34. Report on Housing White Paper - 'Fixing Our Broken Housing Market'

The Head of Housing introduced the report to Members explaining the Housing White Paper was published in February 2017 by the Department for Communities and Local Government, with a focus on its implications for Thurrock.

He continued by informing the Committee, the government wanted to revise the definition of 'affordable housing' within the National Planning Policy Framework and sought to ensure that more affordable housing was delivered.

It was discussed that the White Paper suggested changes to the planning policy, one of these was to assist households currently 'priced out' out of either buying or renting. The White Paper also confirmed the government's support of Bob Blackman MP's Homelessness Reduction Bill.

Members were advised the White Paper confirmed the 1% rent reduction until 2020 and also sought to address holdups within the planning system, some of which had led to the establishment of Gloriana in Thurrock.

The Head of Housing notified the Committee, Officers had spoken with the Minister for Housing, Gavin Barwell MP, during a discussion with representatives from a number of Local Authorities'. The key points raised by the Minister were as follows:

- Three main areas of focus – the need for land, within Local Plans, the need to speed up delivery when planning permission had been granted and the fact there were too few & too big housing developers;
- Councils to be held to account for not just delivering 'glossy plans', but actually delivering housing;
- If local areas promoted development, the Government would 'stand shoulder to shoulder with you' to ensure the delivery happened and;
- Housing Infrastructure fund, a review would be undertaken to get all parts of Government to be 'housing delivery centric' when considering funding regimes.

It was queried by Councillor Potheary as to whether confirmation had been given to selling properties to housing tenants. The Head of Housing explained that in relation to social housing there was no reference to fixed-term tenancies or high-value voids; however tenants could follow the Right to Buy scheme.

Councillor Redsell welcomed the suggestion to use smaller building companies. She remarked that smaller properties were needed so that people living in three and four bedroomed homes, were able to down size and families on the housing waiting list could be given a home.

It was enquired if the affordable housing would be offered to Thurrock residents first, given the housing waiting list had 8,000 people currently on it. Officers explained that within Thurrock the resident qualification was 5 years. When placing people from the waiting list into affordable housing, it would depend on their need.

The Chair addressed the Committee stating he welcomed the report. In particular he commented on affordable homes, remarking that the reduction of percentage-per-site requirement reducing from 20% to 10% was a good start and would give people hope of owning a property. As many families were living in tower blocks with young children and no garden.

He further commented that developers should be encouraged to include bungalows within developments, as there were single pensioners living in three bedroom houses who would prefer to live in more adequate accommodation, on one level.

Councillor Redsell remarked that not all elderly people wished to be moved or to live in a complex.

The Chair requested that a copy of the Council's response to the consultation arising from the White Paper be circulated to all Committee Members once it had been finalised.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the briefing on the Housing White Paper.

35. Developing And Expanding Assistive Technology For The 21st Century For Social Care Service Users In Thurrock

The Head of Adult Social Care and Community Development presented the report to the Committee explaining a Careline Review Team was established to examine the options for upgrading obsolete equipment in the Careline monitoring centre, in sheltered housing and general needs flats that had hard-wired pull cord alarm systems and to review current arrangements for charging for the service.

He continued by informing Members the essential work was being undertaken to decommission the hard-wired pull cord community alarm system in sheltered housing blocks and general needs community alarm flats, it was explained these were to be replaced with dispersed personal alarms where required by the service user. It was also suggested that the Careline

monitoring system be updated as it was obsolete and lacked the functionality required to support the service.

Members were notified that technology had evolved since community alarms were first introduced, with improved Technology, including mobile phones and digital apps it was possible for people to live in their own homes for longer.

Councillor Halden left at 8.16pm

It was discussed that by modernising the service and utilising the government funding confirmed in the budget, this could in turn make Careline / Assistive Technology and the new telecare service free of charge to users of Adult Social Care as part of the wider prevention strategy.

Councillor Potheary queried if residents currently receiving the service would experience any changes and sought if current users would face new charges. The Head of Adult Social care explained that in the long term the decommissioning of community alarm systems would enable people to live an enhanced life. He continued by explaining that monitors could be placed on doors, windows and even fridges to allow people to live in their own homes.

The Committee were notified in relation to the charges, officers were looking for a cost effective option, by completing this could bring all charges equal and would allow the service to be improved. All charges could then be removed in the long term.

During discussions it was enquired if staffing would be reduced. Officers confirmed staffing reductions were not proposed at the current time.

Councillor Redsell welcomed the report and praised Officers for the work they were completing in improving the existing service.

RESOLVED the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to support:

- 1. To the essential work being undertaken to decommission the hard-wired pull cord community alarm system in sheltered housing blocks and general needs community alarm flats, and to replace them with dispersed personal alarms where required by the service user.**
- 2. To the plan to upgrade the Careline monitoring system which is also obsolete and lacks the functionality required to support the service.**
- 3. To develop the Careline service into a new, enhanced and expanded telecare and assistive technology service, linked to telemedicine services where appropriate;**
- 4. In relation to charging for Careline and the new telecare service:**

- **To make Careline / Assistive Technology and the new telecare service available free of charge to users of adult social care as part of our wider prevention strategy.**

The Head of Adult Social Care and Community Development left at 8.28pm

36. Key Worker Housing Scheme

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager addressed Members advising the Council had experienced difficulties in recruiting staff to key roles in the borough such as teachers and social workers. In addition the NHS locally had faced similar difficulties in recruiting to front line positions especially nursing staff.

Members were further informed in order to fill vacant posts the Council and NHS had undertaken a number of recruitment drives both nationally and abroad. These included recruitment fairs across the country and most recently in Spain, Ireland and Australia.

It was explained there were two key issues obstructing recruitment of Key Workers these were:

- Wage Levels - Thurrock's close proximity to London provided easy access to London jobs with weighting allowances.
- Housing costs – Thurrock's housing prices had substantially increased in the past three years, with Thurrock now being the most expensive place across the Thames Gateway.

Members were then notified that recruits from abroad faced additional challenges in that they may have no experience of living abroad or renting in a foreign country, they may have no family, friends or other contacts in the UK. It was further commented as this would be a first job, it was unlikely recruits would be in a position to purchase a property.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager advised the Committee of the Councils plan, that it was intended the Council would initially rent 8 x 4 bedroom properties providing 32 spaces for key workers and then as the scheme developed, more properties would be procured.

Councillor Redsell raised concern that elderly residents would be opening their homes. It was explained that the Right Size scheme was for home owners who would like to down size into smaller more appropriate accommodation that better met their needs. Properties could then be used to home those on the housing waiting list or potentially key workers

It was enquired if the term Key Worker would include other services. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health explained the pilot at present would be restricted to those professions detailed in the report, however it could be expanded in the future.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to support the proposal to assist key workers from outside the borough with shared accommodation, during their first year of employment.

37. Residents Survey Results

The Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services presented the report which provided Members with the headline results of the recent Residents Survey. Members were notified that Cabinet had invited all Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider the results.

She continued by advising 1,000 telephone interviews with Thurrock residents were carried out between late November and early December 2016, achieving a representative sample of the population across the borough.

It was mentioned the survey was the first of its kind since 2010 and was an important opportunity to capture local people's experiences and perceptions of the place, their community, the council and its services, that can be considered representative of the wider Thurrock population.

Members were informed that the majority of the results were positive with:

- 69% of residents feeling satisfied with their local area as a place to live
- 70% felt that they belong strongly to their local area
- 61% agreed that their local area was a place where people from different backgrounds got on well together
- 89% felt safe when outside in their local area during the day

It was also discussed that the results clearly displayed the issues most important to Thurrock residents including the maintenance of roads such as fixing potholes, waste and recycling collections, and parks, playgrounds and green spaces.

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services informed the Committee that Cabinet had agreed Clean it, Cut it and Fill it to continue to improve cleanliness around the borough and to also improve Customer Service within the Council.

Members were further advised that Cabinet had agreed to repeat the survey in September 2017.

It was enquired as to how resident's details were collected to enable them to be called. Officers explained that an external marketing company was used to carry out the survey. It was further explained that residents' were asked to confirm their postcode and if they were happy to provide an email address.

The Chair of the Committee mentioned that it was important to look at the results for Grounds maintenance service, parks, playgrounds, open spaces and street cleaning. He commended the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet for their policy relating to enforcement with litter.

During discussions Members commented on the cleanliness of the A13 on the Dock Approach road stating it was unacceptable for Highways England to leave it in such a state.

Councillor Redsell remarked that she had reported areas of the A13 to Environment Officers, who had informed her that it was not the Council's responsibility but that of Highways England.

Members further discussed the parking of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs). It was raised that the car park at the Tilbury Fort was being used as a parking lot, along with the laybys on the Mannorway in Stanford Le Hope. The Committee agreed that Port of Tilbury and DP World should be informed of the situation.

It was remarked that HGVs should be using the lorry park situated at West Thurrock not parking on the highway.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and commented on the results of the Residents Survey 2016.

38. Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee - Work Programme 2016/2017

Members were given the opportunity to suggest topics they would like to discuss in the new municipal year.

Councillor Potheary raised that she had previously asked to see a report on the review of gatekeeping, which had been commented upon in the Thurrock gazette.

The Head of Housing informed Members that a Housing review was to be completed in April 2017 following which a report would be presented to the Committee.

The Chair sought that an update be emailed to the Committee in relation to the topic raised by Councillor Potheary as this was not the first time the report had been enquired.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme be updated with Members suggested topics ahead of the new municipal year.

The meeting finished at 9.05 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**