

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 July 2014 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Gerard Rice (Chair), Barry Johnson (Vice-Chair), Chris Baker, Sue Gray, Susan Little and Sue Shinnick (substitute for Clare Baldwin).

Apologies: Councillor Clare Baldwin.

In attendance: Councillor Lynn Worrall – Cabinet Member for Housing
B. Brownlee – Director of Housing
R. Parkin – Head of Housing
K. Adedeji – Head of Housing, Investment and Development
D. Moloney – Business Improvement Manager
S. Cox – 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 16 July 2014, were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

3. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

4. Budget Update and Savings Proposals

Officers introduced the report which set out the savings that the Council was required to make over the next three years. The Committee were advised of the following key points:

- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income was ring fenced as it was generated by tenants. This constituted the greatest percentage of the Housing Department's budget.
- That the General Fund was used to tackle homelessness and work with the private sector.
- That although the savings detailed within the report were relatively small at £110,000, these were savings made from the General Fund account.

A Member asked what percentage of the total budget £110,000 constituted, to which officers confirmed that the total budget was £700,000 which equated to a 16% budget saving.

A brief discussion was had on the proposed Supporting People savings in Adult Social Care which directly affected the Housing Service. Officers explained that the Adult Social Care team were required to make significant savings, one area of which was the Supported People fund which provided support to residents at risk of homelessness. Officers advised the Committee of the following key points:

- That some cuts to spending could be absorbed by the Housing General Fund, which was anticipated to be at around £250,000 after taking on some of the income currently received by external suppliers.
- That the funding would contribute to support the Catholic Women's League, Charles Street and Single Homeless Floating Support.
- That it was unlikely that more general floating homeless support could be offered to those residents in the private sector at risk of homelessness due to the fact that there is no income receivable to support these services, HRA cannot support them and Housing General Fund is very limited.
- It was thought that the knock on effect would be increased numbers of people needing homeless advice and support coming back into the service.

The Committee were informed that the Single Homeless Floating support relied upon the use of 19 flats out of a total of approximately 10,380.

Members questioned how much Children's Services contributed towards housing Looked After Children (LAC) at the point they left the care system. Officers were unsure of the contributions made, but informed the Committee that they would investigate and circulate this information by email following the meeting.

A Member raised concerns over two large scale home owners who let out properties in Thurrock and who only accepted cash directly from their tenants. It was felt that those residents were particularly at risk. The Housing Service and Member concerned agreed to discuss this issue separately outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the comments detailed above with regard to the savings proposals within Housing Services be noted.

5. Sheltered Housing Review

Officers briefly introduced the report which outlined the demand for sheltered housing stock, the current service model and how service charges could be applied.

The Committee agreed to discuss each recommendation separately for ease of reference.

Officers introduced the four proposed options for funding the sheltered housing service (recommendation 1.5), and noted the following key points:

- That historically the cost of the sheltered housing service was funded by Supporting People Fund by Central Government.
- That when the funding ceased, the cost was subsumed by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), however officers felt that this was inherently unfair as General Needs tenants were in effect subsidising the cost of providing the Sheltered Housing Service.
- To maximise the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and restore the balance of fairness officers wished to change this.

The Committee were informed that 68% of Housing Tenants in sheltered housing were on housing benefit and that the proposed charge increase was able to be claimed back by residents through housing benefit. However, those residents who did not claim housing benefit would have to pay the increased cost if proposal one was recommended for approval.

Members were informed that if option four was recommended for approval then the expected cost to the Housing Revenue Account would be a total of £4.5 million over 18 years. The Committee acknowledged the scale of this impact.

A Member questioned what the authority's statutory duty was in relation to Sheltered Housing. Officers explained that the Council had no statutory duty and that it was an additional service that the Council provided.

Some Members raised concerns that if option four was recommended for approval, there could in future be a two tier system between those who pay (and may receive a better service) and those who do not. In response officers assured Members that all residents would receive the same level of service if this option was preferred.

Officers reiterated to the Committee that it was an additional service that should be funded from somewhere other than the Housing Revenue Account.

Some Members expressed a preference for charging new tenants only (option four), and felt that there was a sense of natural justice with those who wished to use the service had to pay for it. It was felt that payment for the service could then be considered by the residents when they examined whether Sheltered Housing provision was the right option for them.

Some Members felt it would be unfair to introduce new charges for all when existing tenants had made the decision to enter Sheltered Housing accommodation without thought to a potential future cost.

The Committee were informed that there was approximately 70 new Sheltered Housing Tenants every year, which had to be considered when evaluating option four.

A Member expressed preference for option 1, introducing charging for all tenants, as it was not a statutory duty for the Council to pay for this service and the Council was required to make significant savings. The Member appreciated that although this was a difficult decision to recommend, times were difficult for the Council and tough choices had to be made in order to achieve the required budget savings. It was felt that this was also mitigated by the fact that the majority of tenants (68%) would not be affected by the charges as it could be claimed through housing benefit.

The Chair disagreed and instead proposed that the Committee vote in favour to recommend option four, in order for officers to refer to the necessary decision maker for approval. This recommendation was seconded by Councillor Gray.

A vote was undertaken in respect of recommendation 1.5 detailed within the report, whereupon, 4 Members voted in favour of option four, and 2 Members voted against. The Chair declared that option four as the preferred option for future funding of the Sheltered Housing Service be carried.

Officers provided background to recommendation 1.3 and explained in detail that some properties were hard to let and were also unsuitable Sheltered Housing properties.

A brief discussion was on the HAPPI housing scheme (Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation) and whether lifts could be installed in the proposed properties for decommissioning. Officers stated that this was difficult as there were multiple problems with the properties, not just lift access, that included isolated locations.

A Member asked for clarification as to whether the decommissioning process would save the Council money. Officers confirmed that the cessation of warden controlled services under the programme would save an estimated £250,000.

Officers outlined the proposed new sheltered housing model as detailed within the report.

Members welcomed the proposal and felt that this would assist in helping to make the service offered to residents more consistent.

A Member questioned whether 16 posts were sufficient to cover the demands of the sheltered housing schemes, to which officers confirmed that they felt this was adequate.

A Member asked whether officers could evict tenants who were the cause of Anti Social Behaviour. Officers explained that General Needs tenants could

be evicted if to be found breaking their conditions of their tenancy agreement, however there was no such clause about Anti-Social Behaviour in Sheltered Housing Tenancy Agreements. However, Members were advised that the process in applying for Sheltered Housing was comprehensive so that all prospective tenants were aware of what was expected from them.

The Committee welcomed the fact that there would still be cover at the weekends through the 24hour Care Line system.

Officers explained that it had been suggested to open up hard to let Sheltered Housing properties to General Needs tenants aged 45 years and over, however following a consultation it was found that people were keen to maintain the 60 years of age and over age limit. The Committee agreed with this principle.

The Committee welcomed the results of the consultation.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the outcomes of the Sheltered Housing Consultation as detailed in the report be noted.**
- 2. That the current policy whereby sheltered housing properties are not generally let to people aged less than 60 years be maintained.**
- 3. That the decommissioning of some hard to let and/or unsuitable sheltered housing properties, as outlined in the report, be recommended for approval.**
- 4. That a new sheltered housing service model, as outlined in Appendix 9, be recommended for approval.**
- 5. That option 4 for the future funding of the sheltered housing service, as outlined within the report and detailed in the discussion above, be recommended for approval.**
- 6. That the consultation outcomes be published on the consultation website and provided in written form to tenants along with agreed recommendations.**

Information to Note:

The scope of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee is to oversee the provision, planning, management and performance of all services of the Housing Directorate.

As such the Committee does not have the decision making authority to approve recommendations for implementation, rather the Committee are referring the resolutions as outlined above for consideration by the appropriate decision making body or person; whether Cabinet, Council or for a Delegated

Officer Decision. This is in accordance with Thurrock Council's Constitution as outlined in Chapter 4, Parts 2 and 3.

6. Work Programme

Following discussions at the meeting it was agreed that a report on the detail of the Decommissioning of Sheltered Housing would come back to the Committee for review.

The Committee agreed to add a report to the work programme on Travellers Sites and scheduled this for November 2014.

A Member requested an update on Damp and Mould and specifically whether this had improved health of residents, for example by the examination of school attendance figures. Officers stated that a briefing note could be provided to the Committee to update on progress of the eradication of Damp and Mould, however matters relating to health may require joint work with the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Director of Housing advised that she would investigate and advise the Committee.

The Committee agreed to receive an update on the progress of the refurbishment programme in January 2015.

A Member asked whether there was an update on low and green energy. Officers advised that this had been examined by the Highways department in respect of low energy street lighting. The Director of Housing advised that more information would be available through the Member's involvement on the Housing Development Board.

The Director of Housing requested that the title of an item on the work programme 'Homeless Applications Update' be changed to 'Review of Allocations Policy.'

RESOLVED:

- 1. That a report on the Decommissioning of Sheltered Housing be included on the work programme for an appropriate date.**
- 2. That an additional item on Travellers Sites be added to the work programme for November 2014.**
- 3. That an additional item on the progress of the Refurbishment Programme be included on the work programme for January 2015.**
- 4. That the work programme be noted.**

The meeting finished at 8.23pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**