

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 January 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Lynn Worrall (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Joycelyn Redsell and Sara Muldowney (Substitute) (substitute for Qaisar Abbas) and Joycelyn Redsell

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative (arrived at 7.10pm)

Apologies: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Colin Churchman and Andrew Jefferies

In attendance: Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
Dulal Ahmed, Housing Enforcement Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Mike Jones, Strategic Resources Accountant
Kenna-Victoria Healey, 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.

21. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

22. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

23. Fees & Charges Pricing Strategy 2020/2021

The Assistant Director of Housing presented the report, and in doing so, explained that Local Authorities were involved in a wide range of services and the ability to charge for some of these services had always been a key funding source to local Councils.

Members were informed the report specifically set out the charges in relation to services within the remit of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The charges dealt with were for the General Fund by the Housing Service; with charges due to take effect from the 1 April 2020 unless otherwise stated.

The Chair of the Committee queried that within the recommendation it mentioned that some fees were no longer applicable, she asked why these fees had not been included within the report. The Housing Enforcement Manager explained that the fees in question were now considered under

traded services and would be presented in another report to a different committee.

Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee, further enquired as to why the Council was requiring landlords to pay a penalty charge for failing to comply with legislation in relation to installing smoke and carbon monoxide alarms; when the Council was not following the legislation its own properties. The Housing Enforcement Manager, explained that the installation of smoke and carbon monoxide alarms was required by law in the private rented sector. The Assistant Director of Housing stated that she would ask Officers to investigate the claims stated by the Chair of the Committee.

Councillor Redsell seconded the comments stating that clarification for Members would be useful.

Councillor Muldowney questioned as to whether the increase in Housing fees and charges was to be 2.7% or 3.0% as mentioned within the report. The Strategic Resources Accountant confirmed the increase was to be 2.7%.

RESOLVED

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

24. Housing Revenue Account - Business Plan and Budgets 2020/21

The Assistant Director introduced the report to the Committee advising it set out the base budget position for 2020/2021 following the review and update of the 30 year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

She continued to inform Members the report recommended an increase in rents and services charges for next year, and following a rent reduction over the past 4 years of 1% per year, this had lead the Council to have less than £18million to spend on its properties. It had also lead to on average tenants paying £10 less in rent on average, should the rents had been increased per 1% over the last 4 years.

Members heard the Council should have been spending a minimum of £15million a year on the condition of its stock according to the stock condition survey, however, since the rent reduction had been brought in, an average of around £10milllion had been spent on Council properties.

The Assistant Director of Housing explained a consultation into the rent and service charges had been carried out with residents; who expressed they were unhappy with not having communal decoration and general upkeep within properties. Therefore the Council had included £600 thousand from next year to carry out a communal decorating programme including door entry.

The Strategic Resources Accountant commented that there was a lot of information within the tables attached to the report should Members want any additional clarification he was happy to answer any in-depth questions.

Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee enquired as to why within the report there was not a section on the reserves within the HRA as this was normally mentioned within past reports and how much the Council had in the HRA reserves; in addition how much was in the General Fund reserves for the Housing Department. The Strategic Resources Accountant explained that although the reserves were not within the current report it would be in the February Budget Setting Report. He continued to explain the way the reports were structured over the long term 5 year capital program, was trying to capital the expenditure from the use of reserves.

Members then queried the consultation mentioned within the report, with Councillor Muldowney raising concerns with how the consultation was carried out and remarking local Councillors had not been included. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that resident meetings were held across the borough, where there was a presentation and questions answered for residents who attended. She further commented, at the meeting there were no concerns raised by residents as to the increase in charges.

Councillors Muldowney and Worrall remarked as to the online consultation offered to residents. Councillor Worrall stated that when she looked for the online consultation, she couldn't find it. Officers explained that at the time when Councillor Worrall had checked on the Council's website for the consultation, it had finished.

It was further commented by the Chair of the Committee, that she didn't feel the consultation carried out was completed well. She stated that she had seen the letter which was sent to residents; which didn't give them much, if any information as to what the meeting was to be about. Councillor Worrall stated that the letter should have included additional information, such as the increase in service charges.

The Assistant Director of Housing explained that officers held eight additional meetings for residents, than other local boroughs; with some not holding a consultation and just increasing the rents. She apologised that Members felt the consultation was not held to a high standard, however it was held within a tight timeframe.

Councillor Redsell observed that unfortunately most people were not aware of the consultation being held and agreed that more information should have been included within the letter sent to residents.

The Housing Tenant Representative advised the Committee that at the consultation held in Purfleet, only two residents attended and they spoke with her afterwards, as they didn't understand what it was regarding.

Members heard from the Strategic Resources Accountant who explained the initial point raised by residents was the Civic Offices, which was raised at every meeting. He continued to advise Members that once it had been explained to residents that any increases would be put back into Housing services, people were much more understanding and appreciated that if they paid more, then they would get more, such as door entry systems and internal and external decorating of blocks.

Councillor Redsell commented the vibe from her Ward was that people were pleased with the works being undertaken.

Member's discussions then turned to the repairs bill for the year, with Councillor Worrall seeking if there had been an overspend of £2 million, comparing the report with the same report for the previous year. The Strategic Resources Accountant explained that the two reports should not be compared as they presented the figures in a different way. The Committee were further advised that the Council had regular meetings with Mears which included discussions on controlling spending.

Councillor Worrall stated that the increase suggested within the report was too high and too much, she remarked that these were working families, who were struggling. Officers commented the rent increase on the new builds was the only way the developments could be completed. Councillor Worrall observed residents had had four years of reductions and then an increase in one go; there were no options given to residents of slight increases.

The Assistant Director of Housing advised the Committee that during the consultation the different options were not responded to by residents. She accepted there were families who were struggling, and advised them to speak to the Councils Financial Inclusion Officers as they were there to help.

Councillor Muldowney seconded Councillor Worrall's comment and mentioned that families were having to go to food banks. She commented she was concerned the increase could lead families to be homeless if they couldn't keep up with the charges.

Members heard how Officers were speaking with residents as early as possible, so to avoid them coming into arrears or giving up their homes.

The Housing Tenant Representative advised the Committee that residents were sent letters with information on who to contact when seeking for help. She also informed Officers that many residents were unsure what a Financial Inclusion Officer was or did.

It was enquired as to whether the money for the garages was from the HRA. Officers confirmed it was from the Capital Programme. Members were advised any garage which were able to be repaired would be done so and should for any reason it was not possible to repair then they would demolished and used for parking. Councillor Redsell cited that too many of

the garages had been left for too long and they were usually not used for parking but storage purposes.

Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee, sought if the Committee were in agreement with the recommendations, she continued to state that would like to include an additional recommendation, as Members were disappointed with the consultation and suggested she felt that a freeze should be offered on the charges.

Officers advised the Committee that should they agree to freeze the rent and service charges this would mean the Council would not be able to complete certain works which were required such as continuing with the Transforming Homes programme, and work to improve thermal insulation in properties of non-traditional construction as some residents were struggling to heat their homes.

After discussions Members agreed the following recommendation be included:

The findings of the Committee using the information presented is:

- *No efficiency savings are presented within the budget*
- *Budget proposals are not good value for money*
- *Consultation results within the report do not evidence any support for either a rent or service charge increase*

We cannot endorse this recommendation and propose to Cabinet a freeze on both of the increases.

RESOLVED that the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1. Comments on the assumptions included in the HRA Base Budget assumptions as summarised in the report.**
- 2. Comments on the proposed budget for 2020/21.**
- 3. Comments on the proposals for increases to rents and service charges in 2020/21.**
- 4. The findings of the Committee using the information presented is:**
 - **No efficiency savings are presented within the budget**
 - **Budget proposals are not good value for money**
 - **Consultation results within the report do not evidence any support for either a rent or service charge increase**

We cannot endorse this recommendation and propose to Cabinet a freeze on both of the increases.

25. Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2025

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager addressed Members explaining there was a statutory duty on every Local Authority to have a Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy which set out the local authority's plans for the prevention of homelessness and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support is, or would be, available for people who become homeless or who were at risk of becoming so.

He continued to explain the local authority must ensure that all organisations whose work could help to prevent homelessness and, or meet the needs of homeless people were involved in the strategy; with the current homelessness strategy being adopted in Thurrock in 2015.

Members were notified an updated Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy had been developed which took into account current homelessness in the borough, the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the impact of recent welfare reforms, as well as new opportunities for preventing homelessness.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manger raised the key themes within the strategy:

- Partnership and Collaboration – the importance of working together with partners and other stakeholders.
- Health and Wellbeing – this included improving services for armed forces veterans, who were or at risk of being homeless.
- Provision and Accessibility – the Council had recently experience success in increasing provision of accommodation within the borough. There were ambitions to continue with this and those like the winter night shelter provision.
- Customer Excellence – this would ensure that staff received the necessary training and development needed to reinforce ongoing relations between the Housing Service and its partners and to encourage building new connections.

Members were assured that the Committee would receive updates on the working of the strategy and Officers would continue to ensure that the Committee was involved in scrutiny of the delivery of the action plan.

Councillor Redsell commented that due to Data Protection the British Legion were not at liberty to disclose the whereabouts of a veteran and in some cases, Veterans didn't want help from the Council and it was for the Council to respect that decision.

She further commented that the Veteran's Charter was due to be updated and welcomed a piece of work on this.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manger informed Members that there was information for veterans on the Councils website and Officers were working with partners to improve the information offered.

Councillor Worrall, Chair of the Committee enquired as to when it was likely for the Housing Prevention Board to be in place. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that the Board, was not yet in existence as the strategy was required to be agreed by Cabinet. She remarked that she hoped the first meeting would take place by March 2020.

Councillor Muldowney thanked Officers for the report and commented that she welcomed the strategy. She further enquired as to whether Officers were confidence they would half the number of people sleeping rough in the Borough; as in line with the Governments new policy. The Assistant Director of Housing confirmed they were.

Officers added that in line with the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy an action plan would be in place and would involve different partners and stakeholders such as the NHS and the Housing Service working together as well as other outside charities and organisations. Members were informed that a copy of the action plan would be brought to Committee for their comments.

It was the aim of the Strategy to be able to provide a better service for residents and to have fewer household in crisis, ending in homelessness.

During the discussion, the Chair sought to the position within the service on staffing levels. The Assistant Director of Housing notified Members that there was still a high turnover of staff within the department, due to a number of reasons including the location of the Borough close to London and the higher wages that staff can earn working in London. She continued to advise the Council had an ongoing training programme covering a number of topics such as Homelessness Reduction Act, Customer Care and experience training.

RESOLVED

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to comment on the draft Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25 before its presentation to Cabinet.

26. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2019/2020

The Committee discussed the work programme for the last meeting of the municipal year. Members agreed the amendments to the Work Programme.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the following reports be included on the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2020/2021:**

- **Garages Project update**
- **Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy – Action Plan**

2. That the Temporary Accommodation Contract report be moved to the new municipal year.

The meeting finished at 9.07 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