

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 22 June 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Lynn Worrall (Chair), Augustine Ononaji (Vice-Chair), Mike Fletcher, Maureen Pearce and Joycelyn Redsell

Apologies: Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance:

Ian Wake, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Colin Black, Assistant Director Regeneration and Place Delivery
Tracy John, Interim Assistant Director of Housing
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director of Housing
Susan Murray, Asset Delivery Manager
Kelly Myers, Housing Development Project Manager
Wendy Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny meeting held on 16 March 2021 were approved as a correct record.

2. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Damp and Mould in Council Housing Properties

The report was presented by Susan Murray.

The Chair thanked officers for the report. Councillor Redsell said that she did not agree with some points within the report particularly on ventilation as the tower blocks in Blackshots did not have this. She explained that there was water leaking inside and outside of those tower blocks and the Ward Councillors for the Blackshots area had received reports from residents with issues inside those tower blocks. She pointed out that opening windows as suggested for ventilation was not safe as children could climb onto chairs to

get to the windows. She stated that the tower blocks in Blackshots needed to be demolished instead of spending money on repairing those. She said that Mears painted over mould inside those flats and the mould would reappear again. She stated that she was not happy with this.

Councillor Fletcher asked if there were specific areas in the borough where damp and mould issues were more prominent than others such as the Flowers Estate in South Ockendon. He said that damp and mould issues had become more of an issue over the past few years and that residents felt that they were blamed for this. He noted that Resident Liaison Officers were trained but pointed out that the issue was desk based staff and said that first responders needed to understand the situation that residents were in. He went on to say that there could be an underlying issue to damp and mould which could be due to the Council housing families in small properties. He also sought further details on the Thematic Review from the Housing Ombudsman.

Susan Murray answered that there were no specific areas where damp and mould was higher than other areas. She said that it was due to the architype of certain properties. In regards to the Flowers Estate, she said that she did not have the specific damp and mould details for this area but would find out and send the information out. She explained that the damp and mould issues in the Flowers Estate had reduced due to the MVHR installations (Mechanical ventilation and heat recovery units). Tracy John added that the service was aware of the issues of overcrowding which was due to a lack of housing provisions nationally for families. She said that overcrowding would put pressure within a home and increase the likelihood of damp and mould issues. She went on to say that the Thematic Review was a call for evidence from the Housing Ombudsman which the Council had circulated to council housing involved residents and TRA groups and had encouraged them to respond. Ian Wake added that the report did not seek to blame residents for damp and mould issues and highlighted that the main cause was condensation. He said that the Transforming Homes programme aimed to improve buildings and noted that some properties had reached the end of their life expectancy which needed to be replaced. He explained that a deep dive had been carried out on the complaints in the media and social media and that the service had found that most of those complaints were in regards to Blackshots tower blocks. He went on to say that the Council was currently looking at a scheme for those flats in Blackshots and would need to work with residents on a solution.

The Vice-Chair questioned how often the service carried out inspections of their council housing properties. Tracy John answered that the service relied on residents to report faults and an inspection would follow on. The service aimed to undertake three yearly inspections as part of the tenancy audit which was primarily to check in the tenants on how things were going with regard their tenancy but also looked at the conditions of properties. She said that the service was working with Mears to identify properties with potential damp and mould problems. In addition to this, the service looked at sample checks of

council homes, condition surveys and other relevant data to pick up potential damp and mould problems.

The Vice-Chair felt that three yearly inspections were too long and needed to be on a more regular basis. The Chair said that she had never known of a three yearly inspection and asked for a report on the last three yearly inspection to be brought to committee. Councillor Redsell agreed and said that some of the properties were not in liveable conditions particularly the flats in Blackshots.

Councillor Pearce questioned the thoroughness of checks on council homes that became available. Susan Murray answered that a full void inspection was undertaken on returned properties. She said that these had to meet a fit to let standard as well as the Council's fit for habitation standard. She explained that some properties had a quicker turnaround time than others which may require a longer time if damp and mould needed treating in a property.

Referring to page 19, the Chair noted that the data was over a period of two years. She asked that more in-depth detail be provided on the issues and causes of damp and mould such as if some had been caused by condensation or if some were more dangerous types of mould. She said that a breakdown of the data was needed to identify what mould spores were present and how the condensation had occurred. She also asked if there was a qualified damp and mould specialist that checked the Council's properties. Tracy John answered that a deeper research would need to be undertaken into the details of the data. She said that the Council's surveyors were qualified and trained but that there was no specific qualification for a damp and mould specialist. The surveyors also had access to expert advice if needed.

The Chair said that families had approached ward councillors with damp and mould issues and had shown them doctor notes highlighting asthma problems as a result of mould. She questioned whether the service accepted a medical note as evidence to move a family out of that home and into a new home. Tracy John answered that the Council had a responsibility to resolve the damp and mould issues and repaired these to ensure it was safe to live in.

The Chair noted that the report stated that residents needed to take some responsibility with damp and mould issues. She pointed out that the Council needed to take responsibility too as most of the council homes were old. She highlighted that a state regeneration programme was needed and a holistic approach to be taken in resolving damp and mould issues. Regarding the Thematic Review, she stated that Councillors had not been asked and should have been despite the timing of purdah. She asked whether the Tenancy Excellence Panel had been involved and when the review would be published. Tracy John explained that the Housing Ombudsman had announced the review in the news and the Council had shared this with involved tenants and TRA groups. She said that the Council had no ownership of the review and would check when the Thematic Review would be published.

The Committee stated that they were not happy with the damp and mould issues and that they were dissatisfied with the work that had been undertaken on these. The Chair pointed out that it had been a long time since the last damp and mould report was brought to committee and needed to come back again. The Committee agreed that the report needed to be brought back to the Housing O&S meeting on 9 November 2021 and that the report needed to address the issues that Members had raised in tonight's meeting.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to comment on the Council's approach and performance in relation to the management of damp and mould within the housing portfolio.

5. Housing Delivery Approach

The report was presented by Colin Black.

Councillor Redsell declared that she was on the Local Development Plan Task Force. She commented that the Claudian Way development in Chadwell St Mary was beautiful and that more developments like this was needed in Thurrock. She queried whether residents living in that development had come from the housing list. She said that more bungalows were needed in Thurrock. She noted that the St Chads development was mentioned in the report and pointed out that the development was no a high quality build and that residents living had complaints about the homes there. Kelly Myers explained that St Chads was built to a certain quality which had a different design quality to the other developments mentioned in the report. She said that the Council had its own design quality standards to adhere to now.

The Chair asked whether the St Chads site could be brought back to Thurrock Council where it could be managed by the Council. She pointed out that the development was an 'eyesore'. Ian Wake explained that the site was currently owned by Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) and that it was possible for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to acquire the site depending on whether there were Right to Buy (RTB) receipts. He said that it would be a better option to use the RTB receipts for other schemes instead such as acquiring affordable homes in Thurrock. He briefly discussed the tower blocks in Blackshots.

Councillor Fletcher asked how the number of social homes could be increased. He noted that the housing waiting list had now decreased to 7,000 and questioned what had happened to the other 3,000 people and whether this had been due to the abolishment of band five. He commented that infrastructure needed to be considered alongside housing, schools and doctors. Colin Black explained that infrastructure was considered through the planning stages as a key consideration. He said that the allocation of housing was a part of the Local Plan process. Kelly Myers added that the service

worked with other departments in the Council to consider education and highways in terms of infrastructure.

The Committee commented that officers needed to speak with Ward Councillors on potential housing developments and that there needed to be better conversations held between council departments. They discussed how reasonable affordable housing was.

Regarding the Local Plan, the Chair commented that the number of homes identified had been 40,000, then 28,000 and was now 32,000 again. She sought clarification on the number. Colin Black explained that the figure of 32,000 was based on assessments from 2017 that addressed growth. He said that the figure would be revised following on from recent studies and the revised figure would be announced in October or November.

The Committee highlighted concerns of an increase in Thurrock's population following on from the recent national census and was concerned that this would put extra pressure on the economic growth in Thurrock. This highlighted the need for more and more houses and the Committee stated that Thurrock's infrastructure would not be able to cope.

The Chair commented that the service had built 120 houses and should be trading with TRL. She asked for an update in regards to TRL. Colin Black answered that a report on TRL had been through Directors Board and would be heard at General Services Committee on 15 July which would set out the future of TRL.

Referring to paragraph 2.12, the Chair commented that the sites on Dell Road and Argent Street had been sold to private developers. She said that these sites could have been used to build social homes on. Colin Black explained that the land on Argent Street was fairly small and it had been leased out to a metal works company. There had been joint discussions in making the site sustainable but there had been no agreement on the site and was sold off. With Dell Road, it had been concluded that a capital receipt was more beneficial for the land. He said that there had never been an intention to build on the land as it was sold to a housing association back in 2014 but the sale had fallen through.

The Chair commented that there was land ready to be developed but was being sold off. She felt that the Committee needed to have oversight of these pieces of land. Councillor Redsell commented that across the river from Thurrock, there was Gravesend which had developed its river frontage. She felt that Thurrock could achieve a similar development.

RESOLVED:

Approach to Housing Delivery as set out in the report was agreed.

6. Housing Development Programme Update

The report was presented by Colin Black.

Councillor Fletcher commented that local resident had not been kept with the proposed development for Culver Fields but the consultation process had been managed well. He said that the consultation for Broxburn Drive had one meeting which had been held over Zoom and only two people had joined and had stated their objections against the proposals of Broxburn Drive. He pointed out that the survey questions for Broxburn Drive had been designed to give certain unfair answers only and said that the second consultation needed to be better. He referred to the site options list and said that infrastructure had not been considered and questioned the rationale behind some of the chosen sites for development.

The Chair said that the site options list was not fit for purpose and most of the sites were unsuitable. She felt that work needed to be undertaken to check whether the list of sites were right for development. She said that a process was needed on how sites were chosen and that she would prefer to meet with the Portfolio Holder for Housing sooner rather than later. She commented that the Committee needed to see a list of council land. Councillor Redsell commented that a piece of land in Brentwood Road had been considered five years ago but had not heard more on this since then. She said that other boroughs were building portahomes and said Thurrock needed to do this as well.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to:

1.1 Note progress on the housing development sites to be taken forward for further detailed work, involving engagement with stakeholders and communities.

1.2 Note that a review of the current process and reporting of the Site Options List is to be agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Housing in consultation with the Chair of Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that any revised proposals be brought back to a future meeting of this committee

7. Work Programme

Democratic Services explained the process of briefing notes which had been implemented following on from the Scrutiny Review last year. Members agreed for briefing notes to be sent in between meetings and were aware that they could request a full report of a briefing note if needed.

The Chair asked that the Housing Development Programme Update be deferred until a meeting between herself and the Portfolio Holder of Housing was held. She also asked for a report on HMOs. Tracy John explained that the Private Sector Stock Condition Survey report would include HMOs.

The Committee asked for a briefing note on void homes to be circulated.

The work programme was updated as follows:

- Portfolio Holder for Housing to be invited to the meeting on 21 September.
- Homelessness Report – 21 September.
- Review of 3 Year Council Housing Properties Inspection – 21 September.
- Damp and Mould in Council Housing Properties Update – 9 November.
- Garages Update – 9 November.
- Rent Setting – 11 January 2022.

The meeting finished at 9.03 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**