

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 October 2021 at 7.00 pm (this was the postponed meeting of 21 September 2021)

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

Carol Purser, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance: Councillor Luke Spillman, Portfolio Holder for Housing
Jo Broadbent, Director of Public Health
Peter Doherty, Strategic Lead - Housing Operations
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director of Housing
Ben Tovey, Strategic Lead for Housing Solutions
Grace Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Due to the cancellation of the Cabinet meeting on the previous night, the Chair stated that she had sought advice on the Housing O&S meeting from the Council's Monitoring Officer to ensure that the Housing O&S meeting was able to go ahead and that all publication had legally complied with legislation.

The Chair stated that as this meeting was being held in South Essex College instead of the Council Chamber, there was a time limit for the use of this venue which is until 9.30pm. If the items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and recommence at the next Housing O&S meeting.

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.

8. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

The Vice-Chair asked that future minutes refer to him as Councillor Ononaji and not the Vice-Chair.

9. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

There had been one briefing note circulated to Committee Members on 27 July 2021 - Void Numbers and Process Followed. Members did not agree this

briefing note as it had been sent months ago and asked for the briefing note to be circulated again.

10. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

11. Portfolio Holder Verbal Update

Councillor Spillman gave the following update:

- Homelessness figures had dropped from 293 – 218 which was good news but a contingency plan was needed in case the situation became worse again.
- With out of borough placements, this figure had reduced to two families being placed out of boroughs.
- With Mears and general repairs, there were concerns on supply issues but this was being monitored and Mears remained at an exceptional standard.
- In regards to NEET and development, he had engaged with the Chair and local Ward Councillors and was working with other Council departments to ensure that young people had the opportunity to go into training and be supported in the housing side.
- The service had looked at the CO1 site and potentially, it would be possible to build full Council flats on that site.

Councillor Spillman said that he was impressed with the Housing Team and was encouraging the department to think bigger and be more ambitious for the borough as finances were in a better position.

Councillor Fletcher commented that it was good to hear that finances were good. In regards to the CO1 site and the rest of the borough, he asked what the plans for social housing were. Councillor Spillman said that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had the capacity to build social homes but the risk were the costs of materials. He explained that he would be meeting with Ward Councillors to identify where social housing was needed and which sites were suitable for this.

The Chair sought clarification on the housing plans for CO1 and if the housing would be for private ownership. She pointed out that the plan had not been through formal discussions or through scrutiny. Councillor Spillman answered that the plan before was for private homes but he had felt that this was not good enough for Thurrock. He said that the financial model suggested that other plans were viable. He stated that only informal discussions had taken place for the CO1 site and that no decisions had been made yet so was not part of the formal decision making process yet.

Councillor Fletcher mentioned that he had been a member of the Planning Committee for a few years but had not seen an application for social housing in that time. He questioned when there would be an application for social

housing. Councillor Spillman answered that this would be submitted as soon as possible. He stated that he was committed to building council housing for social housing and that good quality sites needed to be brought forward.

The Chair asked whether the previous Housing Site Options List had been removed. Councillor Spillman explained that the viable sites would go forward and no new sites had been added since. He referred to the previous process of sites which was no longer in place and said that individual sites were for the Planning Committee to discuss if it became an application.

Carol Purser said that she was from the Tilbury Hub and that developers had engaged residents in previous housing development plans. Residents had identified issues and developers were able to resolve these.

The Chair sought clarification on why there were different levels of rent in social housing. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that there was a formula that set a target rent as the government had adjusted the rents which had not been growing in line with inflation. Therefore someone moving into a property may pay a higher rent than the previous person or a neighbour but the difference was a couple of pounds.

The Committee thanked Councillor Spillman for his update.

12. Housing Strategy 2022-27 - Engagement Programme

The report was presented by Ryan Farmer.

Referring to page 16, Councillor Redsell noted the points on complaints and on the safety of flats and said that the flats in Blackshots were concerning with damp issues. She went on to say that more bungalows were needed for older generations. Referring to page 24, she queried why Ward Councillors were not on the list for consultation. Ryan Farmer apologised and said that it was the service's intention to include Ward Councillors in consultation. He referred to paragraph 8.4 and said that the right to accommodate housing options addressed housing needs such as bungalows and would go through the Local Plan process for assessment. He explained that the White Paper on Social Housing addressed how residents could complain and would be incorporated into the Housing Strategy. He said that there was an aspiration for people to live as safe as possible and that the Housing Strategy would be addressing these issues.

Regarding complaints, Councillor Fletcher pointed out that complaints were addressed but 'regurgitated'. The process needed to change as complainants were often told what action had been taken only. Regarding damp issues, he said that other areas in the borough also had significant levels of damp and needed to be taken into account. He also asked what the process was for housing stock that was nearing its end. Ryan Farmer answered that with complaints, the service was learning from complainants. Regarding damp issues, he said that other strategies worked alongside the Housing Strategy which would look to have a robust mechanism in place to ensure residents

were supported and look at the housing stock. He referred to Alexander Court as a good example of this which had reached the end of its life. It would be decanted and residents there would be supported positively and moved to other accommodation such as Calcutta Road in Tilbury within the borough.

Referring to paragraph 5.2, Councillor Pearce noted the points made on violence against women and girls and asked whether men and boys at risk of violence had a refuge to go to as well. Ryan Farmer stated that the Council did not intend to exclude anyone at risk of violence and said that the strategy included all those at risk of violence.

Regarding damp and mould in council properties in Tilbury, Carol Purser pointed out that the Council's contractor, Mears, painted over the mould. However, the mould would come back again a few months later.

The Chair thanked Ryan Farmer for attending community forums. Referring to HMOs, she said that private landlords and sheltered accommodations needed to be included as part of the strategy consultation process. She stated that paper based surveys were needed and not only online surveys as not everyone could access this. She said that houses in Thurrock needed to be 'Thurrock affordable'. She noted that page 33 highlighted that 33% households could not afford a one bed median rent property and pointed out that rents were increasing but not wages. She went on to say that new homes needed good insulation, electric vehicle charging points and should not be built cheaply. Ryan Farmer answered that the consultation process would take place until the first week of January and the engagement for this had been in person with no online engagement yet. The service would also attend forums and have paper based surveys. In regards to 'Thurrock affordable', he said that the service was working with other Council departments to ensure this. For sustainable homes, the Asset Management Strategy would cover this. The Chair said that the service could engage with the Over 50s Conference with Jerry Corbett for the consultation process.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note the contents of this report and comment on the emerging themes presented, in particular, to highlight the priority areas which committee members feel should be considered for inclusion within the Housing Strategy 2022-27.

13. Health and Wellbeing Strategy Refresh

The report was presented by Jo Broadbent.

Referring to physical activity, Councillor Redsell said that Friends of Blackshots had been trying to acquire equipment for the area but had been turned down several times. She said funding had been granted for another organisation instead. Jo Broadbent answered that facilities should address all

ages but was not clear on the grants process. However, there was some funds in Active Thurrock which could be incorporated into the wider plan.

Councillor Fletcher said that facilities such as Grangewaters were under threat and that the service needed to look at what was already operating in Thurrock to make use of these. Councillor Redsell commented that houses could be built around the peripheral of Grangewaters to develop the area.

Referring to page 37 on the life expectancy gap, the Chair commented that this had not changed. Referring to the Local Plan and anti-social behaviour, she commented that the borough was safe ten years ago but people no longer felt safe. She pointed out that more serious crimes were happening and this needed to be recognised as Thurrock was not 'levelling the field' as the report highlighted. She said areas such as Tilbury needed to be addressed for these issues. Jo Broadbent said that the latest life expectancy gap had reduced to 9 years lower for men and 6 years lower for women. There was a difference in affluent and less affluent areas which had reduced a lot. This was in part due to improvements in healthy lifestyles over time however Covid-19 would likely have had a negative impact on life expectancy. Referring to the risk and fear of crime, she referred to the annual public health report 2019 on youth crime and said that the Violence and Vulnerability Board was managing these issues and working with young people to try to prevent those at risk. There were mechanisms in place but it could be some years before an impact could be seen.

Councillor Redsell commented that the service needed to engage with parents first in their preventative measures in youth crime. Carol Purser pointed out that there was no longer a PCSO in Tilbury to support the area which was why crimes were occurring regularly. Councillor Fletcher mentioned that the police in Ockendon were always changing officers and there was no community relationship there. The Chair stated that more police presence was needed throughout Thurrock.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee was invited to comment on the project scope outlined in the attached slide set (Appendix A) and the arrangements for completing the strategy refresh:

- **The overarching Vision for the refresh should be “Levelling the**
- **Playing Field”, with each chapter identifying ambitious actions required to do that.**
- **The actions to Level the Playing Field will be arranged around 6 key influences on health and wellbeing, including wider determinants of health, around which the strategy will be structured:**
 - 1. Quality Care Centred Around the Person**
 - 2. Staying Healthier for Longer**
 - 3. Building Strong & Cohesive Communities**
 - 4. Opportunity for All**

5. Housing & the Environment

6. Community Safety

- **Review and sign-off of the draft strategy document will be at the**
- **HWB Board meeting in March 2022, and thereafter by Full Council.**
- **Operational oversight of the refresh process will be via: HWB**
- **Strategy / TICP Strategy Group, AD Oversight Group, and HWBS**
- **Engagement Group.**
- **The Strategy will be launched in July 2022.**

14. Homelessness Update - Everyone In

The report was presented by Ben Tovey.

The Committee queried where the Stifford Clays B&B was as there were no B&Bs in that area. Officers confirmed that the name of the B&B was called Stifford Clays Farmhouse B&B.

Councillor Fletcher commented that the service did not seem to be prepared for people who were about to become homeless. He felt there needed to be better collaboration between the relevant council teams. He asked what improvements had been made in the service and whether the service asked people to find a second job to prevent homelessness. Ben Tovey answered that there were cases where people had to be placed in temporary accommodation before they became homeless. The service supported people at risk if the service was made aware and aimed to help people to stay in their current accommodation. He said that the service had restructured since the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and that there was a government funded Employment Officer to help people into more secure jobs to prevent them from becoming homeless. He explained that it was part of the Council's duty to refer a person at risk of homelessness within 56 days to refer the person to the service.

Carol Purser mentioned that there had been cases where families were told to wait for an eviction notice. Ben Tovey explained that the first notice of eviction enabled the Council a few months to start work on the case and that the eviction process was long.

The Committee raised issues of staff training, contacting the homeless service and queried the staff turnover in the service. Ben Tovey explained that when he had joined the team, the majority of the team had been agency staff with a turnover of 40 staff members in 18 months. However, the team in place now was permanent and highly trained but would have more training. He said that there was always a staff member on duty at night.

The Chair sought clarification on whether there were enough funds to support the homelessness issues and if this had put a pressure on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Ben Tovey explained that the government had covered the shortfall the previous and current year but would not be covering it in the next year. He said that the service would not be able to afford the high

amounts seen during Covid-19 and this was why the service's ambition was to buy more stock.

The Chair thanked the service for their work during Covid-19 and in finding a home for the homeless. She noted that voluntary groups, community groups, youth officers and individual residents had supported people during the pandemic and thanked them for their hard work as well. She asked how many street homeless were still on the streets and whether this had increased since Covid-19. She said that she was aware that some of the homeless may not wish to be accommodated. Ben Tovey said that the homelessness situation had been worse before the 'Everyone In' scheme had launched. There was a period where there was no one on the streets but recently, there was an increase in reports and some were of people sleeping in cars but would move on to another area and of street beggars but not necessarily homeless. At the moment, there were currently five rough sleepers which the service was supporting. He said that there were some people who had presented themselves to a number of authorities to try to get housing as well.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note and comment on the contents of this update report.

15. Property Audits (aka Tenancy Audits)

The report was presented by Peter Doherty.

Referring to paragraph 6.1 in relation to looking at house conditions, Councillor Redsell sought clarification on whether this was the surroundings inside or outside of the home. On 6.2, she pointed out that 30% of housing stock surveyed was appalling and needed to be undertaken more regularly. She stated that some properties were missed out, not fit for people to live in and the service needed to be aware of these. Officers explained that house conditions were checked within the vicinity of the home where the service was able to manage. In regards to the stock condition survey, Officers explained that it was not industry standard to undertake these every year. The survey looked at one third of the Council's stock, then the other third was looked at in the next survey and then the remaining third in the survey after. When works were carried out on houses, these were updated in the asset management details to ensure an up to date picture of the housing stock. Officers explained that there was a service review on managing the wider environment such as estate inspections with residents or Ward Councillors. There would be improvements made to current processes following on from this review.

Councillor Redsell asked for a report on animals in Council properties as there were some properties that had an excessive amount of pets. Peter Doherty said that the Council tenancy agreement highlighted the control of animals as a condition of living in a council property.

Councillor Ononaji noted that fraud was mentioned in paragraph 2.1 but not again in paragraph 4.1. He sought clarification on whether fraud was still a concern and priority. He said that fraud needed more attention as there were issues of illegal subletting. Peter Doherty explained that fraud was still a focus but had expanded into other Council departments. He said that fraud cases were reported to the Fraud Team and the service ensured to support its most vulnerable residents.

The Chair said that she welcomed the idea of estate inspections as Officers needed to be familiar with the areas they managed. She commented that the external appearance of a property could indicate how a property could be managed inside and suggested that officers knock on doors in these cases. She asked how many face to face visits were now conducted and whether officers had a target to reach each month. Peter Doherty explained that the housing stock was divided in thirds as discussed before. Officers were tasked with a set number of tenancy audits to undertake along with emergency evacuation plans. This was all monitored and performance related.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to comment on the Council's approach to property audits carried out by the Tenancy Management Team within general needs housing.

16. Work Programme

The following changes were made:

- Animals in Council Properties – added to 11 January 2022.
- Private Sector Stock Condition Survey – moved to 2 March 2022.

The meeting finished at 9.13 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