

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 January 2022 at 7.00 pm

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

Apologies: Councillors Mike Fletcher

In attendance:

Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager
Peter Doherty, Strategic Lead - Housing Operations
Mike Jones, Strategic Lead, Finance
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director of Housing
Julian Wain, Strategic Place Advisor
Alastair Wood, Technical Services Delivery Manager, Housing – Technical Services
Grace Le, 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.

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 was until 9.30pm. If the items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and recommenced at the next Housing O&S meeting.

25. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

26. Urgent Items

The Chair had agreed to one urgent of item business as she had requested an update on the incident that had occurred at Lionel Oxley House on 26 December 2021.

Alastair Wood gave an update on the briefing note provided which can be found online [here](#).

Councillor Pearce questioned how often were electrical safety tests undertaken. Alastair Wood answered that this would be followed up with

UKPN on the regularity of electrical tests prior to the incident and the measures to be in place following the incident.

Members requested that an update be provided to the Committee at the next meeting to include a report from UKPN. Alastair Wood and Ewelina Sorbjan advised that they would seek to provide update from UKPN but would need to wait for their report.

The Chair noted that this was the second fire incident at Lionel Oxley House. Following on from the incident, she asked if the service had identified the lessons to be learnt and if there was a written record of the residents that Officers had spoken to. She mentioned that some residents had informed her that they had not been approached. Officers explained that the service had knocked on all doors to speak with residents and had identified 14 households that were affected by the incident. Not all residents of the affected flats were at home at the time of the incident so was followed up with a phone call. The service had already begun to look at the lessons to be learnt from the incident such as the availability of purchase cards for Officers to use. Officers confirmed that tenancy officers and fire officers had worked together to check on each household. An hour later, the service and Mears contractors knocked on doors again. Officers confirmed that there was a written record of which residents were spoken with.

The Chair questioned whether there was scope in the budget to increase the one off payment of £120 to cover additional costs for residents. She also asked when the cladding would be installed in the building and if fire detectors were checked to ensure that they were working and had batteries in. Alastair Wood answered that the service would work with the Contractors on continuing to review support for the residents. He said that it was anticipated work activity on the project would increase in February. . In regards to the fire detection system in the flats, he said that these would be extended within the flats as part of a current project so there would be full coverage within the flat to increase protection. He confirmed this project was already underway and was not in response to any specific incident. The current fire detectors within flats were hardwired as part of the electrical system and were checked in the affected flats by Mears after the incident.

Noting that the fire system would be upgraded, Councillor Ononaji asked if this would include a fire detector in the communal area as this was where the incident had occurred. Alastair Wood explained that due to safety reasons, a fire alarm could not be installed in a communal area. This could cause a danger to residents as it was a single staircase block. Over the years, the fire system had been upgraded in line with fire safety regulations and residents needed to react to fire alarms within their individual dwellings. There were fire safety measures in place which the fire brigade would manage to ensure the safety of residents.

Councillor Van Day raised concerns over there being no fire detectors in the communal areas. He commented on the fire incident in West London a few years ago and pointed out that the advice had been for residents to stay put

which had resulted in the tragedy that had occurred. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that the doors in the hallways of Lionel Oxley House were held open with magnets at all times as part of safety measures. In the event of a fire, the doors would shut to contain the fire and prevent it from spreading.

Members praised the service for their swift response to the incident and the efforts that were put in to ensure residents safety. Members asked that an initial report be brought back to the next meeting to outline what lessons could be learnt and that residents' feedback should be included in the report.

27. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

28. Housing Development Programme Update

The report was presented by Keith Andrews.

Referring to the Richmond Road site, the Chair stated that departments in the Council needed to work together. She said that residents still had not been informed of the works to be done on the site. She commented that the site also needed to ensure that there was adequate parking.

Referring to the sites in Blackshots and Teviot Avenue, Councillor Pearce sought clarification on what major works were planned for these sites. In response to Teviot Avenue, Keith Andrews said that balconies would be upgraded and restructures to the ground. There would be further engagements with residents.

In regards to Aveley Hall, Councillor Redsell asked whether there were other facilities for residents to use. Referring to Blackshots flats, she stated that she was not pleased to hear that the service planned to extend the lifespan of the flats as it was not fit for purpose. She pointed out that the resident consultation had showed that residents were in favour of demolishing the flats. She also mentioned that affordability in Thurrock needed to be addressed. Keith Andrews replied that he would speak with colleagues to identify what other facilities similar to Aveley Hall was available for residents to use. In regards to Blackshots, he said that the service was assessing the potential for redevelopment and that there was a process to consider. Ewelina Sorbjan added that the Housing Strategy would cover the issue of affordability which should be ready by the early summer.

The Chair mentioned that the figures for affordable housing needed to be consistent as she had seen reports that stated 70% and 80%. She pointed out that social affordable homes were needed. Keith Andrews explained that there was difference in the Council's planning policies and the eligibility for funding which was 80%. If it was a non-council development, then the charge would be up to 80%. The Chair said that she would discuss this further during the Housing Revenue Account - Rent Setting and Budgets 2022-23 report.

Referring to the graph in 2.4, the Chair noted the 337 figure in 2022/23 and asked if this figure indicated that there would be 'spades in the ground'. She sought an update on the White Acre site and whether the Prince of Wales pub site would remain as it was now. She also asked when a new site list would be ready and whether all of the properties in Calcutta Road had been allocated yet. Keith Andrews answered that works were expected to start from the financial year of April 2022. He said that the White Acre site was now led by the Adult Social Care department and confirmed that the Prince of Wales pub site would remain as it was. The service was working on identifying potential new sites for housing development as a number of garage sites had been identified. Ewelina Sorbjan said that there were still some properties in Calcutta Road that had not been allocated yet. These were more sensitive as the properties were located on the upper floor and residents were concerned over the use of lifts.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note the updates on sites being considered for housing development.

29. Thurrock Regeneration Ltd - Proposed Development of Culver Centre and Field, South Ockendon

The report was presented by Julian Wain.

Councillor Van Day asked whether health and education facilities had been considered as part of the infrastructure. Officers explained that the Council worked with health and education partners to identify what contributions were needed to mitigate the impact of the development in the area. These matters were addressed as part of the planning application process.

Councillor Redsell commented that no bungalows were included in the scheme. She sought clarification on the size of the open space and its design. Keith Andrews answered that there were no bungalows in the scheme a fair proportion of properties were needed to make the scheme financially viable. It was identified that this site was more appropriate for houses and flats. He said that there were other sites that had the potential for the development of bungalows. In regards to the open space, the design had gone through public consultation and the result was an enhanced open space.

The Chair asked for an update on the status of TRL. Julian Wain explained that TRL was instructed by the Council as shareholder represented by the Corporate Director of Resources, Place and Delivery. TRL now had a full and functioning board of members and was able to take decisions and operate. The names of the board members would be going to the General Services Committee. In regards to operations, there was one staff member and other services were delivered through service level agreements.

The Chair queried how the Council would ensure that the land of the Culver Centre site would get best value for money. Julian Wain explained that an

independent person would be appointed to carry out an independent valuation which would be signed off to demonstrate s123 best consideration under the Local Government Act 1972. This would provide the Council and its residents with assurance that the land got the best value.

The Chair asked if other options had been considered in the disposal of the site such as using private developers. She questioned why private developers were not interested in the site. Julian Wain referred to paragraph 3.1 and took members through the pros and cons listed there. The option of the Council going into a joint venture with private developers was considered and covered in the report. The best option was TRL as it gave the Council a significant degree of control along with a long term investment, generated returns, revenue receipts, certainty of delivery and affordable units.

Councillor Redsell questioned whether TRL faced the same planning constraints as other private developers. Julian Wain answered that specific constraints and conditions relevant to planning applications applied to anyone carrying out the development.

Referring to recommendation 1.2, the Chair stated that she was not supportive of this as full control over the disposal of land was delegated to two people. She referred to minutes from the Housing O&S meeting on 11 February 2020, and read out a paragraph:

“Councillor Worrall sought how Council owned land would be transferred to Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) to ensure that a good value was achieved for the Council. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health and Interim Director of Children’s Services stated that disposal of land would be recommended by Cabinet to be taken to Full Council as per a request of the General Services Committee.

Councillor Worrall requested that the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee be kept up to date at every stage of the development.”

Referring to the legal implications in the report, the Chair said that she was aware of that Cabinet had the authority as the decision makers. However, she highlighted her concerns over delegating this authority to two Councillors and a Director to make the decision. She stated that she was strongly against this and felt that the decision should be made by Cabinet and ratified at Full Council. She pointed out that this had been highlighted in the 11 February 2020 meeting but she had not seen any changes made where the disposal of land would be recommended by Cabinet to Full Council.

Julian Wain referred to the legal implications and explained that the disposal of land was an executive function that was reserved for Cabinet and not for Full Council. He noted the Chair’s objection to the delegation.

Councillor Ononaji commented that it would be good practice that the disposal of land should be agreed at Full Council instead of two Councillors and the Director. He suggested that a change to this policy could be put forward to Full Council as a motion. The Chair agreed with this suggestion. She asked

that a legal representative give an explanation as to why recommendation 1.2 differed to what was stated and minuted from the 11 February 2020.

The Chair proposed that a new recommendation be put forward as she did not agree with recommendation 1.2. The Committee agreed and supported this. Officers would work with the Chair to agree the wording to reflect the Committee's disagreement with recommendation 1.2 which would be put forward to Cabinet on 12 January 2022 where this report would be considered. The wording would also be shared with Committee Members.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee commented on the proposal that that Thurrock Regeneration Ltd develop the Culver Centre and Field, South Ockendon site in accordance with the consented planning application.**

UNRESOLVED:

- 1.2 That the Committee noted that authority will be delegated to the Corporate Director of Resources and Place Delivery, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance, to agree the transfer value of the land, final funding to TRL, and to enter into legal agreements including appropriation of land, as required to enable this development, subject to the financial parameters as set out in the report.**

(Following on from this meeting, the wording for the recommendation to Cabinet was agreed by the Chair as:

At their meeting on 11th February 2020, Housing Overview and Scrutiny received information that decisions on the disposal of land would be referred to Full Council. Based on this previous information, the Committee does not wish to support the delegation to the Corporate Director of Resources and Place Delivery, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance, and the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration to agree the transfer value of the land, final funding to TRL, and to enter into legal agreements including appropriation of land, as required to enable this development, subject to the financial parameters as set out in the report.

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests Cabinet to take the decisions in full Cabinet and to refer the matter to Council.)

30. Housing Revenue Account - Rent Setting and Budgets 2022-23

(Due to the time constraint, the Chair moved this item up on the agenda.)

The report was presented by Mike Jones.

Councillor Redsell mentioned that some of the properties in her ward were being charged for services that were not there. She noted that there were no works to be undertaken for garages and raised concerns over what the garage charges were being used for. Ewelina Sorbjan asked that the addresses be emailed over to her in regards to the charges. Mike Jones referred to table 6 and said that half a million had been allocated to garages per year.

Councillor Pearce was concerned that the rent was increasing but repairs and services were being cut. The Chair agreed and referred to table 1 on the repairs and maintenance budget of £12.2 million. She asked if this was in and out of contract and what the split was for this. Mike Jones replied that the budget was split across various revenues that included void repairs, day to day repairs, planned and preventative maintenance and grounds maintenance. He explained that the charges were increased to meet inflation rates and pressures from external companies and that the budget considered these.

The Chair stated that residents did not feel services were getting better and that the service needed to inform the Committee on what services were being cut. She asked that a briefing note be provided on this. Mike Jones explained that there were no proposals to cut the services that was being provided this year in the next year's budget. The increases were to maintain the level of current services.

Councillor Pearce pointed out that tenants were being asked to undertake their own repairs as some repairs were no longer available. The Chair questioned what repairs had changed. Ewelina Sorbjan said that she would circulate the Council's repairs policy.

The Chair asked what efficiencies had been made in the HRA. Mike Jones explained that it was difficult to give a finalised picture of the efficiencies as there were certain issues such as staffing. There were mostly repairs in the HRA with no external funding coming into the HRA and the staffing was not funded in the same way as other general revenues. He went on to say that the only source of income to the HRA was the rent and for the HRA to make efficiencies, there would need to be cuts to repairs, anti-social behaviour workers or any non-frontline staff which could have dire consequences.

Referring to table 6, the Chair sought further detail on the 'Carbon Reduction Requirements (Tower Blocks)' and 'Carbon Reduction Requirements External'. She also asked if other departments had a budget for carbon reduction. Mike Jones explained that the carbon reduction in tower blocks included the use of heat pumps and that a budget was allocated to reduce carbon and what was affordable. He said that the costs were more tangible in the Housing department due to the works needed on the tower blocks. He was uncertain about the costs across other departments under the general fund.

Noting that there was budget for 'Highways and Lighting' in table 6, the Chair asked why this was included in the HRA and thought that this was under the general fund. Mike Jones replied that an asset that was deemed as HRA land would become the responsibility of the HRA to maintain it. He gave the example of Seabrooke Rise and said that the street area was the responsibility of the HRA so any costs associated with the street area such as lighting was for the HRA. This was on the budget due to the Capital Programme priorities which required targeted investment into lighting.

The Chair questioned how many homes could be bought with the 4% rent increase. She commented that 4% was a big increase and questioned why the increase could not be 2% instead as it had been in previous years. Mike Jones explained that a lower increase in rent would require cuts and efficiencies to be made across other services to meet inflationary costs. This would not be beneficial for residents as there would be reduced levels of service. He said that borrowing on the HRA to purchase new homes worked on a side by side basis. He explained that the purchase of a new home which was then leased on affordable rent and the level of income was enough to cover the cost of the borrowing. In effect, this was self-financing.

The Chair pointed out that this information was complex and had requested that a table be provided to explain this to the Committee. She said that the detail provided in the report was little and that the Committee needed a report on the full structure of the purchase of the new homes in regards to the leasing, Right To Buy receipts and who owned the new homes. She asked that a full report be brought to the first meeting of the new municipal year to help Members understand how the RTB receipts were spent and how PHI scheme worked. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that the report outlined the Capital Works Programme and the work that was undertaken to maintain these works.

The Chair commented that the purchase of properties should increase the funds in the HRA and queried this. Mike Jones explained that social rent charges were not enough to cover the cost of the borrowing, acquisition or the lease. The service's strategy was to set the rent at the LHA level plus the £1000 which was the benefit cap. The affordable rent was set with these in mind and following affordable housing rules, the Council would identify what rent could be charged to ensure it was self-financing. With the benefit cap, it was enough to ensure that the properties were not subsidised by the HRA.

Councillor Pearce sought more detail on heat pumps and whether these were cost effective. Alastair Wood replied that the cost modelling had been undertaken which showed that heats would be significantly cheaper in terms of savings per household. This would help to lift some households out of fuel poverty. He highlighted that the technology was new and had proven to be successful in other areas. He said that heat pump project would commence in the Chadwell flats in March.

The Chair queried whether the service charge costs could be reconsidered and raised concerns over bad debt, increase in fuel prices and the cost of

living. She asked if there was a solution to decrease the cost of rent. Mike Jones explained that the cost of services increased the costs of rent. He said that it was prudent to consider bad debt in accounting when costs were increased. There were also the effects of the pandemic to consider and inflation.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed base budget for 2022/23 (Table 1)**
- 1.2 That the Committee consider and comment on a proposed increase in domestic rent of 4.1%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan, to be implemented from 4 April 2022**
- 1.3 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed increase in service charges to reflect the costs of running each service in line with the budget estimate from 4 April 2022 (detailed in Table 5)**
- 1.4 That the Committee consider and comment on proposed charges for garage rents (para 3.9), to be implemented from 4 April 2022**
- 1.5 That the Committee consider and comment on proposed charges for rents on Travellers sites (para 3.10) to be implemented from 4 April 2022**

31. C01 - Redevelopment Update

Due to the time constraint of the venue, this item was deferred to the next meeting.

32. Animals in Council Properties

Due to the time constraint of the venue, this item was deferred to the next meeting.

33. Work Programme

Due to the time constraint of the venue, this item was not discussed. The Chair and Officers would discuss this outside of Committee.

The meeting finished at 9.30 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