

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 January 2024 at 7.00 pm

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**Present:** Councillors James Halden (Chair), Sue Shinnick (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard, Maureen Pearce, Joycelyn Redsell and Neil Speight

Sue Hodgson, Housing Tenant Representative

**In attendance:** Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director Housing and Development  
Dulal Ahmed, Housing Enforcement Manager  
Mike Jones, Strategic Lead, Finance  
Lucy Tricker, Scrutiny Officer  
Jenny Shade, Principal Democratic Services Officer

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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.

### **24. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 21 November 2023 were approved as a correct record.

### **25. Urgent Items**

Following concerns raised by Councillor Speight, it was agreed that officers would produce a briefing note in regard to the recent refit works on the Garrison Estate in Purfleet and for this be sent out to committee members.

#### **Action 16.**

#### **ACTION:**

Officers to produce briefing note.

### **26. Declaration of Interests**

No interests were declared.

### **27. Proposal to Designate Additional HMO Licensing Scheme**

The report presented outlined the need for the renewal of the Additional Housing in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing scheme in Thurrock. The scheme, initiated in June 2019, had played a crucial role in improving housing conditions and management standards in smaller HMOs that fell outside the scope of Mandatory Licensing. The renewal proposal was based on comprehensive data and analysis, demonstrating the positive impact of the scheme on housing conditions, tenant safety, and community well-being.

The following points were raised:

- Member raised her concern on the increase in the number of HMOs and questioned whether there was a means, through the Planning Committee, of giving members advanced notice of any new HMOs.
- Members raised their concern on enforcement of non-licensing properties.
- Member referred to the scheme generating £432,912 and questioned whether this was net of all costs or income to which he was informed this was income. Member further asked the cost of running the scheme per year to which the officer agreed to provide. **Action 17**
- Member questioned where the monies would be allocated from the additional licensing that would be intended to cover smaller HMOs.
- Member referred to the charges to be implemented and whether this was a significant rise year on year and questioned the comparison figures from last year. **Action 18**
- Member stated it appeared to be unfair to be charging HMOs in only certain parts of the borough and questioned why.
- Member stated the process was complex and saw potential to generate further revenue and suggested there needed to be a financial plan on how the council was dealing with HMOs that could concentrate on staffing and fairness.
- Member stated his support as the benefits would be to protect residents and improve the service being offered by the council.
- The Chair noted the housing team had done a terrific job in generating significant revenue.
- The Chair noted that revenue coming into the housing team did not meet his typical complaints received from his constituents and questioned what work was being undertaken with other departments to ensure an increase rating in enforcement.
- The Chair commented that other departments within the council did not see any of the proceeds of HMOs and questioned why when some of the HMO complaints were linked to other departments.
- The Chair also questioned how the growth of complaints were being tracked for the unlicensed schemes.
- Member asked whether Housing Officers were reporting potential new HMOs back to the team.
- Member stated there needed to be a restriction on the number of HMOs in the borough and had concerns this was being encouraged as a money stream.
- Member stated he was in favour of single HMOs as there was a particular demand in his ward.
- The Chair summed up by stating the committee were in favour of the recommendations but had concerns on what enforcement would look like across the unlicensed properties and across different departments of the council.

**Actions:**

Action 17 - Member further asked the cost of running the scheme per year to which officer agreed to provide.

Action 18 - Officers to provide charge comparison figures.

## **RESOLVED**

### **The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

- 1. Commented on the council's evidence to renew Additional Licensing covering the whole borough for five years.**
- 2. Commented on the other options available to the council to improve housing conditions and management standards in all HMOs.**
- 3. Commented on the public consultation with stakeholders likely to be affected by this decision to extend Additional Licensing and present those findings to Cabinet for a decision on renewing Additional Licensing.**

#### **28. Right to Buy receipts management/PHI Updated**

Members were provided with a verbal update in that the right to buy receipts were subject to ongoing conversations with the Treasury and Commissioners around the right to spend the right to buy receipts and invest them further. The process was currently ongoing with the Treasury and once a decision had been made by the Treasury a report would be presented to members.

#### **29. Housing Revenue Account - Rent Setting and Budgets 2024/25**

The report presented set out the base budget position for 2024/25 following the review and update of the 30-year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The Business Plan was a statutory requirement used to assess the ongoing financial viability of the HRA and its ability to deliver the Council's housing priorities.

The following points were raised:

- Member fundamentally stated his objection to the increase and would not be supporting the recommendation increase to 7.7%. Member stated this was an unfair increase.
- Member referred to table 6 of the report, tower block refurbishment, member assumed this would not include the three blocks at Blackshots, six blocks in Grays, which only left Chadwell and Tilbury and questioned what the plans were in spending £12.5 million pounds on those blocks.
- Member referred to the six blocks in Grays, questioned why the monies for the project had not been ringfenced and put to one side for the scheduled completion of the project. Member also questioned why money was still being banked for a project which should have been finished two years ago.

- Member referred to table 1 of the report, operational services, and table 8, management and strategy, stated he had looked at the breakdown of such costs but felt uncomfortable on the proposed increase in rents and questioned how the council compared with other local authorities.
- Member also questioned whether any best value inspections or benchmarking exercises had been undertaken by the council.
- Members requested a more detailed breakdown of management and strategy costs, officers agreed to share with all members as part of a further HRA report. **Action 19**
- Member referred to page 7, Blackshots decant officer and Blackshots health and safety, to which officers confirmed this was the external company used as independent advisor to provide advice and to guide residents through the process.
- Member referred to garages and stated that income taken for rents should be put back into the upkeep of garages.
- Member referred to table 2, utilities increase, and raised her concerns on what that covered.
- Member stated service charge notices should not be sent out to residents who do not pay for them.
- The Chair stated he was pleased the £1.5 million surplus was going into reserves.
- The Chair asked for reassures that across the authority, not just in housing, with concerns of the direction of inflation, that reserves would go in the confirmed direction of travel.
- Member questioned whether consideration had been given on the new legislation on damp and mould and any potential liability.
- Member stated her concerns that the increase was unfair and way over the top based on the cost-of-living crisis.
- Member referred to table 6, transforming homes, and asked for some clarification on the aims and targets for the coming year, as to what work was projected and expected completion times.
- Member referred to table 6, fire safety works, and asked for some clarification on the £1 million being spent, member stated he assumed this was to bring those properties to fire safety standard which seemed to be a lot of money.
- Member raised concern on how the increase would be managed next year and how difficult this would be for members to explain the increase to residents.
- Members noted the council had to manage the budget as best and as prudently as possible and thanked officers for all their explanations this evening.
- Member raised concern that not enough had been undertaken to reduce some of the figures within the report, the council needed to be more proactive and possibly cutting back on some items.
- The Chair summed up by noting as all the recommendations were for commenting, the minutes from this meeting should be forwarded to Cabinet for their information. Officer agreed to include a reference to these minutes in his cabinet report.

Actions:

**Action 19** - Housing finance team to produce a more detailed breakdown of the management and strategy costs within the HRA.

## **RESOLVED**

1. **The Committee commented on the proposed changes in the base budget for 2024/25 (as set out in Table 1).**
  2. **The Committee commented on the proposed increase in domestic rent charges of 7.7%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan, to be implemented from 1 April 2024.**
  3. **The Committee commented on the proposed increase in service charges to reflect the cost of running each service in line with the budget estimate from 1 April 2024.**
  4. **The Committee commented on the proposed charges for garage rents (para 3.12) to be implemented from 1 April 2024.**
  5. **The Committee commented on the proposed increase in Travellers sites rent (para 3.13) to be implemented from 1 April 2024.**
- 30. Update on Procurement of Housing Contracts for Works Through a Partnership Model**

The report presented provided members with an update on progress to date for the procurement process.

The following points were raised:

- Member referred to the mobilisation period and questioned was this time enough due to the size of the project.
- The Chair raised his concern on the general market fragility, and what may need to be confronted in the next few years was the resilience of some of those organisations that the Council were undertaking business with.
- A discussion took place on the competitive dialogue procurement procedure that the council would be following.

## **RESOLVED**

**Members noted and commented on the contents of this report.**

### **31. Work Programme**

Members discussed the work programme and agreed the February extraordinary meeting should remain as part of the work programme.

**Action 22** - Minutes from the meeting and recommendations would be circulated to committee members before being circulated to Cabinet.

**Action 23** – Members noted that ‘to note’ reports should be removed from overview and scrutiny meetings as they did not add value.

A full recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:

[Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday 9 January 2024, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

**The meeting finished at 9.02 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](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**