

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 March 2024 at 7.00 pm

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

**Apologies:** Councillor Halden and Sue Hodgson

**In attendance:**  
Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager  
Ishdeep Bawa, Avison Young  
Bruce Chibesa, Housing Development Senior Project Manager  
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager  
Mike Jones, Strategic Lead, Finance  
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director Housing and Development  
Julian Wain, Strategic Place Advisor  
Alastair Wood, Technical Services Delivery Manager, Housing – Technical Services  
Lucy Tricker, Scrutiny Officer  
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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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.

[Thurrock Council - Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 05/03/2024 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

### **38. Minutes**

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15 February 2024 were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Redsell requested that individual councillors names be put by their comments instead of the word 'member'.

### **39. Urgent Items**

The Committee discussed the briefing note circulated which explained that on the 6 February the Housing Task and Finish Group agreed that they wished Members to disband the group. Under the Terms of Reference, this can only be agreed by the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee as the parent committee.

The following key points were highlighted:

- Members commented that they did not want to disband the group as it would not improve governance.
- The Scrutiny Officer confirmed that the work of the Task and Finish group can continue within the new committee system and it would be the gift of the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee to set up another Task and Finish group.
- Members noted the number of Task and Finish groups under the new committee system would be limited to two each.
- The Scrutiny Officer confirmed that the group had met twice and there had been no tangible outcomes.
- Councillor Redsell commented that it will take time to set up the new committee structure and she would like to keep the Task and Finish group in the meantime.
- Councillor Liddiard stated that he was on the fence.
- Councillor Abbas stated that the next committee should decide.
- Councillor Speight stated that the minutes of the Task and Finish group have not been provided just the recommendations. He raised concerns that a lot would be changing after May with the new committee structure and it was therefore best to keep it in place and the new committee can then decide.
- Councillor Shinnick agreed to keep the Task and Finish Group.

The Committee took a vote and 5 out of 6 members were not in agreement to disband the Task and Finish group.

#### **40. Declaration of Interests**

Councillor Redsell declared an interest with regard to item 10 Blackshots redevelopment report as ward member.

Councillor Pearce declared an interest with regard to item 9 Teviot Avenue report as ward member.

#### **41. Portfolio Holder Report for Housing - to follow**

Councillor B Johnson presented his Portfolio Holder report to the Committee.

The following key points were highlighted:

- Members noted it was a good report and the team behind it deserves praise. Members noted that their perception of the housing situation on the ground may be worse than it is in reality. Members raised concern that the satisfaction target was set as low as 75%.
- Members queried if the statistics were prepared in the same way as other Local Authorities.

- The Housing Strategy Manager confirmed that the Social Housing Regulations Act introduced 12 nationally reported tenant satisfaction measures and the first national statistics will be published later this year.
- Members raised the need for more social housing and that working with Housing Associations should be considered and prefabrication houses.
- The Portfolio Holder agreed the report showed there were green shoots. Low housing stock was a nationwide issue. The Portfolio Holder raised that another member had suggested that a Crisis Panel Board is set up and he agreed it was a good idea and he will speak to officers about it. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Council was having to borrow money for the Blackshots housing project and it was hoped this would show central government that the Council can be trusted as borrowing will be required for other future projects.
- Members thanked the Housing Teams for their work and noted the progress made.

*Councillor B Johnson left the meeting.*

#### **42. Findings of Stock Condition Survey of Housing Portfolio**

The Technical Services Delivery Manager introduced the report.

The following key points were highlighted:

- Members queried if Blackshots was taken out it alter the statistics. The Technical Services Delivery Manager confirmed it would as Blackshots was included in the survey.
- Members queried what had been done for those in the 'severe risk' category. The Technical Services Delivery Manager responded that they were referred back to the department and the issue of the smoke alarms has been addressed.
- Members queried how officers decide what to deal with first. The Technical Services Delivery Manager confirmed that the survey was critical as it focusses resource on need.
- Members queried the number of houses out of the sample which received an inspection compared with the number identified. The Technical Services Delivery Manager stated that they always receive drop-outs from those properties identified for inspection as residents have been unable to provide access.
- Members queried why properties with damp and mould hasn't been classed as severe risk. The Technical Services Delivery Manager responded that the team works hard to address severe cases.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed and provided comment and challenge as above with regard to;**

- i.) **The assets investment needs of the housing portfolio.**
- ii.) **Key priorities for investment of the housing asset.**

#### **43. Update on Procurement of Strategic Delivery Partner for Housing Works**

The Technical Services Delivery Manager presented the report and stated that the main update is that five bids have been received from the market and they are going through the evaluation stage now.

The following key points were highlighted: -

- Members queried the level of member oversight. The Technical Services Delivery Manager confirmed that there are monthly update reports provided to Cabinet, a Task and Finish group and challenge from Housing Overview and Scrutiny committee and Cabinet can be provided. Members will be kept informed.
- Members queried if emails and documents will be saved and archived. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development confirmed that they have a joint Sharepoint folder for the project. The Council has a tendering portal which is all saved and archived for the future. There is also an archive system for emails.
- Members raised concern that they wanted a broader description of the bidders concerns provided as it could help educate Councillors and the Council as a whole for the benefit of future projects and procurements. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development responded that the feedback was debated in detail at the previous working group and Overview and Scrutiny meeting. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development referred to the appendix from the September meeting which provides a response to the bidders concerns. Five bids have been received and if the market was not reassured by the responses to their queries the Council could have ended up with no bids.
- Members queried what was meant by 'gaging the residents in the evaluation'. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development responded that bidders will put together a package of proposals tailored to Thurrock and residents can evaluate it. The resident engagement team will reach out to groups for nominations for people to help with this evaluation. The Council has reached out to resident associations and groups and complainants. There will be a dialogue session where residents can speak to the bidders and ask questions. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development confirmed the procurement is technically open as it is public money.
- Members queried the total savings. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development responded that savings are not aimed at officer cuts but at reprogramming and getting efficiencies from management of the stock. Savings will come from efficiencies and less time will be spent on procurements and invoice checks.

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 Members noted the contents of the report.**

**44. Housing Revenue Account Review - to follow**

The Assistant Director for Strategic and Corporate Finance introduced the report.

The following key points were highlighted: -

- Members queried the £129,000 for grounds maintenance. The Assistant Director for Strategic and Corporate Finance confirmed that it is for targeted or emergency works that falls outside of the main Service Level Agreement. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development confirmed that the service levels to the HRA are not currently being debated. There will be a new setting of SLA's and this may change what residents receive. It will probably be looked at in the future. There is a small team within housing that cuts weeds and shrubs.
- Members raised that in sheltered complexes the grass is long or there is dog mess and litter present and these issues are really important to residents.
- Members queried the figure for the Tower Block refurbishment of 12 million pounds.
- The Technical Services Delivery Manager confirmed this is the budget parameter set for the South Grays refurbishment some time ago. The budget will be kept in place until the project is completed.
- Members requested that letters are sent out where residents are not caring for green areas they are given to enjoy and the SLA pulled if they are not looking after it. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development responded that Caretakers will report these incidents and letters are sent out to everyone in the block where dog mess or rubbish is being left but it cannot just be left and will be cleared. It can often be difficult to pinpoint who is responsible for the mess.
- The Chair raised that it is a good report and should be updated annually and circulated to new members who will sit on the Committee in the future.

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 Members noted the contents of this report.**

**45. Teviot Avenue Nos - 158 - 228 (evens) - Demolition and Redevelopment - to follow**

The Housing Development Senior Project Manager introduced the report to the Committee. The report outlines that the best option is to demolish the units and re-build.

The following key points were highlighted:

- Members expressed concern that hard copies of the report had not been received with the agenda and only an electronic version was provided by email. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development responded that the delay was due to internal sign-off and Commissioner sign-off and the reports were made available electronically 24 hours after the agenda was published. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development clarified that Members are not been asked to make any decisions.
- Members queried how many units will be re-built. The Housing Development Senior Project Manager responded that 36 flats will be demolished and 48 units will be re-built comprising of 30 houses and 18 apartments. Wheelchair access will be provided and lifetime home standards so the homes can be easily adjusted as residents age.
- Members queried where they are up to with decanting. A report is currently going through Cabinet for internal approval and external approval for funding is also required, then the process of decanting will begin.
- The Head of Housing Development confirmed residents will be given an option to return. Conversations will take place with residents at the time of decanting regarding their future wishes. Some may settle in their new homes whilst the build is taking place and may not wish to return.
- Members queried if officers are confident given the financial risk with the project. The Assistant Director for Strategic and Corporate Finance stated that considering the ongoing maintenance required it becomes uneconomical and it will cost more to maintain these properties than demolish and re-build. On the best information the Council has and under the 30-year business plan the project for this and Blackshots remain financially viable. Interest rates are a factor to consider and the Council has external treasury advisors to provide advice on this. The Assistant Director of Housing Management and Development added that the Housing Development team have delivered on a number of newbuild schemes recently.
- The Head of Housing Development added that the risk rating element is the impact of something happening or not happening however the likelihood of that happening is something different.
- Members raised concerns arising the wording of recommendations.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**The Committee commented above on the following:**

- 1.1 The proposed site area for the redevelopment of numbers 158 – 228 (evens) Teviot Avenue.**

- 1.2 Commencement of decanting residents from these properties and the treatment of these residents in line with the Council's allocations policy**
- 1.3 Payment of home loss and disturbance payments as appropriate**
- 1.4 Commencement of negotiation with leaseholders for the repurchase of properties and completing the purchases with such actions delegated to the Executive Director Adults Housing and Health in consultation with the Chief Financial Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Human Resources and Payroll, and the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Housing.**
- 1.5 Subject to Cabinet approval the use of Compulsory Purchase Powers under s226 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 should this become necessary.**
- 1.6 Service of a demolition notice under Section 138B and Schedule 5A of the Housing Act 1985 that will confirm the Council's intention to demolish the buildings and suspend the obligation on the Council to complete right to buy applications on the dwellings within the agreed site boundary.**
- 1.7 The negotiation and settlement of any statutory compensation claims made by residents as a result of the service of the Initial Demolition Notice with such actions delegated as at Paragraph 1.4 above.**
- 1.8 The establishment of a budget of £1.0m to meet the costs of purchase of leasehold interests.**
- 1.9 Subject to Government agreement to borrowing, the launch of a procurement process to obtain a main contractor for detailed design and construction and the delegation of authority to the Corporate Director for Adults Housing and Health in consultation with the Leader, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Housing, Commissioners and Section 151 Officer, the decision to make the necessary contract awards.**

**46. Blackshots Redevelopment - Business Case - to follow**

The Strategic Place Advisor introduced the report to the Committee. Ishdeep Bawa from Avison Young was also present to answer any questions on the item.

*At 21.09 Standing orders were raised so the meeting could continue beyond 21.30.*

The following key points were highlighted: -

- Members queried the financials on page 20. The Strategic Place Advisor clarified this was considered in the work to establish the business case but Avison Young concluded this was not a viable option.
- Members queried why the joint venture model was not considered viable as the self-delivery route carries a higher risk. Thurrock has a high housing need and in their view joint venture is the only way more houses will get built as the Council cannot fulfil this need on its own. The Strategic Place Advisor stated that generally joint ventures are done at unit sizes of around 500. The market is often less interested if the development is less than 500 units. In this instance there are 280 units of which a minimum of 158 have to be affordable, the opportunity for a market sale for a private sector developer is therefore limited and the joint venture partner is less likely to make a return. The market value in relation to the cost of building is currently a challenge.
- Members queried why other projects could not be combined to give more units and to make joint venture a possibility. The Strategic Place Advisor stated that in his opinion they have explored all options for Blackshots. A more large-scale venture could be considered in the future but given Thurrock Council's current situation and the market interest they could not recommend that at the moment. Ishdeep Bawa from Avison Young added that the re-provision of the current affordable housing plus the planning policy of another 35% of affordable housing shrinks the amount of properties for market sale further. Speed of delivery is a consideration with the Blackshots project.
- Members queried the south site and using the Blackshots playing field and stated that there is a petition coming regarding this. It is being proposed one piece of green belt is being given up for another piece of green belt. There is other council owned land in Blackshots which could be used. The Strategic Place Advisor clarified that they are not taking one piece of green belt away and replacing it with another, they are replacing the tennis courts and fields in trust land.
- Members also queried where the construction traffic will go as there is only Laird Avenue. Members also queried the parking facilities as the surrounding roads are already filled with cars.
- The Strategic Place Advisor stated that members can make their recommendations tonight to cabinet to consider. The Strategic Place Advisor confirmed they and Levitt Bernstein have looked exhaustively around the area and there advise is that none of the other sites are feasible or deliverable. The Strategic Place Advisor confirmed that it would be very difficult to use land without consent from Fields in Trust.
- The Housing Development Manager confirmed that during the pre-application planning process highways and transport colleagues were consulted with about the transport and parking issues and these issues have been considered.



- Members confirmed that they can only build on green belt land in exceptional circumstances and there is a proposal presented which fits within housing policy. Other members took the view that the current high need for housing should be regarded as an exceptional circumstance.
- The Strategic Place Advisor stated that they cannot bring forward a recommendation to Cabinet that planners have said they cannot support. In this case, while the case for very special circumstances still has to be made, it is potentially supportable.
- Members pointed out that there is scrub land sitting there doing nothing which has been used by people to ride off-road motorbikes on.
- Members stated that a North Grays master plan was produced in 2010 which was a good plan. The new Local Development Plan effectively promotes 'urban sprawl' as approved sites are on greenfield sites.
- The Assistant Director for Housing Management and Development confirmed the Council is subject to the S114 and DLUHC are about to give them approval for this project. The Assistant Director for Housing Management and Development agreed that the Council could be more ambitious in the future and Blackshots and Teviot are effectively test cases for the Council to show it can deliver something. The Council needs to prove it can get these small projects done.
- Councillor Redsell did not agree to recommendations 1.2 and 1.4.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1.1 That Committee commented on the design developed to date based on consultation and public engagement as a basis for procuring the next stage of the redevelopment.**
- 1.2 That Committee commented on the next steps as recommended below based on the Business Case developed by the council's advisers Avison Young**
- 1.3 That Committee commented on the proposal that the Council progresses the Blackshots project following the self-delivery approach.**
- 1.4 That Committee commented on the proposal that subject to Government agreement to borrowing, approval is given to launch a procurement process to obtain a main contractor for further design and construction and to delegate to the Corporate Director for Adults Housing and Health in consultation with the Leader, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Housing, Commissioners and Section 151 Officer, the decision to make the necessary contract awards.**
- 1.5 That Committee noted that in accordance with the business case model, a budget of £70.385m is required for the projected estimated cost of the works to be funded by HRA borrowing in**

accordance with the proposed HRA business and capital programme, subject to DHLUC approval.

- 1.6 That Committee commented on the proposed procurement of relevant advisers for the council's client technical team, subject to appropriate delegations on award to the Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health in consultation with the Cabinet member for Children's Services and Housing the award of contracts.
- 1.7 That Committee noted that a budget of £700,000 has been identified from within the existing Housing Revenue Account General Reserves to support the provision of the necessary advisers which will be accommodated within the existing HRA balance or funded from reserve should it prove necessary.

#### 47. Work Programme

No reports were added to the work programme.

The Chair thanked officers and Members for their contributions to the committee over the last year.

**The meeting finished at 10.17 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

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