

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 June 2015 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Cathy Kent (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Clare Baldwin, Sue MacPherson and Tunde Ojetola (from 7.02pm)

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance: Councillor Lynn Worrall – Cabinet Member for Housing
Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing
Kathryn Adedeji, Head of Housing, Investment and Development
Dermot Moloney, Strategic Lead Housing
Stephanie Cox, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Jenny Shade, 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 18 February 2015, were approved as a correct record.

2. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Ojetola declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 6, 'Investment and Development Programme 2015/16', as he was a member of the Planning Committee and some of the developments referenced in the report may be referred to the Committee at a later date.

4. Terms of Reference

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference were noted.

5. Housing O&S Introduction Presentation

The Director of Housing summarised the role of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee and presented a range of information on the Housing service, which included the Housing Strategy vision for 2015-20 and details of the Action Plan.

Councillor Ojetola requested that the Housing Strategy Action Plan for 2015-20 be circulated to members electronically.

Councillor MacPherson asked if the extension numbers of the Housing Department could be made available to Committee Members, in response the Director of Housing agreed that the extension numbers of the Senior Management Team would be circulated and explained the process of the Customer Contact Slip, which was the preferred method of contacting the Housing Service as every call is logged and recorded.

The Director of Housing agreed to discuss details of the Housing Strategy outside of the meeting with any Members who wished to do so.

The Committee agreed to review and monitor progress against the Housing Action Plan every 6 months.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Housing Strategy Action Plan be circulated electronically to the Committee.**
- 2. That the direct extension numbers of the Director of Housing and relevant Heads of Service be circulated to the Committee.**
- 3. That progress against delivery of the Housing Action Plan be reviewed and monitored every 6 months.**

6. Investment and Development Programme 2015/16

The Head of Housing and Corporate Commercial Services introduced the report which set out the key deliverables achieved in 2014/15 and the key priorities for 2015/16 related to the Housing Investment and Development Programmes.

Councillor Ojetola commended the apprenticeships and training programme and questioned how many residents were consulted to achieve the 80% good rating in repairs and maintenance. Officers reported that 3,600 residents were consulted throughout the year and that the service aimed to sample 10% of the 40,000 tenants each month.

The Committee were advised that the service was committed to improving the speed of which service calls were answered through the call handling team, and that new technology had been introduced to enable residents to monitor and receive updates on repair and maintenance jobs online.

Councillor MacPherson asked whether apprenticeship opportunities were targeted only at young people, in response officers explained that the pathway programme through the Princes Trust was aimed at 18-25 year olds, the

Housing Trust for those over 19 years of age, and the Definite Programme targeted those aged 50 years and above.

Members welcomed the fact the housing service offered an apprenticeship programme for older people to help retrain local residents to learn new skills.

Councillor Ojetola asked for clarification on the performance target for the Transforming Homes Programme and questioned what was being done differently in 2015/16 to address the issues that had been highlighted.

The Head of Housing and Corporate Commercial Services advised that the 'good to excellent' performance target for 2015/16 would be 80%, that was expected to be delivered through a number of new appointed contractors and improvement plans and targets that had been written into contracts.

Members were informed that a number of actions were being taken to address damp and mould in council properties, which included proactive surveys through contractors and information and advice offered to residents on how to increase ventilation in the home in order to reduce the number of incidences of mould growth.

The Committee were informed of the progress of tackling damp and mould in homes in Chadwell-St-Mary and Tilbury, which were in different phases of the Transforming Homes Programme.

Councillor Ojetola observed that the financial implications of damp and mould remedial works were dependent on the number cases that came to light through surveys and questioned how all works would be addressed within the existing budget.

In response the Head of Housing and Corporate Commercial Services explained that damp and mould issues were addressed both through the Damp and Mould and Repairs and Maintenance Programmes with the cost offset between both budgets, with the more extensive problems resolved through the Damp and Mould Programme.

Members were advised that a report would be referred to the Committee later in the year to set out a further 5-year programme, which would then be referred to Cabinet for approval.

Councillor Ojetola highlighted that the financial implications section of the report required further explanation and improvement in future, to which the Director of Housing noted.

Members commended the social value delivered through the Housing service, particularly in relation to the pathways into employment for young people and reducing those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET's).

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the contents of the report be noted.**
- 2. That the key housing programmes and objectives for 2015/16 be noted (as detailed in section 3), outlining the key benefits that will be delivered by each work stream in the Housing Investment and Development team work plan.**

7. Homelessness Prevention Strategy

The Strategic Lead Housing introduced the report which set out the plan for the prevention of homelessness and for securing sufficient accommodation and support for homeless residents or those at risk of becoming so. In introducing the report the following key points were highlighted:

- That there were four main causes of homelessness in Thurrock, which were eviction by parents, family or friend; the ending of an assured short hold tenancy; violence or harassment and mortgage and rent arrears.
- That over the past five years exclusion by parents, family or friends had been the most common cause for homelessness, which was a trend that was beginning to change as increasingly more residents were being made homeless through the termination of an assured short hold tenancy.
- That the impact of welfare reform and the introduction of Universal Credit had attributed to the changing trend as private landlords were concerned regarding the non-payment of rent.
- That it was expected that further welfare reform would have an impact on young people under the age of 25 years.

Officers recommended that a further period of consultation be undertaken and a final action plan be referred back to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Councillor MacPherson questioned if the Right to Buy Scheme would reduce the number of houses available, to which it was explained that this may be the case but future housing development was essential.

A number of Members were concerned with the perception that people could intentionally make themselves homeless in order to be allocated a council property.

A discussion took place regarding the steps that were taken by the service in order to minimise those taking advantage of the service who were not most in need, during which the following key points were highlighted:

- That detailed investigations were undertaken when a resident declared themselves as homeless to identify whether homelessness had been caused intentionally, this included checks with previous landlords.

- That the local authority was duty bound to provide temporary accommodation to those homeless households with children whilst an investigation was ongoing. Temporary accommodation primarily comprises of two council run hostels based in the borough or council owned properties. The service limits the use of Bed and Breakfast provision which is not suitable for families with children and is very costly to the local authority.

The Director of Housing emphasised that process of declaring homelessness and the ensuing investigation was very thorough and that this discouraged those from intentionally doing so undertaking such action lightly.

Members were assured that people who arrived in Thurrock without a local connection under the Allocations Scheme were not eligible for homelessness support or Council housing.

Councillor Ojetola commended the Council's tough approach so that people could not act deceptively, but felt that genuine cases needed to be treated with sympathy and concern, to which officers explained that good case management was essential.

Councillor MacPherson noted that the report did not detail the support provided for armed forces service personnel through the Veterans Charter and a motion that had been proposed by Councillor Gledhill and agreed at full Council.

The Committee were advised that additional priority was already given to armed forces service personnel through the Veterans Charter and Local Allocations Policy which had ensured that to date no ex-service personnel had been declared homeless. It was further reported that a dedicated Veteran's house was not required in Thurrock to home ex-service personnel as homelessness was prevented through the Council's Allocation Policy.

The Director of Housing agreed to report on Homeless Armed Forces Service Personnel in future reports.

The Chair asked for clarification on the number of London Boroughs who had purchased or rented property in Thurrock, to which officers explained that they were working with private sector landlords to introduce an incentive scheme to benefit residents in Thurrock and reduce the number of properties let to other local authorities.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the outcomes of the initial review and draft action plan be noted (outlined in Appendix 1).**

2. **That a further period of consultation will be undertaken and that a final action plan will be referred back to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

8. **Right To Move**

The Strategic Lead Housing introduced the report which detailed a new statutory rule called the 'Right to Move' which came into force on the 20 April 2015. In introducing the report it was proposed that the annual quota of properties to be allocated under the new scheme be set at 1% of all council housing allocations for the preceding year, which equated to six properties.

The Committee were advised that Member's recommendations would be referred to Cabinet for determination and approval.

The Strategic Lead Housing set out the strict criteria that needed to be met in order to qualify for the scheme and confirmed that the 1% quota equated to six properties, based on the total number of relets in 2014-15 that would be available for re-letting under the new provisions.

The Housing Tenant representative asked for clarification as to whether someone outside the Borough or even Essex could move into Thurrock if they qualified. In response officers explained that someone from outside of the Borough could qualify if they met the strict criteria set out in scheme, and that they would be awarded Band 3 priority but would be required to follow the established bidding process and meet the behavioural and financial requirements set in the Allocations Policy.

Councillor Ojetola questioned why the annual quota proposed was set at 1%, to which it was explained that this was government's recommendation but that the local authority could increase or decrease the figure. However it was noted that if the quota was determined at less than 1% Thurrock would be required to issue a public statement to state the reasons why the quota was lower than the governments recommended standard.

Councillor MacPherson asked if the six properties allocated under the scheme would remain empty until required, following which it was clarified that properties would not be held empty and it was a case that once the quota was reached further lettings under the Right to Move regulation would cease for that year.

Council Ojetola felt that the set criteria were not clear enough and that the implications needed to be more defined.

Members were concerned that the introduction of the new quota could unfairly disadvantage Thurrock residents in favour of housing people from outside of the Borough and that it would in effect reduce the number of council housing stock available for Thurrock residents.

Officers explained that they believed it would be unlikely that there would be significant demand under the regulation in Thurrock and proposed that the Committee review the figures again at the end of the year, when if there had been any uptake the quota could be reconsidered if appropriate.

In response to the concerns raised by Members, the Director of Housing proposed that officers work to foster mutual exchanges with any 'Right to Move' applicant so as to reduce the impact on Thurrock Council housing stock.

Members indicated their agreement with the proposal and a brief discussion took place to re-word recommendation 1.2, as printed in the report, to read:

- 1.2 *That it be recommended to Cabinet for approval that the annual quota of properties to be allocated under the new provisions be set at 1% of all Council housing allocations for the preceding year (1st April to 31st March), with the provision that officers endeavour to seek mutual exchanges where possible to mitigate the impact on levels of Thurrock Council housing stock.*

Councillor MacPherson requested that the minutes of discussion be referred for consideration with the accompanying Cabinet report and asked for the Housing Service to work closely with the Leaving Care team to ensure that young people leaving care were adequately supported.

The Committee agreed that the 'Right to Move' item be referred back to the Committee in January 2016 for review.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the new 'Right to Move' regulations be noted.**
- 2. That it be recommended to Cabinet for approval that the annual quota of properties to be allocated under the new provisions be set at 1% of all Council housing allocations for the preceding year (1st April to 31st March), with the provision that officers endeavour to seek mutual exchanges where possible to mitigate the impact on levels of Thurrock Council housing stock.**
- 3. That an update on the Right to Move scheme be referred back to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2016.**

9. Work Programme

Democratic Services advised that since the publication of the agenda a number of amendments to the work programme had been proposed, which along with the amendments agreed earlier in the meeting, included:

- That an update on the Council's Repairs Policy be added to the work programme for September 2015.

- That an item on Rent Setting be included on the work programme for January 2016.
- That the Housing Asset Management Plan be included on the work programme for February 2016.
- That an end of year update on the Housing Strategy Action Plan be provided in March 2016.
- That an update on the Right to Move Scheme, detailing take-up against the set quota, be referred to the Committee in January 2016 for review.

Members were in agreement with the proposed changes to the work programme, following which the Chair requested that an updated work programme be circulated to the Committee and officers following the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted, subject to the amendments detailed above.

The meeting finished at 8.47 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**