

DRAFT MINUTES of the meeting of the Housing Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2012 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Rob Gledhill (Chair), Charles Curtis, Sue Gray (Substitute for Diana Hale), Steve Liddiard, Bukky Okunade, Andrew Roast

Apologies: Councillor Diana Hale

Councillors Oliver Gerrish and Andy Smith (given in respect of Item 4)

In attendance: Councillor Phil Anderson, in respect of Items 4 and 5

Ms B Brownlee – Director of Housing
Ms L Sinclair – Interim Head of Housing
Ms D Shepherd – Housing Needs Manager
Mr L Clark – Landlord Services & Strategic Commissioning Manager
Ms K Adedeji – Client Contract Manager (Interim)
Ms A Stuart – Principal Solicitor
Ms E Sheridan – Electoral & Democratic Services

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor D Hale.

2. ADDITIONAL ITEMS

No items of additional were requested.

The Chair welcomed Members to the first meeting of Housing Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and asked those present to introduce themselves.

Following a request by the Director of Housing, the Chair agreed to take Item 6, Update on the Thurrock / Morrison Partnership as Item 4 with the remaining agenda items following in order.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests or whipping was declared.

4. UPDATE ON THE THURROCK / MORRISON PARTNERSHIP

The Director of Housing introduced the report which updated Members of the Committee on the position reached with the repairs partnership with Morrison Facilities Services, summarised the initiatives undertaken by the Council to enable Morrison Facilities Services to enhance the standard of service delivery for housing repairs and outlined measures to be taken should improvements not be forthcoming.

The Client Contract Manager provided a further update to the Committee and confirmed that a rectification plan had now been submitted and the settlement for last year had been agreed. The Client Contract Manager stated that the challenge is now focused on moving forward.

Members debated the report and questioned officers. Councillor Steve Liddiard questioned the change in payment mechanism and voiced concerns. Officers confirmed this was a measure put in place to address payments where the contractor does not deliver and real time information provided by residents will enable such analysis.

The Chair and Councillor Roast questioned how assessments of repair work was undertaken and to what degree it was independent. The Committee were reassured that independent assessment and quality assurance was in place and a mechanism was in place to deduct payments if necessary.

The Chair asked for confirmation of how residents would be informed of this new update. The Director of Housing outlined several ideas to Members including Local Repair Days and working with Sheltered Housing Teams but confirmed she would consider further how best to communicate the changes to residents.

RESOLVED that Members

- a) Note the contents of the report and**
- b) Agree to receive an update on progress at the March 2013 meeting of Housing Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

5. TRANSFORMATION OF LOCAL HOUSING SERVICES

The Director of Housing introduced the report which outlined proposals to transform the way in which housing services are delivered to tenants and leaseholders locally. Members of the Committee heard that this included the cessation of static service delivery points from local offices to the provision of more versatile and mobile ways of customer tailored services. The Director of Housing outlined that the changes were required to accurately target needs of

residents and incorporate national changes. The pilot under discussion was in relation to two housing offices.

The Landlord Service Strategic Commissioning Manager detailed the need to deliver services more effectively and use Officers time to best meet the needs of Vulnerable Householders. Members heard that routine enquiries could be automated to provide a better service and there were new ways to access services. For example, Officers diaries would be provided on line for residents to book appointments directly with the Housing Officer. Vulnerable residents would be contacted proactively to see if they required assistance.

The Landlord Service Strategic Commissioning Manager and the Director of Housing detailed the analysis carried out of existing ways that residents access services. Members heard that most queries were housing related, rent repayment, registration and repairs. These queries were not able to be dealt with at the Housing Office; the office was used to signpost to another service user, such as the Grays call centre.

Councillor Roast raised the issue that the report did not contain a financial business case. The Landlord Service Strategic Commissioning Manager confirmed that there is a transactional saving and the Director of Housing confirmed that the 3 posts in question were SERCO roles and she could not comment on these. The roles may be absorbed elsewhere within SERCO or result in a change of contract.

The Director of Housing spoke regarding the transactional cost and stated that she wanted to see Housing Officers out on Estates, and distribute the Officers across the borough.

Councillor Roast asked Officers if there was a safety net in place. The Director of Housing confirmed that there was a large amount of work already actioned to assist the pilot.

Councillor Gray questioned if Officers knew the number of elderly and vulnerable people affected. Officers confirmed that it was roughly 20% of tenants and assured Members that they would be well looked after under the pilot arrangements.

Councillor Okunade questioned Officers on the issue of home visits. Officers responded and outlined the sources that Housing Officers had available to them and the actions they would take to contact tenants.

Councillor Liddiard confirmed that he had visited Housing Officers in the past and stated that from his experience the number of visitors was low, although they did experience peaks, for example on Monday mornings. Councillor Liddiard observed that this was an expensive way of working.

The Chair invited Councillor P Anderson to address the Committee.

Councillor Anderson outlined concerns regarding the proposed change including that;

- It was an untested way of working that may result in a loss of service
- Access via the internet may be limited and for some users it would take years, not months to enable them to use the service in this way
- The current satisfaction level with the repair service lends itself to face to face resolution. Automated services work best when a service is running smoothly.
- The proposed changes to benefits make this a difficult time to make changes work and mean residents will need additional support

The Chair queried the footfall figures and stated that he could see how this would be beneficial in Purfleet. The Chair queried why Housing Officers were based in the office when frontline staff were available. The Director of Housing outlined the level of support provided by the frontline staff within the Serco contract and Housing Officers were needed to answer level 2 and 3 questions.

The Director of Housing responded to concerns raised by Councillor Anderson. In response to the issues raised about internet access, the Director conceded that this was a valid point but that within 18 months all benefits would have to be applied for via the internet. This council therefore has to look at enabling residents. The Director recognised that some people will always require a face to face service but this is not affordable universally. The pilot will allow the resources to be targeted to meet this selective need. Members heard that it is a controlled pilot, is not unproven but the Director did accept that it is difficult to change especially as no-one wants to see a local service disappear. Members were reminded that repairs are not dealt with at the Housing Offices.

Councillor Liddiard questioned the role that Careline will continue to play. Officers responded that the service will continue exactly as it currently does.

The Chair questioned if the change would lead to an increased number of calls to the call centre. The Director of Housing confirmed that this may be the case but the call would have eventually been dealt with at the call centre.

The Chair outlined his concerns that if the Stanford office is closed, half of the borough won't have a council office and requested that the Community Hub scheme be extended to include Stanford. In response to this concern, the Director of Housing said that the pilot Community Hub scheme had already been chosen as Ockendon but there is no reason why the second hub couldn't be in Stanford.

The Chair raised the concern that a large number of people did not have access to the internet and Members were reassured by officers that methods were in place to address this. These included holding housing surgeries as required with specialist officers.

The Chair requested that a mobile contact telephone number be introduced as calls from a mobile to a mobile are often cheaper. The Director of Housing agreed to look at the cost of providing a Freephone telephone number for mobiles.

Councillor Anderson addressed the Committee to confirm that he appreciated the Officers addressing his concerns and those from his ward members. He stated that until a community hub is opened there is a service gap but noted that many of his concerns would be answered if the library could give additional signposting.

Resolved that Members

- a) **note the report and the comments made in the discussions listed within the minutes be taken forward as part of the proposed changes**
- b) **agree to proceed to a new model of service delivery as outlined in 2.11 of the report with the following provisions**
 - i) **Officers incorporate additional signposting within libraries**
 - ii) **Officers explore the provision of a freephone housing telephone number for mobile telephones.**

6. THURROCK COUNCIL HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME

The Chair introduced the item by outlining he was impressed with the Allocation report and congratulated Officers and Members of the Task and Finish Group on their work.

The Chair invited Councillor Anderson (as Chair of the Task and Finish Group) to report on the work undertaken.

Councillor Anderson reported on a number of important items that were discussed by the Group which included, but were not limited to:

- The preference for a closed list
- The feeling that good flat tenants should have the opportunity to move into houses
- Overcoming immobility
- Changes to tenancies
- Incorporating the Veterans Charter and treating returning forces veterans as Thurrock residents with the years served being treated as if they were on the housing waiting list
- Encouraging downsizing

Councillor Curtis questioned Councillor Anderson with regard to the treatment of Veterans and Members heard that it was the desire that Veterans are given an equal chance for housing and not be disadvantaged. This included giving them the opportunity to have a local connection.

The Chair thanked Councillor Anderson for his report.

Councillor Okanade questioned officers on the outstanding legal response on the behaviour criteria. Members were informed that updated wording has been provided and the delay had been necessary to ensure that the wording was watertight.

The Chair outlined in detail a number of amendments, minor changes or areas for clarification within the Scheme. Officers noted the suggestions and agreed to incorporate the changes as appropriate.

RESOLVED that

- a) **the vision for the Housing Allocation Scheme is approved**
'to provide access to accommodation that is responsive to the needs of local people in a fair, consistent and transparent way'
- b) **the implementation timeline is noted**
- c) **a Downsizing Scheme as set out in the report is recommended to Cabinet**
- d) **the adoption of Thurrock Council's Housing Allocations Scheme is approved and recommended to Cabinet, subject to any amendments which shall be delegated to the Director of Housing in consultation with the Portfolio Member for Housing**
- e) **the report and recommendations from the Task and Finish Panel be noted**
- f) **Officers will provide an annual report to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the operation and effect of the Allocation Scheme.**

7. WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was discussed and the following items noted:

- Officers will look at the opportunity to schedule a meeting in February 2012
- Councillor Liddiard suggested feedback on Public Protection
- A joint overview and scrutiny item on Community Hub was discussed. Officers agreed to invite Members to the Health and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Committee the following week, where the Community Hub item is on the Agenda for discussion.

The meeting finished at 9.10 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail esheridan@thurrock.gov.uk**

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