

**MINUTES of the meeting of Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 April 2014 at 7:00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Steve Liddiard (Chair), Wendy Curtis, Oliver Gerrish, Tom Kelly (substitute for Sue Little) and Sue MacPherson.

**Apologies:** Councillor Sue Little

**In attendance:** K. Adedeji – Head of Housing, Investment and Development  
B. Brownlee – Director of Housing  
D. Moloney – Business Improvement Manager  
R. Parkin – Head of Housing  
S. Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

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The Chair informed those present that the meeting was being recorded and that the recording would be made available on the Council's website.

**27. MINUTES**

The Minutes of Housing Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 30 January 2014, were approved as a correct record.

**28. URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

**29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

**30. DEVELOPING RESIDENT KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the publication of residents led performance indicators and residents' satisfaction with housing services and neighbourhoods. An update was also provided on the Housing Directorates current and future appraisal of residents' satisfaction.

Members were informed that the housing department extensively surveyed residents' views and that these were run by an independent company called KWEST, which ensured an open and transparent process. It was felt that this provided confidence and consistency to the results of the survey. Officers explained that 20% of tenants had the opportunity to feedback their views and the service aimed to survey 500 residents each quarter.

The Committee were advised that there was not a sense of complacency in this area. Residents who were dissatisfied with the service received a call back from an officer, following which any remedial action was undertaken.

Councillor Gerrish welcomed the report and was interested to examine direct feedback from residents. He asked officers to provide further context in relation to national comparators and historical comparisons to determine whether the results were 'good.' It was further questioned whether there was a free text field for residents to include further comments so that their levels of satisfaction could be taken verbatim.

The Committee were informed that the last time Thurrock had undertaken a survey the results were lower than 60%. However it was anticipated that the national benchmark was approximately 70-73%. Officers acknowledged that although improvements had been made there was an ambition to make greater progress on improving the results and that a target to reach 75% general satisfaction rates had been set. It was felt that when more surveys would be conducted over time there would be greater opportunities for benchmarking and comparisons.

Officers assured Members that residents had the opportunity to provide free narrative during the survey.

Councillor MacPherson asked for reassurance that if a resident was unhappy with a particular operative, that the same operative would not return to the property to undertake any remedial work. Officers assured Members that if unhappy with a particular operative they would not return to the property, although another contractor from the same organisation would be required to complete the work.

Councillor MacPherson asked for clarification as to the numbers of people surveyed, as only percentages were provided within the report. It was clarified that one third of all residents who had received an update through the Transforming Homes programme had been surveyed, this equated to approximately 400 out of 1500 residents.

Councillor MacPherson was particularly concerned that the report was not written in plain English and that it was difficult to deduce trends because only percentage statistics were included.

Officers explained that a number of graphs and information had been supplied in order to demonstrate the improvement journey which had taken place.

The Committee requested that in future, reports should also include detail regarding total numbers as well as percentage statistics for each grouping, to which officers confirmed that this would be provided in further reports.

Members were informed that a good spread of residents from across the Transforming Homes programme had been surveyed, and that data was randomised by the independent company. However, it was the decision of the resident if they wished to complete the survey.

Councillor Gerrish asked whether problematic areas across the Borough could be identified through the survey results. Officers confirmed that small areas at street level had been highlighted as particular problem hotspots for levels of dissatisfaction. These levels of dissatisfaction were a result of similar complaints, for example window replacements, second bathroom upgrades. Following the identification of these areas of common complaint, officers had worked hard to inform the residents' of the details of the Transforming Homes programme and when they could expect this work to be completed.

Councillor W. Curtis commented whether damp and mould remedial work should be conducted and completed before installation of new kitchens and bathrooms under the Transforming Homes programme.

Officers informed the Committee that specialist surveys were undertaken before Transforming Homes updates began, and if damp and mould was a contained issue then further updates, such as kitchens, would be installed whilst the damp and mould problem was being managed. The time frame for the Transforming Homes programme was clarified in that internal works were carried out first which were then followed by external repairs. It was further noted that replacement windows were categorised as an external repair.

Councillor Liddiard welcomed the report which was a good news story for Thurrock, and was pleased that it was resident led. He echoed comments that the sample size should be included within the report.

Councillor Kelly questioned what support was being offered to residents in light of the fact that 12% of those surveyed experienced difficulties in completing the online application, and a further 7% reported that they found the bidding process difficult.

In response officers confirmed that support was available at community hubs and an assisted bidding process was offered to those who needed extra help. It was recognised that the process was evolving but officers were keen to provide appropriate support to assist residents.

Councillor Kelly referenced the report which outlined that English lessons were offered to site-operatives in order to improve their communication skills. He specifically asked whether this was of concern to officers and if this impacted on the level of service offered to residents.

In response officers highlighted the following key points:

- That the nationality of the workforce who was employed on the Transforming Homes Programme could not be dictated.
- That there was a layer of management and tenant engagement who were responsible for effectively communicating with tenants.
- That the contact numbers of the appropriate people for tenants to speak to was clearly advertised on project boards.
- That a balance needed to be achieved between the operative and management layer.
- It was remarked that the majority of tenants prioritised the following three aspects of an operatives job, and that these were often achieved and delivered by operatives for whom English was not their first language:
  - Whether the contractor arrived on time, was polite and kept to the scheduled appointment.
  - If their home was treated with respect, and if the contractor did not create a mess.
  - That they were happy with the quality of work undertaken.

Councillor MacPherson questioned whether the talent of the workforce could be used to Thurrock's advantage, and if residents could request an operative with specific language skills or a female only team. In response it was confirmed that contractors were appointed on quality and cost, however in future this could be included within a contract, if Members wished, so that tenants could request a female operative.

Councillor Liddiard commended the work of the Transforming Homes programme liaison staff and requested that the contact details of the team be shared with Members so that enquiries could be effectively handled.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the contents of the report.**

**31. VOIDS PROGRESS**

Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the progress and management of void properties. Members were informed

that there had been an increase in the number of voids, which was a result of the change in allocations policy and due to the downsizing initiative to support tenants so that they would not be impacted by Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC).

Officers apologised that there was a mistake in the calculation of the numbers in paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4, and reported that 1004 properties had been refurbished in the 2013-14 financial year. There had also been a vast increase in the numbers of properties that had been re-let.

Officers remarked that it was expected that of the 1007 properties re-let in the current financial year 622 had been improved to the Transforming Homes standard and 385 improved to a new minimum standard.

Members asked for clarification as to when the void period started and ended, to which officers explained that a void period started when the tenancy formally terminated, not the date that the tenant vacated the property. Tenants were still liable to pay the rent up until the date when their formal tenancy agreement ended. Similarly, the void period ended once the new tenancy started which could be different to the day the new tenant moved into the property.

Officers assured Members that that the new tenancy agreement did not start until the property was ready to move into, once the required repairs were complete. It was explained that officers liaised with the new tenant to ensure the property met the required standards and the new tenant was satisfied. However, officers recognised that there had been a very small number of instances during the year where the property had been transferred to a new tenant in an unsatisfactory condition. In these few instances officers had worked with the tenants in order to bring the property up to the required standard and negotiated the rent as necessary.

Councillor MacPherson commented that if the average loss of rental income per void property was around £1000 whether this resulted in a loss to the Housing Revenue Account of £1 million.

Officers clarified that this was not a loss to the Housing Revenue Account as it would not have been predicted that these funds would be collected, however it was recognised that this did generate a loss of income.

It was reported that this loss was being mitigated by turning around void properties faster, and that on average properties were available for re-let in approximately 6 weeks. It was noted that this compared to some local authorities across the country, some of whom turned their void properties around in 4 weeks. This had been a strong improvement from Thurrock's starting position, but it was expected that

there would always be a degree of voids loss as it was inevitable that some tenants would wish to transfer or vacate a property.

The Committee were advised that an inspection would be conducted once the tenant had given notice to vacate the property and that transfers would not be permitted if the tenant had caused damage. It was noted that abandoned properties were an issue in Thurrock and not every tenant gave notice to leave.

Councillor W. Curtis asked whether the Estate Officer had the final decision for permitting transfers to go ahead, and cited an example where a resident had not been allowed a transfer due to dirty paintwork. Officers remarked that general wear and tear was not a reason why a transfer would be prevented, but agreed to investigate this particular case outside of the meeting.

Councillor Kelly questioned what was being done to reduce long term voids. In response, it was clarified that the Housing Directorate had a list of properties that were long term void and which had structural concerns. Officers were examining the cost of rectifying these issues, for example by structural underpinning, in order to determine whether the works were financially viable. If not financially viable then all options were examined as to the disposal or alternative use for the property.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether Thurrock allowed a greater percentage of transfers than other local authorities. Officers were unsure of where Thurrock was positioned in relation to local comparators, but remarked that the level of transfers was likely to be similar due to the Localism Act and residency criteria.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the contents of the report.**

**32. REVIEW OF HOUSING ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

Officers introduced the report which set out the work that had been undertaken by the Housing Directorate in relation to tackling Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). Officers circulated a draft of the Thurrock Council Housing Safer Communities Strategy and a copy of action plan objectives to Members for review and comments.

It was agreed that the recommendations contained within the report be amended to note the item, which would allow Members to provide feedback on the Strategy.

It was recognised that Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) was a priority for residents, alongside repairs and caretaking. As a result the strategy had been developed, and officers highlighted the following key points:

- That core investigation and intervention was essential.
- That the Anti-Social Behaviour team and the Tenancy Management Team worked together to tackle the issues.
- The key to tackling Anti-Social Behaviour was having witnesses, which is why victim and witness support was vital.
- Preventative actions included, amongst other initiatives:
  - Acceptable Behaviour Contracts
  - Parenting Contracts
  - Family Intervention Project
  - Eviction and Forfeiture of Lease
  - Suspending Right to Buy Claims
- That the team were committed to safeguarding the victims of violence and child sexual exploitation.
- That £5,000 had been budgeted to establish visible patrols out of hours, which included tenant officers and Essex Police.

Officers also highlighted the fact that there was expected to be a change in the legislation in order to provide more powers to Local Authorities to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour. This was as a result of the Anti-Social Behaviour and Crime and Policing Act 2014.

Members welcomed the work that had been undertaken in attempt to tackle the problem of Anti-Social Behaviour in Thurrock, but questioned what was being done to encourage residents to report crimes to Essex Police.

Officers emphasised that this was a challenge, but it was hoped that the victim support strategy and introduction of visible patrols would provide confidence to residents to report Anti-Social Behaviour.

The Committee were advised that the role of the Housing Estate Officer would not change, but that they would assist the Anti-Social Behaviour Officer in collecting victim and witness statements depending on the nature and severity of the incident. It was observed that all officers would be trained in the same manner to ensure consistency of approach.

Members were informed that there were 4 officers in the Anti-Social Behaviour team and a further 19 officers in the Estate Team who also assisted with Anti-Social Behaviour enquiries.

Councillor MacPherson felt that the Environmental Action Team days which had taken place in the past had been successful and asked whether there were any plans for any such similar events. In response it was outlined that the Housing team worked alongside the Community Safety Partnership to take a multi-agency approach and that anti-social behaviour was discussed at local action groups.

Members were advised that a joint patrol with council officers and Essex Police had taken place on Bonfire Night and Fireworks night.

The Committee were informed that there would be a mixture of unannounced and publicised patrols in target hotspot areas and this flexible approach was welcomed by Members.

Councillor Liddiard remarked that he was pleased that new tenancy agreements were being introduced, and that work to safeguard women and children against violence and sexual exploitation was being undertaken.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the contents of the report.**

**33. 12/13 RECHARGING TENANTS AUDIT**

Officers introduced the report which provided an overview of the background to the 12/13 re-charging tenants audit and the actions that had since been implemented. Officers explained that the work had been commended by the Standards and Audit Committee and the report had been referred to Housing Overview and Scrutiny for review.

It was observed that the Housing Directorate could now re-charge for damage caused by tenants and it was reported that so far this had generated an income of £17,000, £7,000 of which was subject to a payment plan.

Officers recognised the need to be flexible in relation to vulnerable tenants but felt that there was now a clear and strong advice structure in place so that tenants took increased responsibility for the property which they resided in.

Due to the actions that had been implemented, officers expected that if re-audited the outcome would be 'green' and therefore requested that a further audit be undertaken.

The Committee agreed that another re-audit should take place, and requested that the outcome be reported back to the Committee in the next municipal year.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee:**

- 1. Agree that a re-audit takes place during 2014-15 and the results be reported back to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- 2. That the contents of the report be noted.**

## **34. WORK PROGRAMME**

Officers informed the Committee that a report on garages was to be received during the next municipal year and noted that the outcome of the internal re-charging tenants audit should also be reviewed following discussions at the meeting.

In addition the Committee requested that the following items be included on the work programme:

- An update on the Right to Buy Programme.
- Information regarding Homeless Applications.
- Private Landlords and Tenants.
- Gloriana – a progress report on the house building programme.
- Sheltered Housing Accommodation Charges.

### **RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee:**

- 1. Agree that the items as outlined above be included on the work programme for the following municipal year.**
- 2. Agree the work programme be noted.**

**The meeting finished at 8.25pm**

Approved as a true and correct record.

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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