

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 March 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Luke Spillman (Chair), Chris Baker (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Colin Churchman, Joycelyn Redsell and Lynn Worrall

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

In attendance:

Ian Wake, Director of Public Health
Tracy John, Interim Assistant Director of Housing
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager
Tiffany Bright, Skills Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Chris Seman, Intelligence and Performance Manager

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed and recorded, with the video recording to be made available on the Council's website.

41. Minutes

Referring to page 13, Councillor Worrall said that she had not received the information on the number of people that had completed the resident survey for the rents Ryan Farmer said that he would send this across.

Referring to page 5, Councillor Redsell highlighted the suggestion for corporate sponsorship for the gates and asked that this be considered by the service.

42. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

43. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

44. Inspire - Head Start Housing : Supporting Care Leavers

The report on pages 17 – 24 of the Agenda was presented by Tiffany Bright. A link to the videos of the project would be emailed to Members.

The Chair felt the project was a wonderful programme and commented that a similar project could be done for offenders as well as care leavers. Councillor

Redsell asked how long care leavers could stay in the property and if the service liaised with them. She also questioned if the videos could be presented at Committee that night; and if care leavers paid rent. Tiffany Bright answered that the average length of stay was eight months but could be longer if the care leaver did not have recourse to public funds. Pre-Covid-19, Officers were checking in every month but were currently calling care leavers every four days to check their understanding of the changing Covid-19 guidelines; if they were able to access education/training and if they had sufficient funds for food/mobile. If care leavers reported Covid-19 symptoms, these phone calls would increase to everyday until the symptoms ceased. In regards to rent, she said that an equitable rental system scheme had been developed as these were shared accommodations to ensure a fair way of contribution where a young person would contribute 10% of their weekly income after completing their probationary period in employment.

In regards to the video, Michele Lucas said that it was 25 minutes long which detailed individual young people living in the Head Start properties and one of the main issues raised was a lack of Wi-Fi which led to the installation of Wi-Fi in the new property that was shown in the shorter video. The videos would give Members an idea of the work that the service undertook with care leavers to ensure that they had a place to live with the wrap around service provided by the Council and linking them to the right opportunities.

Councillor Worrall was pleased to see that the service had taken a proactive approach in ensuring that care leavers had a settled accommodation. She questioned if there was enough accommodation for those who needed it. She noted that universities were currently closed and asked if any care leavers in university were in the Head Start accommodations or whether they could access these. Tiffany Bright answered that the current average occupancy rate was around 84 so had little capacity left and needed to be carefully managed by working with aftercare services in relocating young people when needed. The service set rooms aside for care leavers at university which turned out that none of those rooms were used so another piece of work was being done on this. The service was working closely with the Finance Team to ensure that there was sufficient provision in the next budget to be able to grow the service.

Councillor Worrall asked what the number of rooms were needed to adequately house care leavers to which Tiffany Bright replied that another 15 beds would be more than adequate. Councillor Worrall commented that this was a target that the service needed to work towards and that care leavers and young people needed homes as well so should be considered as part of building homes in Thurrock.

Councillor Abbas said that the report was positive. He sought clarification on bringing care leavers back due to the differing paragraphs on pages 17 and 20. He also asked how care leavers with no recourse to public funds were supported and what support was offered upon leaving care. Tiffany Bright explained that the service's aspiration was to bring the care leavers back to Thurrock by December 2023 as the service was unable to continually support

Thurrock's care leavers outside of the Borough. She said that where care leavers had been involved in serious crimes or in prison, there were court orders that required them to stay away from the Borough that they committed the crime in. The aspiration was for them to return but to ensure that they would not be placed in danger by doing so. In regards to care leavers with no recourse to public funds, she said that the Council covered rent costs and tenants received a personal allowance that was the equivalent of Universal Credit. Care leavers were supported until the day before their 26th birthday and they were supported in home office applications for asylum thereafter.

Lynn Mansfield asked if there was other support available for care leavers after they turned 26. Tiffany Bright answered that the Aftercare Team would provide support if care leavers asked for this and it was a tailored support where care leavers could be supported into private rental accommodation or into an adult social care setting.

The Chair felt the service had taken a proactive approach in supporting care leavers and thanked the service. Michele Lucas added that the scheme had been achievable as there had been a joined up work approach across the Council that had enabled care leavers to be supported through this scheme.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 To scrutinise the cross directorate working to improve the quality of services to care leavers regarding housing options.**
- 1.2 To support and promote innovative ways to engage CLs to prepare for independent living including entry into employment.**
- 1.3 Housing Overview and Scrutiny was asked to note and comment upon the work undertaken by HSH.**

45. Leaseholder Satisfaction Survey Results and Initial Action Plan

The report was presented by Chris Seman.

The Chair noted that the results showed that leaseholders did not feel that they were getting value for money on their service charges and asked how this could be resolved. He commented that some of the blocks of flats were not in good conditions compared to private blocks of flats and he felt that more could be done to ensure a nicer place to live. He suggested using focus groups to identify what leaseholders wanted. The Vice-Chair commented that leaseholders complained about damp and mould and paint issues. Councillor Abbas said that it was hard to justify service charge increases when there was a high level of dissatisfaction. He also asked why the survey had not collected more detailed data to identify why leaseholders were dissatisfied.

Chris Seman explained that the service was looking to deliver focus groups as soon as it was possible to do so which would help to identify why leaseholders were dissatisfied as the survey did not show these reasons. Once these

reasons were identified, it would help the service to identify what needed to be focused on.

Adding to this, Ian Wake noted the Chair's earlier comparison to private blocks of flats and pointed out that service charges in private flats were likely to be higher than what these leaseholders were paying. He said that these leaseholders' blocks of flats had low level Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) which Officers could look into on a 'postcode level' to identify where the ASB was occurring to address these issues but that officers would need to identify the reasons behind leaseholders' dissatisfaction to work out a coaching plan. In regards to the survey, he said that the first stage was in collecting quantitative data to understand the issues in terms of the categories and then to conduct further focused and targeted engagements to understand the reasons behind the quantitative data.

Tracy John added that with the Capital Programme and a decorations programme, this could increase the service charges for leaseholders. She went on to say that there was a difference between leaseholders and tenants in these areas that the service would look to identify the reasons for this through the focus groups.

Councillor Redsell asked how many people had the survey been sent to. She said that people had to take pride in the area that they lived in but if it was not well maintained, people would not take pride in it. She said that people were expected to keep diaries of ASB on council owned properties and that the Council should take responsibility there. She felt that the Council should be aware of where ASB was occurring where flats were not looked after or in good condition and suggested that Officers should physically check properties as had been undertaken in the past. She stated that the Council was the landlord and should aim to keep properties up to standards and felt that where it was not, it did not look good for the area. Chris Seman answered that there were just under 900 leaseholders and every leaseholder was posted the survey except for those that lived abroad. The survey was emailed to leaseholders to those who had not received the postal copy and a second postal survey was sent as well.

Councillor Worrall stated that the survey showed that the service was not good enough and mirrored how people felt in council properties. She said that the service needed to identify why leaseholders felt that they were not getting good value for money as they were charged a lot of money. She highlighted concerns on the survey's low satisfaction level of staff dealing with enquiries and questioned if there was enough staff there and if they were properly trained to be able to answer general queries. In regards to ASB on car parking, she noted that parking permits would be considered and she felt that this was not the right approach to resolve this issue and that the service needed to identify the reasons behind the ASB. In regards to focus groups, she questioned how the Committee would be able to measure the improvements from this survey as they would need to wait a year for the outcome. She agreed with Councillor Redsell's earlier comments on Officers going out to check council properties and said that Officers should be

assigned an area to look after. Chris Seman answered that leaseholder survey outcomes would be measured through a tracker survey on a yearly basis which would focus on the issues raised by leaseholders and measure the improvements that would be implemented. The service also had an ongoing programme of telephone satisfaction surveys that gave results on a monthly basis and the service was also looking to implement a six month leaseholder satisfaction survey next year. Ian Wake added that the service would have a better understanding of what the solutions would be once conversations with leaseholders were held. The service would then need to implement these solutions and then re-measure before bringing an update back to Committee to collectively decide how and when to measure these solutions.

Councillor Churchman commented that a basic service such as acquiring a caretaker took a year which was not satisfactory. Tracy John answered that caretaking charges were not always included in service charges and was aware that there was an issue in areas that did not have a caretaking service currently. A review was in place to identify ways to bring a caretaking service in without increasing costs for leaseholders and tenants and hoped to make progress over the next 12 months.

Members commented that the issues highlighted had been going on for a long time and that the report had provided the information needed about leaseholder properties which highlighted how leaseholders felt. Members looked forward to future reports on this.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

46. Housing Development Programme Update

The report was presented by Keith Andrews.

The Chair questioned why there had been no 'take ups' from SMEs. Keith Andrews answered that the first round of engagement had a mix of responses where some had misunderstood the tender and some had missed the bidding deadline. SMEs showed an interest in coming back and the service aimed to improve the messaging for next time to promote the opportunities and to work better with the SME sector as it was recognised that SMEs generally found it difficult to engage with Local Authorities. He went on to say that this was a national pilot to promote these opportunities and hoped for a more positive response next time.

Councillor Redsell questioned whether there were other garage sites considered for the Site Options List. She also commented on the quality and design of the Claudian Way development in Chadwell St Mary and suggested that the same developers be used for other sites in Thurrock. Keith Andrews answered that the service worked closely with the Housing Team and that garage sites had been reviewed but some were not practical as they had

access and overlooking issues. The service would bring forward any suitable sites once these were identified. He went on to agree that the Claudian Way scheme was good and the service was pleased with the outcome as it was important to invest time and energy into the design to deliver a good quality product.

In regards to the garages on Lyndhurst Road, Councillor Worrall asked whether the service had informed the people that owned those garages that the site was being considered for housing development. She also commented that she was not happy with the process of the Site Options List as it was unclear how sites were added on and then it was taken off or paused. She felt that the list did not have the right pieces of land. Keith Andrews answered that they had not been contacted yet as the requirement was that the sites be brought to Committee at an early stage and that the land contained only garages, not homes. The service would be engaging with those garage owners to discuss the options and the site. He explained that the process for identifying sites had begun 18 months ago and part of the process was to bring the Site Options List to committee to ensure transparency. He said that the March Cabinet report had set out that a process that still needed to be discussed and for a report to come back on the options on how housing delivery could be achieved using the Council's assets. Once this was identified, it would be brought back to Committee which would help to give more certainty to the delivery programme.

Referring to the Claudian Way development and other developments, Councillor Worrall said that the process at that time had been to take those sites to Property Boards with Councillors and then to forums so the sites had been looked at in detail before it had been published. She felt that the same process had not been undertaken this time and that the service should consider property boards with Councillors. She said that she had enquired about the Richmond Road site where users were concerned that they would lose this site and she felt that a consultation should have been undertaken. She went on to say that another process needed to be considered as people were finding out about their sites through Committee which caused them worry. The Chair highlighted that stakeholder engagement was essential in a project and that people should have been consulted to identify any concerns and issues. This would have helped to bring a more realistic list to Committee. He said that he appreciated the service's intention was to be transparent but agreed with Councillor Worrall's point of view. Keith Andrews explained that he was aware that there had been a need for transparency at the start of the project but would take Members' comments into consideration and review the process of introducing new sites onto the list. He said that how information was presented to Committee remained fit for purpose.

Councillor Worrall sought detail on the Prince of Wales pub and said that it was a perfect site for development. Keith Andrews answered that there had been some late objections raised in relation to the method statement for demolition. This had resulted in a withdrawal of the application and to resubmit with more information.

Councillor Abbas asked how many properties were SMEs expected to build and how many of these would the Council buy from them. He also asked if a budget had been allocated for these purchases. In regards to Richmond Road, he asked if the service had considered options for other places that the users could use for their meetings. Keith Andrews answered that there had been a tendering opportunity with a capped value on the number of units between 10 – 15 depending on the location and type of properties. He said that the service had the ability to fund development through the HRA using Right to Buy receipts and potentially through Homes England grant where it was appropriate. The process for these types of projects for a decision to go ahead would be to go through Cabinet to seek budget approval as was usually the case. In regards to Richmond Road, he stated that no decisions were being made and if the site was to progress with development, options for users could be considered to include re-provision of facilities on site or through working with other Council departments to find alternative places. The service recognised that there were existing and valued users on the site and was aware of the need to engage with them.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to:

- 1.1 Note progress on the list of housing development sites to be taken forward for further detailed work, involving engagement with stakeholders and communities.**
- 1.2 Note the addition of a site at Lyndhurst Road, Stanford-le-Hope to the Site Options List.**
- 1.3 Note the deletion of a site at Crammavill Street, Stifford Clays from the Site Option List.**

47. Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy - Action Plan

The report was presented by Ryan Farmer.

The Chair was pleased to see that the Council had delivered on its promise in regards to tackling homelessness and the funding that had been provided by national Government. He commented that the homelessness service had improved over the last few years but was concerned that too many people were still being placed outside the Borough and was concerned whether there was enough provision in the Borough.

Councillor Worrall questioned whether there were vacancies within the Homelessness Team. She said that she had been informed that people were struggling to make contact with Homelessness Officers and that she had tried calling the department herself where there had been no answer. She questioned who or what Jigsaw was. Ryan Farmer said that he did not manage the team but he was aware that there had been a number of posts over the past 12 months which had been created due to the funding from

national Government. He was aware that the team was expanding and could not confirm if there were vacancies that the team needed to recover but there was good coverage within the team. He said that Jigsaw was the name of the case management system that tracked and progressed cases. He asked Councillor Worrall to pass the case details on to him so that he could pass this onto the Homelessness Team to look into.

Councillor Worrall said that she would pass these details on and went on to say that the Homelessness Team needed to follow through with their case work which had been discussed in reports at Committee last year. She said that since the pandemic, there had been support from charities such as Friends of Essex and London Homeless and that the service should consider speaking with charities such as It's Nice to be Nice when engaging with stakeholders instead of consulting bigger organisations. She highlighted that this charity were made up of volunteers in the community to help people during the pandemic. Ryan Farmer said that it was important that the issue of homelessness was tackled in partnership with other organisations. He appreciated that the Council was made aware of other organisations and encouraged Members to continue to do so.

Councillor Redsell questioned whether there were any rough sleepers currently and if any of these were ex-servicemen. Ryan Farmer answered that he was not aware of any currently and said that 77 people had been helped in the past 12 months through the homelessness initiative. He was not aware of any that were ex-servicemen and would provide an update to Councillor Redsell.

Referring to paragraph 4.4, the Vice-Chair questioned whether individuals had been permanently or temporarily housed. Ryan Farmer answered that the figure was now 77 people in which 74 had been placed in emergency accommodation and that 37 of these had moved into permanent accommodation. Three people had been assisted by other organisations with some supported back to friends or family and people were generally supported to find somewhere more permanent to move into.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note and comment on the content of this report.

48. Interim Housing Strategy Timetable

The report was presented by Ryan Farmer.

The Chair commented that there was a lot of uncertainty currently and understood that the strategy would be considered in more detail before going forward. Noting paragraph 4.4, Councillor Abbas said that there were housing developments underway in West Thurrock and asked how these would fit in with the strategy. Ryan Farmer explained that the strategy was not in regards to the provision of sites or how development would be undertaken in Thurrock

which was a part of the Local Plan process. Members discussed that it was important for infrastructure to be in place to enable the Local Plan to progress.

Councillor Worrall commented that a report on the Housing Strategy had been brought to Committee in 2015 and asked if that had laid the foundations for this report. She also asked if the current objectives in the current report had been measured against those from 2015. Ryan Farmer answered that the 2015 report was used as the foundation to ensure that the strategy captured an up to date picture of those figures and was at an early stage so there were further points to consider particularly as the housing landscape had changed significantly since the 2015 – 2020 report. The Chair commented that housing had changed a lot since 2015 particularly in the private housing market which had seen an inflation of house prices. He said that this made it difficult for the housing strategy and Councillor Worrall commented that the housing strategy should be revisited every three years instead of five years if the 2015 strategy was out of date.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of this report and comment on the proposal to develop a new housing strategy. The Committee is also asked to comment on the consultation proposals as set out in section 6.

49. Housing Service COVID-19 Response Update

The report was presented by Ryan Farmer.

The Chair asked whether the service had considered what issues they would face after the pandemic if the Covid-19 vaccination programme was successful. Ryan Farmer answered that in the past 12 months, there had been significant intervention from the service to help people in their stability and security. There had been a ban on residential evictions that had now been extended along with Universal Credit and when these came to an end, people would have to support themselves again but it was unclear to know the full impact this. He commented that the service could potentially see an increase in the homelessness service with people facing financial difficulties but was hard to quantify whilst interventions were in place.

Ian Wake said that the Council had seen a fundamental change in how health services had been provided and care had been altered in order to provide sufficient capacity. He commented that there was a worry in that there could be a bigger health crisis that was not Covid-19 related as things that normally happened had not occurred. This could lead to a demand for more specialist and supported housing in adult social care provision and there was already recognition of a mental health crisis. He went on to say that after the interventions ended, there could be a potential increase in unemployment which would see associated problems that included an increase in homelessness and an impact to the economy that could lead to housing demand. Tracy John added that the Housing Service would look at how they

could continue to deliver its housing programmes and repairs services as well as looking out for issues where people were financially restricted. She said that the service would ensure that teams had the capacity and flexibility to respond to issues and also support staff who may have had issues through the pandemic as well.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders until 10pm to enable the Agenda to be completed.

Councillor Redsell commented that car crimes had increased and questioned if this was due to everyone working from home. She also mentioned that tenants who lived in Chadwell St Mary had been prioritised for the Claudian Way development and was concerned that other people on the housing waiting list had not been prioritised and may have been on the list for a longer time. Ryan Farmer said that he was unable to answer in regards to car crime. In regards to Claudian Way, he said that a local lettings plan had been used as with the Council's previous four new developments. For Claudian Way, 75% of the lettings had been provided to people within the boundary of Chadwell St Mary as people who lived in the area of a new development should be offered the opportunity to move there and this had freed up other properties for people to bid on through the housing register. There had been a proportion of the Claudian Way properties that were still available through the housing register. The bungalows had been offered to people with specific needs for a bungalow across the Borough. With the houses and flats, 25 were made available through the housing register for people to bid on as usual. The Chair commented that Local Lettings policies were good as there was a better buy-in from the local community and satisfied their needs.

Councillor Abbas highlighted concerns on the increase in ASB particularly in the Garrison Estate and asked how this issue would be addressed. He also asked for an update on previously reported cases of people who had no recourse to public funds. He also asked how people on Universal Credit would be helped with the rent increases. Ryan Farmer answered that work was being undertaken to tackle this issue between the Housing Team and the ASB Safeguarding Team. In regards to an update on people who had no recourse to public funds, he said that people were continued to be supported as best as possible and would provide further details after Committee. In regards to Universal Credit and rent increases, he said that the service had been taking a data-led approach over the last 12 months which looked at indicators and signals in advance where people may be starting to face some financial difficulties. This approach had been able identify the people who needed support the most and financial inclusion officers had been able to support people to maximise their income to ensure that they received the benefits that they were entitled to as well as providing advice and support.

In regards to sheltered accommodation and the communal halls, Councillor Worrall highlighted concerns that residents were not able to use the communal halls as it was difficult to make these 'Covid secure'. She asked if there were plans in place to enable residents to book time to use the communal halls. Ryan Farmer said that he understood that there were

feelings of isolation within a vulnerable group that had to shield in the past 12 months. He explained that the service was led by national Government guidance during the pandemic and would open the communal halls as soon as it was safe to do so.

Councillor Redsell commented that feelings of loneliness had been an issue before the pandemic had occurred and she asked what other plans were being implemented here. She also said that the issue of loneliness had brought back a community spirit. Ian Wake answered that he was aware of this and shared the concerns and hoped that everyone would receive their full Covid-19 vaccinations soon. He said that this linked to the Housing Strategy as housing services needed to be integrated with all the other relevant services to enable older people and those who felt lonely to be able to make use of the community resources that Thurrock had. He went on to say that the Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action Group had a great partnership of volunteers that had come forward to help people during the pandemic as well.

Lynn Mansfield sought clarification on what would happen to people once the eviction ban was lifted and questioned if this would put a strain on the Homelessness Service and what the options would be for children. Ryan Farmer answered that if there were evictions within the private housing sector, it would potentially lead to an increase in the Council's homelessness service. When a person or family approached the homelessness service, an assessment of their situation was undertaken and the service would try to help in preventing their homelessness. The service had a duty to provide temporary accommodation to certain people such as those who had children. Within the Council's housing sector, an eviction would be the very last resort as the service aimed to ensure that people had a safe, secure and stable home for as long as possible and would support people where there were difficulties.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note and comment on the contents of this report which sets out the continued response of the Housing service in relation to the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

50. Work Programme

The following reports were added to the work programme for the next municipal year:

- Stock Survey – Damp and Mould.

The meeting finished at 9.37 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**