

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 January 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Allen Mayes (Chair), Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard, Shane Hebb, Joycelyn Redsell and John Kent (Substitute) (substitute for Lynn Worrall)

Carol Purser, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillor Lynn Worrall

In attendance:

Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Mike Jones, Strategic Lead, Finance
Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director Housing
Mohammed Ullah, Repairs & Planned Maintenance Manager, Adults, Housing & Health
Rhiannon Whiteley, 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.

21. Minutes

Councillor Redsell commented that she wanted more of the points that she raised about HMO's to be included in the minutes. Councillor Redsell was advised to contact democratic services to confirm the particular points.

22. Urgent Items

The Interim Director of Housing updated the Committee on the C01 development. She explained that due to the increased cost of borrowing and increased construction costs the scheme would not be financially viable as a housing development site. She stressed that the economic situation is a national issue which is not just affecting Thurrock Council.

The Chair commented that it was disappointing news and he would be requesting that a report is added to the work programme for the next meeting so the matter can be fully discussed and to confirm the impact of this on all planned developments as more homes are needed.

23. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

24. Housing Revenue Account - Rent Setting and Budgets 2023/24

The Strategic Lead for Finance presented the report. He confirmed that the report sets out the base budget position for 2023/24 following the review and update of the 30 year Housing Revenue Account business plan. The Government [launched a consultation on limiting rent](#) increases in 2023/24 to help tenants with the cost of living. Without a cap, social landlords would have been permitted to increase rents by the consumer price index (CPI) measure of inflation in September 2022 plus 1%, allowing a maximum increase of 11.1%. It has now been announced that rents for 2023/24 will be capped at 7%. The report recommends that the rent increase is 7%.

The Strategic Lead for Finance further explained that table 1 in the report shows that the 7% increase will still result in a 1.295 million deficit. This means reductions in expenditure will need to be made and these are detailed at paragraph 3.6 of the report.

Councillor Redsell noted the garage rents had gone up and queried whether garage repairs were still ongoing on the Blackshots estate. Councillor Redsell also queried what a 0 bedroom property is and queried the care taking standards of bronze, silver and gold.

The Strategic Lead for Finance confirmed a 0 bedroom property is a bedsit. The Strategic Lead for Finance responded that the standard boils down to if they have a dedicated care-taker service or not. Gold reflects the level of time spent there and where a more dedicated service is required for example in the high-rise blocks.

Councillor Liddiard raised that many tenants do not know what they are paying for in terms of service charges and it would be really helpful if the services and charges were discussed to see if tenants feel they are getting value for money.

The Interim Director of Housing responded that service charges are at the heart of the service delivery and there is more information they can give regarding the services being provided, a learning session could be done and that may invite challenges from tenants who are paying for things they didn't realise.

Councillor Kent commented that as a result of the Government intervention, the 30 year HRA business plan is subject to review, he queried what the timetable is for the review and if there is sufficient flexibility to take into account the outcome of that review.

Councillor Kent stated that he was very disappointed no local consultation with tenants had been completed about the rent increases and stressed that this is not good enough.

The Strategic Lead for Finance confirmed it has been debated nationally. When rents were reduced it took 200 million pounds out of the HRA business plan. The rent increase could have been 11.1 % to meet the inflationary costs and as a result of the cap a 7 % increase could be looked at as a rent reduction. The certainty around rents is crucial and affects large scale capital works as you have to commit at some point and therefore income streams need to be certain.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed they did debate internally if they should complete a local consultation however the Government opened the consultation to tenant's groups as well as landlords.

Councillor Hebb referred to the rent increase and queried if the Council did push further and went up to 11% or below 7% what effect would that have on the Council's obligations. Councillor Hebb commented that 7% is hard at any time for anyone but especially hard in the current economic climate. He also queried if the Authority were ready to support those who are struggling to make ends meet.

The Strategic Lead of Finance confirmed that even with a 7% increase it does still create a deficit of 1.295 million. If this was reduced to 3% it would create a deficit of 3.295 million. The assisted decorating is the only thing that is discretionary in the budget. If rent increases were lower there would be genuine cuts which would affect operational service delivery.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed they do have their own income recovery team and they have welfare benefits advisors who are well equipped to assist people who may get into difficulties and they try to engage with them before they get into arrears.

Councillor Redsell queried if transforming homes had finished. The Interim Director of Housing confirmed that transforming homes is still running.

Councillor Liddiard queried how many vacant posts there are that are not going to be replaced.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed they are not trying to not replace posts but are looking at the natural churn and trying to slow it down. The underspend is then being captured as a saving.

Councillor Churchman raised concern about the Tevitt Avenue flats and explained that the residents are upset about the amount they are paying currently as there is not much you can do to transform the properties as they are very out of date.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed she is well aware of the issues and the team are working tirelessly to make a viable financial case for development and will carry on repairing the homes in the meantime.

The Chair stated that table 7 on page 31 really highlights the situation and although nobody wants to put up rents, nobody wants to see cuts to the service either.

Councillor Kent highlighted that he welcomed the carbon reduction programme and getting ahead of the curve on that. He commented that he understood the need to pause the assisted decorating scheme but asked that all is done to bring it back as soon as possible as it does have an impact well beyond housing especially on vulnerable elderly residents as it is one of the only times when someone from the Council can see what is going on and it has a benefit well beyond housing.

Councillor Kent stated he could not support a rent increase of 7%, service charge increases of 10.1% and garage increases of 10%, too many tenants are going to be close to being tipped over the edge with food, fuel and heating and possible Council Tax inflation also. Councillor Kent noted the increase in traveller pitches of 4% and stated that he would like to have seen a figure closer to 4% for all the increases across the board. Councillor Kent also commented that in respect of Transforming homes, it would be useful to see the schedule published to members on a rolling basis so everyone could see where work would be done next so they could explain this to residents.

The Chair stated that nobody wants to be asking residents to pay more. A lower rent increase would mean cuts and therefore rents have to be put up.

Councillor Hebb requested more information on the impact of not increasing the rents on the Council's obligations statutory or otherwise.

The Strategic Lead of Finance responded that in effect they would have to find the bigger deficit figure. A more detailed analysis of repair and maintenance would need to be completed. Legally they couldn't reduce anything to do with essential testing and health and safety. The only other areas would be operational service delivery or the capital programmes. He further explained that if works are not completed it will likely become a cash drain with constant repairs and maintenance that may be more expensive in the long term. It will have a serious impact and the Council will fall behind on the business plan.

The Chair stated that he could not support cuts to the service.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed base budget for 2023/24 (as set out in Table 1).**
- 1.2 That the Committee consider and comment on a proposed increase in domestic rent charges of 7%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan, to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**

- 1.3 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed increase in service charges to reflect the cost of running each service in line with the budget estimate from 3 April 2023.**
- 1.4 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed charges for garage rents (para 3.10) to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**
- 1.5 That the Committee consider and comment on the proposed increase in Travellers sites rent (para 3.11) to be implemented from 3 April 2023.**

25. Update on Voids Management Policy

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager presented the report to the Committee. He explained that the report provides an update on the Council's management of void properties within its housing stock. The current Voids Policy has been reviewed and updated from March 2022. The new policy and voids process has been implemented by the Housing Directorate. Voids are unoccupied properties which often require repairs before being ready for let to new occupants.

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager commented that it will be of no surprise that there has been an increase in costs of around 23 %. The team has continued to deliver on void turnaround times.

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager highlighted that there is a new process in place for monitoring the works. Members of the Excellence panel will visit the property to view the works completed.

Councillor Redsell requested the current number of void properties. The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager said he would find the figure and report back as he didn't have it to hand.

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager clarified that the last figure they had for the churn of void properties in this current year is 405 but this number will have increased as this was the figure at the time the report was written.

Councillor Liddiard queried how many long-term voids there are. The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager responded that they do have properties with structural issues, maybe a dozen at any one time. They are working with transforming homes partners to resolve these issues. There are also some properties that have been difficult to let.

Councillor Hebb queried the top reasons for void properties and how this can be reduced.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed that the reasons for void properties often surround natural life events such as people moving, deaths, transfers and abandonment.

Councillor Hebb questioned when a tenant makes changes to a property, can the costs be recovered for this if they have to be rectified.

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager confirmed that they do have a Re-charge Policy and where work has to be completed to strip something back that has been completed this is at no cost to the incoming tenant. They will seek to recover the costs from the previous tenant however they exercise a degree of pragmatism in chasing tenants for this.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Voids Management Policy.**
- 1.2 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Fit to Let standard.**
- 1.3 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to note and comment on the Council's Voids Recharge Policy.**

26. Beaconsfield Place/Calcutta Road - Lessons Learnt

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager presented the report. He outlined that the purpose of the report is to share the background of the HRA development at Calcutta Road, known as Beaconsfield Place and share the lessons learnt. Following the completion and handover of the scheme and the subsequent first round of lettings at Beaconsfield Place, the Housing service and other appropriate stakeholders undertook a review to identify areas of learning which could inform future new build developments to avoid potential pitfalls and strengthen the likelihood of positive resident experiences of moving to and living in their new homes.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager outlined that the development was completed earlier last year in Tilbury and provides 35 homes for people aged over 55. The first lettings were completed on the 7th March 2022. The scheme was nominated for several awards. The tenant feedback survey confirmed that 75% were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with their new home. The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager highlighted that the most prevalent factor to be mindful of in the future is issues around anti-social behaviour, 75% of tenants reported that they feel safe in their home. There has been a detailed action plan put in place to address things that did not go so smoothly.

Councillor Liddiard commented that he had inspected some of the flats and he thought they were amazing. He noted there were issues with children getting into the communal areas but overall the development project was good.

Councillor Hebb stated he really liked the report. He queried how a change of designation can happen so easily.

The Housing Strategy and Quality Manager clarified that it wasn't necessarily an easy decision but it was a strategic decision. A report was carried out on all sheltered housing and in relation to Alexandra Road the condition and accessibility aspirations were not marrying up. It was an appropriate decision made at an appropriate level.

Councillor Hebb commented that a multi-departmental approach is required for projects in the future, the Council has a problem delivering projects and needs to do something very different going forward.

The Interim Director of Housing responded that she will take this away and look at how lessons learnt can be shared across the board.

Councillor Kent commented that he welcomed the re-designation of the new build. He stated that residents hate seeing something new being built across the road and would want the opportunity to move into it. Councillor Kent commented that he really liked the report and the opportunity to look back to see what went well and what didn't. Councillor Kent proposed a further recommendation that this is picked up across the Authority on any major project or new build and this was seconded by Councillor Hebb.

The Chair and Councillor Redsell echoed these comments.

The Chair stated that whilst it is right to celebrate the positives he had to also raise the negatives that he was aware that not all the snagging has been completed 9 months after residents have moved in. He added that residents had also moved out as they didn't feel safe. According to the tenant feedback survey 25 % didn't feel safe and that worried him. He also commented that there were no electric charging points and the windows didn't open more than 10cm. The chair requested that the windows issue be looked at. The Chair requested an assurance that the outstanding issues are completed before it is handed over.

The Housing Repair and Maintenance Manager confirmed that at the end of 12 months there will be an inspection where snags and defects will need to be completed before being handed over. They will be looking to arrange the inspections shortly.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to review this report and provide feedback on its contents to inform future new build developments delivered by the council.**

- 1.2 A further recommendation was added by members that following all new developments or major projects a report should be completed to consider what went well and what did not.**

27. Homelessness Update - 2022

The Interim Director of Housing presented the report and explained that the report is the annual update on homelessness and a general overview of the service. The amount of homelessness presentations has been growing year on year. There has also been an increase in the last few weeks. The reasons for this are the Courts dealing with a backlog of possession cases as they were halted in the pandemic and Landlords putting the rents up in the private sector. The Interim Director of Housing confirmed that they got to a good point in January with moving people out of temporary accommodation however the numbers in temporary accommodation has recently increased again. The team work hard to ensure those that are in temporary accommodation are placed in Thurrock.

The Interim Director of Housing explained that in terms of rough sleeping, officers have worked tirelessly due to the severe weather recently to ensure support is provided. She highlighted that reports of people sleeping rough can be made via streetlink <https://www.streetlink.org.uk/>, via the StreetLink app or by calling: 0300 500 0914.

The Interim Director of Housing stressed that nobody should be sleeping rough in Thurrock.

Councillor Redsell queried if the Council are still giving priority to service personnel. The Interim Director of Housing confirmed this is the case.

Councillor Kent stated that the increase in homeless applications by 20 % in 2 years is shocking and commented that it is not a problem that's going to go away soon. He sought reassurance from officers that everyone who seeks help will be helped.

The Interim Director of housing confirmed that they are looking to grow their own portfolio of temporary accommodation, so they have more control over this. The Interim Director of Housing confirmed that the situation in Thurrock does reflect the national picture of homelessness rising.

Councillor Hebb raised the point that there will be some individuals who refuse help.

The Interim Director of Housing confirmed that they do know of a handful of people that are not willing to be housed and various offers have been made and to a certain extent they have to respect that but it is checked that support is in place. Following the recent bad weather, 11 people were placed over one

weekend and there were a few that the department did not know about. The Interim Director of Housing thanked the community as there were lots of acts of kindness over that weekend.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 **Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the contents of this update report.**

28. Work Programme

Councillor Redsell requested an update briefing note on garages.

An updated report on CO1 was requested and the wider development programme. The Interim Director of Housing confirmed they can do a development update on all of the schemes early in the new municipal year but March would be too early.

The meeting finished at 9.07 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**