

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 July 2017 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Luke Spillman (Chair), John Allen, Terry Piccolo, Jane Potheary, Joycelyn Redsell and Oliver Gerrish (substitute for Gerard Rice)

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillors Gerard Rice

In attendance: Steve Cox, Corporate Director of Environment and Place
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
John Knight, Assistant Director of Housing
Kenna-Victoria Martin, 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 21 March 2017, were approved as a correct record.

2. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business. The Chair informed Members that he had spoken with the Leader, who had asked if the relevant Portfolio Holder could be invited to future meeting.

3. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Piccolo declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was a Member of the Planning Committee.

4. Gloriana Thurrock Ltd Update

The Corporate Director of Environment and Place addressed the committee, in doing so he explained the report outlined the activity completed by Gloriana over the last 12 months.

He continued to explain Gloriana had established a series of controls put in place to govern the development and delivery of projects. This was known as the Governance Gateway and set the parameters within which Gloriana would gain approvals from Thurrock Council in respect of scheme selection, property transfers and finance.

Members were informed the first development at St Chad's, Tilbury was progressing well and was nearing completion, with 20% of the development being made available for affordable housing. The Committee were notified of the pipeline of schemes with the next proposed scheme - Belmont Road in Grays, which had been submitted to the planning department and was awaiting a decision.

Councillor Potheary thanked the Corporate Director of Environment and Place for the report. She sought clarity on the expected role of Gloriana and commented on the percentages of the amount of units available for affordable housing offered to local residents. It was explained Gloriana's principle aim was to develop new market housing within the Borough and to provide quality housing to meet housing needs and improve the lives of Thurrock residents.

The Corporate Director of Environment and Place notified the Committee there was the opportunity for affordable housing would come through the Section 106 which also provided funds for local environment and education priorities. He continued by confirming all future schemes would similarly be presented to the Planning Committee.

During discussions Members were advised the St Chads site had been contaminated with asbestos and so had been an expensive site to develop with no interest from private developers notwithstanding this the project had been delivered within budget.

Councillor Redsell enquired as to the cost of the service charges on the new development. Officers advised the cost would be included in the rent of the properties.

Councillor Allen commented the residents of Tilbury were disappointed as they were advised the properties would be offered to local people. He further stated that the percentage of affordable housing should have been greater. The Corporate Director of Environment and Place remarked that Gloriana was still a new company and perhaps they could have promoted the development differently at the outset. The amount of affordable housing was agreed by Planning Committee on the basis of viability assessments.

Councillor Piccolo sought additional information on the development of planning permission as mentioned at 2.2 and 2.3 of the report. He also mentioned that the Gloriana development was different to the development at the Topps Club.

It was confirmed that the two developments were different in that the Topps Club was a scheme funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Corporate Director of Environment and Place advised the Committee there was funding available through the recently announced Housing Infrastructure Fund to allow ambitious developments, of which the Council were preparing their bid. These would not be through the HRA however, as the borrowing cap remains. A case would be made as part of the bid for the cap to be lifted to allow more Council homes to be built.

Councillor Gerrish enquired as to the future of the housing developments in Thurrock, in particular to income streams from using Gloriana as opposed to Council led schemes through the HRA.

Officers stated in relation to the St Chads site developed by Gloriana that the benefit was an immediate revenue return from the lending of development finance by the Council to Gloriana and that in addition the council received a capital receipt once the units are eventually sold by Gloriana.

The Housing Tenant Representative commented that officers mentioned a learning process from this first development. She queried as to whether all lessons had been learnt. It was confirmed by Officers that lessons had been learnt as this was the first Gloriana scheme – particularly around communication and residents' expectations.

Members sought as to whether the site would be used for housing for Key Workers in the borough. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health explained that was under consideration. He continued to notify Members the Key Worker scheme had been agreed by Cabinet; however it would need to be integrated with the cycle of recruitment – particularly for teachers and NHS staff.

The Chair of the Committee asked if it was possible in line with the Localism Act, if part of the development could be directed to residents living in the area. The Assistant Director of Housing explained there were provisions under the Housing Act for such a clause, however felt it would be subject to legal challenge.

Councillor Spillman then commented that the current work programme was not on the scale required to fully supplement private sector building, to meet the local housing need. He requested that Gloriana present option to Full Council of an ambitious expansion that can meet this need.

Councillor Piccolo commented that it was important that the council and the Planning Committee were not seen as to giving developments by Gloriana any special treatment, as this would set a precedent for other developers.

RESOLVED that the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the information provided on the progress of the Company.

5. Fire Safety in Tower Blocks

The Assistant Director of Housing introduced the report to Members advising them following the tragic events at the Grenfell Tower block in Kensington triggered an urgent review of fire safety arrangements in Thurrock's tower blocks, including:

- The fire safety regime in place for the councils comparable stock and

- The actions taken by the Council since the incident to provide reassurance to residents, co-operate with the government's investigation into the causes of the Grenfell fire, and achieve a 'double assurance' of the safety of our tower block accommodation.

It was stated that the Essex Fire service played a key role at the tenant meetings and further discussed that no tower block in the borough had been called in by the government for testing. Officers notified Members that the council would be carrying out their own cladding testing, which was due to run from August to October.

Officers informed the Committee on nine of the blocks the gas risings were to be removed by National Grid at the end of October, which would also consist of follow up checks. Members were further informed Liberty Gas had been commissioned to carry out gas checks in all the required blocks.

During discussions officers reported they were awaiting guidance from Government in relation to fire sprinklers, Members were advised to install new sprinkler systems of this nature per tower block in Thurrock would cost between £80 thousand to £150 thousand.

The Committee were further notified Officers were to carry out a Stock Condition Survey, along with a stock assessment.

Members thanked officers for the report and congratulated them on how quickly they were in contact with residents to offer reassurance and advice.

Councillor Potheary queried as to whether the compartmentation process was still in place. Officers confirmed fire risk assessments, repairs and daily or weekly checks were being completed. Alongside this fire alarms were checked by the Fire Authority, following which nothing was noted.

The Assistant Director of Housing further commented that front doors on flats within the blocks were to be fire doors. Such doors in an emergency when shut would stop smoke and fire for up to 30 minutes, allowing the fire service to handle the fire.

It was sought as to whether tower block without cladding and schools in the borough would also be checked. Officers informed Members residential homes had been checked, it was further explained NHS England were keen to offer reassurance to residents.

Members commented on the presentation given by the Fire Authority at the Cleaner, Greener and Safer Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It was further commented as to whether any defects identified had been repaired and if the fire risks assessment had been updated. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that a meeting with Mears had taken place and any potential fire safety defect had been made a priority. It was confirmed new fire assessments were to be held and these would be audited by the Fire Service.

The Chair of the Committee asked if funding for the sprinkler systems was to be forthcoming. The Assistant Director of Housing explained they had not received any details at present however such funds would be ring fenced.

The Housing Tenant Representative enquired as to all council properties were too checked, such as the town houses in Chadwell St Mary. Officers advised that it was not really cladding that was used on those properties, however they would be speaking with all residents.

RESOLVED that the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the report.

6. Housing Service Review

The Assistant Director of Housing presented the item to the committee and in doing so the following was discussed:

- Last year a three year programme was started to deep clean communal areas of many blocks. This year it aimed to expand further and start a programme of repainting communal areas, where a need is identified;
- In April the East caretaking team received 100% satisfaction from its residents, which means that the service was rated good or excellent by every resident who took part in the survey;
- In relation to Tenancy management 3379 Audits had been completed since 2015, 17 Properties recovered by Fraud and 4 Right To Buys stopped;
- The rents collection team met their target of 99%, 54% of this was a cash collected which is up by 2% from 2015;
- The councils rent arrears for 2016-2017 was the lowest recorded figure in 10 years and of those arrears 67% are below £250. It was further pointed out that 70% of tenants had a clear rent account or were in credit;
- Within the last 12 months the repairs service had undertaken over 34,000 repairs to the councils housing stock and in delivering these repairs had managed to achieve the highest customer satisfaction of 93%, this had been achieved through implementation of new processes of which has included repairs process and new call scripts, however one of the biggest factors was the team had managed to achieve first time fixes to 95% of these repairs;
- Mears void turnaround time was now under 10 days;
- Members were advised complaints were down by 22%, while compliments had risen up by 58%;
- Safeguarding team were working jointly assessing and meeting the needs of applicants facing Domestic abuse and;
- There were currently 8202 residents on the Housing Register

Members were informed the ASB / Enforcement Team had the first ever closure Order to evict a tenant and the council assisted Essex Police

prosecute a resident to a 7 year custodial sentence for GBH by providing A CCTV package and witness statement.

Officers further notified the Committee of the work to date relating to the Housing Service review. Phase 1 of the review included:

- Looking at how services were running
- Identifying quick wins
- Investigating longer term improvements and efficiencies

The Chair of the Committee commented that prior to the Assistant Director of Housing joining the Local Authority, the customer service performance was poor. Councillor Spillman asked if he was happy with the current performance.

The Assistant Director of Housing, replied he was happy with the improvement made, however there was more to do such as working with residents and changing mind sets. He explained that client care letters had been sent explaining what the council can do and what they could do to help themselves. He stated that dialogue with residents was an important first step.

The Chair of the Committee noted that there was a reference to the importance of homeless prevention in the recent Housing Service report to the Council. He continued to comment that given the causes of homelessness in Thurrock it was not realistic to suggest that homeless prevention alone will effectively reduce the demands on the service.

Councillor Potheary reported that she had received negative commenting from residents relating to the caretaking service. She started on top of their rent; residents had to pay a service charge and were not seeing improvements. Officers explained they were aware of certain blocks which had reported problems. It was explained that the caretaking service was to be reviewed as part of phase 2 of the Housing Review, however inspections were taking place.

Members discussed the Hubs in the borough advising members of the public on housing issues. Councillor Redsell stated she felt it was unsafe for volunteers to advise people of their housing issues as these were often confidential matters. Officers notified the Committee that the role would be to offer first line support and advice such as which team to contact. It was not to complete or assist with case work.

Standing Orders were suspended at 9.15pm to allow Members to complete the item. The Chair suggested a 10.00pm finish.

Councillor Allen queried what would happen if a resident was given the wrong advice. The Assistant Director of Housing assured Members that volunteers are the Hubs were only to offer frontline support and all volunteers were to be mentored and fully training before they were to give any advice. He further

commented that if a volunteer was not confident, they could always contact the Housing team.

Councillor Piccolo declared an interest in that he worked for the CVS which supported the volunteers the Hubs. He continued by commenting the main enquires received at the Hub relating to Housing matters was how to bid on a property and to log a repair.

RESOLVED that the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the presentation.

7. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members discussed the work programme for the current municipal year.

RESOLVED:

Members agreed the following items be included on the Work Programme:

- **Keep Mote**
- **KPI Performance Quarter 1 – October 2017**

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**