

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 September 2020 at 7.00 pm

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

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillor Colin Churchman

In attendance:

Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
Ben Tovey, Strategic Lead for Housing Solutions
Keith Andrews, Housing Development Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Wendy Le, Democratic Services Officer

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 Youtube channel.

11. Minutes

Councillor Redsell mentioned that there was a repetition of her questions within the minutes.

Subject to these amendments, the minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 June 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

12. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

The Committee discussed the option of holding the next meeting in a hybrid setup which was agreed.

Carol Hinvest announced that Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health would be leaving his post in March 2021 to pursue other interests but would be attending the next few meetings of Housing Overview and Scrutiny until he leaves. The Committee praised Roger Harris on his hard work to the service.

13. Declaration of Interests

For item 7, Councillor Redsell declared a non-pecuniary interest as some of the garages mentioned within the report were situated in her ward, Little Thurrock Blackshots.

14. Housing Development Programme Update

The report, which can be found on pages 21 – 28 of the Agenda, was presented by Keith Andrews.

Councillor Abbas raised concerns in the way that the sites listed had been identified for development. He felt that a map should have been attached to the report to highlight where these sites were as well as the sizes and the red line boundaries as mentioned in the report. Referring to the Aveley Hall, he sought clarification on the development plans and the nine units listed as potential capacity on the site. He also noted that an indication for potential expansion of development had been given for Richmond Road where the Thurrock Adult Community College. He was concerned that the services from the college would be removed and sought clarification on the development plans for that site.

Keith Andrews explained that the red line boundaries had not changed and the infographics for the sites had been included in an information pack for Committee back in February 2020 when the item had been heard. The information pack could be brought back to Committee again if required. Some of the sites had been renamed for better transparency following Members' advice but the red line boundaries had not changed. If there were any changes, the process would be to bring these back to Committee.

In regards to the Thurrock Adult Community College, Keith Andrews said that there was no suggestion of a loss of the facilities on the site. There was potential to make the site more accessible and if this was the case, there would be a consultation process to follow which would then bring the site forward for redevelopment.

With regards to the Aveley Hall, Keith Andrews explained that the Housing Team would only become involved and have more details if the site was made available for development. If it became a housing project, the service would then look to provide affordable housing through that site. Councillor Abbas felt that Aveley Hall and Thurrock Adult Community College on Richmond Road should not have been mentioned on the site list if there had been no plans in place. He went on to say that there had been concerns on the sites from local residents who worried the facilities from the sites would be removed.

Carol Hinvest explained that the concerns of what would happen to the Thurrock Adult Community College would be better to be directed to the Education Team who managed the college. She went on to say that the sites in the list was listed if anything was to happen to those sites and that Councillor John Kent had raised the query of the college to the Corporate Director of Children's Services who was aware of Members' concerns. The site had been mentioned in the report because if the Thurrock Adult

Community College was to move, the site would then become bigger than it currently was. However, the site mentioned in the report did not currently include the land that the college was on.

Councillor Redsell commented that listing the site gave reassurance that there would be a consultation process should the site become available. Referring to the delivery of 699 new homes, she questioned whether these included the Tops Club and Chadwell St Mary. Keith Andrews answered that the Tops Club, Chadwell St Mary and Calcutta Road in Tilbury were all in addition to the 699 new homes.

In regards to Richmond Road, Lynn Mansfield asked whether there were homes on the site that would be demolished or if the land on the site was currently empty for properties to be built on. Keith Andrews explained that the red boundary line of the site surrounded the existing buildings on site but there were no plans to demolish any of those buildings and only to infill the site. If the wider site did become available, it would only be then that the red boundary line could potentially be expanded.

Welcoming the removal of Enborne Green from the sites option list, Councillor Worrall said that its removal would allow residents to continue to enjoy their green spaces. However, she was disappointed to see that Elm Park Road was still on the list as the site had a park that residents across the Borough used particularly during the current pandemic. She hoped that the Portfolio Holder for Housing would remove the site from the list after hearing residents' opposition to the site being on the list.

Councillor Worrall mentioned that Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) was no longer operating in its current format and asked for an update on the TRL. Carol Hinvest answered that there was speculation around the future of TRL but Thurrock Council had made no formal decisions on the organisation yet. TRL still existed and was still managing the St Chads development in Tilbury.

Councillor Worrall questioned how the development of the 699 new homes would be financed. Carol Hinvest answered that with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), it would be a combination of borrowing and the use of the Council's Right to Buy Receipts which was how previous HRA developments had been financed. Keith Andrews added that if any of the units were developed for shared ownership, the Council would be able to access Homes England grants.

Referring to the land of Culver Fields, Councillor Worrall commented that the land was owned by Thurrock's residents rather than the Council and queried the process of selling that land over to private developers to ensure the best value was gained from the sale. Keith Andrews explained that the selling of Culver Fields would be a decision for Full Council to make and that the requirements for achieving best value for the sale of the land was a statutory requirement that was placed on Thurrock Council as the local authority. There would be a scrutiny of that report before it would go to Full Council for a decision.

Councillor Worrall questioned why the Housing Development List consider Houses of Multiple Occupancies (HMOs) which was needed for homelessness situations and why the Council did not build HMOs in the Borough. Carol Hinvest answered that the service had purchased the Brook House Hostel last year which was now run as a Council owned and managed hostel. The service was also working with Headstart and with the Children's Services Department on where HMO opportunities were available. The service tended to focus more on permanent housing solutions rather than on new temporary accommodation.

Councillor Worrall commented that Thurrock Council paid other Local Authorities to use their HMOs and could save on costs if Thurrock had their own HMOs. It would prevent families from being displaced as well. Carol Hinvest explained that a lot of HMOS would be needed in Thurrock for the number of families that Thurrock had and that there were objections to HMOs from the Planning Committee. The service was working with Headstart, which was owned by Thurrock Council, to identify potential properties to develop into HMOs but these were difficult to find. Councillor Worrall questioned if the service was still working St Mungos on HMOs to which Carol Hinvest explained that the contract had been re-let and the contract was now with Sanctuary Housing.

Referring back to the Culver Fields, the Vice-Chair said that the green spaces in the area was well used by local residents. He questioned whether some parts of the Culver Fields could be left undeveloped. Keith Andrews explained that the site had been through detailed consultation processes and there had been strong resistance from the local community to building on those green spaces in the area as the Vice-Chair had mentioned. He went on to say that the last set of designs retained much of the open space which acknowledged the concerns from the local community. Although not all of the Culver Fields had been retained, a significant portion had been. The Vice-Chair commented that the local community was unhappy and wanted the Culver Fields to be left as it was and it was an area that was used for recreational purposes by the local community.

The Committee discussed the need for HMOs further and agreed that a report on HMOs in private housing needed to be brought to Committee. There were some private HMOs in the Borough and in some, young adults were not looked after at night and caused issues of anti-social behaviour in some parts of the Borough.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are 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 removal of site Enborne Green from the sites option list.

1.3 Note the completion of the Alma Court (formerly known as Tops Club) Housing Revenue Account new build project.

15. Housing Service COVID-19 Response - Update

The report, which can be found on pages 29 – 40 of the Agenda, was presented by Carol Hinvest and Ben Tovey.

The Chair questioned what the rent arrears were for the current year and how these compared to last year's. Carol Hinvest explained that the rent arrears for the current year was a lot higher compared to last year's and that the current year was the highest it had ever been. She went on to say that it was uncertain how future rent arrears would look particularly when the Government's furlough scheme ended. The service was currently part of Housemark, a benchmarking organisation and there was a predicted rise in rent arrears from October after the Government's furlough scheme ended. The Rents and Welfare Team were working hard to identify cases and referring people for support where needed.

Referring to the nine households that had moved from temporary accommodation without the Council support in the homelessness section of the report, the Chair questioned whether the service was still in contact or providing services to those households. Ben Tovey answered that some of those had been released from prison and had come to the Council for support but three of those cases had reoffended and was sent back to prison. One had reunited with family and two had found their own accommodation. One case had moved into Southwark and was being housed by Southwark Council and supported by St Mungos and Thurrock Council continued to support that person. There were two people who rejected the offer of temporary accommodation but one came back for support and the service was unaware of the other's whereabouts. The service was still in contact with three of those cases to ensure there were support plans in place to prevent them from becoming homeless.

With housing rough sleepers, the Chair felt that there had not been enough engagement between the Council and private landlords on this issue. There were not enough housing associations to house those who were homeless and 50% of the homeless in Thurrock had been placed out of the Borough. He asked what plans were in place to ensure better engagement between the Council and private landlords to house the homeless and where they would be housed. Carol Hinvest answered that the service continued to build and develop relationships with private landlords and housing associations and that there had been a Housing Association Forum before where housing associations had met with the service. Keith Andrews added that the service worked hard to engage with housing associations and that in housing association developments, there were issues of sales values and the prices of house values that were constructed within the Borough which were much lower than London. As a result, housing associations were not as active in

Thurrock although they provided support in general needs, the provision of supported housing was tougher. Carol Hinvest also said that the service was currently developing a joint housing project between Children's Services and Adults Social Care to try to commission more supported housing services to meet specific needs. Adding on, Ben Tovey said that in regards to the rough sleeper cohort, 50 of those had to be housed outside of Thurrock due to emergency accommodation on what had been available that day following legal obligations. The service had a good relationship established with the support agencies in the Boroughs that rough sleepers had been placed in but there was difficulty in placing them in Thurrock. However, Thurrock was competing with neighbouring authorities with London authorities and where the service was able to provide an incentive to private landlords through the access of additional fund, there was better success in housing rough sleepers.

In regards to repairs, Councillor Abbas felt there were some issues to be looked at as there were incidences where residents were being charged too much for a repair. He was concerned of how contractors liaised with residents and sought reassurance that residents were being treated fairly and with respect by contractors. He noted that most of the repairs had been completed or were due for completion and he questioned how certain was the service that the repairs would be completed on time and to the highest standards. In regards to homelessness, Councillor Abbas mentioned that two people had previously had visa issues so had no access to public funds and sought a further update. He raised concerns on people being evicted where there were financial difficulties. Referring to page 36 of the Agenda, Councillor Abbas commented that the term 'customers' should be referred to as 'residents' because residents should be treated as residents and that the Council was not a business so the term 'customers' was not suitable.

Regarding the repairs service, Carol Hinvest explained that the service had a contract with Mears and that a corporate meeting with them took place every month to go through performance indicators, residents' satisfaction rates and upheld complaints were looked at. She went on to say that specific complaints were picked up and that the repairs service usually had the most complaints as it had the highest volume of service undertaken. For certain complaints, the operational team provided learning outcomes from those complaints to improve the services offered. There were also follow up calls to those residents to get their feedback to identify where things had gone wrong and was used as part of the learning outcome to improve communications. During the pandemic, Mears had some repair issues where staff had been furloughed so there had been a staff shortage or staff had been unable to get into people's homes who were shielded. There had also been a national shortage of certain materials so these issues could have also contributed to the complaints in repairs. It was expected that most of the repairs would be completed by the end of the month with the exception of one that did not have an appointment yet.

In regards to the use of the word 'customers', Carol Hinvest said that future reports would use the word 'residents'. Referring to Councillor Abbas' eviction

concerns, she said that nobody could be evicted until the courts started hearing cases again and that those who received an eviction notice would need to have a six month period after a notice was served before a court hearing. The service had hardly served any notices since the national lockdown and had been advised by Government that the service should be focussing on residents who had long outstanding rent arrears from before lockdown which had been outstanding for over a year and on the most serious cases of anti social behaviour and domestic abuse. There were guidelines around supporting those who had fallen into rent arrears because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In regards to the two people who had visa issues previously, Ben Tovey said that one person now had a passport so was able to access public funds. Referring to housing rough sleepers, he explained that the service had a restructure in its team that were specific to the rough sleeper cohort and some roles looked at early intervention and prevention solutions if an individual or family was identified to be at risk of homelessness. There was an officer that managed the placements of homeless people and an officer that provided employment and support. Carol Hinvest added that a person with no recourse to public funds would not have employment opportunities or be able to get a tenancy agreement as it was illegal. The service was able to provide temporary accommodation and as the one person now had a passport, they would be able to seek employment and housing.

Referring to the homelessness section of the report, Councillor Worrall noted that 50 individuals had been provided with accommodation but in a Cabinet report for 16 September 2020, the report gave a figure of 32 individuals that had been accommodated. She questioned the difference in the figures on both reports. Carol Hinvest confirmed that the current report before the Committee was correct with the figure of 50 individuals accommodated. Councillor Worrall went on to ask if there was a financial impact to accommodating these individuals and whether there had been funds from Government or if the funds had come from the service's budgets. Carol Hinvest answered that the costs would be covered in the next finance report that was due at Cabinet on 16 September 2020. There were some funds from Government to cover the costs and the finance report would show the service's costs overall as part of the costs of the Covid-19 pandemic. Councillor Worrall pointed out that page 179 of the Cabinet Agenda for 16 September 2020 highlighted the figure of 32 individuals that had been accommodated and that the report outlined the impact of costs to the Housing service. Carol Hinvest answered that the finance report may also include costs to the private housing sector and enforcement issues. She would look into the report.

Councillor Worrall questioned the impact of Covid-19 on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and on the Housing's General Fund. Carol Hinvest said that the impact of Covid-19 to the HRA had been managed well as rent had continued to be collected so the Council was above August's target for rent collection. However, rent arrears were also higher than it had ever been in the past so as mentioned earlier, it was uncertain how rent arrears would

look in the future. The service continued to work with residents and through housing newsletters, advised residents to inform the service of any immediate changes such as a change in income to ensure the Council could offer support where needed. She went on to say that 68% of the rent arrears were from those on universal credit which was consistent across all housing organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Rents and Welfare Team continued to work hard with residents to prevent them from falling into rent arrears where possible as once in that situation, it could be hard for people to get out of easily. She went on to say that the HRA was a statutory ring fenced account and could not be used to cover the General Fund or any other budget gaps as the HRA consisted of rents and service charges and was dedicated to services to tenants and leaseholders.

Referring to sheltered accommodation, Councillor Worrall commented that residents were not able to access the communal halls in their accommodation which were currently closed due to the guidelines of Covid-19 and continued to be with the new 'Rule of Six' law that would be in effect from 14 September 2020 from Government. However, residents continued to pay the service charges for the services of the communal halls which they were not able to use and raised concerns of mental health issues in the elderly residents residing in sheltered accommodation. Carol Hinvest said that the Sheltered Housing Team had been preparing the communal halls for reopening in line with the social distancing guidelines and had been looking into a booking system for the halls. However, with the Government's new 'Rule of Six', the risk assessment that had been undertaken for the communal halls would now need to be reviewed and reassessed to meet the new rules.

Referring to Councillor Worrall's concerns on the mental health of residents in sheltered accommodation, Carol Hinvest confirmed that the service continued to call those residents where the calls had been asked for, throughout lockdown and continued to do so. In regards to the residents' service charges, she explained that the charges were for the whole sheltered housing service and that the communal halls were a small fraction of that service. The bulk of the charges were for the services from the Sheltered Housing Officers that supported the residents and continued to do so.

Councillor Worrall questioned if CCTV was paid out of the HRA. Carol Hinvest confirmed that the bulk of CCTV was paid from the HRA as most the CCTV services were provided on HRA land and buildings.

Councillor Redsell praised the Housing service and said that the service had performed well despite the current Covid-19 pandemic. She questioned if the service was still in contact with the housing organisation, Family Mosaic. She also asked if there were any ex-servicemen who were still homeless and if there were other areas in the Borough that CCTV could be installed. Keith Andrews answered that Family Mosaic was now a part of Peabody and the Housing service still had contact with Peabody from a housing development aspect. However, Peabody was more focussed on developing in central London Boroughs rather than Thurrock. Regarding ex-servicemen, Ben Tovey said that the service was currently assessing eight rough sleepers in Thurrock

and the Committee would be updated when that assessment was finished. On the CCTV point, Carol Hinvest said that the service was bidding for more CCTV in different areas with one of the bids being for the Grays Town Centre so it was possible to expand the network provided that there was capacity to do so.

The Committee further commented on the good work that the Sheltered Housing Team had undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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.

16. Garage Project Update

The report, which can be found on pages 41 – 48 of the Agenda, was presented by Carol Hinvest.

The Chair commented that most of the Borough's garages were not storing cars and the main purpose of garages were to keep cars off roads and pavements. However, the Borough's garages were too small to store today's modern cars and the question was whether to use the garages for cheap storage solutions or to turn them into affordable homes.

Councillor Redsell agreed and said that the better option would be to demolish the garages and build parking spaces in place. She went on to say that anti-social behaviour occurred behind garages as people could not be seen behind the garages. She queried whether the painting of the garages would be undertaken by Mears and that the painting should not be over another layer as it would cause the layers of paint to peel off. She went on to say that garages tended to be used to store items other than cars and in some cases, there had been hazardous items stored which resulted in a fire. Carol Hinvest explained that a plan was in place that outlined which garages would be demolished and which ones would be repaired. The Stock Condition Survey had identified which garages had a future; could become parking spaces; or needed refurbishment. Most of the garages were too small for modern cars and some residents stored their bicycles in the garages instead. There were a number of sites that were already on the housing development list which had previously been garage sites as well.

Councillor Redsell suggested that the service speak with Ward Councillors on garages within their wards. Carol Hinvest agreed and encouraged Members to speak with the Housing service of any other garage sites that could potentially be developed for council housing or other ideas for use.

Lynn Mansfield pointed out that the Council was still letting garages out and most were used for storage purposes. Carol Hinvest explained that the

service was aware that garages were rented for storage purposes and the issue was what was stored in the garages. It was acknowledged that the garages were too small to store cars and there was a Garage Tenancy Agreement which highlighted that nothing combustible such as gas canisters could be stored in the garages.

Councillor Worrall questioned if there was an income from the let of garages and if this paid towards the garages project or if there were reserved funds for the project. Carol Hinvest was uncertain from a revenues point and would ask for business case to be put together and circulated to the Committee. She went on to say that the garages were the Council's assets and some funds would need to be used to maintain them to prevent them from falling into a state of disrepair or being fenced off due to its unsafe structure. The Project Manager for the garages project was looking at which garage sites could be demolished and developed into homes or car parking spaces.

Councillor Worrall asked for an update of the project to be brought back to the next municipal year. The Chair agreed and said that he wished to see the project bring forth exciting and bold ideas that would add social value and also revenue potential to it. He gave the example of the bungalow project and Carol Hinvest said that the garages on Defoe Parade was the pilot scheme that would prove viability of the project.

RESOLVED:

It was recommended that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive this report for information and comment.

17. Work Programme

The work programme was amended as follows:

- HMOs in the Private Sector was added with a date to be confirmed.
- Annual Allocations Report was added to 17 November 2020.
- Tenant & Leasehold Satisfaction Survey Results and Action Plan was moved to 19 January 2021.
- Fees and Charges was moved to 19 January 2021.
- Key Performance Indicators was added to 17 November 2020.
- Removal of Gates in Accommodation Complexes was added to 17 November 2020.

Councillor Worrall asked that the Fees and Charges report cover any cuts to be made in Housing. Carol Hinvest explained that the Fees and Charges report covered the Housing General Fund only. She went on to say that there were no foreseen cuts yet and if any were necessary these would be covered within the HRA Business Plan report due for the meeting on 19 January 2021.

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**