

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 November 2020 at 7.00 pm

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

Lynn Mansfield, Housing Tenant Representative

Apologies: Councillor Colin Churchman

In attendance: Councillor Victoria Holloway, Ward Councillor for West Thurrock and South Stifford
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Andrew Millard, Director of Place
Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing
David Moore, Interim Assistant Director of Place Delivery
Dulal Ahmed, Housing Enforcement Manager
Andrew Debnam, Housing Development Project Manager
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Mike Jones, Management Accountant
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 website.

18. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 September 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

19. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

The Committee gave praise to Heather Gunn, Strategic Lead for Housing Operations, who was retiring at the end of the month. Members and Officers commended Heather Gunn for her 38 years of hard work and efforts at Thurrock Council which had been a great help to Members, Officers and residents.

20. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

21. Licensing Houses of Multiple Occupation

The report on pages 17 – 28 was presented by Dulal Ahmed.

The Chair questioned the process of identifying the 2,738 Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) for investigation; the number of suitable and unsuitable HMOs in Thurrock; and whether there was a process in which extra powers could be given to the service similar to other Local Authorities (LAs) as outlined in paragraph 6.3. Dulal Ahmed explained that 2,738 HMOs were estimated through a Property Identification Exercise that looked at council tax records, parking permits and electoral registers which showed names of more than three people living within a property. East Tilbury and South Ockendon showed a lower number of licensed HMOs than Grays, Aveley and Purfleet-on-Thames. The service aimed to visit properties for investigation once lockdown restrictions eased. A selective licensing property identification exercise would also be undertaken for further checks on corporate ownership dwellings purchased in the Borough for shared housing and privately rented.

(Clerk's note – the Chair allowed other Committee Members to ask questions before the rest of his questions were answered.)

Councillor Redsell pointed out that not every person in a household registered on the electoral register and asked how often were HMOs visited to check the number of people living there. Dulal Ahmed answered that it was a legal requirement for anyone over the age of 18 to register on the electoral roll and a separate team in the Council managed this. He said that the electoral register had been reliable in identifying unlicensed HMOs.

Councillor Worrall questioned why the Council did not include the building of HMOs within the Local Plan as this would allow the Council to manage their HMOs. She also said that HMOs were needed for a wider age group that included middle aged people too. Dulal Ahmed explained that the service was working closely with the Children's Services Team on the Head Start Programme to procure HMOs in the Borough for young care leavers. Andrew Millard added that the consultation on the Local Plan would provide data and evidence to ensure that the right mix of housing was identified to meet the demands and needs within the Borough.

The Committee questioned why there were only 147 licensed HMOs and if a target, such as a KPI, had been set for the number of properties to be licensed to enable the assessment of the service. Dulal Ahmed answered that the law on HMOs had changed in October 2019 to include properties that had 5 unrelated people sharing an entire house/flat which would require a license. Since the change, the service had published the landlord's licensing requirement and the Private Housing Team was expanded to meet the level of this demand too. Over the last three years, the service had licensed 142 properties compared to five in 2017/18. Carol Hinvest said that a target could be set for the service at the start of the next financial year.

The Committee raised concerns on the lack of supervision over 16 year olds living in HMOs and that more information on HMOs should be provided to Ward Councillors. The Committee also questioned what the income from

licensing fees and fines were used for and the number of staff within the team to manage HMOs. Officers explained that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government awarded private housing funding to inspect young care leaver homes to ensure that these properties and children were safe. Other LAs were placing children in HMO care homes within Thurrock and the Private Housing Team wanted to ensure a better working partnership with LAs on this and also to improve housing conditions for young care leavers. The income from licensing fees and fines were ring fenced and invested back into the service to help maintain and improve the service's work and there were currently 12 staff members in the private housing team.

RESOLVED:

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

22. Fees and Charges Pricing Strategy 2021/22

The report on pages 29 – 40 was presented by Dulal Ahmed.

The Committee questioned why fees for travellers' sites had increased and sought clarification on selective licensing. The Committee requested detail on the mobile homes charges which would be provided by email. Officers explained that the 2.97% fee increase in travellers' sites was for the maintenance of the sites, repairs and engagement service with tenants. Selective licensing was a new scheme to be introduced by the Council that would apply to licensing all private rented properties in Thurrock and not just HMOs.

Councillor Worrall said that carbon monoxide alarms had to be installed in rented private homes by landlords and HMOs but questioned why this was not a requirement in social homes. Carol Hinvest explained that this was the law for the private housing sector but a recent White Paper Bill was proposing to equalise this in social homes as well. The Council had been installing carbon monoxide alarms in their tenants' homes since Councillor Worrall had raised this issue last year and would provide an update on this progress.

RESOLVED:

That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees, including those no longer applicable, and that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee comment on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.

23. Housing Development Programme Update

The report on pages 41 – 48 was presented by David Moore.

The Committee sought more detail on the Richmond Road site as it had recently been announced that the Thurrock Adult Community College (TACC)

would be closed and asked where the new site for the TACC would be. Officers were not involved with where the TACC would be situated following its closure on Richmond Road that had been decided after the report had been written. Options for the Richmond Road site was currently being explored with architects and capacity and types of housing were being considered. Officers would look into the designs of the site and email an update to Members. The planning application for the site was in its advanced stages and could potentially be submitted at the end of the year.

The Committee mentioned recent developments in Chadwell St Mary and Grays Riverside had made improvements to the areas and the designs were modern. The Chadwell St Mary site had a good open space design which should be considered in future developments.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note progress on the list of housing development sites to be taken forward for further detailed work, involving engagement with stakeholders and communities.

24. Housing Development Delivery Approach

The report on pages 49 – 56 was presented by Andrew Millard.

The Chair sought details on the current situation of Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) and how confident the service was in achieving 32,000 homes by the end of the Local Plan period. Andrew Millard explained that TRL currently had no Board of Directors and there was a proposal to bring forward the appointment of new Directors and potential housing options. He said that the figure of 32,000 homes had been identified through the assessment of the Borough's housing needs. The Council's housing delivery rates have been an average of around 500 units per annum for the past 10 years. There were two factors that would significantly increase the Council's ability to deliver the 32,000 homes with one being the allocation new housing sites through the review of the Local Plan. The other factor was the market conditions, which had been strong prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was recognised that Thurrock was a great place to live and that its place-making ambitions led the way in defining what good quality place making could be through the work that the Council was already leading on.

The Committee highlighted the importance of infrastructure and the possibility of building another village or rebuilding parts of Thurrock. It was important that the service did not overbuild which could worsen the infrastructure of the Borough with too many people and vehicles. Andrew Millard answered that the service was not just focusing on the delivery of new homes but also building on great places that would enhance people's wellbeing. New developments had to be infrastructure led as well as high quality and infrastructure had to be able to accommodate new growth and address

existing issues. Transport was important in this as well and a new Transport Strategy was being progressed alongside the new Local Plan.

Councillor Worrall sought more details on what the conflict of interests were that caused the disbandment of the Board of Directors at TRL and questioned whether there were issues in TRL's accounts. She also asked how Belmont Road would be developed as there had been issues on the site previously and asked for clarification on recommendation 1.2. Andrew Millard explained that the previous TRL Directors were concerned about being Council Officers and TRL Directors at the same time but they had not thought that TRL was not viable. The report considered how TRL could be rejuvenated as part of the Housing Delivery Programme. Officers were not aware of any issues in the TRL accounts. With the Belmont Road site, this was owned by TRL and had been granted planning permission with conditions attached. On recommendation 1.2, Officers explained that some schemes would require a formal decision of the Council to be able to progress but the Committee would be kept engaged.

The Committee discussed the Culver Centre site and questioned why the Council was not developing the site; why the site was going through a planning application first as Members thought the Council was considering selling the land; and what the next step would be for the site after the planning application and whether further information would be brought back to the Committee. The Vice-Chair felt that the Council should develop the site for social housing for Thurrock's residents.

Officers explained that no formal decisions had been made on the Culver Centre site yet and a planning application would help to identify options for the site to enable a decision to be made. The site was going through a planning application first before going to Full Council because a planning application would provide a greater assessment of the value of the site. The Committee would continue to receive updates on the site as part of the Housing Development Programme Updates. The Housing Delivery Team did not have the capacity to develop the Culver Centre site as the team was already delivering an ambitious Housing Delivery Programme as highlighted in the previous Agenda item.

RESOLVED:

It was recommended that Members of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1.1 Noted and commented on the proposals to adopt a mixed approach to Housing Development Delivery, in order to improve the Council's capacity to increase its delivery rate.**
- 1.2 Noted that potential schemes will be brought forward for approval in line with the Council's constitution in due course.**

25. HRA Rent Setting Process

The report on pages 57 – 64 was presented by Mike Jones.

The Chair said that he had supported the rent freeze for the past few years but agreed that the rent increase now was necessary as there was a lack of funds in the Council and was incurring more expenses which had been the case even before the pandemic. Councillor Redsell agreed and went on to highlight issues in the rent increase for garages as nothing was being done to improve the conditions of garages. Carol Hinvest said that the service was spending more money on garages which was highlighted in the table in paragraph 6.3.

Referring to paragraph 3.4, Councillor Worrall raised concerns over the statement of 'The Council will try to ensure that it does not set the level of rent and service charge above the Local Housing Allowance level.' She was concerned that not all residents would be supported particularly those who fell into difficult situations. Mike Jones explained that the HRA was set within the local housing allowance but that any housing development programme in the HRA would have to meet the criteria of being affordable within the local housing allowance. The Chair commented that the statement referred to houses within the HRA that were not on social rents but was set at an affordable rent. He noted that the rent would always be affordable and said that Officers should consider service charges on HRA properties as most Councillors had issues with these. Councillor Worrall said that she wanted the service to ensure that Thurrock would never go down the route of not supporting a resident who fell on hard times.

The Committee questioned how residents engaged in the HRA process to which Officers explained that the service had undertaken an online engagement process which had seen over 400 people engaged online. The service had worked with other teams in the Council to ensure that the service were informed of any phone calls from residents in relation to rent and the service planned to put together a video to reach residents. The Committee felt phone calls to residents were needed as some residents could not go online to engage in the process.

Councillor Abbas opposed the rent increases especially for this year due to the pandemic. He sought clarification on why rent had increased for garages to which Carol Hinvest explained that there had been a large increase in the number of people renting garages.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposal for engagement on rent increases within the Housing Revenue Account.

26. Automatic Gates

The report on pages 65 – 74 was presented by Carol Hinvest.

The Chair invited Councillor Holloway to ask her questions.

Councillor Holloway asked her residents had been given the option to keep the gates (at Rookery Court) and not be charged to which Carol Hinvest confirmed that they had not.

Councillor Holloway said that the Portfolio Holder for Housing had announced at Full Council that no decision had been made on charging elderly residents for the gates (Rookery Court) but she had later received correspondence that the charge had been agreed and would be implemented in the new financial year. She sought clarification on this. Roger Harris explained that the full consultation on all the sites had not yet been completed. Once consultation was completed, this would be discussed with the Portfolio Holder and a decision would be made based on the consultation feedback and the balance of spend within the HRA but there would be a service charge for the Rookery. The charges would potentially be confirmed in the New Year and would not come into effect until 1 April 2021.

Councillor Holloway noted that the report highlighted no security issues (for Rookery Court) and questioned whether this had been looked at during the first lockdown. She said that there was a school opposite (to Rookery Court) and that there were additional security issues. Carol Hinvest explained that the service had looked at reported incidents over the whole of last year and part of the first lockdown.

Councillor Holloway sought clarification on the number of gates to be removed. She also noted that no consultation had taken place with residents of Alexandra Court and that the gates would be removed which would bring the total gates cost down to around £90,400. She felt that this was small amount to ask for in the HRA budget of £50 million to keep the gates in place to protect Thurrock's elderly residents.

Carol Hinvest explained that Alexandra Court would be decommissioned as a sheltered housing scheme and therefore the Council had not consulted residents as it would have been disingenuous to consult with them on a gate to a complex that would be decommissioned. She clarified that the number of gates to be removed, not including Alexandra Court, were five. Roger Harris explained that choices and priorities had to be made in the HRA in a number of areas and that residents in Rookery Court had been consulted who were prepared to pay the service charges for the gates to remain. The issue of the gates would be discussed with the Portfolio Holder. Councillor Holloway did not feel her residents were given a choice in the service charges for the gates (at Rookery Court) and that they were not given any options but to pay or have the gates removed.

The Chair questioned what the potential loss would be if money in the HRA was spent on the gates; if the gates were providing genuine security to residents; and if the service was satisfied that the consultation had received enough good quality responses to enable them to reach their decisions.

Officers explained that the £50 million budget was for all the assets within the HRA and recent spends on projects included a new communal and external decorating programme which was important to all residents and an assisted decorating programme for sheltered housing residents and for residents in general needs who could not do their own internal decorating. The service was also spending more money on door entry systems as this was a priority of residents. The service would not remove gates if there was a chance that it would seriously increase risks of crime to their residents. Officers felt enough responses to the consultation had been received as letters had been sent out, residents had been called and were generally called on a regular basis.

Councillor Worrall questioned whether the cost of the gates could have been made under another budget (she had noted in the earlier report that the budget for Sheltered Accommodation Improvements was zero). She also noted paragraph 5.2 and felt that the gates should be paid for within the HRA which residents would agree with. She was concerned that HRA money could be allocated for garages, which only a small percentage of people also used, but could not be allocated to the gates in sheltered housing complexes to protect Thurrock's elderly residents. She also raised concerns on the removal of gates from some sheltered complexes which would enable people to park inside the complexes and cause issues of security to elderly residents. The Chair said that the budget for garages differed to the gates for sheltered accommodation as garages were charged for people privately renting these.

Carol Hinvest answered that the programme of works that Councillor Worrall raised was a specific programme of works which was under Ramps and Doors Entry projects where push buttons would be installed and ramps installed for elderly residents to enable them to continue their independent living. This would also ensure that all sheltered housing blocks in Thurrock would be brought up to standards and compliant with the Equality Act. Roger Harris added that residents on housing benefit or universal credit would not pay for the service charge introduced for Rookery Court. He went on to say that the Committee's comments would be fed back to the Portfolio Holder.

The Committee suggested that the service look into other options for maintaining the gates such as sponsorship from businesses and sought clarification on whether the gates would be electronic. The Committee commented that the maintenance of the gates should have been within the budget for repairs if these had been broken for a while. The Committee sought reassurance that removing the gates would not increase risk to the elderly residents and that they had been appropriately notified of the service charge to remaining gates.

Officers answered that the gates would be electronic as push gates were too heavy to be pushed by increasingly frail residents and would require a change in the complex layout for these type of gates. Residents had been consulted and notified on the service charges for the remaining gates with the exception of Alexandra Court which is being decommissioned and Benyon who would be consulted soon.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders at 9.24pm to enable all the items on the Agenda to be completed.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the proposals to:

- 1.1 Consult with residents regarding the ongoing requirement of automated gates on applicable sites and, if the consensus is that the gates remain, the subsequent implementation of a service charge.**
- 1.2 Remove gates which are situated at several high rise sites where new parking restrictions no longer require gates to control parking.**
- 1.3 Remove gates at specified Sheltered Housing complexes which do not provide additional security or parking deterrent benefits due to style and location if residents do not support keeping them.**
- 1.4 The final decision to be made by the Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

27. Sheltered Housing Decommissioning - Alexandra Road and Dunlop Road

The report on pages 75 – 82 was presented by Ryan Farmer.

The Committee thought the report was good and that Alexandra Court had provided a good service to its elderly residents for a number of years. More details were sought on the local lettings plan; why Alexandra Court was chosen over Crown Court; if Alexandra Court would be used to house homeless residents; and whether two bed properties would be built on the site.

Carol Hinvest explained that Crown Court was more amenable to the refurbishment of accessibility works that was needed whereas Alexandra Court was not because of its design. With the local lettings plan, what would not be let to current residents in Alexandra Court would be the four two bedroom flats in the Calcutta Road development and needs would be assessed accordingly across the Borough. Most residents in Alexandra Court would move to Beaconsfield Place and some had expressed a preference to move to other parts of the Borough that was close to family members. Once a block was empty in Alexandra Court, homeless residents would be housed there. Sheltered and homeless residents would not be mixed in one block. There would be two bed properties built on the site and would be balanced

with a mix of housing types of properties which would be assessed and fed through the planning process.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on:

- 1.1. the proposal to decommission the Sheltered Housing properties at Alexandra Road and Dunlop Road in Tilbury.**
- 1.2. the proposal to implement a local lettings plan for the new housing development for older people at Calcutta Road which gives priority to tenants affected by the above proposed decommissioning.**

28. Housing Service COVID-19 Financial Update

The report on pages 83 – 88 was presented by Carol Hinvest.

The Committee questioned what the areas of concern were for the service; the number of people in Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs); and whether the government funding was enough for the Council to cover the homeless budget.

Officers said that the concerns were in regards to the furlough scheme that would not materialise until it ended in March 2021. There were concerns in the private rented sector with potential evictions that would not happen until 11 January 2021 which could potentially put a pressure on the service's temporary accommodation needs. Officers would provide the number of people in B&Bs through email. It was the service's aim to ensure that people were not placed in B&Bs for long periods of time and to help them find accommodation although it was difficult when there was a lack of availability in privately rented accommodations which had a low turnover. Some of the homeless residents placed there since the start of the pandemic had moved on and some had received housing offers, new homeless residents had been picked up during this time as well. Officers confirmed that the government funding was enough for the Council to cover the homeless budget.

RESOLVED:

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the contents of this update report.

29. Work Programme

An update regarding the next steps of the Housing Delivery Approach and TRL would be incorporated into the Housing Development Programme Update due on 19 January 2021.

The meeting finished at 10.02 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**