

Minutes of the Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 March 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Allen Mayes (Chair), Steve Liddiard, Shane Hebb, Joycelyn Redsell and Lynn Worrall

Apologies: Councillor Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair) and Carol Purser (Housing Tenant Representative)

In attendance: Dulal Ahmed, Housing Enforcement Manager
Peter Doherty, Strategic Lead - Housing Operations
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy and Quality Manager
Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director Housing
Julian Wain, Strategic Place Advisor
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

29. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 10 January 2023 were approved as a correct record.

30. Urgent Items

There were no items of urgent business.

31. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Redsell made a non-pecuniary interest in relation to item 7 as she lived in the Blackshots area.

32. Cabinet Member Report - Housing

Councillor Spillman presented his portfolio report, which can be found from the following link:

[\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 07/03/2023 19:00 \(thurrock.gov.uk\)](#)

Councillor Spillman paid tribute to the housing team officers and it had been an absolute pleasure in working with them and stated the achievements made within his report were the achievements of officers as a lot of the work had been undertaken at every level and that needed to be taken into account.

Councillor Spillman touched on the following items within his report:

- First priority was homelessness with the homeless service in the council being first class, with results being achieved.
- Most frustrating had been housing development with some plans no longer viable due to increasing interest rates. With Blackshots being the most exciting regeneration project the council had been seen for some time.
- Referred to Housing Regulations and big changes that would need to be made next year that will need to be responded to. Other regulations issues regarding damp and mould and safety checks, and with league tables being published.
- Damp and Mould. Thurrock council was more forward in the process when compared to other councils, undertaken a deep dive and being proactive. To identify those properties not aware of and act upon.
- Repairs were above adequate, contract with Mears was performing well and had a close relationship with them.
- Transformation and joined up working with estate officers and frontline officers working closely with colleagues and making each visit count.
- The budget was tough, and savings would need to be made with no damage to services.
- The portfolio was now in a much better place, the housing department was in a good place considering the environment, being portfolio holder had been a good experience and appreciated the interaction and feedback.

Councillor Mayes thanked Councillor Spillman for the brief overview of his portfolio and referred to damp and mould, he had concerns as this was a long-term project and within the council's current financial situation that every effort must be made to ensure residents were not living in awful conditions. He questioned whether any claims from residents had been made against the council for damp and mould who were not getting the services that should be delivered. Councillor Spillman did not know the number, but he was aware that claims had and will be made against the council which would be dealt with by the legal team. To ensure that control measures were in place to make sure the department acted immediately and suitably. Councillor Mayes requested that number be provided to committee members outside the meeting. Councillor Spillman stated it was education and communication between the council and tenants to prevent damp and mould in properties.

Councillor Worrall stated those residents trapped in unsuitable flats was not good enough and questioned what the portfolio holder's message would be to those residents who were unable to move as building work had stopped. Councillor Spillman stated building plans had been scaled back due to borrowing costs and some projects were no longer on the table. Councillor Spillman empathised with residents as the environment was very difficult at the moment to build, would engage with private sector to see where buildings could be started, and this had been a great frustration.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether physical checks were carried out on estate repairs that had claimed to be undertaken to which Councillor Spillman stated as a follow up, 10% to 15% of repairs would get checked for quality but would like more follow up checks to be undertaken.

Councillor Redsell referred to caretaking in estate services and stated this service was not great as work was not being undertaken. She referred to the traveller's site in Blackshots and questioned whether any officer had actually visited there to see the terrible state that it was in. Did not agree that the percentage of repairs was on target with Blackshots residents complaining about damp and mould being told to get on with it. Councillor Spillman stated caretaking standards varied in certain wards, and reports need to continue to be made to enable services to be levelled out. He would be happy to attend site visits with members if required and would be happy to visit the traveller site. It was vital that officers communicated the correct information with residents on damp and mould.

Councillor Hebb noted the attitude adjustment within the housing team over with the work undertaken by the previous and existing portfolio holder and this had demonstrated that officers did care. He stated there was an independency element missing in the current process in regard to whether damp and mould in properties was a council, structural or a resident issue. Members agreed this was a good idea, with Councillor Spillman stating there was only so much guidance and support a council could give. Ewelina Sorbjan stated there was a task and finish group to develop and work for the benefits of residents and to offer wider protection for the council.

Councillor Worrall referred to the number of HMO unlicensed properties and stated the target had to be reduced, this had to be a priority as the council was losing money.

Councillor Hebb referred to caretaking services and grounds maintenance and whether the concept of using a local area coordinators approach could work, working in tandem with the Tenants and Residents Panels.

Councillor Hebb also referred to housing stock being available for people with changes in life circumstances, this should also include financial circumstances, and possibly an element missing from the strategy would be that when residents financially can, they move out into the private homeownership model which would then unlock properties. Councillor Spillman stated he was personally against this as he valued mixed council estates with different people and would cause a danger of no welfare in areas. Although there was a debate to be had with reasonable arguments both ways.

Councillor Mayes thanked Councillor Spillman for the update which had been a good opportunity for members to ask questions, he could see there was a lot of passion and the housing team had achieved some good results but also recognised that work needed to continue, and those not so good results needed to be resolved.

Councillor Spillman summed up by thanking members for their comments and would be happy to meet with members outside the committee to go through the priorities. It had been a pleasure working with officers who lived, breathed,

and had great talents which had made his job easier, and this needed to be retained.

33. Blackshots Estate - Demolition and Redevelopment

Julian Wain presented the report that requested the committee to consider and comment on further approvals required relating to the redevelopment of the Blackshots estate. The report proposed a site area for redevelopment and advised that Cabinet authority be sought for the vacation of the blocks and the making of appropriate payments to displaced residents.

Councillor Redsell stated the project should be further on than it was now as this meant another year for residents in those blocks, she was not happy with the plans as greenbelt did not need to be taken to deliver this project, there were other options that needed to be looked at and possibly used. Any plans to build six or more high flats she would be against as the same problems would occur in 20 or 30-years' time, people deserved a decent place to live. Councillor Redsell acknowledged there was still a long way to go and hoped the consultation sought the views of residents and that information being provided to residents from officers was correct. Julian Wain thanked Councillor Redsell for her continued support and stated the consultations would look to minimise that and provide the most efficient scheme possible. An exhaustive list of sites had already been explored but if there were any other sites these could be looked into and stated there was a balance between height and land tag. Ewelina Sorbjan agreed the message had to be correct and there should be no reason for officers not to know what was happening.

Councillor Worrall thanked officers for the very detailed report and stated she was pleased there was finally some progress being made on this. That families did not deserve to be stuck in high-rises which were just not fit for purpose and questioned whether those families could choose where they go and have priority. She was concerned that one of the options was to demolish and leave the land and could therefore lose the revenue from the housing, rents and council tax. Councillor Worrall questioned whether leaseholders were happy that the blocks were coming down and whether the amount of money being offered by the council was satisfactory to prevent any disruption of demolition. Julian Wain stated approval had been sought from commissioners for disturbance payments, leaseholder negotiations and the development of the business case. One of the things that would be asked of the contractor was how the project could be phased and the best chances of undertaking a one-phase decant. This was subject to procurement, subject to a scheme that was financially viable and why the study was so important to get something designed that would work. The sample of leaseholders was small and one of the real importance of the consultation.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether residents realised there would be an increase in rent to which Julian Wain stated this would be based on affordable rent and, as yet the council had not set a firm policy decision. Councillor Liddiard referred to a potential scenario of one leaseholder left in the block

that could cause issues and whether leaseholders had been offered another leasehold property in another block. Julian Wain stated policy was a straightforward buy-out and offered a sum equivalent to the market value of their property and not offered an automatic return to somewhere else. Councillor Liddiard was reassured that the blocks would be kept water and wind tight until the blocks were empty and this would all form part of the negotiations with residents. Councillor Liddiard questioned whether they would be offered another flat in the private sector to which Julian Wain stated his initial reaction would be probably yes. Ryan Farmer stated some analysis had been undertaken on property purchasing of those leasehold properties and similar properties in that area were comparable, benchmarking had been undertaken and work had been undertaken with legal colleagues and at this point in time it was a reasonable offer.

Councillor Hebb suggested whether it would be worthy of the committee undertaking a visit to help sponsor this work and support the work that was being undertaken. Councillor Hebb stated the council had no evidence of the ability to deliver major projects and had failed to communicate with the public on milestones of projects and had concerns there were no project plans that explained those key milestones on how the project was expected to be delivered. Councillor Hebb suggested a new recommendation "Committee requests regular public reports on project milestones (including slippage factors) and requests officers to confirm to committee what members-led mechanisms will be used to review the adherence to the plan". To which all members agreed. Councillor Spillman stated the council had various experiences of delivering housing projects and hoped that was some reassurance for members.

Councillor Hebb questioned whether those milestones should be a Corporate KPI and how they be recorded, measured, and monitored. He also referred to risks, those acute risks that were here and now and risks that had been identified for the residents that lived there. He questioned whether control measures were in place to reduce the risk of satisfactory whilst the work was being undertaken. Members agreed that discussions need to be undertaken with residents, referred to the expert advice as mentioned in the report and questioned how confident officers were with the diligence that had been undertaken and who were the advisors. Julian Wain stated there was an officer steering group which had started to examine the milestones, risks, issues, and mitigations and agreed this should go through a governance procedure and be reported on a regular basis. In terms of pressure on housing stock this was an issue and would remain so until the properties had been built. In regard to communicating with residents, housing officers would be visiting residents to undertake housing needs assessments discussing what people need, where they want to go and to go through the process.

Councillor Redsell stated there was other land in the borough that belonged to the council that was not being utilised, which could be used for this project and those other options should be used. Julian Wain stated the design team could take a look into this and in line with Thurrock modelling it would not be

appropriate to bring in private sector as this would be a housing revenue account scheme for which the council would pay.

Councillor Liddiard referred to the greenbelt land and questioned whether the council would have to pay building rate to the revenue account or whether this was housing land to which Julian Wain stated this was playing fields, general fund land.

Councillor Mayes thanked members for their comments this evening on this item and stressed residents were desperate to move as quickly as possible and fully supported the report to ensure those residents were moved out of those blocks of flats and into housing that was fit for purpose.

RESOLVED

Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on:

- 1. The proposed site area for developing proposals for the future of the Blackshots estate.**
- 2. Commencement of decanting residents from these properties and the treatment of these residents in line with the Council's allocations policy.**
- 3. Payment of home loss and disturbance payments as appropriate.**
- 4. Approval to commence negotiation with leaseholders for the repurchase of properties with approval to complete purchase delegated to the Corporate Director Adults Housing and Health and Chief Financial Officer in consultation with the Director of Place and the Portfolio Holders for Finance, Housing and Growth.**
- 5. Subject to further Cabinet approval the use of Compulsory Purchase Powers under s226 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 should this become necessary.**
- 6. In view of the decant and leasehold repurchase decisions, no dwellings within these three blocks shall be re-let.**
- 7. Service of a demolition notice under Section 138B and Schedule 5A of the Housing Act 1985 which will confirm the Council's intention to demolish the buildings and suspend the obligation on the Council to complete right to buy applications on the three tower blocks in question.**
- 8. Approval to negotiate and settle any statutory compensation claims made by residents as a result of the service of the Initial Demolition Notice delegated as at Paragraph 1.4.**

- 9. Approval to establish a budget of £2.7m to meet the costs of purchase of leasehold interests.**
- 10. Agreed to receive a report in December 2023 to consider the full Business Case for redevelopment of the site and determine the most appropriate financial option at that time.**
- 11. Committee requested regular public reports on project milestones (including slippage factors) and requests officers to confirm to committee what members-led mechanisms will be used to review the adherence to the plan.**

Julian Wait left the committee room at 8.44pm.

34. Estate and Tenancy Management - Roles and Responsibilities

Peter Doherty presented the report and explained how the estate and management services were currently delivered and highlighted the future ambition for the roles and responsibilities relating to estate and tenancy management.

Councillor Redsell stated she did not agree to the new role as there were already estate officers who needed to be made more accountable. That council tenants should take more responsibility of where they lived and their outside space. Councillor Redsell praised the work of some estate managers but stated there was still a big learning curve to make this better and to work alongside the cleaner and greener teams to make the area look better. Peter Doherty stated that action plans had now been introduced in a number of areas and were working quite well but the biggest issue was around the lack of a digital platform. This would enable the council more transparency in reporting, collecting data and to be able to utilise that information. Focus going forward would be on neighbourhood officers and digitalisation which would drive forward improvements and to make council tenants take more responsibility for where they live.

Councillor Worrall strongly agreed that some of the estates were a disgrace, not across the board but everywhere should be nice place to live. That in cases, herself having to report rubbish as caretakers and housing officers had just ignored it, that estate managers need to take responsibility and show that they were doing their job, and this should be better. Councillor Worrall questioned why we were still using paper-based reporting and stated that somebody should be checking that estate managers dashboards to ensure they were not being manipulated.

Councillor Liddiard welcomed the report and strategy, suggested that meetings were undertaken with estate managers to prioritise what needed to be undertaken and asked when this was implemented that it be tested in Tilbury first.

Councillor Hebb agreed this was a sensible and practicable approach, referred to the “Report-It” function on the website and questioned why smart phones to report issues were not being used by officers and to look to other authorities, such as London, where these schemes were running successfully. Ryan Farmer stated there were different technical solutions being used and steps were taken to expand services and hopefully by the summer there would be something positive to share. For clarity, Councillor Hebb supported the report and urged officers to engage with the IT and Transformation on the customer services strategy, particularly on customer self-service.

Councillor Mayes proposed a new recommendation to state that technology should be used to enable reports to be provided to ward councillors to enable them to understand what was taking place in their ward.

Councillor Liddiard stated the report referred to efficiencies and questioned whether this was going to save money or cost the council more to which Peter Doherty stated savings would not be the key driver it was about providing better services.

Councillor Redsell reminded the committee that not all residents used technology and were not digitally minded.

RESOLVED

- 1. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted, commented and challenged the contents of this report which highlights the challenges in providing effective estate and tenancy management services and the ambition for addressing these through a person centred (tenancy management) and locality/place based (estates management) approach.**
- 2. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested that technology be used to enable reports to be provided, particularly for ward members.**

35. Homes for Ukraine Response Programme

At 9.15pm, the Chair moved standing orders to extend the meeting by a further 15 minutes.

Dulal Ahmed presented the report that reflected the activities of the service during the year. The challenges faced by the Council during 2022 were well publicised and this report should be read in that context. Future service activity would need to reflect the intervention the Council found itself in. Particularly difficult decisions would need to be made on levels of service and methods of service delivery during 2023 and beyond.

Councillor Hebb thanked all those involved, the help provided in this humanitarian crisis and that ultimately the objective would be to help people return back to Ukraine and raised a couple of points:

Whether the 10% dropout withdrawal was due to there not being a full appreciation of what the role of the host was and asked for some clarification on the root cause of this. Referred to page 34 of the agenda, “wrap around services” and questioned what pastoral help and support was being provided to accommodate their lives here as best as possible. Requested further details around the wellbeing and suitability assessment between the host and sponsor and referred to the guidance provided through the job centre about building a life and career but ultimately people would want to go back to their families. Dulal Ahmed provided the following responses, in that the 10% of sponsors that had withdrawn from the scheme were properties that were not suitable as well as circumstances of sponsors changing. In regard to support, sponsors and guests were provided with a welcome sponsors pack, guest handbook and a template of house rules. This provided clarity on the role of the sponsor, expectations, and rules around what the guests would hope for and help in terms of resolving any problems with relationship breakdowns. There had been a lot of lessons learnt through the process in terms of resettlement support. In regard to the housing options, updates were available on the web site, regularly producing newsletters for sponsors which covered a range of issues to support the sponsors and their guests, regular conversations took place with the job centre around employment options. In terms of property and safeguarding checks these were undertaken monthly with sponsors and guests, working closely with the adult and children’s services teams.

Councillor Redsell raised a concern that people may get lost in the system to which Dulal Ahmed stated Thurrock would still have a duty to that Ukrainian guest if they were to move to another part of the borough or had problems with housing options they would be referred back to Thurrock for support, which was part of the funding. Councillor Redsell questioned whether the six-monthly checks was sufficient as a lot could happen in that time to which Dulal Ahmed stated monthly checks were undertaken, six monthly checks was the government’s guidance on what was expected of local authorities as part of the scheme.

Councillor Worrall thanked officers for the report and thanked them for the amazing job undertaken. She referred to the welcome payments, sponsor payments and questioned where the shortfall money was sitting and what would this be allocated to. Dulal Ahmed stated the money received from Government would be subject to increase with new arrivals and would be carrying out a reconciliation exercise on where people had left to go back to their own country and therefore the money would reduce. Further guidance was expected on what the reconciliation process would mean in terms of what the council would do with that money. That money also funded staff costs, publication, events and the money would last for three years and would need to spread over that time and be ringfenced for that purpose.

Councillor Worrall referred to those families that may become homeless and questioned whether this funding would come out of the ringfenced money and not the general HRA. Dulal Ahmed stated in terms of those families that had

been provided assistance the funding under this scheme had been used but going forward the Government had announced additional funding to help local authorities so that it would not become a short or long-term burden on local authorities.

Councillor Mayes questioned whether this ringfenced funding could be used for anything else apart from this scheme to which Dual Ahmed stated no.

Councillor Hebb proposed a new recommendation for welcome packs to be sent to all committee members, to which all members agreed.

RESOLVED

- 1. The Committee commented on the progress of the Private Housing Service response to the Homes for Ukraine scheme in Thurrock.**
- 2. The Committee noted the council can deliver its Ukrainian response programme within central government funding.**
- 3. The Committee notes homeless Ukrainian guests may be housed out of borough given local housing pressures if homeless presentations steadily rise.**
- 4. The Committee requested that welcome packs be sent out to all committee members.**

36. Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) - Verbal Update

Members were referring to the tabled briefing note and were provided with an update on the Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) controlled under mandatory and additional licensing within Thurrock. Members were provided with an update on unlicensed HMOs, how the process and validation practices worked.

Due to timings of the meeting, all members agreed this item should come back to committee as there were more questions to ask and required more time for these to be presented. This item would be added to the 2023/24 work programme.

The briefing note can also be viewed from the following link:

[\(Public Pack\)Item 9 - Briefing Note - Houses of Multiple Occupation Agenda Supplement for Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 07/03/2023 19:00 \(thurrock.gov.uk\)](#)

37. Work Programme

Members discussed the work programme and agreed the following items be added to the 2023/24 work programme:

- Housing Development
- CO1
- Houses of Multiple Occupation
- Repairs Performance

The Chair thanked members and officers for their contribution to this committee over the past year.

The meeting finished at 9.47 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**