

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - HOUSING
- 14 NOVEMBER 2017

(To be read in conjunction with the Agenda for the Meeting)

Present

Waverley Borough Council

Cllr Pat Frost (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Carole Cockburn
Cllr Patricia Ellis
Cllr Michael Goodridge
Cllr Tony Gordon-Smith
Cllr Denise Le Gal
Cllr Richard Seaborne
Cllr Liz Townsend

For the Tenants' Panel

Mr Adrian Waller (Co-Optee)

Apologies

Cllr John Ward and Miss Brenda Greenslade

Also Present

Councillor Carole King

22. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 September 2017 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 2.)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr John Ward and Miss Brenda Greenslade.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

There were no declarations in relation to items on the agenda.

25. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 4.)

There were none.

26. INTRODUCTION TO PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING (Agenda item 5.)

Simon Brisk, Private Sector Housing Manager, gave a presentation to the Committee which introduced the functions and responsibilities of the Private Sector Housing team.

Simon informed Members that he is a qualified Environmental Health Officer (EHO), and his team comprised one other full-time EHO and an administrator. There was a vacancy for a part-time EHO. The team also included a Care & Repair Officer who was part of the Guildford & Waverley Care and Repair, which is a shared Home Improvement Agency based at Guildford Borough Council's offices.

The team dealt with a wide range of private owners and occupiers, including homeowners, private tenants, Housing Association tenants, landlords, and gypsies and travellers. The main area of work was in relation to housing complaints, and approximately one-third of private rented properties were sub-standard. The number of private rented properties in Waverley had doubled over the last 10 years, with a corresponding increase in complaints. Typically complaints related to health and safety issues, including damp, cold, mould, over-crowding, fire and electrical safety, and risk of trips and falls. Over-crowding was also becoming more common, caused by landlords over-letting, or tenants sub-letting.

The Council had a range of enforcement and other powers it could use in response to complaints including Improvement Notices, Prohibition Orders, Emergency Remedial Action, Demolition and Management Orders. There were also powers under the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide alarm Regulations.

The Council also had powers to address complaints of illegal evictions or harassment by landlords. These allowed the Council to prevent an eviction happening or to reinstate the tenant's position post-eviction. The Council had powers to prosecute landlords who abused their position.

There were around 500 properties in Waverley classed as Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) of which 40 met the requirement to be licensed by the Council. The criteria for licensing were due to change (removing the requirement for licensed HMOs to be 3 or more storeys) which could increase the number of HMOs to be licensed. Licensing allowed the Council to set conditions on the maximum number of occupants, fire precautions, and other amenities.

The Council was also required to license all caravan sites with a valid planning permission. The Licence allowed control of conditions on fire precautions, health and safety, drainage, access and other amenities. The Council could prosecute for failure to obtain a site licence, or non-compliance with licence conditions. There were currently 39 licensed caravan sites in Waverley, including four large mobile home sites and sites for individual traveller families.

A little-known duty of the Council was to arrange public health funerals, in the absence of anyone else being available or able to do so. Last year, the Council had arranged seven funerals at an overall cost of £4,500. The Council had a first claim on the estate of the deceased to recover funeral costs.

A major part of the work of the Private Sector Housing team was management of various grants for home improvements. The Disabled Facilities Grant was a mandatory grant for disabled adaptations which was available to owner-occupiers, private and housing association tenants, and landlords. Applications were means-tested and there was a £30,000 limit. Around 40 grants were completed each year. Works reduced admissions to hospitals or care homes and saved on care costs at

home. Safe and Warm Grants were discretionary grants provided by Waverley for works including heating, insulation, security or removal of housing hazards, and were available to disabled, elderly or low income households. A significant increase in the amount of funding from the government via the Better Care Fund had led to a review of the criteria for grant awards to enable better use of the funds. This was explained in the following agenda item on the Home Improvement Policy.

The Chairman thanked Simon Brisk for his very informative presentation, and the Committee agreed that the Private Sector Housing team should have much higher visibility in the community. In response to questions, Members noted that:

- student accommodation such as halls of residence or boarding school dormitories were exempt from HMO regulations.
- use of enforcement powers rarely resulted in Waverley taking landlords to court, and the issue of formal Notices usually resulted in the required action being taken. Whilst it was good that the powers were effective, a successful prosecution would provide the opportunity for positive publicity of the functions and powers that Waverley had in relation to private sector housing.
- the Guildford & Waverley Home Improvement Agency was currently funded by Surrey County Council (SCC) and through fee income. Funding from SCC would be reducing in 2018/19 and the shortfall would be funded from Waverley's Better Care Fund allocation.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed that private sector housing was an important part of the housing supply for the borough, and provided options for people presenting to the Council as homeless. The Private Sector Housing team ensured that the supply of housing was fit for purpose.

27. REVISED PRIVATE SECTOR HOME IMPROVEMENT POLICY (Agenda item 6.)

Simon Brisk, the Private Sector Housing Manager, introduced the report which set out the proposed changes to the Home Improvement Policy. The current policy had been approved in 2013. Until recently, Waverley had received around £250,000 of government funding a year for Aids & Adaptations, and typically had spent around £400,000 a year. In 2015, government funding for this work was replaced by the Better Care Fund, and the funding allocation to Waverley and other Surrey boroughs and districts was significantly increased: in 2017/18 Waverley had received £640,000. The increased level of funding was expected to continue at least until 2020.

In 2016/17, Surrey County Council (SCC) and the Surrey boroughs and districts jointly commissioned an independent review of how to make best use of the increase in the Better Care Fund award in relation to home adaptations. The recommendations included dispensing with means testing for simple adaptations, providing "Relocation Grants" to help people move to somewhere more suitable and providing "Prevention Grants" for minor works to reduce care packages, hospital/care home admissions and bed-blocking.

Some of the recommendations had already been implemented at Waverley, but revisions to the Home Improvement Policy were needed to implement the full range of recommendations. Processes had been revised to speed up grant approvals,

including extra funding to pay for private Occupational Therapist (OT) assessments rather than waiting for SCC OT assessments. Removing means testing for minor adaptations and enabling works to be carried out as quickly as possible would have a big impact on people's quality of life.

Cllr Frost was particularly pleased to hear that private OT assessments were being obtained to reduce the time it took for residents to get suitable adaptations to their homes. Cllr Gordon-Smith asked if the Relocation Grant could assist people who were downsizing, without any specific need for disabled adaptations. This would potentially release family homes in the general housing market. In response, officers advised that whilst the EasyMove scheme had helped Waverley tenants downsize, particularly where they were over-occupying, it was not a good use of resources to try to provide and subsidise a similar facility for general market housing.

Cllr Seaborne welcomed the general approach set out in the policy, and the revisions that would make it easier to help residents needing home adaptations. He was disappointed that there had not been an opportunity for Members to have more meaningful input to the review of the Home Improvement Policy. He felt that the Policy Statement needed to emphasise the enabling role of the Council, rather than the mechanism of awarding grants; he also suggested the version number of the Policy be included on the front page, and that the procedure for reporting back to Members should be documented within the Policy.

Cllr Frost suggested that Cllr Seaborne follow-up with Officers off-line on any detailed points that he had, but reminded Officers generally that Members wished to have the opportunity to contribute to the review of policies before they were finalised.

The Housing O&S Committee supported the proposals to relax some of the constraints on allocation of grant funding in order to widen the type of assistance available and increase the number of vulnerable residents eligible to apply for help to remain living safely and independently in their own homes.

The Committee noted that it was proposed to extend eligible works under the Safe & Warm Grant to include re-wiring, asbestos removal, and removal of hoarding. The Committee suggested that works might also be included to address flooding, damp and mould, as these could have serious impacts on health.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the Executive adopts the revised Home Improvement Policy, subject to eligible works under the Safe & Warm Grant also including works to address flooding, damp and mould.

28. HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT 2017 (Agenda item 7.)

Mike Rivers, the Housing Needs Manager, updated the Committee on the implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the steps being taken by to ensure that the Council fulfilled its duties under the new legislation.

Waverley had an outstanding record in preventing homelessness, and the success of the Council in fulfilling statutory homelessness responsibilities had been

recognised by an independent peer review. There were no Waverley households currently in temporary accommodation.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 would come into effect in April 2018 and was the most significant change in homelessness legislation for 40 years. The main aim of the legislation was to broaden the scope of prevention services to all household groups presenting as homeless, not just those with children or significant medical needs. The case management process would also become much more intensive than currently, and data recording and reporting requirements would be increased.

Similar legislation introduced in Wales in 2015 had resulted in a significant increase in councils' case management and administrative work in relation to homelessness. Some Surrey local authorities were already recruiting to increase capacity in anticipation of higher workloads. Waverley had reviewed staffing in the Housing Options team in February 2017 and increased capacity slightly in anticipation of the new legislation. However, until the Code of Guidance was published and the legislation implemented it was unclear what sort of extra staff resources would be needed.

The Committee noted the implications of the new legislation, and was pleased to see that Waverley was liaising with colleagues from other Surrey boroughs and districts, Surrey County Council, and voluntary organisations, to identify opportunities to meet the requirements of the Act. It was also noted that Waverley was involved in piloting a new IT package that would support the new reporting requirements.

The Committee was reminded that the definition of 'homeless' was having no legal right to accommodation, and this included rough sleepers. The duties of the local authority were to prevent homelessness where possible, and the relief of homelessness. A personalised action plan would have to be drawn up for each case, and applicants would have statutory rights of review of the decisions made by councils during the prevention and relief processes.

One of the biggest challenges would be finding suitable supported accommodation for people with mental health or other specific needs. Surrey County Council had reduced the amount of funding for supported housing, and whilst the Government was consulting on new proposals for funding supported housing the new model would not come into effect until April 2020.

The Committee thanked Mike Rivers for his update on Waverley's preparation for the implementation of the new legislation, and noted that Waverley's Homelessness Strategy was being updated and would be brought to the Committee in the New Year. The Committee requested a verbal update at each meeting on the impact of the new legislation.

29. HOUSING SERVICE PLAN 2017/18 - MID-YEAR REPORT (Agenda item 8.)

Annalisa Howson, Service Development Manager, introduced the report that informed the Committee of progress against the 2017/18 Housing Service Plan.

The Committee noted that good progress was being made on all the objectives, and items that were still in progress were on the Committee's work programme to be reported in January and March 2018.

30. CUSTOMER SERVICE PROJECT - HOUSING (Agenda item 9.)

Annalisa Howson, Service Development Manager, referred to the Service Plan 2017/18 objective of Improving Customer Service in Housing. There were five strands of work in the action plan:

- Identify key transactional services to be delivered online
- Create online forms and workflow
- Publicise and refer tenants to online services
- Implement new call handling telephone system
- Increase texting services

Good progress had been made on identifying services that could be delivered online; four online forms had gone live and another six were in testing and would be live by the end of the year. The forms were easy to complete, formatted for mobile devices and used customer-friendly language.

The development of a digital platform for tenants responded to younger tenants' wish to be able to 'self-serve' in some of their interactions with the Council. Phase one was focused on providing information on rent accounts, and Phase two would focus on repairs and maintenance. Tenants had been informed about the new ways of contacting the Council at the open meeting in July, in the summer edition of Homes and People, and at every routine contact. The message would be reinforced on a regular basis.

New telephone call management software had been installed which provided improved management information about the performance of the call handling team, and the number of lost calls had decreased significantly. More use was being made of texting to keep tenants updated of contractor appointments, and also missed rent payments and other bespoke messages.

To support the vision of a streamlined customer service operation, and ensure value for money and quality of service, the staffing structure in Housing had been reviewed and some key changes implemented, including moving Tenancy & Estates Co-ordinators into the Customer Service team.

Whilst Members recognised the need to develop facilities for online reporting and transactions, they were concerned that older tenants may be left out or receive an inferior service. Officers emphasised that the digital interfaces were additional to traditional methods of contacting the Council. As well as meeting the expectations of younger tenants, it meant that more time was available for staff to help more vulnerable tenants.

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee was pleased to see the good progress being made on Service Plan objectives to improve customer service in Housing. However, the Committee was frustrated that the interface between Orchard and Agresso had still not been fully implemented, and this meant that

Housing customer service officers were wasting time by having to authorise invoices separately in Orchard and Agresso when they could be focussed on customer-facing services.

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed to recommend to the Executive that the Orchard – Agresso interface is expedited as a matter of high priority, to release staff resources from unnecessary invoice administration, and to ensure that Waverley’s management accounts accurately reflect order commitments.

31. HOUSING SERVICE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT - QUARTER 2 2017/18 (Agenda item 10.)

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewed performance management indicators for the Housing Service for Quarter 2, 2017/18 and was pleased to see the good performance overall. In particular, the Committee congratulated Officers for getting the void re-let performance back on track in the second quarter.

The Committee noted that rent collection was slightly below target due the number of rent accounts in credit. Waverley’s rent arrears amounted to less than 1% of the rent roll which was one of the best performances in the country. However, the Committee was concerned about the impact of the roll-out of Universal Credit on rent collection, and felt that it was important that rent arrears were monitored as part of the suite of performance management indicators, as well as rent collection.

The Committee noted that Officers worked closely with Waverley Citizen Advice on debt management, but they were also exploring how best to mitigate the risk of Universal Credit and take a more sophisticated approach to the management of rent accounts. Specialist software had been identified that would enable proactive management of rent accounts and reduce the risk of arrears increasing, and this would be bid for in the 2018/19 budget process.

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny agreed to recommend to the Executive that funding is prioritised in the 2018/19 budget for specialist rent management software to support officers maintain Waverley’s good performance on rent collection, bearing in mind that rental income drives the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. Officers were asked to include data on rent arrears in future performance reporting.

32. FUTURE OF WAVERLEY'S SHELTERED HOUSING SCHEMES (Agenda item 11.)

Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, briefed the Committee on plans to develop the Sheltered Housing Service in response to the withdrawal of Housing Related Support funding by Surrey County Council (SCC).

The Committee had been informed in January 2017 that SCC had given notice that Housing Related Support funding for older people would be withdrawn from April 2018. This funding had been used by Waverley to part-fund the Sheltered Scheme Managers and enabled them to provide a range of support services to Scheme tenants.

The feedback from residents during the County Council's consultation in the summer had confirmed how much they valued the presence of the Scheme Manager, and retaining an on-site manager for each scheme had been a priority in developing proposals. Besides the support role, Scheme Managers also managed their building including health and safety issues, and managed the tenancies of residents. Whilst it was not possible to avoid the legal constraints on the Housing Revenue Account being used to fund 'support and care', the role of the Scheme Managers could be developed in such a way as to ensure that they continued to operate from each of the Sheltered Housing Schemes.

The key objectives for the Sheltered Housing service going forward had been defined as:

- To retain a manager presence on site to:
 - reduce the impacts of social isolation for our tenants.
 - help to ensure the safety of tenants and help them live independently.
 - ensure that the building management and maintenance is effectively managed.
 - enable tenancy sign-ups and management are dealt with efficiently.
- To promote 'Good Neighbour' schemes, encouraging tenants to support one another.
- To develop the managers' role to include:
 - marketing the Schemes to potential tenants.
 - promoting the Schemes as a community hub, to maximise the use of the communal areas, develop links with community groups and parish councils, and become a source of income.

This work could be funded from the HRA, and there would be a growth bid in the 2018/19 budget of £150 -170k, to offset the transfer of costs from the General Fund. The Committee noted that it was proposed to re-brand the service, as Senior Living Schemes; and to declassify the two Extra Care schemes.

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee supported the proposed development of the service to address the cut in funding from Surrey County Council, and the necessary growth bid within the HRA. The proposed re-branding was supported in principle, although it was suggested that a more 'homely' alternative to *Schemes* would make them sound more attractive to prospective tenants.

The Committee suggested that all Members be advised of the dates and times of consultation meetings to be held at each of the Sheltered Housing Schemes, so that they could attend and provide reassurance to residents of Waverley's commitment to the sheltered housing service.

33. OCKFORD RIDGE REGENERATION PROJECT (Agenda item 12.)

Andrew Smith, Head of Strategic Housing and Delivery, updated the Committee on progress on the Ockford Ridge Regeneration project.

Work was progressing on a number of fronts, including the first phase of refurbishment, construction on Site D, procurement and appointment of contractors

for disconnection and demolition works on Site A, and submission of the Reserved Matters planning application for Site B. It was now anticipated that funding would be available to complete the redevelopment of Site C, the final part of the regeneration, and proposals would be worked up following completion of the site assembly.

Cllr Frost expressed her disappointment at the delay in starting the Committee's review of the Housing Design Standards, which was intended to inform the architect's designs for Site C.

Cllr Seaborne noted that £240,000 of the budget for Site A had been rescheduled into 2018/19, and the Committee was advised that there had been a delay due to the timing of carrying out bat surveys. The overall budget had been agreed and the formal rescheduling of budget ensured that it remained available for when it was needed. In addition, Officers were confident that the budgets for Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the refurbishment would be spent in full.

Cllr Seaborne asked if a simple Gantt chart for the overall project could be included in the next update, to see whether the project was on-time.

34. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 13.)

Alex Sargeson, Scrutiny Officer, updated the Committee on the items on their Work Programme for the meetings in January and March 2018:

The items currently heading to the January 2018 Committee were:

- Tenancy Agreement Review (next stage in process)
- Housing Strategy 2018-22 (draft strategy)
- Housing Maintenance Contracts Procurement update
- Service Plan 2018-21 (3 yr Service plan)
- Homelessness Prevention Strategy
- Ockford Ridge Regeneration Project update

And to March 2018 Committee:

- Review of age-related properties
- Final report back on Review of Design Standards
- Government proposals on housing related support funding
- Q3 Performance Reporting
- Ockford Ridge Regeneration Project update

In response to Officers, the Committee agreed to move the Homelessness Prevention Strategy from January to March, and to add the Tenant Involvement Progress Report to the programme for the March meeting.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 9.10 pm)

Chairman