

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - HOUSING
- 20 MARCH 2018

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

Present

Cllr John Ward (Chairman)	Cllr Michael Goodridge
Cllr Pat Frost (Vice Chairman)	Cllr Tony Gordon-Smith
Cllr Patricia Ellis	Cllr Richard Seaborne
	Miss Brenda Greenslade (Co-optee)
	Mr Adrian Waller (Co-optee)

Apologies

Cllr Carole Cockburn and Cllr Liz Townsend

Also Present

Councillor Carole King, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing

47. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 January 2018 were confirmed as a correct record of the meeting.

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

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Carole Cockburn and Liz Townsend.

There were no substitutes present.

49. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

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

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

There were no questions.

51. RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WAVERLEY SCRUTINY GROUP'S REPORT ON RECHARGES (Agenda item 5.)

Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, introduced the members of the Waverley Scrutiny Group – Pat Wright and James Remnant – who were attending to present their report on Waverley's Recharge Policy and Process.

James Remnant confirmed that this was their final report. The Waverley Scrutiny Group was disappointed that some of their recommendations had not been accepted, but he understood that the Council's response was being reviewed, and

he suggested that consideration of the report and the recommendations be deferred to the next meeting in order that the Scrutiny Group and Housing Officers could continue their discussions and reach agreement on the way forward.

Hugh Wagstaff agreed that some further work was needed on the Council's response and he was happy with the suggestion to defer the item for now.

The Committee thanked the Waverley Scrutiny Group for their very comprehensive report and agreed to defer detailed consideration of it to the next meeting.

52. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2018-2023 (Agenda item 6.)

Michael Rivers, Housing Needs Manager, presented Waverley's draft Homelessness Strategy for 2018 - 2023. The Council was legally required to produce a Homelessness Strategy at least every five years, and the current strategy would run to July 2018.

Waverley had an excellent track record for preventing homelessness, despite the trend nationally and in Surrey for increasing numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation. The Council's success in preventing homelessness had been recognised by the grant of the Silver Award from the National Practitioner Support Service, which was established in 2013 to support local authorities in improving frontline housing and homelessness services.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 would come into effect from April 2018, and would present a significant challenge to all local authorities due to the wider responsibilities for responding to homelessness applications. The Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan for 2018-2023 reflected the new responsibilities and anticipated increase in demands on the Housing Options service. It had been developed in consultation with the Council's statutory and voluntary sector partners in homelessness intervention and prevention.

In response to Members' questions about rough sleepers, Michael Rivers advised that the number was an estimate based on identified rough sleepers on a specific night in the autumn. The exercise was conducted with the help of agency partners including police, faith groups, and the countryside rangers. In 2017, one rough sleeper had been identified, by a park ranger. In Waverley, rough sleepers were as likely to be in the countryside as in the towns, and some deliberately sought the seclusion of the countryside to avoid interference by the authorities.

The Committee commended the Housing Options team for their success in preventing homelessness over an extended period, and were pleased that the new Strategy built on the established approach whilst proactively preparing to meet the challenges of the new legislation.

With regard to the cost of meeting the new homelessness prevention responsibilities, Andrew Smith, Head of Housing Strategy & Delivery, explained that a close watch was being kept on the costs of homelessness prevention and there was provision in the budget to meet costs that emerged during the year: the best way to control costs was to avoid having to place households in temporary accommodation, and the preferred approach was to spend in order to avoid this cost, ie spend to save.

The Committee endorsed the new Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2018 – 2023 to the Executive and Council.

53. DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY 2018-2023 - STRATEGIC HOUSING AND DELIVERY (Agenda item 7.)

The Committee received the final draft of the Housing Strategy 2018 – 2023: Strategic Housing and Delivery, which was introduced by Andrew Smith, Head of Strategic Housing and Delivery.

The Strategy set out how the Council would address the lack of housing that was affordable (in its widest sense) within Waverley. The affordability challenge had been set out in the Housing Need and Local Affordability Analysis, which highlighted the need for a strategic approach to meet housing need.

The Committee had been sent an earlier draft of the Strategy, and Andrew Smith thanked those Members who had provided feedback and comments, which had been taken on board in this final draft.

Whilst this was a five-year strategy, the intention was to review it on an annual basis to ensure that it kept abreast of changes in Government policy and practice.

Having previously considered the Housing Need and Local Affordability Analysis, and an earlier draft of the Housing Strategy, the Committee was pleased to endorse the final draft to the Executive and Council for adoption.

54. OUTCOME OF CONSULTATIONS TO REMOVE AGE RESTRICTIONS FROM COUNCIL HOMES (Agenda item 8.)

Annalisa Howson, Service Improvement Manager, introduced the report which updated the Committee on the work to review the age restrictions on letting of certain Council homes. The aim in carrying out the review was to increase the number of homes available to general needs applicants, to create balanced communities, and to maximise rental income.

Overview & Scrutiny had previously agreed in principle to the age restrictions being lifted subject to consultation with key stakeholders and there being no freehold title restrictions. There were 20 schemes that were affected by age restrictions, although only four had a legal covenant that related to the provision of accommodation for older tenants. These were described in different ways, such as 'for occupation by old people' or 'elderly persons'. Legal advice indicated that 'elderly' was sufficiently ambiguous for the covenants not to be enforceable.

Tenants in the 20 schemes, and the relevant Ward members, were consulted on the proposals to remove age restrictions at the end of 2017. Only a small number of tenants responded overall, and the Head of Housing Operations met with tenants to explain the reasons for the proposals and to understand their concerns. Most of the concerns did not relate to the age of the tenants, and all responses were considered carefully by a panel comprising officers and the Housing Portfolio Holder.

The panel decided to lift the age restrictions on tenants at 18 of the 20 schemes, the exceptions being College Gardens and Lucas Fields. College Gardens was covered by an enforceable covenant via the Ewart Bequest, and Lucas Fields was very popular with older applicants.

Given the low rate of turnover, it was not expected that there would be a rapid change in the communities in the other schemes where the restrictions had been lifted. It was important to remember, too, that whilst these schemes had been restricted to older tenants no additional support was provided to them.

The Committee was pleased with the level of engagement that had taken place with Ward members throughout the consultation process, and were happy in principle with the way forward, provided properties were allocated according to needs. Annalisa Howson confirmed that a bungalow would be allocated to applicants with a particular need for ground floor accommodation and therefore was more likely to go to an older applicant.

Adrian Waller, Chairman of the Tenants' Panel, expressed his disappointment that the Tenants' Panel had not been included as a stakeholder in the consultation process. This was a very significant issue, that affected a lot of vulnerable tenants. Whilst the Tenants' Panel did not disagree with the approach or the outcome, they did feel that they should have been included in the engagement with tenants.

Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, apologised for any perceived slight, which had not been intended. The review had been discussed at Overview & Scrutiny previously and the Tenants' Panel had not objected to the review, but they should have been made aware of the consultation at the time it took place.

The Committee noted that a thorough consultation had been carried out, and the feedback considered carefully by Officers and the Housing Portfolio Holder. The Committee was pleased with the outcome, which would make more general needs housing available whilst the special circumstances in relation to College Gardens and Lucas Fields had been recognised.

55. OCKFORD RIDGE REDEVELOPMENT UPDATE (Agenda item 9.)

Louisa Blundell, Housing Development Manager, gave an update on the progress of works on Ockford Ridge.

Site D construction was progressing, with handover of the houses expected by the end of April, and the flats by the end of May. Allocation of properties in accordance with the Ockford Ridge Allocation Policy was underway.

Refurbishment works were continuing, although recent poor weather had delayed progress on some of the external works. The first tenant had returned to their refurbished home in February, and more were due to return over the coming weeks. Feedback had been very positive.

Pre-development works were underway on Site A, and procurement of contractors for service disconnection and diversion works, demolition, and the main build were all being progressed. The procurement of the main build contractor would be an OJEU tender due to the value of the contract.

The Reserved Matters planning application for Site B had been approved at the end of November 2017. The construction programme was reliant on the completion of Site D by May 2018 and Site A by November 2020, which would allow the majority of tenants from Site B to decant permanently or temporarily to the completed sites. In the meantime work would continue to secure necessary legal orders, complete the financial appraisal and obtain budget approval in readiness for the construction phase.

An architect had been appointed to prepare an outline planning application for Site C, and this would reflect the outcome of the review of Design Standard Guidelines being undertaken by the O&S Working Group.

Cllr Paul Follows commented that he had been at the recent community consultation event on 15 March, which had been well attended by local residents. He had some concerns about the number of comments about health and safety in relation to the contractor, and felt that there needed to be a proper response at the next meeting of the Consultation Group. Louisa Blundell agreed to follow-up with him on this issue.

The Committee was pleased to note the continued good progress of the Ockford Ridge redevelopment programmes.

56. REVIEW OF HOUSING STANDARDS DESIGN REVIEW - INTERIM REPORT FROM THE MEMBER WORKING GROUP (Agenda item 10.)

Cllr Richard Seaborne presented the interim report from the member Working Group that was reviewing Waverley's Housing Design Standard Guidelines for new Council homes.

Cllr Seaborne thanked Louisa Blundell and Alex Sargeson for the excellent support that they had given to the Working Group, and commended the energy and enthusiasm of the Working Group members for the task. It was particularly helpful to have Adrian Waller on the Working Group, and his contributions had ensured that the discussions were grounded and realistic.

The Working Group had considered internal space standards, external amenity space, energy performance and sustainability, and had compared Waverley's current standards with the national standards and those adopted by other local authorities. They had also done site visits within Waverley to look at recent Council developments to understand what the Standards were like in reality. Throughout the process the Working Group had been mindful of the cost implications of enhancing the Standards, and on this basis felt unable to recommend adopting Passivhaus standards at this time.

In recognition of Cllr Ward's observations about the use of the roof space, the Working Group had considered this issue in some detail. The newly appointed architect for Ockford Ridge Site C had provided some very interesting examples of how building into the roof space could provide additional living and storage space and also add visual interest to the street scene.

The next steps would be to prepare the final draft of the revised Design Standards and these would come to the next meeting of the Housing O&S Committee for endorsement to the Executive.

Adrian Waller commented on how much he had enjoyed working on the review, and that the site visits had been particularly valuable and reassuring about the high standard of building Waverley achieved. Louisa Blundell agreed that it had been enjoyable and very positive, and she was looking forward to sharing the Site C designs with the Committee in due course.

The Committee thanked the Working Group and Officers for the work they had put in to the review of the Housing Design Standards, and it was clear that a great deal of thought and consideration had been given to the subject.

57. HOUSING SERVICE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT - QUARTER 3 2017/18 (Agenda item 11.)

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee was delighted to see the continued excellent performance across the Housing Service. The Committee was particularly pleased that the performance on re-letting void properties is achieving the 20-day target, as this is a key indication that teams across the Service are working together effectively to provide homes for residents in housing need.

The Committee also understood the reason for the rent collection indicator being 'off target' and noted that a consequence of this is that the level of rent arrears is well below that of 2016/17.

58. TENANCY AGREEMENT REVIEW - UPDATE (Agenda item 12.)

Annalisa Howson gave a verbal update on the progress of the Tenancy Agreement review.

The Preliminary Notice of Variation (PNV) had been sent to all tenants, and to Members of the Housing O&S Committee, at the end of February. The deadline for feedback from tenants was 23 April 2018. To date, there had been 15 contacts and four tenants had made appointments to visit Rachel White, the Tenancy & Estates Manager. A consultation event had been held, attended by 80 tenants and the Tenants' Panel, which had been very positive.

The main issues being raised were reassurance regarding changes in tenure, and concerns about using the loft space. The restrictions on using loft space for storage would be reviewed before the new Tenancy Agreement was issued.

The final Notice of Variation would be sent to existing tenants at the end of April, and the new Tenancy Agreement would come into effect for new tenants from May 2018. All new tenants were given a copy of the Tenancy Agreement when they viewed a property, and then again at the point of sign-up.

Adrian Waller informed the Committee that he had shared with Officers concerns that had been relayed to the Tenants' Panel. He had also received feedback that some tenants had found the PNV unclear and they had not had their original Tenancy Agreement to hand to compare it with the revised version.

Annalisa Howson thanked the Tenants' Panel for their help in the consultation. Whilst issuing a 'track changes' version of the Tenancy Agreement had been considered, the extent of the changes meant that it was very difficult to read and in practice not particularly helpful. The PNV had explained each of the changes to be made, and all tenants would be sent a copy of the revised Tenancy Agreement.

Cllr Frost observed that the style of writing used in letters to tenants had been discussed on a number of occasions, and it was important that Officers remembered their audience: older tenants were easily frightened by overly formal or legal sounding documents.

The Committee noted the progress of the review of the Tenancy Agreement, and the timetable for launching the new Tenancy Agreement.

59. HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE CONTRACTS PROCUREMENT - UPDATE (Agenda item 13.)

Annalisa Howson gave a verbal update on the procurement of contracts for Housing repairs and maintenance services.

The procurement was on track for the new contracts to go live on 1 April 2019. The recommendations of the O&S Procurement Review Group had been taken on board in drawing up the tender and contract documents. The work of the tenant volunteers on the tender evaluations and scoring had been greatly appreciated, and they would be invited to take part in a further round of evaluations at the next stage of the Competitive Dialogue procurement process.

The Committee noted the progress on the procurement, and thanked the Tenants' Panel for their contribution to the work.

60. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 14.)

Yasmine Makin, Graduate Management Trainee, introduced the Committee's Work Programme and drew attention to the items currently scheduled to come forward in July. The Waverley Scrutiny Group's report on recharges would also be coming back to the Committee, as agreed earlier.

Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, advised that the Housing Asset Management Strategy and Action Plan would also come forward in July; and, possibly, an update on Government policy of Affordable Housing delivery.

Yasmine Makin drew attention to the Budget Strategy Review Working Group being led by the Value for Money & Customer Service O&S Committee. This Working Group would be working with Finance Officers to drive forward the Medium Term Financial Strategy. This would be a long-term project and the membership of the Working Group would be drawn from all four O&S Committees. Housing O&S Committee was invited to nominate two members to join the Working Group. The Committee was reminded that the Housing Service did have a significant General Fund budget, including budgets for homelessness prevention and private sector housing responsibilities.

It was agreed that Yasmine would circulate the detailed project scope to provide more information about the proposed work streams and the expected outcomes, and invite Committee members to respond if they were interested in joining the Working Group.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 8.20 pm

Chairman