

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - HOUSING - 4 JULY 2017

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

Present

Waverley Borough Council

Cllr Carole Cockburn
Cllr Patricia Ellis
Cllr Pat Frost
Cllr Michael Goodridge
Cllr Tony Gordon-Smith
Cllr Richard Seaborne
Cllr Liz Townsend
Cllr John Ward

For the Tenants' Panel

Miss Brenda Greenslade (Co-Optee)
Mr Adrian Waller (Co-Optee)

Apologies

Cllr Denise Le Gal

Also Present

Cllr Carole King, Portfolio Holder for Housing

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN (Agenda item 1.)

The Committee confirmed the appointment of Cllr John Ward as the Chairman of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee for the Council year 2017/18.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN (Agenda item 2.)

The Committee confirmed the appointment of Cllr Pat Frost as Vice-Chairman of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee for the Council year 2017/18.

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed Members, Tenants' Panel representatives, Waverley Scrutiny Group members, and Officers to the first meeting of the new Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and invited everyone to introduce themselves.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 3.)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Denise Le Gal.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 4.)

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

5. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 5.)

There were no questions from members of the public.

6. INTRODUCTION TO HOUSING (Agenda item 6.)

The Chairman invited Damian Roberts, Strategic Director of Frontline Services, Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, and Andrew Smith, Head of Strategic Housing and Delivery, to give an introduction to the Housing Service and the wider context and issues that impact on what Waverley is able, or has, to do as a local authority housing provider.

Hugh Wagstaff began by reflecting on the Grenfell Tower fire, which would impact on how social housing was managed and relationships with tenants for many years. Nationally, there had been six different housing ministers since 2010. The reputation of social housing landlords was now very low; and the response by Kensington & Chelsea LBC had highlighted their tenants' experience of their voices not being listened to for many years.

Hugh was pleased to say that this did not reflect the experience at Waverley. Tenant involvement, and independent tenant scrutiny, was a central principle of the co-regulation standards, and one that Waverley had signed up to fully. The government had given choice to tenants on their landlord, but local authority landlords were subject to a higher level of oversight and scrutiny through the democratic process, and members had an important role in listening to tenants and championing social housing.

Damian Roberts reminded the Committee that all district authorities had statutory strategic housing responsibilities, but Waverley was one of only a handful of Surrey districts that had retained its housing stock and landlord function. This meant that Waverley had a huge impact on the lives and life choices of council tenants. Working in partnership with tenants was important, but so were the relationships with contractors and councillors, and ensuring that there was a common goal of improving standards for tenants.

Continuing the presentation, Andrew Smith outlined the roles of the Strategic Housing & Delivery Service and drew attention to the new Housing Strategy that would come forward later this year, and the new Homelessness Reduction Act. The new homelessness legislation would put significant new burdens on local authorities to respond to homelessness applications, which would impact on Waverley's outstanding track record of preventing homelessness and avoiding the need for households to go into temporary accommodation other than as an absolute last resort.

The Council also had statutory responsibilities in relation to the private rented sector, in responding to complaints by tenants; and also in licensing Housing in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). New regulations in relation to HMOs were expected later in the year which, again, were likely to put additional burdens on the Council.

In addition to Waverley's own housing development activities, the team also worked with colleagues in Planning, property developers and Housing Associations to

deliver as many affordable homes as possible. However, there was a fundamental issue around the lack of housing supply – both market and affordable – which was heavily influenced by local and national planning constraints.

Hugh Wagstaff gave a brief introduction to Waverley's Landlord Service, whose role was to manage and maintain the Council's housing stock, including rent collection and supporting tenancies, working with contractors to deliver responsive repairs and planned works, managing sheltered housing, and delivering the Family Support service. The Government's rent reduction policy had impacted hugely on the amount of funds in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, and some difficult decisions had been made in order to adjust the stock maintenance programme to the budget available.

The Housing Improvement O&S Sub-Committee had been closely involved in shaping the procurement of the new housing maintenance contracts, and this process was on track. The Sub-Committee had been very influential in helping drive improvement in contractor performance on repairs and also the customer experience of the repairs service, and this was now one of the best performing services in benchmarking within our peer-group.

Referring again to the Grenfell Tower fire, Hugh informed the Committee that Waverley had no high-rise flatted schemes, and only 3 blocks of 4-storeys. The majority of flats were in small 2-storey blocks, and generally these had no common areas. All Fire Risk Assessments were current, and actions identified in them had been completed. A programme of inspections of communal areas in blocks of flats had been established to identify where tenants were using these for storage of items such as bikes or push-chairs. Alternative storage arrangements would be provided where this was possible, but tenants would be reminded that they could not block fire exits or compromise evacuation routes, and this would be enforced.

Cllr Frost was very pleased that the Housing Improvement Sub-Committee had had such an important role in supporting the work of the Housing Service, and it was noted that the procurement of the housing maintenance contracts was on track and the tender documents would be issued shortly. The Sub-Committee's concerns that as much time as possible be allowed for mobilisation had been recognised, and the timetable had been brought forward to enable this. An update on the procurement would be provided later in the year.

The Chairman asked about the scope of the new requirements in relation to Homelessness Prevention, and Andrew Smith advised that the new duty was to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need; and also without necessarily having a 'local connection'. Councils would now have to accept homelessness applications or presentations from any person in the country, and an applicant could make multiple applications at different councils. There would be some transitional funding available in 2017/18 and 2018/19 to help meet the costs of the legislation, and consideration was being given to the best way to use funding and to configure the team to respond to the new duties.

The Chairman thanked Officers for their very informative presentation, which for Members less familiar with the details of the Housing Service highlighted the huge range of functions that fell within the remit of the Committee.

7. TENANCY AGREEMENT REVIEW (Agenda item 7.)

Rachel White, the Tenancy & Estates Manager, introduced the report that set out the scope and timetable for the review of the Tenancy Agreement. The Tenancy Agreement was the contract between each tenant and the Council, and it set out the roles and responsibilities of both tenant and landlord.

The aim of the review was to ensure that the Tenancy Agreement clearly supported policies and procedures that had been developed to enable the Council to manage individual tenancies but also meet its obligations to tenants collectively, and the wider community. The Tenancy Agreement needed to set out tenant responsibilities without ambiguity and support Officers in taking effective and timely action when addressing tenancy breaches.

The current Tenancy Agreement had been reviewed by a specialist housing barrister, and a number of amendments had been identified to improve clarity and reflect changes in the law. Further revisions would be added to reflect specific Waverley policies and procedures.

It was important that all the Council's services had the opportunity to review the proposed changes and propose amendments where appropriate to reflect delivery of universal services. The Tenants' Panel would also play a crucial role in the informal consultation on the development of new Tenancy Agreement, which would take place over the summer and early autumn. The final draft of the revised Tenancy Agreement would be presented to the Housing O&S Committee in November, before the start of the formal consultation with all tenants. The aim was to implement the new Tenancy Agreement with effect from 1 April 2018.

The Committee was supportive of the principle that the Tenancy Agreement should support the effective management of the Council's housing stock, and the process set out to review the Agreement.

Whilst recognising that this was a legal contract, Members had some concerns that the document was not in Plain English, and Adrian Waller highlighted a couple of examples of less than transparent 'legalese' that were not new but could cause alarm. The Committee recommended that if the document itself could not be simplified, a Plain English version should be developed to sit alongside it. Members also noted some typos in the revisions put forward by the barrister and stressed that documents needed to be carefully proof-read before being published.

Cllr Seaborne noted that he had expected there to be a national standard for tenancy agreements, but had not been able to find one through an internet search. He asked whether officers would be consulting with other landlord councils to obtain examples of tenancy agreements. Rachel confirmed that there was no standard template agreement, although there would be sections that would be common to all social housing tenancy agreements. She did have some good examples of tenancy

agreements that were better laid out and more accessible than Waverley's and the intention was to use the best ideas in setting out Waverley's new agreement.

The Committee endorsed the review of the Tenancy Agreement, and noted the timetable for the draft to come back to the Committee. The Committee recommended that a Plain English version of the Agreement – or some other form of explanatory text – be produced to ensure that tenants were absolutely clear what they were being consulted on, and eventually signing up to.

8. RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WAVERLEY SCRUTINY GROUP'S REPORT ON VOIDS (Agenda item 8.)

The Chairman welcomed members of the Tenant Scrutiny Group – Pat Wright, James Remnant, and Phil Deans – to present the findings of their work to scrutinise the voids process.

Pat Wright began by thanking Waverley officers and Mears staff for their co-operation with the Scrutiny Group in carrying out the review. James Remnant then outlined the scope of the review, which had been quite wide-ranging, the findings and the recommendations that the Scrutiny Group had made.

They had been asked to undertake the review by the Head of Housing Operations, and to focus on the re-let standard, reducing the cost of a void, and improving value for money in the voids process. Ten recommendations had been made, aimed at: improving budgetary control of the voids process, including implementing recharges for certain elements of work; reviewing the re-let standard with tenants and promptly surveying satisfaction of new tenants; and reducing the time taken for each stage of the void process, including more accurate record-keeping.

The Scrutiny Group was pleased that the recommendations had largely been accepted by Waverley Housing Officers, and actions identified to address the issues identified.

The Committee thanked the Scrutiny Group for their very thorough report and the practical recommendations. The Committee felt that there were some issues identified that had not been carried forward into the recommendations: the lack of a marker on Orchard to indicate the end of the warranty period; differences in key dates between Waverley's records and Mears'; and, the lack of version control on the re-let standard. The Committee was concerned that the report may have been influenced by officers. James reassured the Committee that there had been no pressure from officers to drop recommendations, and the Scrutiny Group had been guided by advice from the Housing Quality Network to keep recommendations focussed. The Scrutiny Group did have some concerns about whether there were gaps in the computer interface between Waverley's and Mears' systems that might lead to discrepancies and lost time in the voids process.

Cllr Seaborne raised the issue of budgetary control, and the model used for setting the budget for voids. He asked if there was a better model that might be used that reflected the typical range of properties that became void over the course of a year, rather than a simple average.

In responding to questions, Hugh Wagstaff advised that great improvements in the voids process had been made over the previous 2 years, but the 20 day target continued to be a challenge and there was clearly scope for further improvement. The work of the Waverley Scrutiny Group had provided a fresh impetus to drive improvements forward and bring the re-let target to 15 days.

Budget-setting was based on historic data about the average number of properties that became vacant in a year, and the average cost of bringing them back to re-let standard. Whilst it was a very simple model, it was difficult to develop a model that would take account of the different age and type of properties, and the possible state in which tenants might leave a property. It was helpful that the Scrutiny Group and the Tenants' Panel were so supportive of Waverley implementing recharges to tenants who left their property in a poor condition in breach of their tenancy agreement. Budget had been allocated to enable the appointment of a Recovery and Recharges Officer, and recruitment was underway to fill this post.

The intention of the new post was not to penalise those tenants who took pride in their home, but to ensure that the tenant responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement were met. Through the ongoing work of the Tenancy & Estates Officers, as well as property inspections when notice to vacate a property was given, tenants would be advised if there was remedial work they needed to carry out either in their home or to clear their garden. Only if they failed to take action themselves would charges be imposed.

In concluding the discussion, the Chairman thanked the Waverley Scrutiny Group for their hard work, and the contribution they had made to driving improvement in the Council's services. The recommendations would be monitored by the Committee to ensure that they were completed on time, and the Committee would continue to monitor the performance on void re-lets each quarter. The Chairman suggested that in addition, Officers report back to the Committee on the issue of IT systems in Housing and how they interfaced with the systems of our contractors.

9. OCKFORD RIDGE REGENERATION PROJECT - PROGRESS UPDATE (Agenda item 9.)

The Chairman invited Andrew Smith and Louisa Blundell to update the Committee on the Ockford Ridge regeneration project. He recognised that the project was a massive investment for the Council that would provide new and refurbished homes for tenants, as well as new rental income for the Council from the net increase in houses. It was an area of the Council's work that was ripe for scrutiny, but there were different perspectives that could be explored and he was keen to hear the views of the Committee.

Louisa Blundell gave a presentation that briefly covered the history of the estate, and the development of the regeneration project in 2012 which was made possible by the reform of council housing finance that took place with effect from 1 April 2012. The master plan for the redevelopment and remodelling of Ockford Ridge was developed in the first half of 2013, followed by a consultation with residents of Ockford Ridge. The project was split four sites (A, B, C and D) and in August 2014 the Council's hybrid planning application – outline permission for 83 dwellings on

Sites A, B and C, and detailed planning permission for 16 dwellings on Site D – was granted.

Given the length of the lead-in time for the project, from inception to work happening on Ockford Ridge, it had taken lot of work with residents to demonstrate to them that the Council was committed to the project. The show homes completed towards the end of 2016 had been a key milestone and a tangible demonstration of what was to come. These properties had already been let, and work was well underway on the construction of Site D.

The next site to be developed would be Site A, and the detailed planning application had been submitted and was due to be considered in September 2017. The number of dwellings proposed in the detailed application had been increased compared to the outline permission, which would enable all the residents from Sites B and C to be decanted, as well as residents of Site A who wished to return. Officers were now working on bringing forward Site B, with the detailed planning application coming forward in the autumn of 2017.

Alongside the redevelopment, a pilot phase of 6 refurbishments had been carried out over the winter of 2016/17. Some important lessons had been learned, including freezing the design at an early stage and having tenants formally agree to the design to be tendered. Lessons had also been learned in relation to the way that Waverley appointed experts to oversee the refurbishments, and a more simplified arrangement had been tendered for Phases 1-3 which would streamline communication and clarify responsibilities and accountability. On Waverley's side, the Development Team had also been configured so that each officer had specific responsibility for a particular element of the overall project.

Throughout the project, the role of a dedicated Tenant Liaison Officer had been crucial to the ongoing progress and success each stage, particularly in supporting tenants through the process of decanting to another property on a long- or short-term basis, or making a permanent move off Ockford Ridge.

The procurement process for Site D had been challenging and taken longer than expected as the original tender through a Framework failed to produce any tenders. A subsequent OJEU tender resulted in the appointment of W Stirland to develop Site D. The reduction in council house rents imposed by the government impacted on the HRA business plan and there was some concern about the Council's ability to complete the regeneration of Ockford Ridge as planned. However, the financial position was now more positive and budget approval would be sought to bring forward Sites B and C.

Cllr Gordon-Smith congratulated officers, and the Council as a whole, for persisting with the vision for Ockford Ridge, even when matters had not gone smoothly. There had been resistance to change from some residents, but the show homes had been instrumental in overcoming remaining opposition. Good communication was key to keeping residents on-side, and being responsive to their complaints and concerns.

Damian Roberts emphasised the huge impact the development was having on the community, not just individuals. The estate was not 'deprived' in absolute terms, and residents did not perceive the estate in that way; but, statistically the residents

did have more challenges than those across most of Waverley, and the improvement of their housing and local environment could have a transformative impact. It had been an important realisation that whilst not all residents were vulnerable, the impact of the change happening to them and around them effectively created a degree of vulnerability that had to be handled sensitively.

The Committee welcomed the presentation and the good work being undertaken on Ockford Ridge. Cllr Seaborne asked if the Committee could receive a summary of the progress against the timetable, and also see how the budgets had been rescheduled to reflect delays in progress. He accepted that delays happened, but they were also learning opportunities.

The Chairman felt that the Ockford Ridge regeneration was a suitable subject for an in-depth scrutiny review, but there were many perspectives that could be explored. He suggested that it might be helpful to have a site visit to Ockford Ridge, followed by an informal discussion to consider ideas about scrutiny topics and how to proceed.

The Committee agreed that a site visit would be useful, especially for those Members not familiar with the area. There was a reluctance to avoid undertaking a review that might delay any aspect of the project, and Members were pleased and reassured that officers had reflected on the how each step in the project had gone and taken action to address weaknesses in processes that had been identified. A scrutiny review would need to be carefully scoped so that it added value, and did not impact negatively on the work underway.

The Committee therefore asked officers to arrange a site visit to Ockford Ridge, with a report back to the meeting in September to discuss possible scrutiny topics.

10. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT - QUARTER 4 AND 2016/17 OUT-TURN
(Agenda item 10.)

Annalisa Howson introduced the performance management report that covered the 4th quarter of 2016/17 (January – March 2017) and the overall performance for the year. Performance had generally been good, with just three indicators missing the target.

The voids re-let performance had fallen below target, with the average number of days to re-let normal voids in Q4 being 24 days. The average for the year was 22 days. This was a marked improvement from 2015/16, but did demonstrate that the 20-day target was challenging and did not allow for any slippage in processes.

It was not considered that there was any fundamental weakness in the voids process, and a range of actions had been taken to further support the process and address issues.

The performance on gas safety checks was a snapshot at the end of the quarter, and it was not unusual for a small number of checks to be outstanding. Every reasonable effort was made by the contractor to schedule appointments in good time to achieve compliance, but occasionally there were unable to obtain access to a property without the intervention of the Council. There was a very clear escalation

process from the contractor to the Council, and the Council did not delay in referring cases to court for a warrant. Two checks were outstanding at the end of March, and both had been completed in April after a court warrant enabled access.

The responsive repairs 'fixed first time' indicator had improved again in Q4, to 76% of jobs, although it still fell short of the target of 78%. There had been steady improvement over 2016/17 in this indicator, and this was reflected in the corresponding improvement in customer satisfaction with the responsive repairs service.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was noted that:

- The performance indicators were suite of indicators that were used with in the service as a performance management tool.
- There was no target set for the number of affordable houses delivered each quarter as they tended to be completed and handed over in multiples as developments were completed.
- Where possible, hard-wired smoke alarms were installed in council homes, and these were checked as part of the gas safety check. It was likely that there would be changes in requirements for smoke and fire alarms in some types of property as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Committee had been asked to consider how it wished to monitor performance in the Housing Service in future, and the Chairman noted that two of the O&S committees had decided to take the report by exception. He had originally felt that the Housing Committee might do the same, but on reflection he was inclined to suggest that the report format should continue as it was for the time being, as it provided useful context for the work of the Committee.

The Committee noted the overall good performance, and the exceptions, and agreed that they wished to continue receiving the full performance monitoring report on a quarterly basis for the time being.

11. COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 11.)

The Chairman reminded the Committee that as a result of their discussions a report had been requested on the compatibility of the IT systems used in Housing and whether there were any issues arising from a lack of compatibility.

Cllr Seaborne had asked for information about the budget model for void costs in order to understand the variability of cost in relation to the type of dwelling or characteristics of the departing tenant. The Chairman suggested that a discussion off-line with Hugh Wagstaff might answer any questions of Cllr Seaborne.

Adrian Waller asked for an update on the outcome of the Tenants' Scrutiny review into cleaning of communal areas and community rooms. Hugh Wagstaff advised that the target date for the contract to start was September 2017, and it had been disappointing that this had been delayed for so long after the good work that had been undertaken by the Tenants' Scrutiny Group.

The Chairman agreed that it was important that actions that were agreed by the Committee were monitored and progress reported back to the Committee at each meeting so that they were not lost, and any delays could be challenged.

A site visit to Ockford Ridge would be arranged for later in the month or early August, and a report back made at the next Committee.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 9.25pm.

Chairman