

MINUTES  
OF A MEETING OF THE  
**COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

held on 8 October 2024

Present:

Cllr T Bonsundy-O'Bryan (Chair)  
Cllr D Jordan (Vice-Chair)

Cllr A Aslam	Cllr T Spenser
Cllr S Mukherjee (Items 6-10)	Cllr M Sullivan
Cllr F Mumtaz	

Also Present: Councillors S Greentree and D Roberts

**1. ELECTION OF CHAIR**

Councillor Sullivan moved and Councillor Aslam seconded the election of Councillor Bonsundy-O'Bryan as Chair of the Committee.

RESOLVED

That Councillor Bonsundy-O'Bryan be elected Chair of the Communities and Housing Scrutiny Committee for the ensuing year.

**2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No apologies for absence were received.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director – Communities, Louise Strongitharm, had declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which she was a Council-appointed director on the agenda. Between publication of the agenda and the meeting Mrs Strongitharm had resigned from all Council-owned companies.

The interests of the Strategic Director – Corporate Resources, Kevin, and the Head of Transformation, Digital and Customer, Adam Walther, were referred to in the agenda but it should be noted that neither were present at the meeting.

**4. MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee held on 30 July 2024 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

## **5. URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Urgent Business under Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

## **6. WORK PROGRAMME CHSC24-010**

The Chair requested an update on the preparation of the tenant satisfaction survey that was discussed at the previous meeting of the Committee.

Officers confirmed that the process had begun and questions would include those required to be asked by the regulator. The survey would be shorter overall than the 2024 edition. Officers undertook to provide committee members with an update once the questions had been finalised, expected to be by the end of November. Officers expected that the questions would allow for more granular data, such as area of the Borough, to be collected.

In response to a query from the Chair, Officers confirmed that the survey would be sent out both by post and email.

The Chair suggested, and the Committee agreed, that an item on the support provided by the Council to refugees be added to the suggested additions to the work programme. The Chair would meet with the Strategic Director of Communities and the Scrutiny Officer to scope the topic.

The Committee agreed to close the four outstanding actions on the Recommendation and Action Tracker raised at the previous meeting.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

### **6.1 Changes to Committee Calendar CHSC24-011**

The Committee agreed to hold an additional meeting on 26 November 2024 and to postpone the Committee meeting due to be held on 7 January 2025 to 21 January 2025.

RESOLVED that

- i. an additional meeting be called to be held at the usual time and in the usual place on 26 November 2024; and
- ii. the meeting of the Committee due to be held on 7 January 2025 be postponed until 14 January 2025.

## **7. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT CHSC24-009**

In response to a query about families staying in bed and breakfast accommodation for more than 6 weeks, the Strategic Director of Communities explained that increased demand was straining the Council's resources. Although a range of temporary accommodation was available, residents struggled to move on due to insufficient long-term housing. The aim was to limit temporary accommodation 6-12 months, but some families occupied these for significantly longer.

The Council considered placing families in accommodation sized below their need as it was generally beneficial. Much of the temporary accommodation was out of Borough, reducing residents' access to support networks, and lacked cooking facilities. The Council did not track the number of families living in inappropriately sized accommodation.

The Committee requested an analysis of family sizes on the housing register, which Officers agreed to provide based on bedroom need.

The Government was supporting the Council to reduce the time families spent in temporary accommodation and an action plan had been developed. The Government had suggested that the Council make direct offers, as opposed to 'choice-based' lettings, for those in temporary accommodation. The Council recognised the importance of early intervention in preventing homelessness.

The Chair requested regular updates on progress.

Responding to a question on educating void periods, the Acting Head of Housing explained that the voids team had had procured two responsive, effective contractors. Internal process delays were being addressed with a revised housing structure. The Council aimed to engage vacating tenants earlier to reduce responsibility on the Council for restoring condition. Incremental improvements were expected over six months.

The void standard and statutory compliance checks were required before reletting properties. The Acting Head of Housing undertook to provide Councillors with the void standard.

The Chair asked for better indicators for community meals than the number of clients. Officers agreed to consider more informative metrics with Members.

In response to a query, the Strategic Director of Communities agreed to discuss more detailed information on leisure facility usage with Freedom Leisure. An item on Freedom Leisure's performance would be added to the Committee's January meeting agenda.

**8. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME: UPDATE FOR COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CHSC24-006**

Concern was raised about the Council's insufficient communication on cladding works. The Acting Head of Housing acknowledged the need for improved communication with residents but emphasised that concerted effort had been made on cladding works, door knocks, letter drops, and multiple in-person events despite low turnout. The contractor responsible for the works had agreed to provide resident communications.

The Council's communal heating systems were complex and outdated, lacking consideration for maintenance and part replacement. Repairs were being balanced with system replacement, supported by a budget and replacement strategy. Non-functioning systems would not be left unattended. Dilapidation surveys on all housing schemes had informed the strategy by providing risk ratings and systems were being standardised to facilitate future maintenance. The Acting Head of Housing recognised the need for better communication regarding communal heating systems and stated that the Council would review how contractors could be more involved in resident communications.

The Council had 13 active cases of damp and mould. The Regulator of Social Housing required all social housing entities to have a damp and mould strategy. The Council's strategy was integrated into its repairs process with clear escalation pathways. Property

surveyors would use the standardised Housing Health and Safety Rating System when assessing properties to also assess damp and mould. Additionally, a training session was planned for all housing staff to identify signs of damp and mould.

In response to a Member's query, the Strategic Director of Communities confirmed that tenant representatives were not prohibited from speaking to the media. The representatives were recommended to inform the resident engagement team leader, who could provide support, and because tenant representatives might have access to confidential information.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that sessions for Councillors on the activities of the housing assets team would be organised.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

## **9. COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER POLICY AND PROGRESS CHSC24-007**

Responding to a Member's query, the Strategic Director of Corporate Resources stated that public toilet facilities would be considered once the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process was sufficiently advanced, though it would be materially more difficult to identify an income. Officers committed to maintaining dialogue with parties interested in taking on public conveniences. Where a Community Asset included public convenience facilities, Officers could include in transfer considerations.

The Chair sought assurance against a fire sale of assets, clarification on selling assets at uncompetitive prices, how offers were assessed for long term value.

The Strategic Director of Communities explained that the Council needed to address budget pressures to demonstrate to the Government its eligibility for support with legacy debt issues. Bids were assessed based on community use and how that would be maintained, and viability of long-term plan. Freehold sales of assets would be exceptions, requiring external evaluation of the asset. Any sale would adhere to the Council's Commercial Protocol. The Council was reviewing its estate usage, considering the value tenants brought to the community beyond rent payments, and expert opinions would be sought throughout the process.

Once an asset was transferred, it would be monitored through annual reports on accounts and management provided by the operator, though the Council would not actively monitor their management and budgeting.

Financial checks were conducted on all parties that had submitted an Expression of Interest, with further checks for those that submitted business cases, required for progression of transfer.

The Council expected 28 business cases to be submitted for the 18 assets available for transfer.

The Chair requested that Officers keep the public informed on the CAT process.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

**10. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN PROGRESS RFSC24-008**

The Chair thanked Officers for bringing an update report as opposed to only introducing the item once finished. The Committee considered the item to be technical and that Members would benefit from a session dedicated to understanding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and how it was funded, which was supported by the Portfolio Holder and Officers agreed to provide.

The Strategic Director of Communities summarised how the HRA functioned. It was a ring-fenced account that was only to be spent on services required for the Council's homes and tenants. Its budget was approximately £23 million and it had very little reserve, at £300,000 which was calculated as £100 per household. External consultants had been commissioned and had recommended that the reserve be raised to £500 per household. The Council had previously held greater reserves, but the compound effects of mandatory debt as required by government to make improvements to housing stock, government-mandated rent rise moratorium, and rising standards had seen reserves fall.

It was a requirement of Councils for a 30-year plan for the HRA which the Council had previously operated internally. However, the external consultants had been commissioned to produce a more comprehensive plan and including industry standards and government policy as well as stock condition.

The Council had initially considered fixing its stock in a 2-year window but modelling of the 30-year plan in such a scenario led to runaway debt. The consultants had provided an alternative solution to funding which the Council was reviewing.

The Strategic Director of Communities noted that there was an upper limit on the amount that could be spent in a year by the Council due to the limits of managing a budget with existing resources. It was therefore not considered prudent to increase the budget further. Sustainable growth to the staffing budget was being considered.

The Council would review making better use of rent flexibility and in some cases increase rent. In particular, social rents were relatively low and well within the threshold of housing benefit payments. Mechanisms existed which would allow the Council to increase rents above the standard limit under certain circumstances.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm  
and ended at 8.38 pm.

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_