

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 30 July 2024

Present:

Cllr S Greentree (Chair)
Cllr D Jordan (Vice-Chair)

Cllr A Aslam Cllr F Mumtaz
Cllr T Bonsundy-O'Bryan Cllr M Sullivan

Also Present: Councillor I Johnson

Absent: Councillor S Mukherjee

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Mukherjee.

Apologies were also received from Cllr Nicholson, who would have attended as Portfolio Holder.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received from Members.

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director – Communities, Louise Strongitharm, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which she was a Council-appointed director. The interests were such that Louise Strongitharm could advise the Committee on those items.

The interests of Strategic Director – Corporate Resources, Kevin Foster, 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.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Housing Scrutiny Committee held on 20 May 2024 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

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

5. WORK PROGRAMME CHSC24-004

The Committee reviewed the work programme.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

6. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT CHSC24-005

In response to a query, Louise Strongitharm explained that the Homelessness Elimination Plan had been formed in conjunction with the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC). The Homelessness Elimination Plan had been developed to improve the Council's approach.

Feedback from DLUHC had highlighted that the Council's private sector lettings (Let's Rent) was a strength of the service provision. In contrast, the Council needed to reduce the number of families in temporary accommodation. The Council struggled to move those in temporary accommodation into permanent accommodation. An Officer specialising in temporary accommodation had been appointed to tackle this.

Louise Strongitharm noted the difficulties in finding properties for larger families, often relocating them outside the Borough, which was disruptive to the family.

The Council did follow up with former community meals customers to understand why they had stopped using the service. No customers stopped due to the increased costs. Rather, most had to a care home or had passed away.

The Strategic Director of Communities noted improvements in housing services, particularly in repairs, which had improved significantly following insourcing the landlord services in April 2022. Co-locating the repairs contractor, Mountjoy, with the Council's landlord services and procuring a specialist gas contractor were key drivers of the improvement. Void turnover, rent collection, and compliance had also improved. Resident engagement had greatly improved through the appointment of Rosalynn Funnell, Resident Engagement Team Leader.

7. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME: UPDATE FOR COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CHSC24-001

Louise Strongitharm introduced the item. In July 2023, the Council recognised that it was not able to meet the decent home standard and therefore self-referred to the Regulator of Social Housing. It was subsequently recognised that carbon monoxide and fire detection could not be evidenced for every property.

The Corporate Leadership Team determined that a strategic focus was needed to improve the Council's housing services. A fifth theme was added to [the Improvement and Recovery Programme](#), the Housing Recovery and Improvement Programme (HRIP). The HRIP was being delivered within existing resources and was composed of seven workstreams:

1. Data and insight
2. Finance

3. Homes and safety
4. Resident engagement and consultation
5. Staffing and developing culture
6. Tenants and communities
7. Tools and ways of working

Most progress had been registered in the homes and safety workstream. There had also been notable progress in other workstreams:

- Finance: Consultants had been commissioned to advise on the Council's 30-year housing revenue account business plan.
- Resident engagement and consultation: All complaints procedures had been reviewed and updated.
- Resident engagement and consultation: The results of the tenant satisfaction survey were being analysed and tenant engagement sessions planned.

Cllr Johnson, Portfolio Holder for Housing, noted that the Council had become aware of a substantial backlog of repairs following the insourcing of housing services in April 2022 and that these were being addressed.

On performance indicators, Louise Strongitharm noted that the capturing of tenant satisfaction measures, a report on which was being presented at item 9 of the agenda, would provide an excellent baseline. Further work on reporting compliance to scrutiny committee was needed.

It was emphasised that, when considering expenditure, the Council had to prioritise safety and could not always replace fittings with the regularity that residents would wish.

Craig Humphrey considered that it was important to monitor the accessibility of the Council's services and consideration needed to be given to Officers being present in the community.

The Council was due to begin a stock condition survey in August. Craig Humphrey noted that there had been a delay in starting the survey whilst the template was confirmed. The survey was due to begin week beginning 5 August and was still expected to be completed in December 2024 as per the original timeline.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

8. FIRE REMEDIAL ACTIONS PROGRESS - JULY 2024 CHSC24-002

Craig Humphrey introduced the item and explained that the data was presented in the format provided to the Regulator of Social Housing.

New software was being initiated to monitor the completing of actions which would improve reporting.

The Committee discussed the storage of mobility scooters in communal blocks. Craig Humphrey explained that they posed a significant fire risk and as such the Council could not allow them to be kept within blocks. This approach was supported by Surrey Fire and Rescue.

Whilst fire-rated storage could be considered, the Council's financial situation prohibited this approach being used, unless it was practical and affordable.

There remained 1,600 outstanding fire remedial actions to fulfil, from an initial 3,700. The Council had prioritised the highest risk items. Some lower risk items were relatively simple to complete, such as evidencing electrical safety certification.

The Council did not have a regime for proactive inspections and lacked the resources to introduce such.

The acting Head of Housing explained that cladding risks were present in 14 blocks, related to the building design and the position of the cladding. The risks differed from those associated with high-rise blocks reported in the media. Most other fire safety risks were fire door replacements, loft compartmentalisation, and publicising fire safety policies. Housing management needed to monitor communal areas to ensure they were kept clear.

The draft Fire Safety Policy was discussed. It had been reviewed with the support of external consultants over the preceding 6 months as the Council's understanding of its building risks and overall fire risk assessments developed. Craig Humphrey confirmed that the approach was largely based on regulation, best practise, and compliance.

Surrey Fire and Rescue had not been involved in creating the policy and were not expected to be. However, Officers had incorporated insights from previous work with Surrey Fire and Rescue.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the report be noted; and
- (ii) the draft Housing Fire Safety policy be endorsed.

9. TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES CHSC24-003

Rosalynn Funnell introduced the item. The Regulator of Social Housing set both consumer and economic standards by which the Council had to operate. Tenant satisfaction measures were part of the consumer standards. The Council would be required to report to the Regulator in June of each year.

A tenant survey conducted using a census approach, showed relatively poor performance in complaints handling and response to anti-social behaviour compared with other Boroughs. However, the Council's repairs response was rated better than that of other Boroughs. These findings matched feedback from other residents.

It was requested that in future reports include absolute data (raw numbers) and narrative to contextualise the relative data (percentages). Additionally, it was requested that full details of data be given, rather than summary and derived figures. Combined, it was considered that this would enhance the Committee's ability to scrutinise.

Rosalynn Funnell explained that the Council had mandatory timeframes both to acknowledge and handle housing complaints. All stage one complaints were required to be acknowledged within five working days and handled within 10 working days. Stage 2 complaints should be acknowledged within 5 working days and handled within 20 working days. If the complaint was not resolved in stage 2 the complainant could raise the complaint with the housing ombudsman. Complaints training had been carried out with all housing staff. The Committee requested copies of the material from the training.

Feedback indicated that the survey was lengthy. Rosalynn Funnell confirmed that the survey was emailed and posted to residents and could also be completed online and via the phone. For the 2024/25 survey, it should start several months earlier than the 2023/24 survey was begun.

The Council was reviewing how it could use technology to improve the interactions that residents had with it. It had been highlighted by residents that receiving a response from Council was key.

The Committee discussed the planned tenant engagement sessions, and it was requested which ones Councillors could attend. The Marketing and Communications team was due to publish the schedule shortly. Councillors were welcome to attend the summer events and panels, but the focus groups were intended only for residents.

The Committee discussed the potential for tenant representatives to be involved with the Committee.

Officers agreed to provide Councillors with details of the groups that could be set up by tenants.

There were currently 11 tenant volunteers involved with the Resident and Landlord Partnership Panel.

RESOLVED That

- (i) The report and results are noted; and
- (ii) The proposed actions and improvements are supported.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.34 pm.

Chair: _____

Date: _____