

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

held on 11 December 2024

Present:

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

Cllr A Aslam                      Cllr F Mumtaz  
Cllr S Mukherjee                Cllr M Sullivan

Also Present: Councillors A-M Barker, I Johnson, E Nicholson, S Greentree and S Oades.

Absent: Councillors T Spenser.

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Tom Spenser.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The interests of the 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 8 October 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 CHSC24-017**

The Chairman welcomed Members to the meeting, noting it was the Committee's first since the release of the Grant Thornton report, which highlighted significant issues in the scrutiny processes. Key points from the report included that senior leadership was not exposed to challenges or new ideas, there was a lack of curiosity from some Councillors, and there was limited evidence of effective use of scrutiny powers. These findings underscored the

importance of robust scrutiny, and the Chairman encouraged the Committee to approach their discussions with a readiness to challenge and be challenged, ensuring transparency and openness. This was crucial for effective governance and achieving positive outcomes for Woking.

The Committee considered the Work Programme for the next meeting on 21 January 2024, which would cover Housing Complaints, the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy draft, and a Freedom Leisure Performance Review. No additional topics were raised for the Committee to consider.

The discussion then moved to the recommendations and actions tracker, specifically the resident survey. It was noted that the survey questions were set by the regulator of social housing, including the wording, length, answer options, and order of questions. This year, the survey would adhere strictly to the regulator's prescribed format to avoid the issues faced last year with an overly lengthy survey.

Katherine Hiscock explained that the survey would focus on the Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) and be more user-friendly and accessible. The team had been working closely with the communications team to ensure compliance with the regulator's requirements. She mentioned the implementation of the Smart Survey system, which would allow digital distribution and better data analysis.

The meeting continued with the Chairman emphasising the importance of using data for analysis and insights. He stressed that improving data visibility within housing, including property and customer data, was crucial for making informed decisions. Katherine Hiscock reassured the Committee that data and analysis were central to her role and the housing transformation roadmap. She highlighted the importance of data in decision-making and service improvement. Following the TSM survey, an action plan would be developed to address key points from the survey, involving collaboration with various Council teams.

Following a question about data contributions from in-house teams and contractors like Mountjoy, Katherine Hiscock confirmed that Mountjoy, being co-located, meant that they could easily report concerns, and there was a proactive relationship for data sharing. Efforts were underway to integrate contractor data into the housing system for seamless data transfer and a single source of truth.

Craig Humphrey added that the ongoing stock condition survey would provide a detailed view of each property. He noted that the contractor had been proactive in identifying safeguarding and condition issues. Regular meetings ensured close engagement on exceptional cases.

Some Members raised concerns about collecting data from tenants with language barriers and those who were digitally excluded. Katherine Hiscock explained that multiple methods would be offered for survey collection, including digital and paper options. Tenants would be notified in advance, and support would be provided for those who needed assistance. Translation services would be utilised as needed.

The Chairman emphasised the importance of proactive outreach to ensure statistically significant data from various groups. Katherine Hiscock agreed and noted that this year's survey had more forward planning, allowing for better proactive engagement and quicker responses. She mentioned that the TSM were in their second year, and adjustments might be made based on regulatory changes.

The Chairman highlighted the committee's ongoing interest in the survey and requested regular updates.

**RESOLVED**

That the Work Programme be noted.

**6. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT CHSC24-016**

The challenges with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were discussed, noting that many indicators did not exclusively represent the Council's performance but were influenced by external factors like the economy. For instance, the number of new households placed in B&B accommodation during the quarter was in part seen as a reflection of external circumstances beyond the Council's control. There was a significant push this year to set targets for KPIs. Setting these targets was deemed essential for aiming and measuring progress, with compliance targets, particularly in building safety, set at 100%, although achieving this might take time. It was suggested to include reasonable estimates in the narrative, and it was agreed that Louise Strongitharm would take this action to look into whether there was a better way to do this.

The discussion also touched on the need for realistic targets, as setting unachievable ones rendered the red, amber, green rating system meaningless. Targets needed to be realistic and tied to achievable outcomes to effectively scrutinise performance.

Additionally, it was noted that some indicators, like homelessness rates, were more about business intelligence than performance indicators. These indicators were crucial for understanding the broader implications on the Council's financial health and statutory duties. It was suggested that performance reports might evolve into performance and business intelligence reports to better reflect the organisation's overall health. The committee expressed willingness to support the process of updating indicators and ensuring targets were realistic and reflective of actual performance. There was an acknowledgment of the need for continuous tracking and updating of these indicators.

The Committee raised concerns about the increase in housing complaints, which rose from seventeen in Q2 to Twenty-Four in Q4. Katherine Hiscock explained that the increase was due to a more proactive complaints management approach implemented in April 2024.

Following a query regarding complaints, Katherine Hiscock clarified that Housing Services remained open until 5.00pm, and only Corporate Customer Services and Revenues and Benefits closed at 1.00pm.

The Chairman suggested a detailed review of the data, including homelessness, living well, and housing compliance. He proposed exploring the use of AI to handle routine inquiries and provide immediate clarification. Katherine Hiscock commented that most contact was related to repairs, which was common for housing providers. She highlighted the Council's historical under-investment in digital capabilities and the ongoing efforts to improve systems and data. While AI was recognised as a useful tool, the Council was currently focused on establishing robust systems to support efficient work and better service access for residents and tenants.

The Committee discussed the need for the website to be user-friendly and accessible. Katherine Hiscock explained that the council was redesigning the website with an external

agency, involving council officers, residents, and tenants. The new website was expected to launch around February or March 2025. The Committee suggested promoting the web launch publicly within Wards to encourage usage and reduce calls, improving complaint accuracy and public perception.

The Chairman raised concerns about the increasing number of households in emergency accommodation over five consecutive quarters. He also questioned the lack of targets for the length of stay in other types of emergency accommodation, noting that while the six-week target for B&B stays was well-established, there was less clarity on the impact of longer stays in other forms of emergency housing.

Louise Strongitharm acknowledged the concerns and suggested a detailed report on homelessness be brought to the Committee in the future. She explained the complexity of setting timescales for various temporary accommodations and proposed a wider discussion on the allocations policy next year.

Members raised concerns about the poor condition of pavements around Sheerwater. Louise Strongitharm promised to find out the latest information on highway works and feedback to the Committee. Following a further question about the timeline for the new homes in Sheerwater, Louise Strongitharm explained that the yellow phase was completing, with properties available from January, and other affordable housing developments expected to be completed by the end of 2025 or early 2026. All homes would be let through the Council's housing register, with some direct lettings under homelessness duties.

The Chairman requested a detailed breakdown of the re-letting process for properties to identify improvements. He also commented on the KPI for community meals, noting that despite price changes, the number of clients had not dropped significantly. He suggested gathering richer data points, such as customer satisfaction surveys, to better understand the impact and effectiveness of the service to understand their impact better.

Louise Strongitharm discussed the difficulty in finding more in-depth indicators beyond what was already available. She suggested conducting occasional transactional satisfaction surveys to supplement existing data. Louise Strongitharm emphasised the importance of monitoring numbers, especially given the current funding situation for discretionary services, and remained open to suggestions for more meaningful indicators.

The Chairman raised a broader question about reviewing performance indicators, suggesting a thorough review with Councillors' input, perhaps through a small Task Group. Louise Strongitharm agreed to bring data to a future committee, typically refreshed at the financial year's turn.

Following a discussion by the Committee, the Chairman requested further information on the operation of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP), possibly as a post-winter analysis or as part of the future homelessness paper.

The Chairman concluded by noting improvements in housing compliance.

**RESOLVED**

That the Performance Management Report be noted.

## **7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN CHSC24-014**

Before discussion began on the item, the Chairman extended his gratitude to the Housing Team for their efforts in providing the requested HRA briefing sessions for Members.

Louise Strongitharm introduced the report and provided the Committee with an overview of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan, which was set to be considered by Council. The Committee were reminded that the HRA was a statutory landlord account, ring-fenced for expenditure related to tenants and housing stock. Following self-financing in 2012, an annual 30-year HRA business plan was required to outline expenditure priorities.

In conclusion, the first version of the HRA business plan showed a viable 30-year plan, emphasising the need to prioritise safety, building fabric, decent homes components, and decarbonisation in this order. The plan included minimising borrowing, maximising capital receipts, and disposing of underperforming assets. The Council needed to improve revenue performance by reducing costs and recovering service charges, using a combination of measures as recommended by consultants.

The Chairman acknowledged that while Members were not technical experts, their role was to ask questions from a resident's perspective. The Chairman questioned what risk level the HRA Business planned posed. Councillor Ian Johnson, Portfolio Holder responded, noting that there was some risk, but that this risk was higher if the Council did not take action, as it would affect tenants' needs and regulatory compliance. Louise Strongitharm added that the document balanced financial risk with regulatory compliance and building safety. She emphasised that having a plan reduced risk by allowing for monitoring and prioritisation. The model presented could be adjusted quickly if government policies changed, further reducing risk.

Following a question, Craig Humphrey clarified that extensive data analysis, including existing stock condition data, was part of the report. He emphasised the importance of maintaining a fluid business plan to balance risks and ensure homes met decent standards. Craig Humphrey also explained that fire safety works would be instructed on a block-by-block basis. He noted that new fire risk assessments might identify additional items, but the overall number of fire safety works would gradually diminish. Craig Humphrey explained that housing providers typically conducted a full stock condition survey every five years, either all at once or through a rolling program. He assured the Committee that the previous survey data was reputable and not expected to show major shifts, though some adjustments might be necessary. Louise Strongitharm added that the plan aimed to determine an affordable level of borrowing for the HRA, with the 3.7% interest rate as a long-term average. The plan maintained a working balance over its life, allowing for flexibility as conditions changed.

Following a question about any potential issues from the stock condition survey, Craig Humphrey responded that surveyors addressed health and safety issues as they arose, but it was too early to analyze the data. He suggested providing an update to the Committee once the surveys were concluded early next year.

Members asked about the consultation process for applying rent flexibility to re-lets, expressing concerns about affordability. The discussion acknowledged the need for careful consideration and consultation to ensure rent flexibility was manageable for tenants.

Katherine Hiscock explained how the rent setting policy was developed. This policy covered the approach to rent setting, including annual rent increases and the proposed use of rent flexibility. The policy, now in draft, was included in the wider HRA business plan for

scrutiny. Rent flexibility allowed for a potential increase of up to 5% for general needs properties, assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Following a comment from Members, Louise Strongitharm addressed the idea of including contents insurance as part of rent. She explained that rent was heavily regulated, so contents insurance would have to be a separate service charge, requiring tenant consultation. She questioned whether it was something the council should get involved in.

Following a question about the longevity of older buildings, Craig Humphrey explained that stock condition data allowed for targeted work programs based on various factors like need, design, and age. Louise Strongitharm added that decarbonisation would be a significant issue, with some buildings unable to meet required standards. This would need to be considered in the 30-year plan.

The Chairman highlighted the challenge of addressing historic underinvestment in social housing while being financially constrained. He expressed concern about passing the cost of necessary investments onto vulnerable residents through rent flexibility. Louise Strongitharm responded that Woking's social rents were very low, around 50% of market rents, and most tenants were in receipt of benefits. Even with a 5-10% rent increase, rents would remain below the local housing allowance.

The Committee raised concerns about the Council's borrowing history and the risks of increased borrowing, especially if interest rates were to spike due to unforeseen global events. Members questioned assumptions in the financial modelling and the potential impact on the HRA's ability to service debt.

The Leader, Councillor Ann-Marie Barker suggested that from listening to the conversation of the Committee, perhaps a sensible suggestion would be that the Executive be asked to pay particular attention to the interest rates and review the HR Business Plan based on this information.

The Committee were supportive of this recommendation.

#### RECOMMEND TO THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee noted the interest rates and the volatility in them and recommended to the Executive that in their regular reviews of the HRA Long Term Business Plan, the Executive should pay particular attention to interest rates and review based on that information.

## **8. OVERVIEW OF BROCKHILL DECISIONS CHSC24-015**

Louise Strongitharm explained that the paper outlined the background leading to the decision to close and dispose of the Brockhill site. Unfortunately, over the past two years, Brockhill had fallen into disrepair and faced several issues, most notably around fire safety. Woking Borough Council had concluded that the building was effectively obsolete, and the level of investment required was unviable for a building of its age and size. Following a consultation, full Council unanimously resolved to close Brockhill on February 8, 2024.

There was some suggestion that the decision to close Brockhill might have been different if the council had known about certain legacy recharge adjustments, implying a lack of funds. However, the report clarified that the decision was more about the viability of investing in a building that no longer met best practice standards for its age and size.

Some Members questioned whether there had ever been a scheduled maintenance plan for Brockhill or if it had been neglected throughout its lifetime. Louise Strongitharm explained that Brockhill had undergone some internal works, with communal areas generally kept in good repair. However, the fabric of the building, including roof, windows, and doors, were nearing the end of their lifespans. Louise Strongitharm did not have the historic maintenance plan for the building available to advise the Committee.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Stephen Oades for calling in the decision to the Committee and invited him to speak on the item. Councillor Stephen Oades expressed his dissatisfaction with the report, stating that it did not fully capture the background and seemed disingenuous. He argued that claiming a building from the 1980s was obsolete was inaccurate. He highlighted that Brockhill had 48 flats and operated at full or near-full occupancy for over three decades, generating millions for the HRA account. Despite this, he claimed that virtually none of the money was spent on maintenance, with only minor internal investments.

Councillor S Oades criticized the neglect of both the building and its residents. He mentioned that residents were promised compensation for heating failures in January 2023, but by October 2024, no one had received any compensation.

Louise Strongitharm responded, also addressing a point raised by Councillor Oades on the payback period and rents. She explained that paragraph 5.5 of the report detailed this. At the point of closure, if it was fully occupied, the total rent and service charge for Brockhill was £540,000. However, she emphasised that rent, and service charges covered various services, not just property maintenance.

Louise acknowledged that not all rent was available for building maintenance, as some covered the on-site support team. She noted that there would have been repairs, maintenance, compliance checks, and void works. Additionally, a large portion of the service charge, was for energy consumption. This was before accounting for other expenses like catering and usual tenant services. She pointed out that with a larger staff team, there was likely very little surplus for the capital program at Brockhill. Consequently, she believed the payback period would have been very long, if at all.

Regarding the reimbursement of heating charges from January 2023, Louise commented that the Team would need to look into this. Louise Strongitharm expressed that closing Brockhill was one of the hardest decisions in her career. She acknowledged the efforts of the Brockhill team in finding solutions for residents and ensuring they were settling in well. Despite the challenges, they aimed to support residents and make the transition as smooth as possible.

Councillor Ellen Nicholson echoed the sentiments expressed by Officers and was the Portfolio Holder for Living Well until July of that year. Councillor Nicholson praised the excellent care provided to Brockhill residents by Surrey County Council and Woking Borough Council staff. The residents received support from both the voluntary sector and the Council, and the process of transferring them to alternative residential homes and care facilities had gone relatively smoothly. Councillor Nicholson acknowledged that dealing with over 40 residents would always present challenges, but she commended the team for their compassion and empathy.

Councillor Ian Johnson, Portfolio Holder, supported Councillor Nicholson's remarks, sharing his own experience. He explained that fire safety experts had identified high risks in the building, leading to the decision to close it for the safety of the residents. He

dismissed the notion of an unknown capital programme figure, stating that decisions could not be based on unknowns. He believed the closure was necessary and praised the efforts to find alternative accommodation for the residents.

Some Members of the Committee thought that lessons could be learned from the experience, and proposed a review to understand what could have been done differently and to avoid similar situations in the future.

The Chairman acknowledged that there were disagreements about the facts and numbers, and that multiple truths could coexist. He noted that while the quality of care provided was excellent, there were also processes that did not work well, and promises that were not fulfilled in the expected timeframes. Closing a care home was always an emotional and painful decision, especially for the residents and their families.

Craig Humphrey stressed the importance of learning from this situation to prevent similar issues in the future. He commented that the trigger for Brockhill's closure was a fire risk assessment, which revealed a total lack of compartmentation, meaning there was no fire stopping in the building. He echoed Louise's sentiment that the decision to close Brockhill was very difficult. He pointed out that regulations and fire safety requirements had increased significantly, making the Council more accountable for residents' safety. Officers stood by the decision made to close Brockhill, stating that they would not apologise for prioritising safety.

The Committee agreed with Officers and the necessity for robust fire safety inspections and safety measures. Officers assured the Committee that ongoing maintenance, management, and compliance with evolving regulations were crucial to avoid similar situations in the future.

Louise Strongitharm added that the suddenness of the situation was particularly challenging. She suggested that having planned maintenance in place and better foresight could have allowed for earlier engagement with Surrey County Council and a more organised approach. The urgency due to safety concerns meant delivering difficult messages close to Christmas. She emphasised the importance of proactive asset management, stock condition data, and long-term plans to avoid rushed decisions in the future.

The Chairman acknowledged the importance of scrutiny and challenging decisions. He thanked Councillor Stephen Oades for raising the issue and emphasised the need for Councillors to continue asking tough questions.

**RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7:00pm  
and ended at 9:50pm

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

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



