

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday 16 January 2024, 7.00 pm – 9:10pm
Council Chamber - Civic Offices

Members Present:	Councillors A Patel (Chairman) M Markham, S Murray, R Brookes, R Sharif, C Nweke, P Bolton and A Lion
Other Councillors:	Councillors R Balcombe, J Philip, K Williamson and J H Whitehouse
Other Councillors (Virtually):	Councillors D Wixley
Apologies:	Councillor(s) J Lucas, C McCann, J Jogia, Caroline Pond, S Yerrell and J Lea
Officers In Attendance:	Surjit Balu (Interim Housing and Property Director), Laura Kirman (Democratic Services Officer), John Taphouse (Interim Service Manager (Assets Strategy)), Gill Wallis (Service Director Customer & Community), Steven Mitchell (PR Website Editor) and Christopher Walsh (Service Manager (Housing Needs and Management))
Officers In Attendance (Virtually):	Vivienne Messenger (Democratic Services Officer) and Jennifer Gould (Strategic Director and Chief Operating Officer)
Co-opted Members:	Mr W Marshall
Contractor:	Ben Johnson and Stuart Thomson (Qualis Property Solutions)
Contractor (Virtually):	Angie Marshall-Smith 9 (Abovo-Consult)

[A RECORDING OF THIS MEETING IS AVAILABLE FOR REPEATED VIEWING](#)

19 WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that this meeting would be recorded and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

20 SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee noted that:

- Councillor Lion had been appointed as substitute for Councillor Lea,
- Councillor Bolton had been appointed as substitute for Councillor Yerrell, and
- Councillor Nweke had been appointed as substitute for Councillor Pond.

21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Council's Members Code of Conduct.

22 NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**Action:**

The detailed response as item 17 in the minutes of the previous meeting be circulated to members of the Committee.

Resolved:

That the notes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 26 September 2024 be taken as read and were agreed as a correct record.

23 WORK PROGRAMME

The Communities Scrutiny Committee noted the progress made and agreed the work programme.

24 QUALIS PROPERTY SOLUTIONS PERFORMANCE REPORT

Ben Johnson, Qualis, outlined the 2023/4 end of year performance and business update for Qualis Property Solutions. Details of the key achievements, key challenges, year-end performance, complaints and compliments, the business plan and next 12 months were provided.

The Committee welcomed the report were advised in response to the queries raised that:

- Housemark had carried out the independent benchmarking of the service which was median performance and cost.
- That approximately 200 customers per month had responded to the customer satisfaction survey.
- The total community investment pot would be increased to £30,000/annum.
- The voids service had been brought in-house, this had given more control over time and quality of works.
- There had been proactive work for boiler service prior to the cold spell which had reduced complaints.
- Liaison with Londonn Quadrant would be considered.
- 'My Qualis' was a customer based app, other forms of contact including telephone lines would remain.

Resolved:

The Committee considered and commented on the report.

25 DRAFT CONDENSATION, DAMP AND MOULD POLICY

John Taphouse presented an overview of the Draft Condensation, Damp and Mould Policy (attached) and the causes, impacts and effects of damp and mould. The key points of the policy and feedback from the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel consultation were outlined. Proposed timescales for response to cases of damp and mould were outlined as per the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023.

The Committee acknowledged the importance and value of this policy and raised several queries.

The Committee were advised that:

- This work would be carried out within current resources, there would be better management of the serve and liaison with Qualis for initial reports and feedback from customers to identify problems.
- In the regeneration of estates programme trickle vents in doors and windows should ensure enough airflow to mitigate mould due to lack of airflow.
- Positive Input Ventilation (PIV) could be used when no other resolution could be found.

The Committee suggested that 'Housing Needs' could be used to raise awareness of managing condensation and ventilation, and requested that the consultation on Awaab's Law be circulated.

Resolved

The Committee considered, commented, and commended the report to Cabinet.

Post meeting update

Link to consultation on Awaab's law: [Awaab's Law: Consultation on timescales for repairs in the social rented sector](#)

26 HOME OWNERSHIP STRATEGY 2023/24 TO 2028/29

Chris Walsh introduced the report and advised the Committee that it was good practice within the social housing sector to have a Home Ownership Strategy. The Strategy covered:

- The sale of council residential properties
- The calculation of and collection of service charges from our leaseholders
- The provision information to solicitors
- Supporting Section 20 consultation for planned works where needed.

The Council received 12,314 applications to purchase council stock under the Right to Buy legislation, between 1 April 1977 and 1 April 2023, from which 6,492 properties were sold.

The Strategy had been formulated in consultation with representatives of the Epping Forest District Tenants and Leaseholders' Panel and set out how the Home Ownership process will be delivered over the next five years. The Home Ownership Team managed service charge accounts for 1089 leasehold properties.

The Committee were advised that difference between the number of applications for right to buy and those sold was due to a variety of factors, including specific requirements and timescales associated with the process and failure to secure a mortgage.

W Marshall advised the Committee that the question of right to buy had been raised at by the tenant's representatives at national level.

Resolved:

The Committee considered, commented, and commended the report to Cabinet.

27 INDEPENDENT LIVING FOR OLDER PEOPLE STRATEGY, 2023 TO 2028

Chris Walsh introduced the Independent Living for Older People in Epping Forest Strategy 2023/28 and highlighted that the Council was the largest social landlord in the district providing homes for 11% of households and managed 12 Independent Living schemes.

The Strategy contained a high-level delivery Annual Delivery Plan which would be further developed in 2024. The key aims were summarised as:

1. Work towards providing aspirational accommodation for older people
2. Make best use of assistive technology to help older people remain independent for as long as possible.
3. To keep the delivery model under review
4. Engage with residents to improve the quality, suitability and desirability of our Independent Living schemes.
5. Carry out options appraisals for poorly performing stock in the Asset Management Strategy
6. Future housing provision for older people to be reflected in the Asset Management Strategy and stock condition survey.

In response to resident's feedback members of staff are now on site at the schemes 2 days/week

The Committee

- Welcomed the Strategy
- Were advised that WIFI was not currently available in communal areas,
- Suggested that preparation for the implications of the move to digital and BT PSTN switch off for individual residents telephone lines should be considered, and that a wider older person strategy could be revisited.

Resolved:

The Committee considered, commented and commended the report to Cabinet.

28 HRA BUSINESS PLAN

Surjit Balu provided an overview of the HRA business plan and advised the Committee that the Housing Stock Condition survey had been an essential component in developing the plan, and 550 properties do not meet the decent home standards. Standards continue to increase and all works to properties would be addressed through the planned capital works programme as the business plan proceeds.

Angie Marshall, Abovo-Consult provided details of financial aspects of the report and the bespoke HRA model which allowed cashflow projections to be made over the next 30 years. This was based on data from the Council's current systems, a new independent stock condition survey carried over the last 12- 18 months and projections for economic assumptions in the social housing sector.

The plan provided the ability to stress test, for key dynamic risks such as the borrowing rate and changes in Government legislation regarding Social Housing. Officers had taken a safe and prudent approach when developing the business plan, with a balance between borrowing, developing, and improving the housing stock. The agreed minimum £2m revenue working capital balance would be maintained throughout the plan. All costs had been included in the plan, however some potential income had not been included because it could not be quantified. The Plan could be amended and updated year on year and during the year, to respond to changes, therefore maintaining a safe and prudent approach.

The Committee commented that this was a safe and prudent HRA business plan.

The Committee received clarity that:

- The potential income that hadn't been accounted for was in relation to small strips and pockets of land, any receipts from sales would need to be spent on capital
- The 30 year cashflow projection were based on a variety of assumptions, inflation used the Governments' Autumn Statement figures and there had be a prudent approach to rent increases of CPI plus 1%

- The rents were an essential component of the plan, and if these were not raised this would impact and there would be less to spend on services. If capital was removed properties would not be kept up to standard, there would be an increase in void losses and increased cost of responsive repairs.
- The plan aims for 180 units to be built across the District. Demand for housing outstrips supply and this is a national position.
- Flats above a Council owned commercial property could fall under the HRA but this was dependant on the tenancy agreement
- The Asset Management Strategy was being developed and this would include garage sites.
- Borrowing for the HRA was from the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB)

Resolved:

That Overview & Scrutiny Committee:

- Commented and recommended the HRA Business Plan for approval to Cabinet,
- Requested that an annual performance update, including stringent stress testing, be proposed for the work programme for scrutiny in the next municipal year, and
- Noted the opportunity to improve the Council's estates, which would improve the life span of our assets and feed into our ongoing work to 'create great places where people want to live'.

29 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**Resolved:**

The committee noted the date of the next meeting was on 5 March 2024 at 7:00pm.