

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON TUESDAY 7
SEPTEMBER 2021, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor J Wyllie (Chairman)
Councillors S Bell, M Brady, R Buckmaster,
A Curtis, H Drake, J Frecknall, M Goldspink,
D Hollebon, D Snowdon, N Symonds and
A Ward-Booth

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors E Buckmaster, C Redfern and
P Ruffles

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Scrutiny Officer
James Ellis	- Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer
Jonathan Geall	- Head of Housing and Health
Helen George	- Housing Development and Strategy Manager
Jess Khanom- Metaman	- Head of Operations
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Katie Mogan	- Democratic

Ben Wood

Services Manager
- Head of
Communications,
Strategy and
Policy

130 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Devonshire and Stevenson. It was noted that Councillor Andrews was substituting for Councillor Devonshire.

131 MINUTES - 8 JUNE 2021

Councillor Symonds proposed and Councillor Ward-Booth seconded, a motion that the Minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2021 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2021, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

132 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reminded Members that the meeting was being webcasted and the cameras would now zoom in on individual Members as they spoke.

The Chairman asked those Members that had not yet

completed the short survey sent out by Zoe Taylor-Dixon and the IT Team to dedicate some time to completing it. He said that this should take no more than a couple of minutes.

133 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

134 EAST HERTS TENANCY STRATEGY FOR 2021 TO 2026

The Head of Housing and Health, on behalf of the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods, submitted a report that covered the East Herts Tenancy Strategy for 2021 to 2026.

The Head of Housing and Health said that under the Localism Act 2011 having a Tenancy Strategy was a statutory requirement for any local authority that was also a housing authority. He said that the strategy document would focus the views and guidance of the authority in terms of the types of tenancies that it would like to see on offer in East Herts. Members were advised that the document would also focus on rent levels, given the tie in between rent levels and the tenancy types that were on offer.

The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that the Tenancy Strategy document took the form of guidance in that it did not legally compel registered providers to adopt certain types of tenancies or rent levels in East Herts.

Members were advised that the document laid out

what the Council expected from registered providers. The Committee was also advised that the sharing of information served to inform registered providers on the level of housing need within the District.

The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that recent housing research had been incorporated into the Tenancy Strategy and it was expected that rent levels set by registered providers were at the lower end of 50% to 80% of market value. Members were also advised that it was expected the length of tenancies should be for as long as possible and for a minimum of 5 years, with very few registered providers setting fixed term tenancies, and the majority now setting life-time tenancies.

The Committee was advised that the Council worked with registered provider partners via the East Herts Housing Forum and the strategy document had been presented to them at a meeting on the 29 June 2021. There had been very positive feedback from Members of the Forum.

The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that the Tenancy Strategy was part of a suite of housing related strategies that were currently being drafted. The much broader full Housing Strategy for 2021 to 2026 was currently out for public consultation and was scheduled to be presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the meeting on 2 November 2021. Members were also advised that the Homelessness Strategy and accompanying action plan would also be reviewed to bring this up to date in light of changing housing needs in East Hertfordshire.

Councillor Hollebon asked the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods to provide a comparison of housing numbers within East Hertfordshire District Council, past and present. She expressed concerns about the difficulties being experienced by the younger population in terms of getting onto the housing ladder. Councillor Hollebon also commented on the particular difficulties being experienced by single people when being considered for housing.

The Head of Housing and Health said that the Tenancy Strategy was not the document that dealt with supply. He referred to the District Plan and the Housing Strategy as the documents that covered the matter of supply. Members were advised that East Herts did relatively well in terms of the numbers of affordable homes when compared to the rest of Hertfordshire.

The Committee was further advised that the policies did work well and the Tenancy Strategy was intended to match the types of tenancies to the very real housing pressures that existed in East Herts.

Councillor Frecknall commented on the strength of the strategy and whether it was realistic that housing associations would adhere to it. The Head of Housing and Health said that the Localism Act 2011 only required registered providers to have regard to the Tenancy Strategy. He said, however, that the level of discussion and joint working with registered providers was such that the asserting of the soft influence of the Council was maximized.

The Housing Development and Strategy Manager made a number of points regarding the linkages between the Housing Strategy and the Tenancy Strategy.

The Chairman read out the question submitted by Councillor Devonshire in respect of percentage targets and the penalties the council could incur for failing to meet targets. Councillor Frecknall asked his question in relation to the numbers of affordable houses in the District being so low and also in respect of the target percentages contained within the District Plan.

The Head of Housing and Health reiterated that the Tenancy Strategy was not about delivery. He commented on the interplay between rent levels and housing development and reminded Members that planning policies dictated the amount of homes that were delivered on site. He also referred to the statistics that related to the percentage increase in affordable homes matching the percentage increase in private homes. Members were reminded that a lesser number than 40% affordable housing often had to be accepted on viability grounds by the Development Management Committee.

The Chairman read the first question from Councillor Goldspink regarding the guidance for registered providers on rent levels and whether this could lead to the levels being fixed at around 60-70% of Market Rents. The Head of Housing and Health said that social rents were set by nationally set formulae which took in account local rent levels and local incomes. He said that the Tenancy Strategy made it clear that the

Authority favoured Social Rent over Affordable Rent wherever that was possible in East Herts.

Members were advised that in respect of Affordable Rent, the national guidance was that they could be set up to a maximum of 80% of Market Rent, and the Tenancy Strategy had indicated a preference towards the lower end of the amounts referred to by Councillor Goldspink. Members were reminded again of the interplay between rent levels and the quantum of new build that was developed. The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that flats were cheaper to build than houses and houses were also more expensive to acquire. She referred to the importance of the balance of property types in East Herts in order to meet a range of housing needs.

The Chairman read the second question from Councillor Goldspink regarding the setting of the Local Housing Allowance rates and whether this could be changed according to local circumstances (Local Housing Allowance rates are used to calculate Housing Benefits for tenants renting from private landlords). The Head of Housing and Health said that the Local Housing Allowance rates were set by the Valuation Office Agency's Rent Officers, and local authorities did not have a say on Local Housing Allowance rates. These rates are based on rent levels within Broad Rental Market Areas within local authority areas, so they take into account local housing costs.

The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that a lot of research went into local rent levels. However, there had been freezes in Local Housing

Allowance levels over the past five years.

The Chairman read the third question from Councillor Goldspink, asking why East Herts had not performed to the same level as St Albans and Three Rivers in relation to homelessness and temporary accommodation. The Head of Housing and Health answered that the rates of assessed homeless cases per 1,000 households fluctuated for a variety of reasons. Members were given a comparison to figures from other Hertfordshire Authorities and Officers were open to comments outside of the meeting in respect of homelessness and the Council's approach.

The Chairman summarised the first question from Councillor Brady regarding why some tenancies were five years and others were lifelong. The Housing Development and Strategy Manager said that most registered providers no longer used fixed term tenancies as they never really evolved into checking whether tenancies were still required. She explained that most providers used lifetime period tenancies that just continued unless there were specific grounds, defined in legislation, for a tenancy to be ended.

The Chairman detailed the second question from Councillor Brady in respect of how East Hertfordshire District Council was addressing the shortfall in the social housing sector. The Head of Housing and Health referred back to his earlier answers regarding the Tenancy Strategy. He also referred to work that was being done with registered providers in terms of maximising work with developers regarding Section 106 agreements or options for regeneration in East

Herts.

Councillor Snowdon asked if Officers had any further background information in terms of the rising numbers of people with high levels of support needs. The Head of Housing and Health said that Officers intended the Tenancy Strategy to set out the context of the contours and shape of the housing need in the District. The Housing Development and Strategy Manager added that Officers had seen a higher level of need amongst single people during the past eighteen months. She cited the example of cases where single people were no longer able to live with family or friends due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Councillor Curtis made a number of points that were relevant to the Tenancy Strategy, including the fact that he welcomed the efforts that were being made to limit the number of fixed term tenancies, and asked whether the 50% – 80% range should be quantified in terms of actual numbers in the strategy document.

The Head of Housing and Health referred Members to research at section 3.10 of the report and he said that there more detail in the Housing Strategy. He said that Officers had tried to demonstrate whether the percentage level of rent would be affordable or not.

Councillor Curtis asked whether there could be a Member information training session to address any confusion amongst Members regarding the Tenancy Strategy.

The Head of Housing and Health responded to a query

from Councillor Bell by referring back to his previous answers regarding affordable housing provision and the planning process. Councillor Redfern referred to the costs of people being accommodated in bed and breakfasts in East Herts. She commented on whether any consideration was being given to the provision of housing that had been built by the Council.

Councillor Curtis proposed and Councillor Hollebon seconded, a motion that the report be received and the comments of Overview Scrutiny Committee be passed onto the Executive. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be received; and

(B) comments made by Members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee be passed onto the Executive.

135 PROGRESS REPORT CORPORATE PLAN: HERTFORD THEATRE AND HARTHAM LEISURE CENTRE

The Executive Member for Wellbeing submitted a report that invited the Members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review progress of the Hertford Theatre and Hartham Leisure centre capital development projects.

The Executive Member for Wellbeing set out the context for the report and said that these projects had been approved by Council and the business plans had all been approved and confirmed. He said that he

hoped any discussions at this meeting would be focussed on how the Council was delivering on those decisions.

The Executive Member said that Grange Paddocks, Bishop's Stortford was almost completed and would be opening soon and Hartham Leisure Centre was also well underway. He said that Hertford Theatre had received planning approval and demolition would commence by the end of the year subject to the receipt of tenders from contractors.

The Executive Member said that ambitions had evolved and he hoped that the constructions elements of both Hartham Leisure Centre and Hertford Theatre would achieve Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) excellent ratings in terms of sustainability. He commented on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and talked about other considerations including rights of way and sewers in the case of Hartham Leisure Centre.

The Executive Member said that Officers had kept the Leisure Board and Hertford Theatre Project Board fully briefed so that decisions could be made in moving the projects forward. He acknowledged that having a number of capital projects running concurrently was challenging but the Executive was committed to providing a crucial network of social infrastructure that would play a big part in delivering the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and corporate goals for the physical and mental wellbeing of residents in East Herts.

Councillor Brady asked about the costs and timing of the capital projects and whether the supplies of bulk cement at present were a cause for concern. The Executive Member took the point that there had been difficulties and he commented on the national shortage of HGV drivers. He said that Officers had worked closely with potential contractors and were working with all parties to ensure that there was a minimal impact on project delivery.

Councillor Frecknall asked a question about the timing of the closure of Hertford Theatre in June for a contract that wasn't due to be awarded until November at the earliest. He commented on the potential impact on the revenue gain for the last 6 months of 2021, including the impending pantomime season.

The Executive Member said that Hertford Theatre was closed for a considerable period of time as the nature of programming and bookings had meant that it was not easy to switch a theatre on and off. He said that a decision had been made about the next steps as it had not been possible to run the theatre at break-even. He said that asbestos removal had been scheduled to avoid delays and a lot of effort had been put in by the director of the theatre in keeping in touch with current and future users of Hertford Theatre.

Councillor Hollebon said that these projects had considerably impacted on the Council's finances. She asked if Members could be assured that the Council was getting value for money.

The Executive Member said that this had been already

been demonstrated. He emphasised the commitment of Officers and the Executive in ensuring that the Council did get value for money.

Councillor Curtis said that he welcomed the work being done to ensure that projects were delivered in a cost effective way. He asked the Executive Member if the tenders for Hertford Theatre were estimates or hard quotes. The Executive Member for Wellbeing said that there was a budget that had been approved by Council and he could not comment on the tenders and the Council would have to deliver what was possible within the approved budget.

Councillor Symonds asked if proposed improved accessibility would include blue badge spaces within the grounds of Hertford Theatre. The Head of Operations said that Officers in the Parking Team were looking into the matter of blue badge parking.

Councillor Bell asked if any consideration had been given to the use of the grounds of Hertford Theatre in Summer 2022 for open air theatre shows. The Executive Member for Wellbeing encouraged Members to respond to the strategy consultation in respect of parks and open spaces.

The Executive Member and the Head of Operations answered a question from Councillor Goldspink in respect of a risk of sewage diversion works regarding Hartham Leisure Centre.

Councillor Andrews proposed and Councillor Hollebon seconded, a motion that Members review the Hertford

Theatre and Hartham Leisure Centre capital projects and the comments of Overview and Scrutiny Committee be passed onto the Executive. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that Members review the Hertford Theatre and Hartham Leisure Centre Capital Projects.

136 UPDATE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN EAST HERTS

The Executive Member for Planning and Growth submitted an information report that covered activities which contributed towards economic development in the District.

Councillor Hollebon asked if economic development could be reviewed annually in the form of an update report as there could be budget implications if the market was stronger or weaker one year from now.

Councillor Curtis asked what the Council was doing to promote the use of the Ware Launchpad. He also commented on possible economic development opportunities in East Herts. He referred to the corporate SEED priority entitled enabling communities and commented on a number of high profile inward investments in neighbouring authority areas in Hertfordshire.

Councillor Curtis asked what was being done to attract similar large scale inward investment projects in East Hertfordshire, and what could be done to protect

against the conversion of ground floor town centre units into residential uses.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that the lack of larger sites available for commercial development is a challenge to securing inward investment at the scale recently seen by Sunset Studios in Broxbourne. With regards to the Ware Launchpad the facility is being marketed however he was open to a further discussion with the Ware Priory Trading Group or Ware Town Council on any further measures that could be taken.

Members received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

137 FEEDBACK ON EAST HERTS COUNCIL COMPLAINTS 2020-21

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy submitted a report that invited the Committee to review complaints information for 2020/21.

Councillor Hollebon said that the website needed regular updating to make it easier to get to the relevant department. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy confirmed that there was a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section on the website as well as a web chat facility for residents.

Councillor Frecknall said that the amount of upheld complaints had grown significantly in 2020/21. He asked if there was any learning to be taken from this in relation to working in a hybrid model to futureproof

the Council.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that had not been able to find any correlation between the number of complaints and the fact that most Officers were working from home for a significant amount of time. People are complaining about the same things now as they did before the work from home guidance was implemented. He said that the recording of complaints had improved and Members were referred to the previous year's figure of 59 complaints which seems incredibly low. The current figure of 169 complaints seems like a more accurate reflection of the reality.

The Chairman asked about the call centre service performance in respect of the percentages of calls that were answered and the percentages of calls that were abandoned. He expressed concern about the unacceptable call abandonment rate.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that the call centre performance had weakened due to staff turnover and also in relation to increased demand. He said that the volume of demand had also been increasing across all channels of communication used by residents to contact the Council. Members were advised that there had been "perfect storm" of fewer resources and increased demand.

Members were reminded of the call back option that is in place for customers where they can book a time slot with an officer to receive a call back on planning, benefits or housing issues. This has been popular and

allowed Officers to better manage customer demand and ensure people weren't waiting on the phone. Members received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

138 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer said that this was the usual work programme Members received at each meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. She drew Members' attention to the draft work programme attached as an appendix to the report.

The Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that ideally, there should be no more than two items on an Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda. She said that reports should be focussed on corporate SEED priorities.

Members were advised that Planning and how this service could be improved had been added to the work programme. The Scrutiny Officer said the Transformation Programme had been added to the work programme in respect of how the Council was going to deal with the new working from home and office requirements and front of house.

The Scrutiny Officer said that both of these topics aligned with the SEED priorities' "Digital by Default" objectives and Members' views were sought on update reports on both of these topics being submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services said that as the Transformation Programme was a large topic that covered many different strands, it would be helpful if Members could drill down to specific areas of work that were included in the transformation programme, as not all were suitable for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman asked if Members could email him or the Vice-Chairman or the Scrutiny Officer by the middle of next week with suggestions for topics for scrutiny within the wider Transformation Programme.

Councillor Andrews suggested that waste and street cleansing be included as a topic for scrutiny. He referred to the steady increase in concerns expressed to him in respect of street cleansing by Town and Parish Councils and also by residents. He said that street cleansing was the main cause for concern and he referred to overflowing litter bins as well as the clearing and cleansing of public spaces and the clearing of detritus and litter from footways.

Councillor Curtis commented on whether there would be some value in the Committee looking at contract management more generally. The Committee was supportive of both of these items being added to the work programme.

The Chairman reminded the Committee that there was a scoping document for Members to complete with suggestions for future scrutiny.

It was moved by Councillor Snowdon, and seconded by Councillor Andrews, that the draft consolidated Work Programme be approved, subject to the addition of street cleansing and contract management to a future meeting. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the main agenda items for the next meeting be agreed;

(B) the proposed Consolidated Work Programme, included at Appendix A, be approved, subject to the addition of street cleansing and contract management to a future meeting.

139 URGENT ITEMS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.34 pm

Chairman
Date