

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Zoom, on **Thursday, 24 September 2020** at **6:30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Mark Newton, Councillor Keith Robinson, Councillor Caroline Topping

Other Members present:

Councillor Stephen Burroughes, Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Maurice Cook, Councillor Richard Kerry

Officers present:

Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Kerry Blair (Head of Operations), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Cairistine Foster-Cannan (Head of Housing), Kathryn Hurlock (Asset Investment Manager), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Bridget Law (Programme Manager)

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Geoff Lynch. Councillor Tony Cooper acted as Substitute.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

3 Minutes

It was proposed by Councillor Back, seconded by Councillor Gooch and by majority vote

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 July 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Appointments to Outside Bodies for 2020/21 (Scrutiny Functions)

The Scrutiny Committee received report **ES/0506** which sought consideration of the appointments to Outside Bodies with a scrutiny function for the remainder of the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

It was proposed by Councillor Deacon, seconded by Councillor Gooch, and by unanimous vote

RESOLVED

1. That Councillor Patience and Councillor Cloke be appointed by the Scrutiny Committee to those Outside Bodies with Scrutiny Functions, as outlined in Appendix A, for the remainder of the 2020/21 Municipal Year.
2. That Councillor Beavan and Councillor Cooper be appointed as designated Substitutes and to attend the Outside Bodies indicated at Appendix A in the event that the primary appointee was unavailable
3. That, unless otherwise stated, the Leader of the Council be authorised to appoint to any outstanding vacancies left unfilled by the Scrutiny Committee or that arise throughout the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

5 Cabinet Member's update

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Richard Kerry, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, to the meeting and invited him to provide his update.

Councillor Kerry stated that the Housing Service was one of the largest services in the Council in terms of numbers of staff and size of budgets. It covered everything from the enforcement of housing standards in the private rented sector to the collection of rent from the Council's own tenants, assisting homeless households and rough sleepers, and building new, energy efficient Council homes. He said that, obviously, the Housing Service had undergone a period of momentous change with the current pandemic which has presented significant challenges. Councillor Kerry continued to identify the key priorities and challenges for the Service for the coming year.

The Private Sector Housing Team had left the county-wide home improvement agency in May and launched East Suffolk Independent Living. This was an agency that dealt with adaptations to residents' homes through Disabled Facilities Grants. Early work to pilot a better, more focussed service for customers was underway and already the benefits of the in-house service were becoming evident. The Council was sharing its learning and development with all the Suffolk Council partners as the former county-wide contract came to a close. Embedding East Suffolk Independent Living was a priority for the Housing Service to ensure an improved service was delivered to our community.

Councillor Kerry referred to the Digital Transformation of the Council's landlord service. He said that although this presented a challenge, it also provided a great opportunity to the Council to make efficiencies and improve service delivery to its tenants. The Housing Service embarked on the digital journey some time ago, but this year would see the transformational change.

The Scrutiny Committee was informed that progress to mobile working capability for the Housing Maintenance Team was on track; this would modernise and improve current working methods and the efficiency of the Team's workforce. Housing Services were also working on a tenant's portal app which was almost complete and would be launched in the autumn. This was a mobile ready app that any of the Council's tenants

could sign-up to and receive 24 hour access to their rent balance, the ability to make a payment, set up direct debits, report repairs and send messages. Further developments of the portal were planned to enable more functionality over the next couple of years as other technologies were brought online.

Councillor Kerry said the various housing strategies identified the need for the Council to build more new affordable homes. However, the need to build well and sustainably was the priority. The Housing Services was conscious of the Council's climate emergency declaration and was working with a specialist consultant team to develop Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) for new build council homes. This would reduce the carbon impact on the environment as well as reducing energy costs for tenants.

Finally, Councillor Kerry referred to the Scrutiny Committee's request for a report on the Council's response to rough sleeping through the pandemic, and the potential impact on the Council when the Government's eviction moratorium ended, to be brought to its Extraordinary Meeting in mid-October. He said that addressing rough sleeping remained a high priority and certainly one of the biggest challenges. The Housing Needs Team had worked with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to reprofile the rough sleeping grant funding received before the pandemic to ensure that costs for the rough sleeping Hub were fully covered. In addition, three new fixed term posts dedicated to working with rough sleepers had been created and successfully recruited to. The Council had also submitted a bid to the Government's 'Next Steps Accommodation Programme' for further funding to support those rough sleepers housed as a result of the pandemic. The outcome of the bid was expected in the next few weeks. Councillor Kerry said that, collectively, this should bring real change to the level of rough sleeping in the district and directly impact on people's lives.

In conclusion, Councillor Kerry said the Housing Service was working to meet the needs of local residents in many other ways but he had selected these four as the most significant challenges and priorities to be addressed in the coming months.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Kerry for his informative update. The Chairman invited questions.

Councillor Beavan referred to the cessation of the Government's moratorium on evictions and asked about the anticipated impact of this on the Council. The Chairman reminded the Committee that a written report on this would be received at the Extraordinary Meeting on 15 October, however, he asked Councillor Kerry if he could respond briefly. Councillor Kerry replied that there had been additional demand for social housing during the pandemic and this was anticipated to increase. The Housing Needs Team would continue to work with anyone who contacted them to find suitable accommodation. Councillor Kerry wished to record his praise and thanks to the Housing Service teams for their first class work.

Councillor Topping asked how those tenants that might not wish to take up the offer of an app or portal would be contacted and able to communicate with the Council. Councillor Kerry said a telephone option would always remain available and that it was

appreciated that not all users would wish to use an app. It was however a useful tool for those that did wish to avail themselves of it.

Councillor Topping also referred to some incidences of ex-Council housing having been bought privately but now standing empty; she asked if it was possible to reacquire these bringing them back into use as social housing. Councillor Kerry replied that the Council did re-purchase ex-Council house stock on occasion. The Housing Service team made contact with the owners of empty houses to see if it might be available for purchase. The Chairman asked if this approach cheaper than building new houses; Councillor Kerry said it was cheaper and that right to buy receipts could be used.

Councillor Gooch referred to the demography of the county, in particular the ageing population, and asked if that related to the design of social housing. Councillor Kerry confirmed that families were offered assistance to down-size and that the Council could contribute to moving costs; this was publicised. Councillor Gooch also asked about the access of residents to private green space and asked if the Council was planning to build properties with this or, if not, was it possible to adopt this quickly. Councillor Kerry replied that this was, largely, down to the planning system and policies but, as legislation changed, this ambition would be incorporated.

Councillor Green asked if there were currently any persons placed into bed and breakfast accommodation while more suitable accommodation was identified. Councillor Green also asked how the Council dealt with people who had deliberately and consciously made themselves homeless. Lastly, Councillor Green asked about those constituents who wished to build their own homes to the same green energy standards as he Council. Councillor Kerry replied that there were no people in bed and breakfast accommodation and that the Council had used its own void properties instead. Councillor Kerry that dealing with people who had intentionally made themselves homeless was a challenge but, under legislation, there was no requirement on the Council to house people in these circumstances. Lastly, he said that those wishing to build their own homes would need to seek advice from the Planning department.

Councillor Deacon welcomed the building of Council housing and asked if new tenants would have the right to buy the property. Councillor Kerry confirmed that, within certain clauses, this would be possible. Councillor Deacon asked if the purchased housing stock would then be replaced. Councillor Kerry said that Right to Buy receipts would be used to replace sold stock. Councillor Deacon, with reference to permitted development legislation, asked if the Council might consider constructing additional stories on existing stock. Councillor Kerry said this was not under consideration at the moment.

The Chairman asked Councillor Kerry to indicate his greatest achievement, to date, in his Cabinet Member role. Councillor Kerry said that all achievements were a team effort and praised the teams within Housing Services for their commitment to helping people and getting the job done.

Councillor Gooch noted the carbon neutral green energy ambitions for new social housing stock and asked about the viability of retrospectively fitting this to existing stock. Councillor Kerry said the existing stock was being reviewed, some of it had

limited potential for retrospective fitting. Councillor Kerry said that, in early October, a virtual exercise would be held to explain the vision for carbon neutrality with providers, developer etc. and to ask them to tell the Council how they might be able to assist with meeting that ambition.

Councillor Green referred to a brownfield site in Felixstowe which had had a gasometer removed; she asked if this was a suitable site to obtain for social housing. Councillor Kerry said that there was the potential for the soil to be contaminated and that sometimes such sites were not financially viable for housing to be located on.

6 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Scrutiny Committee received and reviewed its current Work Programme.

7 Exempt/Confidential Items

It was proposed by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Deacon, and by unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government 1972 (as amended), the public be excluded from the Meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

8 Jubilee Terrace Beach Hut Development

- Information relating to any individual.
- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

9 Housing Development

- Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.

The meeting concluded at 9:12 pm

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Chairman