

## **EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Committee:** Stronger Communities Select Committee      **Date:** Tuesday, 12 July 2022

**Place:** Council Chamber - Civic Offices      **Time:** 7.00 - 8.25 pm

**Members Present:** Councillors J Lea (Chairman), J Lucas (Vice-Chairman), C Amos, R Balcombe, I Hadley, R Pugsley, D Wixley and S Yerrell

**Members Present (Virtually):** Councillors D Plummer

**Other Councillors:** Councillors H Whitbread

**Other Councillors (Virtual):** Councillors R Brookes, H Kane, S Kane, A Lion and J H Whitehouse

**Apologies:** S Murray, C Nweke and D Stocker

**Officers Present:** R Perrin (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer) and P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services))

**Officers Present (Virtually):** J Nuth ((interim) Housing Strategy Manager), D Fenton (Service Director (Housing Revenue Account)), S Lewis (Customer Services Manager), R Purse (Senior Business Analyst (GIS & Gazetteer)) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

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### **1. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION**

The Chairman reminded everyone present that this meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

### **2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

The Committee noted that there were no substitute members.

### **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

### **4. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

That the notes of the previous meetings held on 1 and 22 March 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

### **5. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee noted the Terms of Reference and Work Programme.

It was noted that item 22 had been completed as the information had been provided verbally at the the O&S Committee on 16 June 2022 and a written report had been included in the minutes.

**6. CO-OPTION OF INDEPENDENT MEMBER TO STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE FOR 2022/23**

The Committee noted that the Appointments Panel had recommended to Council the co-option of Mr Wyn Marshall to this Committee for the 2022/23 municipal year.

**7. TRANSFER OF SERVICES FROM BROADWAY HOUSING OFFICE**

The Housing and Property Director, D Fenton advised the Committee that following a review of the number of tenants visiting the Broadway office for housing purposes, it was felt that there was a better, more efficient way to provide the services for those people and spend more time in the housing estates. Therefore, it had been proposed to close the Broadway office creating a saving for the council. Furthermore, a local Baptist church in Loughton had contacted the council, to join up with partnerships and other professionals to provide a hub service for tenants and residents. Therefore, enabling the housing officers to provide a flexible service.

The Committee asked questions and made comments on the following points.

- Could the name of the church be provided? It was the Baptist Church, Loughton.
- Had officers considered the religious sensitives with the hub being held in a church? This issue had not been considered, although the services provided in the hub were more community-based rather than religious. It was mentioned that a hub service had been considered by the council at the Broadway office, although a Member had advised officers that as the church had been already providing a similar service, it could seem wasteful and confusing to have two organisations providing the same type of services.
- Where did tenancy lettings/housing sign up's normally take place? It was common practice for signups to take place in the property, following a viewing and on the odd occasion it would take place elsewhere.
- It was noted that the hub would be run by the church and the council would rent a desk when required.
- Did officers know that the St John's the Baptist Church was not on the high street and therefore, may not be as visible as the housing office. It was noted that a shop unit would be used as hub, which would be on the high street.
- What were the rental costs for the hub? The Housing and Property Director, D Fenton advised that the cost had not been negotiated although it would be nothing like the costs associated with the housing office or potential rental income forecast from renting the office.
- Where were users of the housing office travelling from? This information was not available.
- What were the savings and rental costs associated with this decision? It was noted that the savings were £22,000 per year and currently no rental commitment made to the church.
- Would the changes be advertised? Yes, residents and tenants would be informed of the changes through a variety of channels.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee noted the closure of the Broadway Housing Office and the relocation and partnership working within the church hub at St John's, Baptist Church Loughton.

## 8. CASH PAYING CUSTOMERS

The Customer Services Manager, S Lewis advised the Committee that an alternative payment method for customers who continued to rely on cash and/or need of face-to-face assistance to facilitate payments would be required due to the closure of the Broadway office and to improve the general accessibility.

Officers had compared various options to assist cash paying customers with council tax and Non-Domestic Rates and had found that Allpay cards were the most cost-effective alternative, in terms of return investment. Furthermore, housing services were already using this system for their payments. The only inconvenience foreseen, would be that customers would require different Allpay card for each payment service, resulting in possible multiply cards being held by the customer. Although, this would be outweighed by the addition of a district wide face to face services 6 days a week via 20+ Post Office counters, along with the additional ability to pay via over 30 Allpay PayPoints within the district.

The Committee asked questions and made the following comments

- How did the Allpay cards work? The council would issue the customer with a Allpay card for the relevant service that was billed being to them. Then the customer would take both the card and payment to one of the 62 payment locations around the district, where the customer would hand over the card and make a cash, debit/credit payment to the relevant account.
- It was noted that there were a number of post offices missed off the list, although this may have been due to them not having the Allpay facilities.
- What age groups paid in cash? Although the data was not available, in general most people who paid cash were of an older generation and did not have a bank account or were carers or required assistant with technology.
- The council office was a very positive presence in an area of the authority.
- It was noted that Allpay was already used by the housing service, so many customers were already aware of this, and the evidence supported the use of this type of payment working.

### RESOLVED:

1. That the Committee noted that cash paying customers currently using the Loughton Broadway Office would be issued with Allpay cards for council tax and Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)
2. That the Allpay service would be in place before the closure of the Loughton Broadway Cash Office.
3. That following the initial roll-out, the Allpay scheme would be opened to all Council Tax and NNDR customers as an opt-in service.

## 9. SHELTERED HOUSING REFURBISHMENT PROGRAMME

The Housing and Property Director, D Fenton advised that following the successful refurbishment of Frank Bretton House, sheltered housing scheme, the council wished to continue the refurbishment program at other sheltered schemes within the district to make the communal areas feel modern, welcoming, and desirable.

The pilot refurbishment took 6 months to complete, and resident's feedback had been obtained from 75% of tenants, which would assist with the order of works and improving the customer experience going forward.

The Committee asked questions and made the following comments

- That it was a great idea to upgrade these types of properties to attract more residents in sheltered accommodation.
- That local artwork could be used in future refurbishments.
- That residents should be made aware of potential increases in rent due to the refurbishments, as this may affect tenants on pensions credits. It was noted that the £7.70 charge had been added as a service charge and the charge would be paid for those tenants who were in receipt of housing benefits. Any tenants that were near the payment threshold, would be assisted by officers in making application to assist with the service charge.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the Committee noted the successful refurbishment of Frank Bretton House, Sheltered Housing Scheme.
2. That the Committee recommended approval be given to the continuation of the sheltered housing refurbishment program undertaking refurbishments at one to two sheltered schemes a year until complete to Cabinet.
3. That the sheltered housing refurbishments were eligible for Housing Benefit and the Council funded the scheme upfront with money from the HRA, which had a new component added to the service charge and had been accounted for in the HRA business plan.

**10. CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HOUSING - PAPER 1**

The Housing and Property Director, D Fenton advised the Committee that the report provided members with an overview of the Consumer Standards in which registered providers were obliged to adhere to and the council would need to be plan for and resource accordingly. There was emphasise on tenants involvement and empowerment as well as health and safety and part of this included informing members of the changes and their responsibilities under the new landscape, including the national context and local context.

It was noted that all local authorities were now to be regulated by the regulator of social housing. The regulator produced a regulatory framework that housing associations and now councils must adhere to and were included in the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-standards#our-approach>

The regulations were now in place, and it was normal practice for organisations to undertake a mock IDA to help understand the gaps and assist in developing an action plan. Officers would be looking to commission this shortly and present a report to the relevant committee later in the year. There were significant areas of work for the housing teams and members would be kept informed of the progress.

The Committee made comments and asked questions on the following

- How much would this cost the council? At present it was not known, although the housing team were scoping out the requirements.
- Would leaseholder be included? This was specifically for tenants although there were changes for leaseholders which would be brought to members attention.
- Compliance could be very detailed; would members be supported in order to understand the impact of these regulations? The Cabinet would be receiving a briefing concerning Building Safety and Construction (Design and Management) CDM regulations and various officers had completed training in these regulations in order to assist members.
- What was an IDA? It was noted that an IDA was an In-depth Assessment, which would be carried out by the regulators from social housing.
- Does the council have to comply with all the regulations? Yes.
- Had these regulations been developed following the Grenfell Tower disaster? Yes.
- It was noted that the Housing Regulator and Housing Ombudsman would be very strict with authorities on compliance going forward.

**RESOLVED:**

That members noted the changing landscape for housing and property services.

**11. REVIEW OF HOUSING STRATEGY 2022-2027**

The Interim Team Manager for Housing Strategy, J Nuth informed the Committee that the current Housing Strategy 2018-2022 had been due for renewal and although the Housing Strategy was not a statutory requirement, it provided a cohesive direction of travel for cross-cutting housing related services. The aim of the strategy was to reflect and facilitate the co-ordination of activities for those services that directly impact on current and projected need for and supply of affordable housing in the district.

A review of the Housing Strategy commenced in May 2021 which was underpinned by a review of the Allocations Scheme, the Tenancy Policy and the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. These were approved by Cabinet on 1 March 2022 and would take effective in September 2022 for the period 2022-2027.

The Committee asked questions and made the following comments

- Would the green spaces within the urban areas be protected for recreational use? It had been noted that Homes England had linked health and wellbeing to the external environment and requirements were being incorporated into the National Planning Policy Framework for new developments and regeneration project either to provide or enhanced and protect green spaces. These requirements were also key features in the Council's 'More bricks and mortar' project.
- Would older properties be made more energy efficient? It was noted that the council had been working on proposals and funding with E-ON for a pilot scheme to retrofit the older councils' properties to become more energy efficient.
- What were the costs involved for the council? It was noted that the Housing Strategy spanned a number of existing services and partnerships and would be delivered through greater collaboration between these services and partnerships.

- What was the DWELL standard? It was a standard for older peoples housing. DWELL (Designing for Wellbeing in Environment for Later Life)
- What was an EPC? It was noted that it was an Energy Performance Certificate, which was required for a property when it was rented. It contained information about the property's energy use, typical energy costs and recommendations about how to reduce energy use and save money.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the Committee noted the draft Public Consultation Outcome Report for the Review of the Housing Strategy 2022-2027 at Appendix 1.
2. That the Committee noted the draft vision, five proposed priorities and associated aims and objectives for the draft Housing Strategy 2022-2027.
3. That the Committee noted the proposal to delegate authority to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community to approve the periodic publication of an associated Housing Strategy Action Plan.
4. That the Committee noted the proposal to ensure the Housing Strategy for 2022-2027 was reviewed and updated no later than 2027.
5. That the report be recommended to Cabinet for approval with no changes.

**12. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Committee noted that the date of the next meeting would be 20 September 2022.

**CHAIRMAN**