



STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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HOUSING COMMITTEE

05 July 2022

7.00 - 8.41 pm

Council Chamber

Minutes

Membership

Councillor Mattie Ross (Chair)

Councillor Paula Baker
Councillor Katrina Davis
Councillor Colin Fryer
Councillor Lindsey Green
Councillor Laurie Davies

*= Absent

Councillor Lucas Schoemaker (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Nicholas Housden
Councillor Steve Hynd
Councillor Jenny Miles
Councillor Loraine Patrick

* Councillor Christopher Jockel *

Officers in Attendance

Strategic Director of Communities
Head of Service Counter Fraud and
Enforcement Unit
Head of Strategic Housing Services
(Interim)
Operations Manager

Senior Housing Strategy & Enabling Officer
Housing Manager
Compliance and Assurance Manager
Housing Advice Officer
Democracy & Information Governance
Officer

Tenant Representatives

Becky Adams

Mike Richter

HC.001 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Davies and Jockel.

HC.002 Declaration of Interests

There were none.

HC.003 Minutes

Councillor Schoemaker raised a question regarding page 4 where it referenced an overspend of income. It was confirmed that it meant that there was extra income.

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 April 2022 were approved as a correct record.

HC.004 **Public Question Time**

There were none.

HC.005 **Final Report Out of Hours (OOH) Action Plan**

The Strategic Director of Communities introduced the report and drew the Committees attention to appendix A which showed the corrective action plan. This was divided into 4 parts which consisted of:

- Part 1 - Working procedures and roles and responsibilities needed to be refreshed. There was a need for an updated procedure manual.
- Part 2 – Contract and risk management. Excelsis had been updated to reflect any high-level risk.
- Part 3 – Insourcing.
- Part 4 – Performance and reporting.

Councillor Housden questioned the 85% target of answered calls on page 37 of the reports pack, which had been downgraded from the original target due to being unachievable. He noted that Stroud District Council (SDC) had been achieving a figure of 85.5% which meant that between 30 - 40 calls were going unanswered a month. The Strategic Director of Resources explained that they were working very hard in a difficult environment to bring those figures back up.

It was confirmed that there was a separate column on page 37 that showed the number of calls that were cancelled by the caller.

The Strategic Director of Resources gave the following responses to questions asked regarding page 37 of the document pack:

- The longest wait figure found in the table was an average of the wait times experienced across the reporting month.
- It was agreed to get back to Councillor Green with the reasons for the average idle time and the average hold time containing no data.
- It was agreed to get back to Councillor Housden with the target percentage of calls answered under the previous contract.

Councillor Hynd proposed and Councillor Baker seconded.

Councillor Baker and Councillor Miles commended the report.

Mr Ritcher, tenant representative, raised concerns that the figures reported were during months with minimal emergencies.

Councillor Housden expressed further concerns regarding the 15% of calls that go unanswered every month.

Councillor Schoemaker stated that it was too early to judge the performance of the contractor. If the figures remained at the same level after a 6-month period then it would need to be investigated further but currently there was a marked improvement month by month.

Councillors Green and Hynd echoed Councillor Schoemakers comments.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED To note the corrective actions already implemented.

HC.006 Prosecution of Housing and Tenancy Fraud on Behalf of Social Housing

The Head of Service, Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit (CFEU), introduced the report and explained that it was a shared service between 6 different councils including SDC. They assisted with Housing Fraud prevention as well as with the prosecution side for Social Housing providers and SDC.

In response to Councillors questions the Head of Service CFEU gave the following responses:

- All costs were billed to the Social Housing Providers, and they would always invoice any costs associated.
- It was agreed to provide data outside of the meeting for the partnership including where a prosecution had taken place, the costs involved and to provide the updated loss avoidance costs and legal costs.

The Housing Manager agreed to provide some internal examples of fraud investigations and the costs surrounding them. She further informed the Committee that they hadn't had to take legal action yet but had taken back a few properties as a result of investigations.

The Head of Service CFEU gave the following answers in response to questions:

- The partnership was formed to widen the fraud investigations from benefit fraud to all departments within a council. Enforcement was difficult for some councils to fulfil therefore the partnership provided specialist skills in order to complete tasks when a council had a lack of knowledge or experience.
- In every case they would look at the tenant and their situation to ascertain their involvement with the fraud. The team was extremely sensitive at managing safeguarding issues and worked with other departments to ensure a holistic approach to educate and support individuals where required.

In response to Councillor Patrick, the Head of Service CFEU explained that the review of emergency gold and silver banded applications was to help identify people who had forgotten to update their circumstances as well as those who were misrepresenting themselves and being dishonest.

In response to Mr Ritcher, tenant representative, the Head of Service CFEU confirmed that they were funded through the 6 partner Councils who paid for their services.

Councillor Miles proposed and Councillor Fryer seconded.

Councillor Baker commended the services provided by the CFEU.

Councillor Green expressed her support for the report and stated that it would send out a good message to prevent people from committing fraud.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED To:

- a) Note the content of the report;
- b) Endorse the use of appropriate enforcement powers and those powers set out in the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act 2013 (POSHFA); and
- c) Support the prosecution (where appropriate) of housing and tenancy fraud offences committed in relation to properties owned by the Authority or Social Housing providers within the District.

HC.007 **Progress Update on Key Action Plans (Cleaner Estates and Service Standards)**

The Housing Manager provided a brief verbal update which included:

- They were looking to identify a few areas to place closed skips around the district in order to save money and speed up the fly-tipping collection process.
- They had procured art research to carry out the STAR survey which would be taking place in October.
- As part of the Tenant Engagement Action Plan, the tenant representatives had now begun their mentoring and inductions which were delayed due to Covid.
- The role for the Tenant Engagement Officer had been advertised.
- 10 tenants had undertaken scrutiny training and would be scrutinising different council departments in the coming months.
- They would be re-naming the Neighbourhood Management Officers to Housing Officers for simplicity.
- They would be working with the Planned Maintenance Team to look ahead at the work that would be carried out in order to plan ahead for things like scaffolding.

In response to questions regarding the closed skips the Housing Manager confirmed:

- They would be placed in identified hot spots where fly-tipping was abundant.
- The areas surrounding the skips would be closely monitored to ensure the problem hadn't been moved elsewhere.
- They were looking for a few locations to place a number of skips as part of a larger trial period for 3 months.
- It was agreed to bring the figures for the cost of the skips used against the cost of fly-ripping to the next committee meeting to see how much had been saved.

HC.008 **Appointment of Performance Monitors**

Lindsey Green and Trina Davis were re-appointed as performance monitors.

HC.009 **Member / Officer Reports**

- a) Information Sheet - Rough Sleeper Initiatives

The information sheet was circulated as part of the reports pack, prior to the meeting.

It was agreed to get further information of all the provisions available within the district and circulate outside of the meeting.

- b) Tenant Representatives (verbal report)

Mr Ritcher, tenant representative, explained that the tenants had been preparing for scrutiny panels. One of the areas they had identified to look into was the voids turnaround time and compare this to similar councils. They would also be looking at the state of the properties before they were let to tenants.

Miss Adams, tenant representative, provided a brief update their induction where they had visited the Littlecombe site for a tour.

c) Performance Monitoring

Councillor Green introduced the report and explained that they had focused on a few key parts that they felt were the most important to the Housing Committee. If any Councillors wished to focus on something not on the list then they were open to suggestions.

d) Retrofit / Carbon Reduction Task and Finish Group Update

It was agreed to move this item to the next housing committee.

e) Tenant Engagement and Empowerment Task and Finish Group Update

Councillor Fryer gave a brief verbal update to the Committee which included:

- The scrutiny panel was being set up for September.
- 3 tenant engagement sessions were held at Gloucester cricket club where 16 new tenants expressed an interest in available roles.
- Recruitment was going ahead for the new Tenant Engagement Officer
- Planned to hold monthly sessions in the Stonehouse and Paganhill housing hubs.
- TPAS housing conference was upcoming for staff and tenants.

Councillor Miles queried the complaints process and enquired whether the council could work with an independent person in order to support tenants with any complaints they had. The Housing Manager confirmed that tenants were now able to write directly to the Ombudsman without first going through the council's system.

f) Housing Repairs and Voids Task and Finish Group Update

Councillor Baker summarised the work that had been completed previously by the Task and Finish Group.

The Operations Manager further updated the committee of the recent updates that the team had been working on which included:

- Void figures had been reduced from 164 to around 50 properties.
- There were some longer-term properties which still needed to be resolved.
- There were concerns for recruitment due to the large movement from gas to renewables where there was a lack of knowledge and experience.
- They were working with tenants to identify areas of overlapping responsibility where the tenants could do things to prevent damage and protect areas in the home.

The Chair commended the figures and the hard work that had gone into reducing the number of void properties.

In response to Councillor Green the Operations Manager confirmed:

- They were now engaged with a firm called Energy Angels who would work as an intermediary. They would support with changing metres, swapping ISO switches, and getting power back to properties where it had been shut off.
- They were looking to get towards a normal level of operation after the backlog created by Covid. Once in this position they would be setting targets for each category of voids in order to better manage the performance.
- The next round of apprenticeship requirement would be targeted towards renewable energy.

HC.010 **Work Programme**

The Chair informed the committee that the Older Persons Strategy and the Tenant Handbook reports had been moved from the December committee to the January committee in order to provide enough time in the December committee to consider the budgets.

HC.011 **Members' Questions**

There were none.

The meeting closed at 8.41 pm

Chair