

Minutes

RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

21 July 2022

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge



	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chairman) Colleen Sullivan (Vice-Chairman) Scott Farley (Opposition Lead) Janet Gardner Sital Punja Peter Smallwood Heena Makwana</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Mark Billings, Head of Housing Options, Homelessness & Standards Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services Maureen Pemberton, Head of Revenues Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer Iain Watters, Director - Strategic and Operational Finance Debby Weller, Housing Policy and Strategy Manager Tony Zaman, Interim Chief Executive</p>
10.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ekta Gohil with Councillor Heena Makwana substituting.</p>
11.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
12.	<p>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 15 June 2022 be agreed as an accurate record.</p>
13.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THOSE MARKED PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items of business were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
14.	<p>CONSULTATION ON THE COUNCIL STRATEGY 2022 - 2026 (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Tony Zaman, Interim Chief Executive, and Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central</p>

Services, provided an overview of the Council Strategy 2022-2026. The strategy set out the Council's high-level objectives for the next four years and aimed to ensure services worked together across Directorates to achieve better outcomes for residents. It set out ambitions both for residents and for the Council. Five commitments to residents were incorporated within the strategy relating to: Safe and Strong Communities; Thriving, Health Households; a Green and Sustainable Borough; a Thriving Economy and a Digital-Enabled, Modern, Well-Run Council. Specific targets for the Council were not included in the Strategy but would be reflected in the annual delivery plan.

A consultation stage would actively seek the views of residents, partner organisations and businesses and would inform the final strategy which would be presented to Cabinet in October 2022. The consultation stage would also invite comments from the Select Committees.

Members enquired how the Council intended to interact with hard-to-reach communities noting that some residents would be reluctant or unable to use digital platforms. It was confirmed that community groups and faith leaders would be actively engaged. Ward Councillors would also be encouraged to promote services and assist residents in accessing help and support. Members heard that approximately 81,000 residents had already signed up to 'My Account' which was encouraging. It was hoped that this number would continue to increase; however, it was acknowledged that some residents preferred to access Council services in traditional ways.

Members noted the importance of residents having the confidence to access services independently rather than being reliant on their Ward Councillors. The Committee was informed that the NHS had been working on a project in North West London to gain a better understanding of local communities; the Council intended to 'piggy back' onto this in the future to target hard-to-reach communities. Moreover, services would be localities-based and differentiated according to the needs of local residents – this model would be included in the Council's future service plan.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that the Council aimed to eliminate rough sleeping by 2024 in line with Central Government objectives. A target of zero had been set; however, Central Government had been informed that this would be difficult to achieve in Hillingdon given the existence of Heathrow Airport in the Borough. Members were informed that the Council had a responsibility to ensure that all new housing developments were appropriately located. Moreover, it was committed to enabling more residential properties in the Borough in line with planning policy.

Members requested further clarification regarding 'My Account' usage. It was confirmed that a heat map by Ward had been shared with the Cabinet Member. Analysis of 'My Account' usage information would enable the Council to target those areas / community groups with lower take up. In terms of access to technology, it was acknowledged that some residents were unable to afford broadband, buy devices etc. The Council would work in collaboration with local partners and organisations to support these residents e.g. by providing access to reduced-cost broadband / free devices for families. The Council aimed to be as digital as possible in the future; however, it was acknowledged that the movement to a digital framework had to match the needs of society – some groups may not be able to access digital information, may lack technical skills or may struggle to understand due to language barriers.

In response to further questions from the Committee, Members were advised that steps

were being taken to make better use of all data currently available (to include Hillingdon First data). This would facilitate studies into patterns of behaviour and would enable officers to better understand the needs of residents across the Borough.

At the request of Members, it was agreed that resident associations would be contacted regarding the strategy prior to the close of the consultation period. It was further agreed that the maintenance of trees would be included in the strategy under section 3 (A Green and Sustainable Borough). Any further questions or comments could be forwarded to Democratic Services.

Select Committee comments on the Strategy would be delegated to the Democratic Services Officer, in conjunction with the Chairman and in consultation with the Opposition Lead.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the report be noted.**

15. **EMPTY PROPERTIES (COUNCIL TAX PREMIUM & EMPTY DWELLING MANAGEMENT ORDERS)** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Iain Watters - Head of Finance – Financial Planning, Capital, Treasury & Systems, Maureen Pemberton – Head of Revenues, Debby Weller – Housing Policy and Strategy Manager and Mark Billings – Head of Housing Options, Homelessness and Standards presented the report which provided information in relation to the use of the Council Tax Premium and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

Members were informed that there were currently approximately 1,100 empty and exempt properties in Hillingdon. It was confirmed that, since 1 April 2013, the Council had been able to charge an empty home premium on a property that had been unoccupied and unfurnished for two years or more. At the time the premium had been up to an extra 50% of the council tax on the property. Since 2019 it had been possible to increase this premium to 100% for properties that remained empty longer than two years. Further increases were now possible for properties empty for longer than 5 years (200%) and 10 years (300%). Hillingdon charged a 150% Empty Homes Premium at present.

In terms of Empty Dwelling Management Orders, the Committee heard that these were a useful tool but were currently used as a last resort due to the risks involved – it was often difficult to recover the costs involved in getting a property up to standard. The preferred approach at present was to offer advice and persuade owners to bring properties back into use. It was acknowledged that this was an area for review; further investigation was required to better understand the options open to officers and which were most beneficial / cost effective. Enforcement action was an option but none of the enforcement options were straightforward and all would require further resource.

Members requested further clarification regarding properties exempt from Council Tax – class F (6 months exemption following the grant of probate / letters of administration after the death of an occupier). It was confirmed that such situations would be monitored carefully and appropriate action taken. There was sometimes a delay in applications for probate or there could be a dispute therefore this was at times a lengthy process. In cases where the deceased had no family, the Council would look at land registry records or conduct other research in relation to the case.

The Committee requested further information regarding the 163 properties currently attracting the Empty Property Premium of 150%. It was confirmed that a breakdown of the banding for these properties could be obtained.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that, where a property was found to be unoccupied, the recovery of an outstanding tax debt was challenging; the liable party had to be identified and located first to enable recovery action to be taken. An external inspection unit would be utilised to pursue the case and a statutory process through court would ensue which could ultimately lead to a charging order or forced sale.

Members enquired whether current legislation enabled the Council to do its job effectively. It was confirmed that, although the powers were generally in place, processes were often lengthy and complex. More legislation to support the local authority would be welcomed. It was anticipated that an empty property strategy would be drafted later in the year to set out what could be done within existing resources. To date 4 of the 163 long term empty properties had been brought back in to use – it was hoped that this situation would continue to improve.

In terms of concerns re. fire safety, Members heard that the Council's ASB team had the power to clear front gardens and could put a charge on an empty property. It was likely that this work would become increasingly important given the repercussions of climate change and its impact on the environment.

In response to Members' enquiries, it was confirmed that officers already worked together to delegate tasks across departments; opportunities to improve on this would be investigated further. The Committee felt it should be easier for residents to report empty properties online (though it would not be possible to publish a full list of such properties across the Borough). It was confirmed that, at present, most of the information regarding empty properties was sourced from Council Tax records. Member enquiries in relation to empty properties were also encouraged.

Members were informed that, as part of the Housing and Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategies, an extensive project was underway across West London and Hillingdon regarding the best use of housing stock.

It was agreed that a potential increase in the premium chargeable on empty homes to 200% would be kept under review. Members requested sight of the new empty property strategy once available; it was agreed that this would be added to the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Residents' Services Select Committee Work Programme be updated to include the new empty property strategy; and**
- 2. That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the position on Council Tax charges for empty properties and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.**

Members were thanked for the ideas provided to date. Further suggestions for review topics / information items included:

1. Housing Repairs – Members noted that, at present, kitchens / bathrooms were only refurbished after a set period of time had elapsed; it was suggested that there should be some flexibility and frequency of repairs prioritised depending on need (potential review topic);
2. Homelessness / Clients presenting to Housing Services – the process to be as supportive as possible and all avenues to be explored to ensure people were rehomed appropriately (potential review topic);
3. The impact of HS2 on residents’ services (parking, traffic etc) – information item to add to the work programme;
4. Climate Action Plan – climate change and its impact on how the Council managed services – to be followed up after October 2022;
5. Alleygating – Democratic Services to explore previous work on this topic – possible information / review item to add to work programme;
6. Enforcement of removal of ‘To Let’ signs / flyposting within the Borough (Members heard that the Borough Solicitor had previously written to estate agents stating that To Let signs must be removed at the appropriate time);
7. ‘A Thriving Economy’ (Council Strategy 2022-26) – ‘support thriving multi-purpose, viable town centres, including creating a new master plan for Uxbridge’ – potential longer-term review topic;
8. Enforcement of Deliveroo drivers who occupy parking spaces and are not fined for doing so. Democratic Services to ask the ASB team to incorporate this into their information report to be presented to the Committee in September 2022 or ask Roy Clark to prepare report if his area.

It was agreed that Democratic Services would explore the feasibility of the proposed Homelessness / Housing Repairs review topics and report back to the Committee in September 2022. The proposed additional information items would be added to the Work Programme.

RESOLVED: That the Residents’ Services Select Committee:

1. **Noted the guidance on undertaking policy reviews in Appendix 1;**
2. **Sought to make use of the scorecard to assess any policy review topic ideas; and**
3. **Developed a shortlist of two potential topic ideas for officers to scope further and report back to the Committee on feasibility.**

17. **FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 8*)

Members noted that a number of the officers who appeared on the Forward Plan no longer worked at the Council, namely: James Rodger and Victoria Boorman. Democratic Services agreed to amend the Forward Plan accordingly.

RESOLVED: That the Residents’ Services Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

18. **WORK PROGRAMME** (*Agenda Item 9*)

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee considered the report and agreed any amendments.
The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.22 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny on 01895 250185 or epenny@hillington.gov.uk
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