

Minutes

RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

13 March 2024

Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre



HILLINGDON
LONDON

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chair) Colleen Sullivan (Vice-Chair) Scott Farley (Opposition Lead) Janet Gardner Ekta Gohil Sital Punja Peter Smallwood</p> <p>Others Present: Melissa Blower (Housing Improvement Programme Manager) Sophie Coughlan (Arboricultural Manager) Stuart Hunt (Head of Green Spaces) Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services) Maggie Nelson (Head of Housing Needs) Liz Penny (Democratic Services Officer) Ian Thynne (Head of Environmental Specialists) Richard Webb (Director of Community Safety & Enforcement) Debby Weller (Head of Housing Strategy and Policy)</p>
56.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>There were no apologies for absence.</p>
57.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
58.	<p>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>In relation to the Community Infrastructure Levy and S106 Monitoring – Annual Report item, Members noted that, although “the statutory requirements in terms of the information required to be published had been met”, the Committee had previously been informed that they would be provided with said information but this had not happened.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 13 February 2024 be agreed subject to the aforementioned amendment in relation to the information provided to Committee Members.</p>
59.	<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>
<p>60.</p>	<p>REVIEW OF HOMELESS PREVENTION & THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY - WITNESS SESSION 1 (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services), Melissa Blower (Housing Improvement Programme Manager), Debby Weller (Head of Housing Strategy and Policy) and Maggie Nelson (Head of Housing Needs) were in attendance to present the report and answer Members' questions.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Central Services acknowledged that the current situation in relation to homelessness was extremely challenging. There had been a 27% increase in demand with 100 people presenting as homeless each week. This was primarily being driven by evictions from private rental accommodation. It was noted that, over the last five years, there had been an increase in demand but a 41% reduction in affordable privately rented accommodation supply. The Council's strategy focussed on homelessness prevention and boosting of supply; 500 new homes were to be purchased and officers were also exploring ways in which they could increase supply in the private rental sector. The Council was also investing in improved systems and processes to improve the customer experience.</p> <p>The Head of Housing Needs addressed the Committee Members and provided an overview of the customer pathway from start to finish. Members heard that customers usually approached the Council via the website in the first instance by completing an online form. The information provided was assessed and advice and guidance given if necessary. If appropriate, the enquiry was then passed to the triage team who assisted the customer in providing the information required and determined which additional documents needed to be provided. This enabled the team to establish whether the customer was eligible for assistance; some applicants had limited / no recourse to public funds. If eligibility was established, the case was assigned to a case officer.</p> <p>Once assigned to a case officer, the first stage was prevention; officers tried to intervene as early as possible e.g. by negotiating with landlords in an attempt to enable the tenant to stay in their current accommodation. If prevention was unsuccessful, the next stage was the relief stage at which point alternative accommodation was sought. A maximum of 56 days was allocated for both the prevention and relief stages of the process. During the relief stage, advice and guidance was provided to assist the client in securing accommodation. If they had a priority need for temporary accommodation, this would be provided. Temporary accommodation for larger families was difficult to source and very expensive, so these families were sometimes encouraged to remain in situ for as long as possible i.e. until a bailiff warrant was secured; however, they had the right to assist on temporary accommodation being provided if they did not wish to wait.</p> <p>Once an individual or a family had been placed in temporary accommodation, officers then tried to secure private rented accommodation for them; affordability was a factor and the accommodation offered was sometimes out of borough. Once a property had been secured and the clients had moved in, the duty was discharged. If no accommodation had been organised by day 57 of the relief stage, officers would need to reach a decision within 15 days as to whether the Council had a longer-term duty to them.</p>

It was acknowledged that the current situation was challenging with fewer houses becoming available. Many landlords were increasing their rents or choosing to sell their properties. Officers were aware that this was a very stressful situation for people and tried to be as empathetic as possible.

The Head of Housing Strategy and Policy was in attendance and provided an update on partnerships around homelessness. Members heard that the Council had a number of established partnerships with the voluntary sector, particularly with Trinity who assisted in meeting the needs of rough sleepers. Thames Reach also worked closely with the Council and helped with outreach projects to identify those who were sleeping rough at Heathrow and throughout the Borough. Heathrow presented a significant challenge - Thames Reach worked at the airport and a mental health worker also visited the airport to assist.

The Committee was informed that first stage accommodation was available at Olympic House which was managed by Trinity. There were other similar accommodation options across the borough which offered a lot of support including in relation to the health aspects associated with rough sleeping – this was mainly funded by CNWL. The funding was in place until the end of 2025, but it was hoped it would continue thereafter. Other support for those with drug or alcohol addiction was available through Arch – Hillingdon; grant funding was also available for this service.

Members heard that the Homelessness Strategy was a statutory 5-year document which ran until the end of 2024 and was in the process of being reviewed. It was anticipated that a draft of the new Strategy would be available in the autumn. There had been a number of key changes and 'Project Neptune' would feed into the new Strategy. There would be a focus on prevention and the issue of Autism / ADHD and the homeless would be explored which had not been included in the past. The current Strategy would be reviewed over the course of the next few months and the consultation process would be completed over the summer. Service users would be involved in this process to ensure their experience of the customer journey and how this fed into service provision was included.

Members sought further clarification regarding the current staff training programme noting that service users often presented with mental health issues, and some reported that officers were judgemental and lacked empathy. In response to this, it was confirmed that training was available for all staff. Trauma-informed issues training was to be introduced in the near future and was booked for 1 May 2024. New training was also to be introduced in response to new legislation which set out the duty of the Council in respect of domestic abuse.

In response to further questions from Councillors, it was confirmed that, in the past, customers often had the same case officer throughout the housing process. Unfortunately, this was no longer the case due to staff turnover and an increase in case numbers; there was a reliance on technology to ensure cases were effectively passed on to new officers.

Members sought further clarity regarding the 56-day relief stage of the process. It was confirmed that, if a suitable property were secured, it would be offered to the family in question. The family was not obliged to accept the property but, if they chose not to, the Council's duty would be discharged at that point. The customer could request an independent review and a decision would be taken independently – a further 56 days were allocated for this process. Should the Council's original decision be upheld, its

duty would be discharged at that point. However, if the Council's decision were overturned, the family would be offered an alternative property in due course.

With regard to accountability, the Committee was advised that officers were responsible for ensuring all the necessary information was on file. Senior officers carried out quality assurance checks and met with officers once a month to review their caseload and address any concerns.

Members expressed concern regarding the mental health and wellbeing of officers who were often overloaded with work. It was acknowledged that it was a very stressful role - some officers had previously had up to 100 open cases which was unmanageable. 5 new officers had been recruited to assist and 150 cases had been transferred across to said officers. Staff wellbeing was taken seriously, and extra support was available if needed.

In response to further questions from Councillors, it was confirmed that an out of hours housing service was available. It was acknowledged that not all people wanted to / were able to apply for housing assistance online. If necessary, those who presented in person were directed to support services who could assist them in registering online. Information was also available in other languages. It was confirmed that those who were granted leave to remain were given 28 days' notice then received an eviction letter which only allowed them one week to vacate their premises. Housing officers were working with the Home Office and it had recently been agreed that the 28-day letter would be accepted as notice giving local authorities more time to find appropriate accommodation. It was acknowledged that the situation in relation to single people was particularly challenging as they often did not have a priority need for accommodation.

Councillors enquired whether the IT systems currently in place were fit for purpose and asked how the expectations of clients were managed. In response to this, the Head of Housing Needs recognised that some people thought it was better to present as homeless rather than waiting for a Council property. This was never a good idea. Officers always tried to manage the expectations of customers and ensured they fully understood the process. In terms of the IT systems, Members were informed that Locata was currently used for housing allocations and Jigsaw for homeless applications. From April 2024, the current Jigsaw system would be changing to a Locata-based system thereby enabling the two systems to work together more efficiently. It was confirmed that the new systems would enable officers to drill further into the data to establish patterns and take a more proactive approach. Complaints data would also be used to drive improvements, inform training and improve communication.

Members requested a presentation on the new systems as this would be beneficial.

In terms of acquiring new properties, the Corporate Director of Central Services confirmed that all options were being considered and speed was of the essence. During the first year of a 3-year programme, it would be necessary to purchase property directly, but it was important to ensure that this process did not end up triggering homelessness. If landlords had empty properties or a portfolio to sell, the Council may consider such purchases where appropriate. All options were being considered to boost supply including private rentals of reasonable quality. The social sector was also being explored. The Council would also ensure it achieved the maximum possible in terms of grant funding.

With regard to temporary accommodation, it was recognised that people were sometimes housed in an overcrowded situation for a while due to a lack of available accommodation. If the temporary accommodation provided was not acceptable, action would be taken and the customer would be removed.

Councillors noted that the standard of accommodation provided by private landlords was often unacceptable. A charter was proposed to ensure properties were fully and appropriately vetted. It was suggested that properties should be inspected by other parties to ensure they met the required standard.

At the request of Members, it was agreed that the Head of Housing Needs would prepare a step-by-step summary of the homelessness process which would be circulated to the Select Committee.

It was suggested that a visit to the contact centre would be beneficial to enable Members to better understand the process and see firsthand how officers interacted with other departments across the Council when handling housing-related calls.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of homelessness and the customer journey in Hillingdon .

61. **CRIME & DISORDER SCRUTINY: SAFER HILLINGDON PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE UPDATE** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Richard Webb, Director of Community Safety & Enforcement, was in attendance to answer Members' questions regarding the Safer Hillingdon Partnership Performance Update report.

Members commented that much of the data provided in the report was a little unclear and out-of-date. It was confirmed that older data had been provided as it related to the end of the strategy period. It was acknowledged that a new dashboard would be required in the future to provide further detail and a level of insight previously not available. More work was needed in the serious violence strategy to engage communities and make a difference in terms of serious violence in the Borough.

With regard to the information set out on page 9 of the report regarding IRIS, Members noted that there was no mention of domestic abuse relating to men, the elderly and LGBTQ+ groups. It was important to ensure that GPs were fully trained to meet the needs of all.

In respect of the utilisation of resources as mentioned in the report on page 9, point 4, Members heard that a new joint process between the local authority and the Police was in place. Each month a review was conducted to ensure Police / Council alignment on matters which would make the biggest difference across the Borough. It was noted that the Council had a Safer Communities Team; however, the Council's response to crime and disorder concerns covered several teams – it was important to pull together to address the problems most effectively.

Members were informed that the IRIS project would provide training in GP surgeries noting that GP referrals into domestic abuse support services were currently very low.

The aim was to ensure that all GPs were responding to the signs.

With regard to knife crime, it was recognised that this was a broad term – a further breakdown of the different types of knife crime could be requested. It was confirmed that the main issue related to young people carrying knives in the vicinity of schools rather than inside the schools themselves.

Members enquired how often the SHP priorities were reviewed noting the proliferation of burglaries in the Borough. The Committee was informed that the SHP reviewed its priorities annually – it was important to consider the impact of crime in addition to volume. The SHP was exploring better ways of factoring in all these elements.

The Committee emphasised the importance of community engagement given the diverse communities across the Borough. The Director of Community Safety & Enforcement concurred with this and recognised the importance of involving local communities in helping to form the Strategy and determine priorities; this was not embedded in processes at present. Members were informed that the SHP would be meeting the following week and a Community Engagement event was one item for discussion.

Councillors enquired whether members of the Safer Neighbourhood Board (SNB) could be more involved with the work of the Safer Hillingdon Partnership (SHP). The Director of Community Safety & Enforcement explained that the Chair of the SNB was a member of the SHP but agreed to consider additional ways in which other members could be involved.

It was noted that the Strategy document provided was the starting point only which created the framework – it had been important to meet the 31 January 2024 deadline. The Strategy would be refreshed later in the year and would be supported by a more detailed plan. It was confirmed that the Theory of Change model was a relatively new concept hence the use of experienced trainers was recommended.

Members thanked the Director of Community Safety & Enforcement for his input but felt it was imperative that a representative of the Metropolitan Police attend future meetings to provide a fuller update in relation to Crime and Disorder in the Borough.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the contents of the reports and asked questions in order to clarify matters of concern or interest in the Borough.

62. **TREE PLANTING** (*Agenda Item 7*)

Stuart Hunt, Head of Green Spaces, and Sophie Coughlan, Arboricultural Manager, were in attendance to answer Members' questions in relation to the Tree Planting report.

Members sought clarification regarding the apparent dip in the number of trees planted in the Borough this year. It was confirmed that, in previous years, the figures had included the planting of Whips; this year more Standards had been planted than Whips which accounted for the dip in numbers.

Councillors enquired how often trees were planted in the same area as trees which had been cut down. Members heard that these figures were not recorded. However, it was

important to note that trees fared better when planted in areas where the residents wanted them. If a tree had been removed, residents could submit a request for a replacement tree; however, it was not always possible to replace like for like.

Members were informed that sponsorships in collaboration with residents were also encouraged; a one-off sponsorship fee was chargeable and multiple residents could come together to sponsor a tree as a group should they wish to do so. Trees for Streets carried out leaflet drops in relation to this, and further information would be provided in Hillingdon People magazine. Sponsorships could also come from companies – particularly in the case of more deprived areas. Members welcomed this approach and felt businesses should be encouraged to support the Trees for Streets initiative. It was confirmed that the map on page 83 of the agenda pack reflected sponsorships only; additional tree planting was carried out across the Borough to even things out and ensure good coverage.

The Committee sought further clarification regarding the information in the table on page 81 of the agenda pack which showed the numbers of trees removed / planted year by year. It was confirmed it could take ten or more years for Whips to be helpful in tackling air pollution. However, Whips reached maturity much better than Standards and were generally more successful. **The figures in the table showed the total number of trees planted but a breakdown of these figures separating out Standards and Whips could also be provided.**

In response to further questions from the Committee, Members were advised that, when deciding on locations for tree planting, all things were taken into account in an attempt to ensure 'right tree, right place'. A lot of trees had been planted around schools to act as pollution screens. Members suggested that the Council could possibly do more tree planting on housing land / TfL land in the pockets of space available. A more joined up approach would be welcomed.

Councillors heard that watering had been brought in-house during the summer of 2023. This had enabled the Council to be more in control and act more quickly if trees were struggling. The same procedure was planned for the summer of 2024. Climate change was a challenge, but officers were learning what worked well and sought to plant resilient species where possible to suit the environment.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee:

- 1. Noted the Tree Planting update; and**
- 2. Suggested any specific areas / locations where Members / residents would like to see more trees to be considered further.**

63. **STRATEGIC CLIMATE ACTION PLAN** (*Agenda Item 8*)

Ian Thynne, Head of Environmental Services, was in attendance to answer Members' questions regarding the Strategic Climate Action Plan.

Members noted that the Strategy relied heavily on carbon offsetting which was difficult to measure. The world was moving away from carbon offsetting, and it was important

to understand what came next. The Committee heard that the Council's approach to carbon offsetting was not yet fully established. The aim was to reduce emissions first and consider the purchase of green energy. There was also a potential train of thought around the local authority producing its own energy.

The Committee observed that, once the Council sold energy into the grid, it had to buy it back at the market rate. It would be beneficial if the Council could create and use its own energy. Planting trees was not an adequate solution to address climate change. Emissions in public buildings should be further investigated with a view to reducing consumption and it was important to have a vision for the future.

The Head of Environmental Services acknowledged that this topic was still relatively new; local authorities were trying to find their feet and work through how much carbon needed to be offset. Building performance was a factor; good progress had been made to date, but it was acknowledged that further planning would be needed.

Members observed that the green nature of the borough was an asset. However, it was important to move away from the language of 'carbon offsetting' and embrace a new term 'carbon credible'. This would enable the Council to be more innovative in its approach.

It was confirmed that the Head of Environmental Services would be reviewing the Strategic Climate Action Plan in 2024 which would present a good opportunity to take stock of the current situation and plan for the future.

In response to further requests for clarification from the Committee it was confirmed that housing stock was not included in carbon offsetting figures to ensure there was no double counting – the local authority did not have control of all housing stock energy.

Members enquired how the Council could work with big businesses and energy companies. The Head of Environmental Services confirmed that, as this was all relatively new, it was important to get the Council's own house in order in the first instance using the Government funding available. The next step would be to approach big businesses and work with partners. Tentative discussions had already taken place with Brunel University and Heathrow airport.

Councillors noted that Breakspear Crematorium was one of the few services which currently ran at a profit in partnership with Harrow. Members enquired whether future expenses relating to the upgrade of the Crematorium could potentially be shared with Harrow. **The Head of Environmental Services agreed to explore this further outside of the Committee meeting and report back.**

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the content of the Strategic Climate Action Plan progress report.

64. **FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 9*)

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.

65. **WORK PROGRAMME** (*Agenda Item 10*)

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.

	The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.11 pm.
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	These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer on epenny@hillington.gov.uk . Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, officers, the press and members of the public.
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