

## Merton Housing - A Way Forward.

Christian Care AGM - 9<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Before beginning his talk Andrew Judge wished to say how impressed he had been by the reports he had just heard and wished to thank all volunteers for their efforts on behalf of those in need in the borough. London was in the midst of a housing crisis – it was very difficult to find affordable houses to buy and almost impossible in most areas to find anything affordable to rent, either privately or through the local authority or housing association. There was nothing affordable in London for those dependent on benefits and subject to a benefit cap and 120,000 households nationally were so affected last year. Over the years the right to buy had removed 2 million properties from local authority housing stock. At the same time home ownership in London had been reduced in recent years and many people in rented accommodation were living in non-decent or even hazardous properties. Of the 206,000 people in Merton 9,500 were on the waiting list for affordable properties to rent. There were about 85,000 residential properties in the borough and 29,000 privately rented: many poorly managed compared to other tenures. In light of these statistics the Council elected in May had made housing one of its priorities. It had declared its intent to start building soon on four sites with planning permission for 93 homes with more to come. These homes would be well designed with an emphasis on Passivhaus credentials. They had asked the Greater London Authority for help towards the cost of £30 million. The homes would be built by the Council (favoured option) or by a Housing Association. In September Merton had 285 people in temporary accommodation, one third housed in Merton and 2/3 in neighbouring boroughs, and a target of 6 weeks maximum for this category. There were 2 people rough sleeping in June, 17 in nightly paid accommodation and 53 placements of adults being “fostered” at present. 452 preventions of homelessness had been achieved in the last year.



During the pandemic the winter night shelter programme had been disrupted and a property with 6 single rooms had been acquired to be deployed from December to mid-March in accordance with new Government guidance.

Councillor Judge was sorry to report that Clarion, by far the largest housing association in the borough, has had a poor record on repairs with unacceptable delays and poor service, but that his experience was that they now seem to be improving.

Ross Garrod, Leader of the Council, had started leading visits to estates in person with council officers and councillors to see what was happening and it was hoped to improve the situation. The Council was establishing a partnership with housing associations.

In the private sector, landlords did not always investigate anti-social behaviour and many properties in multiple occupation were overcrowded. Most problems occurred in five wards to the east of the borough, data had been collected in these wards and it was planned to introduce selective licensing from September 2023, subject to the outcome of consultation, extending this to other areas if successful. From May 2023 there would be the introduction of Article 4 directions in 7 wards to require planning permission before homes were turned into houses of multiple occupation to prevent overcrowding and poor facilities again subject to consultation.

It was estimated there were 1,900 empty homes in Merton so landlords were to be encouraged to improve these and get them back on to the housing market, with capital monies being available to start this.

Another approach taken was a Tenants' Champion Scheme where anyone having problems with their landlord can contact the Council's tenants' Champion through the Council website to seek support and if possible, a remedy to their problems. Repairs were a major issue. The Council was looking at best practice in other boroughs.

Councillor Judge invited questions: he was asked how to report empty properties and said someone was being recruited to the housing team to collect this information; if anyone knew of unsatisfactory they should email full details to Andrew Judge. He fully agreed that house design was very important, particularly providing adequately sized rooms. The St. Helier estate built in the 1930s was an example of these principles. The homes soon to be built by the Council were originally to be for the private rental market

but would now be socially rented. Cases of overcrowding should be reported Council housing officers. Andrew Judge entirely agreed with the observation that Vantage House which had no communal spaces and seemed most unsuitable for families, with inadequate amenities, in the middle of an industrial estate. and said it was a very poor refurbishment of office space into flats, with many of the families being sent there from far away but pointed out Merton had no say in the redevelopment or the location of families as the Government's permitted development rules for converting offices to flats did not require planning permission. When asked to what extent the Council are constrained by planning rules generally he said that, whilst the Council had the powers to grant or reject planning applications, the applicant could appeal the decision to the Secretary of State. Someone else asked for clarification of an HMO (house of multiple occupancy) and was told it was where people from two or more unrelated households were living in one property and should be properly regulated. It was to tackle abuses in this area that the planned collection of data was aimed.

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