

## MEETING OF THE

### CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 17 November 2015 at 6.30pm

#### WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

**Present:** Councillor Sara Bashford (Chairman)  
Councillors Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chairman), Margaret Bird, Simon Brew,  
Bernadette Khan, Matthew Kyeremeh, Shafi Khan

Co-optees:  
James Collins, Vinoo John and Dave Harvey

**Also in attendance:**

- Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning
- Councillor Alison Butler, Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning
- Councillor Louisa Woodley, Cabinet Member for Families, Health and Social Care
- Councillors Joy Prince and Carole Bonner

Young people's group:  
Kristoff Kerr, Vikky Branch, Mahdi Choudhury, Khadija Francis, Imranoor Rahman, Gloria Nsiah, Francis Uwagboe

**A52/15 Welcome and Apologies for absence (agenda item 1)**

Apologies were received from Councillor Andrew Pelling, who was represented by Cllr Shafi Khan at the meeting.

Apologies had also been received by the following parties:

- Mohamed Al-Kaisi and Emmanuel Oben from the young people's group
- Razi Lodhi and Melody Whelan (private landlords invited to the meeting)
- Sarah Fulham (Evolve Housing, formerly the YMCA)

**A53/15 Minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2015 (agenda item 2)**

**RESOLVED THAT:** the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2015 be signed as a correct record.

**A54/15 Disclosures of interest (agenda item 3)**

There were none.

**A55/15 Urgent business (agenda item 4)**

There was none.

**A56/15 Exempt items (agenda item 5)**

There were none.

**A57/15 Housing for young people (agenda item 6)**

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Mark Meehan Director of Housing Needs
- David Morris, Housing Strategy Manager
- Greg Davis, SNAP team manager
- Samad Nadimi, Operations Manager, Drop in Zone, Floating Support and Restoring Families
- Isobel Walker, Service Team Leader for Intensive Housing Services, Croydon Churches Housing Association (CCHA)
- Jacqui Henry, Croydon Drop-In

Officers gave an overview of the report prepared for this meeting. They reminded attendees of its key elements:

- The availability of housing for young people
- The legislative framework governing housing and how it applies to the young
- The availability and quality of housing advice for the young
- The availability of advice on how to manage a tenancy
- The extent of homelessness among the young and the impact of homelessness on them
- Vetting process for prospective tenants

The sub-committee was reminded that the weekly Local Housing was £82 Allowance in outer South London and £95 in inner South London (some northern parts of this borough) and that rents were high and rising steadily in Croydon and the rest of Greater London. The most likely route for young people on a low income was consequently to rent a room in a shared flat or house, as social housing was only available to young people with significant needs.

Officers added that the supply of affordable housing for rent was likely to shrink further in future with the introduction of the welfare bill, which was to introduce an extension of the Right to Buy to housing association properties. As a result of the shrinking housing supply, the borough's housing allocation policy had been amended following the Localism Act 2011 to limit eligibility to be entered on the Housing Register to applicants with more acute needs. It was stressed, however, that homelessness legislation placed 16-17 year olds without a home in a priority category.

Officers went on to outline the services available to young people through organisations such as CAYSH, including the “STOP” project which provided housing up to 12 weeks for homeless young people in crisis.

Young people questioned officers on the “STOP” project, asking whether the length of stay in emergency accommodation could be lengthened beyond 12 weeks. Officers replied that many stays did actually extend beyond that amount of time, to ensure that problems between young people and their parents were resolved so they could return home, or that suitable supported housing could be organised for them if their needs required it.

Young people asked if the council could make rents cheaper in the borough. The Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning replied that the council did not have any control over private rented accommodation and that housing benefit was the means by which people could be helped to pay the rent. She added that Local Housing Allowance (LHA) had been set in law to a level which only enabled people needing this benefit to seek accommodation in the cheapest 30% of properties on the market, and that LHA rates were due to be frozen for four years while rents were in all likelihood going to continue rising.

Young people questioned officers regarding incentives to landlords to encourage them to rent property to young people. Officers replied that the council was working actively with local private landlords to encourage them to do so and that incentives included covering the rent deposits of young tenants and other financial inducements. Officers were asked whether the Croydon Rent In Advance Scheme was still running, and confirmed that it was.

Young people asked what measures were being taken to discourage property owners from leaving their properties empty. They were advised that the council had a section dedicated to bringing empty homes back into use. In addition, where a property has been empty for more than two years, an additional 50% premium is added and 150% council tax is payable on these properties. It was highlighted that many investors purchased property in Croydon and then left it empty. The council was exploring ways of addressing this trend.

Asked how many empty properties there were in Croydon, officers stated that Croydon had the smallest percentage of empty properties in Greater London and that its target within the council’s housing strategy was to bring 300 empty properties back into use. They added that it was not always easy for the council to keep up to date regarding empty properties in the borough, and that an “app” had been developed for residents to report properties which appeared empty to the council, so that appropriate action could be taken.

Young people asked what was being done to publicise this app. Officers explained that it had been publicised at the recent landlord conference but admitted that more had to be done to raise awareness of it borough-wide. They added that it was part of the “Your Croydon” app, which was used mostly for environmental reporting. It was suggested that the app should be also be available through the Croydon College website. A representative of Croydon College advocated making it available through the student advice service.

A discussion arose regarding the possibility of bringing empty commercial property

back into use as housing. In particular, sub-committee members highlighted the use of rules on “permitted development”, whereby any office space could be converted into residential units, which did not have to be “affordable” or meet the Mayor’s space standards. As a consequence of these freedoms, more “permitted development” decisions had gone through than anywhere else in the capital, leading to the provision of extremely small and poor quality accommodation, which could lead to problems in future. Another consequence of these large numbers of conversions had been a decrease in office space and an adverse impact on the availability of office jobs. The number of such developments had grown to such a degree that an “Article 4 direction” had been agreed by the Secretary of State, preventing the conversion of any more office space into homes in the centre of Croydon.

It was observed that the forthcoming redevelopment of Croydon College might present a future opportunity to build student accommodation.

Young people highlighted the problems which arose when housing benefit started being paid to tenants rather than directly to landlords, as a result of which many failed to pass on the housing benefit as rent payments and many landlords consequently stopped renting their property to tenants in need of LHA. They asked whether young people could be classified as a “vulnerable group” whose benefit could be paid directly to the landlord, to encourage more landlords to make their property available to them.

The Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning explained that there was some flexibility in the system at the moment. All people deemed not to be vulnerable had to manage their own LHA but this could be paid directly to the landlord after an individual had developed 8 weeks’ worth of rent arrears.

However, this flexibility is due to disappear with the introduction of the “universal credit”, where all the benefits due to an individual would be lumped into one amount, paid directly to him or her. It was explained that the principle behind this benefit was to give people the opportunity to learn to control and manage their own budgets. Young people were advised that the council met regularly with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to find solutions and were also lobbying the government to highlight the possible dangers of introducing these changes.

It was highlighted, however, that the benefits due to young people in supported housing were paid directly to their landlords. In addition, Croydon’s Drop-In Zone in the Turnaround Centre carries out assessments on the needs of young people who sought housing through them, and that a range of housing options was identified for young people at risk of homelessness. It was explained that the Turnaround Centre offered holistic services to young people self-referring or referred to them, addressing educational, employment, mental health, housing and any other issues identified in assessments.

Young people asked what work had been done with developers to encourage them to provide affordable accommodation in the borough. Attendees were reminded that “affordable” rent had been set by central government at up to 80% of the local market rent, which was still very costly for a large number of Croydon residents. They were also informed that some properties in new developments would be rented at the “affordable” rent levels, others at 60% of market rents, and others still at the full

market rent.

Young people asked whether councils as developers could not set their own prices. They were advised that while some units would be let at a lower rent, these had to be subsidised by letting other units at the full market price.

Young people questioned officers and councillors further to explore ways of reducing housing costs in the borough. The Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning highlighted one option, which involved selling a property to someone at a discount, stipulating that the property should be sold on at the same discount when its owner decided to move on. Unfortunately, most young people under 25 cannot afford to buy property in the borough at today's prices.

Officers were asked whether there were any schemes in place to reduce market rents. The Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning stated that the only way to reduce the upward pressure on rents was to increase the housing supply and that the council had set up its own development company to contribute to the provision of new homes in the borough. Unfortunately, the local authority did not have enough finance to build significant numbers of new homes, but under the London Plan, Croydon was set to provide thousands of new homes in the next few years - although even these were unlikely to meet local need in full. Officers stated that the London Plan target for Croydon was 1435 new homes per year. They added that 1528 properties had been completed in 2014-2015 and that 2680 homes had been started that year.

Officers were asked how many of these new homes were to be let at an "affordable" rent. They replied that 705 new affordable homes were completed in 2014-15 (some for shared ownership, others at 80% of market rent and others still at a lower rent) and 223 such properties had been completed the year before. Officers explained that the basis of the affordable housing programme 2011-2015 had changed in the middle of the programme, as a result of which more affordable homes had been built at the end of the programme than at the beginning. Officers undertook to provide a breakdown of the numbers of properties built through this programme.

Young people wanted to know how they could afford the rents charged in the borough. Officers stated that a person on about £190 a week would be eligible for full housing benefit as this income had to cover food, transport and various other necessities apart from the rent. They highlighted the benefit calculator available through the council's website, which could help young people get a clearer idea of how they could manage their finances and what benefits they were eligible for. It was acknowledged that living in Croydon today was very expensive, and not just for the young, in spite of the fact that it was one of the cheapest boroughs in the capital.

Officers were asked whether young people could be put on a separate housing waiting list so that they could compete with families and stand a chance of getting social housing. They explained that separate lists already existed for housing for single people, couples and households of various sizes, but that eligibility was based on need and length of wait, and not on age.

The Director of Housing Needs acknowledged the current challenges and stressed that the council needed to tackle housing need through prevention and early intervention. He explained that two main problems needed to be addressed:

- the threat of real homelessness
- people's aspiration to live in their own homes, which was becoming a challenge even for 40 year olds because of soaring housing costs

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People also highlighted the challenges faced by 18 year olds once they become ineligible for a range of support available to 16 -17 year olds.

It was acknowledged that some parties felt strongly that rent controls should be introduced. However, it was reiterated that the council had no powers to impose rent limits in the borough. Young people were encouraged to raise awareness of this issue with their Member of Parliament, so that central government would become aware of the challenges facing young adults living in the capital.

Officers were questioned on the use of "licenses" instead of assured tenancies. The representative of CAYSH stated that 16-17 year olds housed by them had licenses. The representative of Croydon Churches Housing Association added that the young people housed by them also had licenses lasting about two years.

Whether the young person is housed by CAYSH or CCHA. the likelihood of being evicted was very low as officers provided the young people concerned the support they needed to learn to manage their tenancy effectively. If a young person irretrievably breaks the conditions of his/her license, steps are taken to contact the appropriate agencies to provide alternative accommodation and the support he/she requires to put his/her life in order. In such cases, the council's "team around the child" is often contacted to set up a plan of action for the young person.

Officers were questioned about what constituted a "moderate" need as they were aware that young people - or any people - with such a need were not eligible to go on the borough's housing register. Officers explained that the level of need was assessed through a variety of criteria including the quality of the applicant's current accommodation and their personal health, with an input from the council's medical officer and occupational therapist, but that age itself was not a selection criterion.

Young people turned to questions on support to avoid eviction under Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 (as amended), according to which private landlords are not obliged to provide grounds for the eviction. Officers explained that if a landlord had followed the correct procedure, gone to court and evicted a tenant who did not have any special needs under the borough's housing allocation policy, the individual would be given advice and information, including links to websites advertising homes to let.

Officers added that much of support housing provision for young people focused on preventing homelessness and crisis points. This included negotiating with private landlords to resolve the situations which had brought about the risk of eviction, or providing young people in need with assistance to find alternative housing if the private landlord went ahead with eviction.

Officers announced that consultation on Croydon's housing allocation policy was planned to take place in 2016 and urged all present to contribute their views to this consultation process.

Young people turned their attention to vetting processes for prospective tenants. They asked how vetting processes could be improved for young people, many of whom do not have a financial track record or access to an employer's reference to satisfy a prospective landlord. It was acknowledged that young people were at a disadvantage, added to which many landlords were reluctant to let property to young people because of the perceived risk of tenancy arrears and anti-social behaviour. Officers stated that the council could help provide a reference if they had information regarding the young person concerned. The representative of CAYSH stated that the organisation provided support to young tenants and liaised closely with landlords, providing reassurance on the support the young person had access to. In addition, the organisation operates the Croydon Rent In Advance Scheme, which provides support to young tenants and further reassurance to prospective landlord. Young people asserted that refusal of a tenancy on age grounds constituted discrimination. They were advised that in such cases, the council's tenancy relations officers and a number of associations providing support to young people could speak on their behalf to landlords to persuade them to provide a tenancy to a young person. The landlord licensing scheme could also give councils the opportunity to negotiate with private landlords. However, it was acknowledged that there existed no legislation regarding discrimination on the basis of age.

Officers were asked whether the same financial assessment was conducted on under 21 year olds as over 21 year olds. The representative of CAYSH stated that 18-21 year olds presenting at the Drop-In Zone received a full assessment of all their needs, including independent living skills. If these appeared to be lacking, supported housing was provided for them to prepare them for a fully independent adult life.

Young people asked whether the council had considered bringing in "introductory" or "provisional" tenancies to monitor tenants at the beginning of their tenancies and to provide any support they required at this critical phase. Council officers stated that this was not current practice but may consider them. The representative of Croydon Churches Housing Association stated that this was the practice for their "general needs" accommodation, and involved three monitoring visits during the first year of the tenancy, which was converted into an life-time assured tenancy if everything went well.

A further challenge facing young people seeking housing through a letting agency was the need to make upfront payments both to the landlord and to the agency - which often also charge landlords for the lettings service. Councillors condemned this practice, which put many households under severe financial pressure.

Young people went on to question officers regarding housing advice. They explained that they were aware that there was a lot of advice available, but that many young people did not know this. They enquired how the council and other agencies could signpost housing advice more effectively. The representative of CAYSH stated that his organisation liaised with colleges, attended various open days to provide housing advice, and provided advice online through its website. Young people were reminded that Access Croydon provided information for all, including people of their age, and that it directed young people to the Turnaround Centre for a full assessment of their needs. Officers agreed, however, that their commissioned services for young people needed to be made more visible. It was also observed that educational establishments could do more to provide housing advice for their students.

Young people explained that they were also aware that CAYSH had worked with schools on housing issues faced by young people and that Croydon College was implementing an initiative called “Domestic Violence Ambassadors” which involved young people spreading the word about this issue and possible solutions.. They suggested that a similar initiative be implemented to help young people at college to get a better understanding of local housing matters and become better equipped to deal with their own housing needs. All officers present agreed that this was a worthwhile idea.

Young people went on to ask whether tenancy relations in the council were well enough resourced to deal with all the tenants in Croydon at risk of eviction as a result of Section 21 eviction proceedings. They were advised that it was resourced sufficiently and that every effort was made to prevent eviction through a variety of means including negotiations with the landlords concerned, help to find additional income, appropriate childcare when this was an issue, etc. to avoid homelessness.

It was highlighted that work experience and apprenticeships could also help young people access better employment opportunities and gain a good income, thus reducing the risk of homelessness through rent arrears or the risk of living in poor housing conditions. Representatives of the council, CAYSH and CCHA all expressed their commitment to apprenticeships and explained that they employed apprentices in their teams. Young people stressed the need for these organisations to publicise the apprenticeship opportunities more widely to ensure good take-up and provide local young people with better prospects for the future.

Young people asked what links there were between the council and JobCentre+, and what opportunities it offered to do an apprenticeship. They were advised that both CAYSH and the council worked very closely with JobCentre+ in Croydon and Thornton Heath, as well as with other organisations providing employability skills, such as advice on how to apply successfully for a job, interview skills, confidence building support. Officers also stated that JobCentre+ was represented on the Children and Families Partnership Board and contributed to work on reducing youth poverty in the borough.

Officers also highlighted the work carried out to address the issues of young people living on the street. Outreach workers dealt with the first priority, which was to provide a roof over their heads in a hostel or shelter, and the second priority was to work on their employability skills, mental health, etc. to enable them to lead an independent life.

Young people highlighted the issue of young people reduced to “sofa-surfing”. Such young people were not technically homeless but their precarious housing conditions had serious repercussions on their studies and future prospects. They asked what local services could do to provide them with appropriate support. The representative of CAYSH stated that such young people would be offered a full assessment of their needs through an “early help” form - used by a wide range of local organisations providers to assess the needs of prospective service users - and would in all likelihood offer about three to six months’ support to such young people. The Cabinet member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning also highlighted the services provided by the YMCA (now called ‘Evolve’) all over the borough.



Members raised the possibility of interventions in the “intermediate housing market” to provide more affordable housing to working people. They stated that housing associations were currently reconsidering their roles in the housing market, and that this should perhaps include planning to provide smaller housing for young single people. Young people raised the possibility of providing low-cost housing through a “community land trust” in the borough. Members also mentioned the possibility of providing housing through a “co-op” model although this would require gathering the necessary resources from a number of contributors.

Young people were congratulated for their in-depth questioning. Particular praise was expressed regarding the performance of the Chair. Young people were urged to follow up their interest in housing for young people by contacting their local councillor or MP, taking part in forthcoming consultations on the borough’s local plan (planning policy) and the council’s housing allocation policy. In addition, members encouraged the young people to put forward topics for future scrutiny to ensure that their needs and aspirations were reflected in the borough’s future scrutiny work programme.

One idea for involving councillors or MPs might be to agree three or four questions on a topic of importance to young people, and then to ask these of a number of politicians, to raise awareness of the issue and find out what local politicians can do about it.

On behalf of the group from Croydon College, the young Chair thanked the members of the sub-committee for their words, acknowledging that young people often felt that they did not have a voice. He expressed the hope that opportunities for this type of young engagement would be widened out in future.

The Cabinet members and officers were thanked for attending the meeting.

To conclude, members agreed that:

- the needs of young people reduced to “sofa surfing” because of the very limited supply of affordable housing in the borough
- the need to retain graduates in the borough to boost its economic vitality
- the need to build housing for many different income ranges
- the need to include the needs of young people in consultation on the Local Plan and the housing allocation policy in 2016
- the possibility of introducing starter tenancies to encourage good habits
- the need to sign-post housing advice more effectively
- the idea of establishing housing ambassadors in schools and colleges, where young people themselves would disseminate information and advice on housing
- working with local businesses to encourage them to offer young staff support with rent deposits as well as references to prospective landlords
- young people should follow up these discussions by contacting local councillors and Members of Parliament to raise awareness of the housing needs of young Croydonians and the need to address them, and contribute to the consultations on Croydon’s Local Plan and Housing Allocation Policy

**RESOLVED THAT** the following recommendations should be made to Cabinet, Croydon College and Scrutiny councillors:

The Council should:

- 1) Address the needs of its large young adult population in the Croydon Local Plan and its Housing Allocation Policy
- 2) Work with local developers to provide suitable housing for young graduates to retain talent in the borough
- 3) The council's development company should consider providing accommodation specifically for young people, such as basic "starter homes"
- 4) Consider introducing starter tenancies to encourage good tenancy management from the very beginning of a tenancy
- 5) Consider offering more enticing incentives to landlords to encourage them to lease more accommodation so that it can be let to young people on low incomes
- 6) Publicise the "My Croydon" app and housing services through a wider range of media including billboards around town
- 7) Work with local businesses to encourage them to offer their young staff support with rent deposits or part of them, and provide references to prospective landlords to make it easier for young people to obtain a tenancy

In addition the Sub-Committee made the following recommendation to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee:

- 1) That scrutiny should run more "young people's take-over" meetings to give young Croydonians the opportunity to question politicians on issues of concern to them and thus encourage young people to get involved in local democracy

The Sub-Committee also recommended to Croydon College that it should create Housing Ambassadors among students in order to:

- 1) Disseminate information and advice on housing issues
- 2) Encourage young people to get involved in the council's consultation on the borough's Local Plan and Housing Allocation Policy
- 3) Raise awareness of young people's housing issues with local councillors and members of parliament

### **A58/15 Scrutiny work programme (agenda item 7)**

Members confirmed the work programme for the rest of the year.

The meeting ended at 9.38pm