MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE
Council Chamber - Town Hall
10 March 2026 (7.00 - 9.10 pm)

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	David Taylor (Chairman)
Havering Residents' Group	Philippa Crowder, Laurance Garrard, Robby Misir and John Wood
Labour Group	Matthew Stanton (Vice-Chair)
East Havering Residents Group	

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

109 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There was no interest disclosed at the meeting.

110 MINUTES

The minutes of the sub-committee meeting held on 27 January 2026 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

111 NEW HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME - PROGRESS REPORT

The Sub-Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director of Housing Demand and the Housing Choice and Applications Manager on the implementation of the Council's new Housing Allocations Scheme and Housing Register system which went live in September 2025.

Officers outlined the development and implementation of the project, noting that a number of risks had been identified at an early stage. These included concerns regarding contractor capacity, staff turnover, continuity within the delivery team and the completeness of the new system. Particular concern had been raised regarding project management arrangements due to issues experienced on a previous project. Although these concerns were recorded and monitored through the project risk log, progress was adversely affected by staffing changes, contractor performance issues and repeated delays during 2024 and early 2025.

Members were advised that the Council's preferred option had been to migrate applicant data directly from the previous housing register system into the new platform. However, the contractor confirmed that this could not be achieved within the agreed design and implementation timescales. As a result, a full re-application process was introduced to ensure data accuracy and allow comprehensive testing and verification prior to go-live.

The Sub-Committee heard that the project experienced a number of setbacks, including slower-than-expected progress during 2024, extended configuration work, the departure of key project personnel and periods where project activity stalled. In response, governance arrangements were strengthened, a new project team was appointed and officers worked closely with MRI, the software provider, to complete system configuration, testing and implementation. The Housing Register was temporarily closed to facilitate final testing and application verification before the new system was successfully launched on 24 September 2025.

Following implementation, application numbers significantly exceeded expectations. Historically the service received around 200 housing applications per month; however, 642 applications were received within the first two weeks of launch and 1,552 applications were submitted during the first full month. By February, more than 3,000 applications had been received. Of these, over 1,600 had been assessed and more than 1,000 fully processed through verification stages.

Officers reported that the higher-than-anticipated demand created a substantial processing backlog. In response, additional staffing resources were deployed, assessment processes were prioritised according to housing need and regular performance monitoring arrangements were introduced. At the time of the meeting, approximately 172 high-priority applications remained under assessment and officers continued to focus resources on reducing outstanding cases.

Members discussed concerns raised by some existing applicants whose relative position on the Housing Register had changed following the introduction of the new allocations scheme. Officers explained that transitional arrangements had been incorporated into the policy; however, following implementation it became apparent that additional measures were required to ensure existing working households were not unfairly disadvantaged. Consequently, a "working household contribution" adjustment was introduced while maintaining the policy objectives of the revised allocations framework.

The Sub-Committee was informed that the scheme was now fully operational, with ongoing monitoring arrangements in place. These included regular reporting to the Cabinet Member, reviews of banding outcomes and continued assessment of staffing and resource requirements to ensure the efficient administration of the service.

Members sought assurance regarding communication with applicants. Officers advised that residents had been notified of the new arrangements in August 2025 and had received further updates in November regarding implementation delays and increased application volumes. Since then, communications had been undertaken through individual correspondence and updates published on the Council's website.

The financial implications of the project were also discussed. Officers confirmed that while some additional costs had been incurred as a result of delays and implementation challenges, these had been partially offset through contractor cost reductions and the provision of additional support without full reimbursement. As a result, the overall financial impact on the Council had been mitigated.

In response to questions regarding the transfer from Capita to MRI, officers confirmed that no project information or system data had been lost. MRI had received a full handover and was able to continue development work without restarting the project.

Members sought further information regarding arrangements for vulnerable applicants, including those with significant medical needs and households living in long-term temporary accommodation. Officers advised that accelerated assessment processes, specialist panels and targeted interventions had been put in place to ensure vulnerable households received appropriate consideration within the allocations process.

Discussion also took place regarding the initial processing of applications. Officers explained that existing applicants had been given a two-week period to submit applications before the scheme was opened more widely. As application numbers increased significantly, the service moved to a prioritisation approach based on assessed housing need rather than processing applications solely in date order.

Members questioned whether the impact of increased homelessness-related priority awards had been fully anticipated during the design of the scheme. Officers acknowledged that while demand from homeless households had been expected, the overall volume of applications received after launch exceeded projections, particularly from applicants able to submit applications immediately following implementation. This led to the introduction of further mitigation measures to address unforeseen impacts.

The Sub-Committee sought assurance regarding plans to clear the remaining backlog. Officers advised that approximately 583 applications remained outstanding and that temporary additional staffing resources would remain in place through April and May. The objective was to significantly reduce the backlog by mid-May before returning to normal operating arrangements.

Members requested that further communications be issued to applicants setting out current progress, expected processing times and the actions being taken to address outstanding applications.

During discussion on temporary accommodation, officers advised that households living in high-cost temporary accommodation could not automatically be prioritised for permanent housing outside the allocations framework, as this would potentially disadvantage other applicants with significant housing needs. Separate work continued to reduce temporary accommodation costs through other interventions.

Members acknowledged the challenges encountered throughout the implementation process and welcomed the work undertaken to stabilise and successfully deliver the new system. The Sub-Committee supported a formal review of the Housing Allocations Scheme approximately 12 months after implementation and agreed that a further report should be submitted in September 2026 to review performance, outcomes, impacts on applicants and lessons learned.

The Sub-Committee noted the update and thanked officers for their attendance and responses to Members' questions.

112 EMERGENCY TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IN HAVERING AND THE LACK OF SUPPLY

The Sub-Committee received a report and presentation from the Assistant Director of Housing Demand and the Director of Living Well on the increasing pressures facing the Council's homelessness and temporary accommodation (TA) services, together with the Council's strategy to increase accommodation supply and reduce reliance on emergency placements.

Officers advised that homelessness demand had increased significantly since 2020 due to a combination of factors, including rising housing costs, the continued contraction of the private rented sector, affordability pressures and wider economic challenges. Temporary accommodation remained one of the Council's most significant financial pressures and represented a major risk to the General Fund.

The Sub-Committee was informed that approximately 350 households were currently living in temporary accommodation, including families with children and single people placed in hotels and nightly paid accommodation. Members noted that homelessness pressures had intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the Government's "Everyone In" initiative, which led to a substantial increase in single-person accommodation placements. Family homelessness subsequently increased significantly from 2022 onwards, resulting in growing reliance on hotel accommodation and other emergency housing solutions.

Officers explained that the Council had responded by securing nightly paid self-contained accommodation within the borough to provide more suitable housing for families and reduce the use of hotels, particularly for households with children. Additional temporary accommodation had also been provided through the use of Royal Jubilee Court. However, Members were advised that this was not a permanent increase in housing supply because the site remained earmarked for future redevelopment.

Despite rising demand, the Council had made progress in improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of temporary accommodation. Members noted that the number of families remaining in bed and breakfast accommodation beyond the six-week statutory limit had reduced significantly, reaching zero during parts of the previous year, although numbers had since risen again to approximately 30 households.

The Sub-Committee also considered the challenges facing the Council's private sector leasing portfolio. Officers reported that leased properties had reduced substantially from approximately 840 properties in 2019-20, with between 80 and 100 properties being lost each year as landlords withdrew from leasing arrangements, sold properties or sought higher returns elsewhere. Rising interest rates, inflation and increasing landlord costs had accelerated this trend, while lease-end repairs and dilapidation liabilities created further financial risks for the Council.

Members noted that homelessness presentations had risen considerably in recent years. Family and friend exclusion remained the most common cause of homelessness in Havering, while domestic abuse continued to be a significant contributing factor. The average number of approaches to the homelessness service had increased from around 169 households annually in 2019-20 to approximately 284 households more recently.

Officers outlined the Council's homelessness prevention measures, including rent deposit schemes, landlord incentive programmes and support to help residents access private rented accommodation. However, it was acknowledged that worsening affordability within the private rented sector had reduced the effectiveness of these interventions. Members also heard that forthcoming legislative changes, including the Renters Rights Act, could create additional pressures within the housing market.

The Sub-Committee received an update on a range of initiatives designed to increase accommodation supply and reduce future temporary accommodation costs. These included a property acquisition partnership which aims to deliver up to 150 properties, office-to-residential conversion schemes, pension fund investment opportunities and build-to-rent developments. Although progress on some schemes had been slower than originally anticipated, officers advised that further acquisitions and supply projects were continuing.

If successfully delivered, these programmes were expected to significantly reduce the Council's reliance on hotels and nightly paid accommodation by 2028-29 while improving outcomes for homeless households and creating a more sustainable homelessness service.

Members were updated on the Family Welcome Centre scheduled to open in May, which would provide 74 units of temporary accommodation and replace capacity previously available at Royal Jubilee Court. Officers highlighted that the facility would adopt a psychologically informed, trauma-focused approach, recognising the complex needs often experienced by homeless families. Staff training in trauma-informed practice was underway to support this model.

The Sub-Committee also noted progress on the Waterloo Estate modular housing scheme, which would provide 18 additional units of temporary accommodation and was expected to become operational during spring 2026. The scheme would provide move-on accommodation for households currently living in temporary accommodation and help improve accommodation flow through the system.

During discussion, Members sought clarification regarding the future of Royal Jubilee Court and the length of stay experienced by some residents. Officers confirmed that the accommodation would remain in use until replacement facilities became available and that households who had spent extended periods at the site would be prioritised for transfer to new accommodation as opportunities arose.

Members also questioned how the Council ensured that accommodation secured through private sector partnerships met local housing needs. Officers explained that acquisition and partnership discussions were focused on family-sized homes, particularly two, three and four-bedroom properties, reflecting the borough's most pressing accommodation requirements.

The Sub-Committee discussed future housing supply projections, the potential repurposing of accommodation if demand reduced and whether additional short-term solutions could have been delivered more quickly. Officers acknowledged that securing sites, funding and the necessary approvals often required considerable time, but stated that the Council continued to explore opportunities to accelerate delivery where possible. It was emphasised that the Council's approach sought to balance immediate accommodation needs with longer-term investment in sustainable housing provision.

Members also considered the role of planning and development in addressing housing demand and were advised that housing and planning teams worked closely together to ensure identified accommodation needs were reflected in discussions with developers, although viability considerations often influenced final delivery outcomes.

In response to questions regarding financial planning, officers confirmed that demand for temporary accommodation was continually monitored and incorporated into budget forecasting. Although investment in additional accommodation supply was expected to reduce future expenditure pressures, significant demand and associated costs were expected to remain for the foreseeable future.

The Sub-Committee welcomed the progress being made across the Council's accommodation delivery programme, while recognising the significant challenges facing homelessness services. Members requested further updates on modular housing proposals and noted the extensive work being undertaken to increase accommodation supply, reduce costs and improve outcomes for residents experiencing homelessness.

113 **VOIDS OVERVIEW**

The Sub-Committee received a report and presentation from the Assistant Director of Housing Property and Assets on void property performance and management during 2025/26. Members were advised that, up to February 2026, a total of 620 residential voids and 352 garage voids had been completed. Voids were categorised as B1 (minor works), B2 (major works requiring up to 90 days) and B3 (long-term or complex voids requiring extensive works). Officers clarified that a typographical error within the report had incorrectly stated the average void turnaround time, with the overall average re-let time being 24.96 days rather than 41.75 days.

The Sub-Committee noted that 229 general needs and temporary management organisation (TMO) voids had been completed during the reporting period, with the majority falling within the B1 category. In addition, 47 sheltered housing voids and 15 hostel voids had been completed. Officers advised that approximately 86% of all voids required only minor works, typically involving repairs, decoration and replacement of fixtures and fittings.

Members received an update on buyback properties and noted that a significant proportion of these were categorised as B3 voids. Officers explained that properties acquired through the buyback programme often required substantial refurbishment works before being suitable for letting, largely because many had been occupied for long periods and had not been maintained to the Council's required standard. To mitigate this issue, surveyors were now being involved earlier in the acquisition process to assess property condition and identify potential refurbishment requirements before purchases were completed.

The Sub-Committee discussed performance against void turnaround targets and noted that, when benchmarked against peer authorities, Havering's performance compared favourably and ranked amongst the strongest in London. Officers advised that ongoing work to improve systems, data collection and reporting would further strengthen performance monitoring and benchmarking capabilities.

Members questioned the gap between the completion of repair works and the eventual letting of properties. Officers explained that although repair works might be completed relatively quickly, additional time could be required for property allocations, applicant verification, occupational therapist assessments where adaptations were involved, and the management of offer and acceptance processes. In response, officers outlined improvements that had been introduced, including earlier applicant verification checks and the prioritisation of verification activity before formal offers were made, with the aim of reducing avoidable delays.

The Sub-Committee also explored whether occupational therapist assessments could be undertaken earlier when adapted properties became available. Officers acknowledged that there was scope to improve coordination between services, although adapted properties represented a relatively small proportion of the overall housing stock. Members encouraged officers to continue reviewing processes to minimise delays in rehousing households requiring adapted accommodation.
Further discussion took place regarding the advertising of void properties through the Choice Based Lettings system. Officers confirmed that void properties were generally advertised while repair works were still underway, enabling bidding and shortlisting activity to take place in parallel with refurbishment works. Members welcomed this approach and encouraged officers to continue identifying opportunities to reduce the time between works completion and tenancy commencement.

Members raised concerns regarding delays in sheltered housing lettings and questioned whether allocations could be managed more directly by housing allocations staff. Officers explained that scheme managers played an important role in assessing suitability and ensuring prospective residents met the specific requirements of sheltered accommodation. Nevertheless, officers agreed to review the process to identify whether efficiencies could be achieved without compromising suitability assessments.

The Sub-Committee also discussed the financial implications of void turnaround times, particularly in relation to family-sized accommodation and temporary accommodation costs. Members emphasised the importance of returning larger properties to occupation as quickly as possible, given the Council's demand for family housing and the costs associated with temporary accommodation placements. Officers agreed that reducing void turnaround times remained a key priority and highlighted the contribution of the buyback programme in increasing the supply of larger family homes.

In response to questions regarding performance benchmarking, officers advised that sector-wide reporting changes and limitations within existing housing management systems had made direct comparisons with other authorities challenging. However, a new IT system was expected to improve reporting capabilities and enable more meaningful benchmarking across London boroughs in the future.

Members acknowledged the positive performance achieved by the service, while highlighting opportunities for further improvements in allocations, verification processes, sheltered housing lettings and adapted property management.

The Sub-Committee noted the report and requested that officers continue to explore measures to reduce void turnaround times and maximise the availability of housing stock.

Chairman

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