

HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.00 pm on 10 SEPTEMBER 2012

Present:- Councillor V Ranger – Chairman.
Councillors S Barker, J Loughlin, K Mackman, J Menell and D Morson, D Perry and D Sadler.

Tenant Forum representatives: Mr S Sproul.

Officers in attendance: L Bunting (Democratic Services Officer), P Evans (Housing Business & Performance Manager), S Joyce (Assistant Chief Executive – Finance), A Liles (Housing Asset Manager), R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services), S Robinson (Housing Enabling and Development Officer), J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager) and S Wood (Planning and Housing Policy Manager).

HB13 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Redfern and David Parish (Tenant Forum representative).

Councillor Ranger declared a personal interest as a council tenant.

HB14 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2012 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HB15 HOUSING STRATEGY

The Planning and Housing Policy Officer reported that the Draft Housing Strategy would be presented to the Board at the next meeting on 11 October. There was a six week consultation period and the Strategy would then be presented to Cabinet in December.

HB16 DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Housing Asset Manager gave a report highlighting the current position with regard to development. He outlined the options available which included the traditional method of tendering and developing framework agreements with developers.

Councillor Barker referred to a visit she had made to the current Holloway Crescent development. She asked for an assurance that surveys are undertaken regarding asbestos. It was reported that the authority had a legal obligation to carry out full asbestos surveys before starting work on a development.

Councillor Morson asked a question regarding the meaning of taking the project to Level D stage at the site at Mead Court, Stansted. The Housing Asset

Manager reported that this meant that the project would be taken to the planning stage.

In answer to a question from Councillor Perry the Chairman said that a commercial arrangement was needed before being put to the Planning Committee.

Councillor Barker was concerned that local members be kept informed of developments which she said would help save any problems occurring at a later date.

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer had produced a table which set out the various stages in the Rural Exception Sites process and outlined the current status for each parish council. This was in line with the Council's agreement with the Rural Community Council of Essex, where all parish councils were being targeting jointly to promote Rural Exception Sites other than those who had successfully delivered schemes of the last four years. A leaflet had been created to take parish councils through the different stages of the process.

HB17 **TENANCY STRATEGY**

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager reported that the West Essex Tenancy Strategy had now completed a period of consultation with the three contributing authorities and the final version was now ready to be recommended for approval by Cabinet at its next meeting on 25 October.

The Council had been working with Epping and Harlow councils to produce a West Essex Tenancy Strategy. The Council's housing departments and other registered providers must have regard to the Strategy when making decisions on where, how and if, to use fixed term tenancies when making housing allocations. The Board had been briefed on the Strategy at previous meetings and it had been amended to take on comments made by members. The updated document had been circulated to the Board.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager also commented that members would need to consider what stance they wished to see the Council take with regard to Uttlesford's Tenancy Policy. Officers could then prepare the Policy for consideration at the next Housing Board meeting.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1 the adoption of the West Essex Tenancy Strategy be approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 25 October 2012
- 2 officers bring before the next Housing Board, their proposals for the Uttlesford Tenancy Policy

HB18 **RENT ARREARS ESCALATION POLICY**

The Housing Business and Performance Manager presented a report which informed the Housing Board of the proposed changes to the Rent Arrears

Policy and supporting procedures. The report requested that the Board review the proposed changes and make any necessary comments.

The planned changes would support the requirement to proactively manage tenant rent arrears to ensure that arrears levels were kept to an optimal minimum at all times. This would be particularly relevant with respect to the implementation of the Welfare Reform to take place in April 2013.

The Housing Business and Performance Manager referred to the benchmarking exercise that the Housing Services Service had recently conducted. Results had identified that a number of other authorities were instigating the arrears procedure at an earlier stage than this Authority does currently.

Additionally Housing Services were currently working with the Revenues and Benefits Service to understand and plan for the implementation of the Welfare Reform in 2013, with particular regard to the size criteria measure ('bedroom tax'). This would result in a number of tenants experiencing reductions in their Housing Benefit payments due to under-occupancy and it was foreseen that this fact and the benefits cap would possibly effect the level of arrears currently being experienced by this Authority.

As a consequence of these reviews a revised Arrears Escalation Policy had been developed. The Housing Business and Performance Manager explained the how the process would effect weekly paying tenants.

The proposed changes were scheduled for implementation in early October which would allow sufficient time for the process to be embedded prior to the Welfare Reform being put into operation.

Councillor Barker asked a question concerning court actions for outstanding arrears and which would take precedence, rent arrears or Council Tax arrears? The Housing Business and Performance Manager said that there was a need to work corporately in such cases. The Assistant Chief Executive – Finance commented that only a small part of Council Tax was credited to the Council but that it received the whole amount of rent income. However he considered that corporate efforts would be made to prepare repayment plans in these cases.

HB19

STAR SURVEY

The Housing Business and Performance Manager reported that a good response of 34% had been received to this survey. Full results would be reported to the next meeting.

HB20

ALLOCATIONS POLICY CONSULTATION

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager reported that there was need to review and amend the allocations policy to incorporate the changes required by the Localism Act 2011. The Council also had to consider what other changes they may want to make, given the increase in flexibility that The Act and 'The Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England', allowed. It was an opportunity to review the policy as a whole and make any further amendments.

It was pointed out those topics members of the Housing Board might wish to consider were highlighted on the draft document which had been circulated. The following areas were included:-

Discharging homelessness duty in the private sector
 Armed Forces – local connection
 Bedroom size criteria (already agreed and to be implemented as soon as software update available)

Other areas for consideration were:-
 Penalties for refusing properties
 Bedroom criteria for working age applicants requiring bungalow accommodation
 Local connection criteria.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager asked the Housing Board to consider the report and let her have any comments or suggestions by the date of the next meeting, if not before.

RECOMMENDED that the Housing Board approve the amended Allocations Policy for consultation.

HB21

BUSINESS PLAN PRIORITIES - PROJECTS

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services presented a detailed report which identified additional expenditure which was required to maintain the housing stock. Members of the Board were aware that there were significant funds available as a result of the release from the Subsidy mechanism. The business plan identified funds required to repay borrowing, invest in the current stock and fund further developments. A further sum of money was also set aside in each of the first five years of the business plan for potential projects. In the current financial year this amounted to £1,432,000. Although there was a certain amount of flexibility and choice in what projects were prioritised it was agreed that this money would, in the first instance, be used to replace any stock lost through RTB sales.

A scheme to provide external wall cladding to selected council properties had been approved in August and it had been agreed to draw £244k from the uncommitted funds. This was subject to confirmation that the HRA business plan could meet the RTB match funding, and subject also to confirmation that by drawing on uncommitted funds, the Council's obligation to undertake new build would not be compromised. It was agreed that regular financial and performance reports on progress in delivering the HRA business plan will be submitted to Housing Board throughout the year, including availability of these uncommitted funds and RTB completions. The Board had been provided with performance progress to the present date.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services reported that an additional number of properties, over and above those in the current work programme, had been identified that would require full re-wires in the current financial year. There were also some communal areas in sheltered schemes and general needs flats that also need to be re-wired. She was therefore proposing that a further £500,000 be drawn from the major repairs reserve fund to carry out these essential works.

In answer to a question from Councillor Barker, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that a survey had taken place which had revealed that this work would need to be programmed.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Finance had produced a chart outlining the position within the current budget and explained the present situation. He said that the extra works were affordable from the existing headroom.

After discussion it was

RECOMMENDED

- 1 that the sum of £500k be used from the major repairs reserve to fund additional electrical work identified on the housing stock
- 2 that remaining uncommitted funds be kept in a reserve fund for the redevelopment/refurbishment of sheltered schemes.

HB22 DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

The next three meetings of the Housing Board were arranged as follows:

11 October 2012
29 November 2012
10 January 2012

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that she would circulate a forward plan in due course.

HB23 URGENT ITEMS

(i) Performance Indicators

The Housing Business and Performance Manager referred to performance indicators and reported on feedback. She reported that corporately the Authority was doing well but in comparison with other authorities were not doing as well. She would like comments from the Board on how to take this forward.

(ii) Domestic Abuse

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager had received a letter from an organisation called 'Safer Places' which provided outreach services for residents experiencing domestic abuse. They were offering to provide such a service in the Uttlesford District with a weekly 'drop-in' to be held either in the Council offices or a children's centre. The service would include one to one support at the drop-in and also telephone support as well as providing information on a wide range of matters to include housing, benefits, debt and safety planning. The service currently ran drop-in centres in Harlow and Broxbourne.

Currently there were no such services in the Uttlesford area. The cost of this service would be £16,498 for 18¾ hrs part-time worker over 12 months plus £1,800 for publications etc.

Councillor Perry as this stage declared an interest as he currently assisted a Cambridge based centre. He did however, say that such a link could possibly be created in Cambridge and considered that this could also be explored further.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that domestic abuse was an increasing problem in Uttlesford.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Finance said that there was a corporate process for considering grants to voluntary bodies and this item could be referred to that process. However, if Members wished to fund this item from existing approved budgets for homelessness, this was affordable as some budgets were not yet committed.

Councillor Mackman said that Uttlesford should have a facility and considered that if the funding was available then it should be used for this.

Councillor Menell enquired about the Hardship Fund recently approved by Cabinet. The Assistant Chief Executive – Finance said that this was a separate fund with two objectives, to house homeless people in Uttlesford instead of sending them to Harlow, and to support voluntary organisations involved with helping people suffering hardship.

After being proposed and seconded it was

RECOMMENDED that the amounts as listed be used from identified budgets to finance drop-in support as outlined above.

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm.