

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.30 am on 23 OCTOBER 2012**

Present:- Councillor V Ranger – Chairman.
Councillors S Barker, J Menell, D Morson and J Redfern.

Tenant Forum representatives: Mr D Parish and Mr S Sproul.

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer) M Donaldson (Accountancy Manager) P Evans (Housing Business & Performance Manager) 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).

HB24 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Freeman and Loughlin.

Councillor Ranger declared a non-pecuniary interest as a council tenant.

HB25 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2012 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the correction of two typographical errors.

HB26 BUSINESS ARISING

i) Minute HB23 (ii) – Domestic Abuse

In answer to a question from Councillor Barker it was reported that the Safer Places drop-in outreach support service was expected to start in November. The service would be publicised mainly through local agencies and referrals.

HB27 DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Board was updated on current housing developments. 134 houses were expected to be completed on section 106 sites, which was above the annual target of 100. The number was expected to be

similar going forward as a number additional sites had gained planning permission.

Members commented that this was a good news story, a significant number of affordable homes were being provided mainly for Uttlesford residents. There were many other positive initiatives taking place within the housing service and it was felt that these should be better publicised to the wider public. Councillor Redfern said she would prepare a press release to be sent out in the next few weeks and asked members and officers to email her matters that could be included.

Holloway Crescent

It was reported that although there had been some delays in starting work on site, the scheme was still expected to be completed by the end of March 2013.

The concern group had questioned whether a proportion of the 8 affordable units would be available for local residents. The Board could determine local lettings under the Council's allocation policy and AGREED the following:-

50% of the allocations for the affordable Units at Holloway Crescent, Saffron Walden be made from residents in bands A – C of the housing waiting list and residing within a 4 miles radius of the properties.

HB28

MEAD COURT DEVELOPMENT

The Board was informed of progress with the proposed development at Mead Court, Stansted. A meeting of the Mead Court Task Group in May had agreed to commit resources to drawing up proposals for a new build scheme and had instructed the Design Partnership for this part of the project. A plan had been drawn to maximise the number of affordable units with a mix of houses, bungalows and flats, and this had been considered by a further meeting of the task group. The next steps were to conduct a parking survey and to approach the planning department to agree the broad design principles.

The task group had suggested that the preferred option should be to proceed with a local authority new build scheme. The advantages of this approach were that it would achieve increased rental income for the HRA, ensure that the whole site remained within council ownership creating a valuable asset, retain nomination rights and achieve a housing mix that made the best use of the site and met current housing need.

The residents would be kept informed of progress and meetings would be arranged with the parish council and ward members.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that a Council new build project be taken forward as the preferred option for this site.

HB29

DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY

Members received the draft Housing Strategy 2012 – 2015. This would update the existing document which was out of date as many of the priorities had now been achieved. The new strategy would set out the priorities for the next 3 years. The work had been informed by the housing conference held earlier in the year.

The draft strategy was now subject to a 6 week consultation. Members made a number of comments on the document, which would be included in the final draft to be considered by the Housing Board in November before being approved by Cabinet on 13 December 2012.

HB30

LOCAL TENANCY POLICY

At the last meeting the Board had recommended to Cabinet the approval of the West Essex Tenancy Strategy. The Council was now required to formulate a local tenancy policy that had regard to the Strategy.

Before a draft policy was prepared Members views were sought on the principle of fixed term tenancies, which had been provided for in the Localism Act 2011. The rationale behind fixed tenancies was to make the best use of the Council's housing stock by reducing the number of under-occupied properties. At the end of the period the tenancy would be assessed and if the circumstances of the tenants had changed they would be required to move to a smaller property, which would leave a larger property vacant for a family in need.

The Board discussed whether fixed tenancies should be introduced, the length of the term and the type of properties to which they should apply. It took into account discussions that had been held with the West Essex Partners on this issue.

Members were advised to focus on what the policy was trying to achieve, which was to free properties to allow better management of the housing stock. It should not impose a disproportionate administrative burden on staff. It was therefore agreed that it was not appropriate to take account of the tenant's financial circumstances as this would be too difficult to determine. It was felt that the policy should apply to properties with 3 bedrooms and above as these were the

houses in demand and the ones most likely to suffer under occupancy. Members added a caveat that the effectiveness of the scheme would depend on a supply of smaller properties coming forward. It was agreed that a 10 year period was the most suitable length of the tenancy.

The new policy would only apply to new tenancies so action was still required to reduce number of existing under occupied properties. An under occupation survey was shortly to be conducted to establish the extent of the problem and the incentive scheme would be reviewed in due course.

AGREED that the Housing Needs and Landlord Manager prepare a draft tenancy policy for discussion at the next meeting.

HB31

RENT SETTING POLICY

The Housing Board was asked to consider a draft rent setting policy which was required following the introduction of the 30 year Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. Under this regime local authorities were permitted to set their own rent levels. The policy aimed to take a longer term view as yearly rent setting could cause uncertainty within the viability of the plan.

In calculating and allocating the HRA self-financing debt, assumptions had been made by Government that local authorities would adopt a rent and service charge policy which ensured funds were raised to repay this debt. Members had agreed a debt repayment structure which continued these assumptions for 30 years. The Council had a viable HRA, with sufficient balances to ensure loans could be repaid and sufficient funds to carry out actions that had been identified in the plan. If the Council did not levy a rent increase which provided for a viable HRA, future opportunities to invest in services, existing and new homes could be lost.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that the rent policy aimed to protect the business plan but also to ensure that rents for tenants did not rise disproportionately high.

Members were reminded that Government policy was to bring about a converging pattern of rents for all similar social housing properties. The target date for properties to converge to this 'formula rent' was 2015/16. Advice recently received indicated that this would not now be possible on some properties until at least 2020. This scenario would need to be fed through the business plan and the implications managed. In relation to this matter, it was agreed that information on property rents would be brought to the next meeting.

It was AGREED that the draft policy be forwarded to the Tenants Forum and considered again at the November meeting of the Board.

HB32

STAR SURVEY RESULTS

The Board received a copy of the high level results from the STAR Survey. The survey had been developed by HouseMark to enable social landlords to monitor and benchmark service satisfaction levels. The survey had been conducted in August and to date the response rate had been good. It was noted that a large percentage of the replies had been received from long established or more elderly tenants. Further samples from specific demographic groups would probably be required in the future.

A full report would be submitted to the next meeting when the outcomes and possible actions going forward could be discussed in greater detail. The results would also be up loaded to the HouseMark website which would enable the production of future comparative figures.

A summary of the results would be included in the Annual Tenant report and Housing News.

HB33

BUSINESS PLAN ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services updated members on the priorities included in the HRA business plan. A separate report was circulated on the energy efficiency projects that had been completed and future projects suggested for energy improvement measures to bring all properties in line with other council stock.

The Board considered other projects for this financial year and AGREED that a report be brought to the next meeting regarding a possible site for a domestic violence refuge in the district.

HB34

DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

The next meetings were scheduled for

29 November 2012
10 January 2012

An updated plan would be circulated before the next meeting.

URGENT ITEMS**i) Matter from the tenant's forum**

Sam Sproul mentioned issues that had been raised at a recent meeting of the tenant's forum. There had been concern at recent Government proposals

1) to allow large house extensions without the benefit of planning permission, and 2) Changes to the rules requiring a percentage of affordable houses on new development sites.

With regard to the second point, the Planning and Housing Policy Manager said that the Council had included its own policies on this issue in the emerging local plan. These would continue to require a percentage of affordable dwellings within any new developments over a certain size.

The tenant's forum had also been concerned about the rising cost of oil and asked whether the Council had considered bulk purchase to gain a lower price for council tenants. The Assistant Director said that this had been looked at but it was not considered to be beneficial for the council to act in this role. This initiative would be more effective at a local level and the Council could assist by putting residents in touch with local organisations that were currently operating this type of scheme.

ii) Regulatory Panel

The Housing Business & Performance Manager said that 8 tenants had been appointed to the Panel. Training would now be arranged and it was expected that the Panel would be up and running from January. It was suggested that it would help the panel members to have an informal meeting with the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Board and the Tenants Forum representatives. A suitable date would be arranged.

The meeting ended at 12.40 pm.