

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.00pm on 29 NOVEMBER 2012**

Present:- Councillor V Ranger – Chairman.
Councillors K Mackman and J Menell.

Tenant Forum representative: Mr S Sproul.

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

HB36 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Perry, Barker Morson and Redfern.

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

HB37 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2012 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HB38 HOUSING STRATEGY

Members received the final draft of the Housing Strategy 2012 – 2015, which had been updated to take account of the comments made at the last meeting. Further comments had been received in response to the consultation.

The Council's registered RHA had expressed concern at two of the requirements - for blocks of flats over 2 storeys to have a lift and for the affordable properties to be provided in clusters of no more than 10 units. Members wished this requirement to be retained in the strategy, but it was acknowledged that there might be issues around viability. It was therefore agreed that the strategy should state that these issues would be discussed at the time of the application.

The CAB had provided some useful statistics to be included in the study. It had also stressed that when considering providing a domestic violence refuge it was imperative not to reveal the location.

A number of planning agents had commented on the NPPF and the requirement for more market housing. This was acknowledged but not considered to be an issue for the housing strategy.

Councillor Ranger asked for the strategy to mention that new affordable houses should be of good build quality and not distinguishable from the market housing within larger developments.

Councillor Menell asked what action was being taken in respect of under occupied properties, which she suspected were mainly occupied by elderly residents. She was informed that a survey would shortly be undertaken to establish the extent of the problem. A report would be made to the meeting in January outlining the extent of the problem and possible incentives and policy in this area.

AGREED that the Housing Board agree the Housing Strategy 2012-15 and recommend its adoption by the Cabinet.

HB39

MEAD COURT DEVELOPMENT

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer gave details of progress with the proposed development at Mead Court, Stansted.

The Cabinet had recently agreed that the scheme should be taken forward as a local authority new build scheme. Since then the Mead Court Task Group had been working on the plans and the latest version was circulated.

Officers had visited the remaining tenants to explain the scheme and the comments were generally positive. There would be a further meeting for the residents in the day room, when the architect would be present to show the detailed plans. A small group of members and officers would be presenting the proposals the parish council meeting on 5 December.

Planning permission was expected to be granted around March 2013 with the 1st stage to be built a year after that. The final scheme could be completed in around 2 years.

Members welcomed the proposed scheme and particularly thanked the Housing Enabling and Development Officer for all her work in progressing the scheme. The meeting was informed that she would be leaving the Council to take up a new post in January and Members wished her all the very best for the future.

HB40

RENT SETTING POLICY

The Board received the final draft of the Rent and Service Charge Setting policy. This would determine the levels by which housing rents and service charges would be increased on an annual basis. The draft had been considered at the previous meeting and also by the Tenants' Forum and approved by the Council's legal department.

Once approved the rents for 2013/14 would be calculated according to the policy for rent increases from 1 April 2013. The approved policy was in line with the Government's national social rent restructuring policy. This assumed that

- Guideline rents will converge with formula rents in 2015-16.
- Rent increases of just above inflation year on year after 2015-16.
- A limit on individual annual rent increases of RPI + 0.5% + £2 per week up to convergence and thereafter for annual increases in formula rents of RPI + 0.5% until 2015/16. After convergence annual increase in formula rents of RPI +0.5%.

The Board considered various rent setting model scenarios that had been prepared based on this formula. It was noted that of the 2853 properties outstanding for convergence, 809 properties would still be outstanding in 2015/16. Over the next couple of years the numbers would decrease significantly but the final property would not reach convergence until 2025/26. The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Health said that there was no pressing need to increase rents above the Government's policy, as most properties would reach convergence within a few years of 2015/16 and the full convergence rent was also being charged on new tenancies. The annual rent proposed would give certainly of the level of rent setting until 2016. This would protect both the tenants and the HRA business plan.

A question had been asked in response to the consultation inquiring whether RPI plus 0.5% would be required after convergence. It was noted that the policy was to be reviewed in 2015/16 and as part of that review comparisons could be made with the rents charged by other social housing providers.

It was AGREED that the draft Rent and Service Charge setting policy be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

HB41

ALLOCATIONS POLICY

The Board received the draft Allocations Policy which had been updated to take account of the comments received in response to the consultation. It was explained that the Policy had been required to incorporate changes introduced under the Localism Act. The policy

allowed for increased flexibility and the final document had incorporated particular wishes of members.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager went through the report and highlighted the following further amendments, which were agreed by the Board.

- A paragraph to explain precisely how properties were allocated through the policy.
- A new statement to be added to explain the type of incentives available for tenants in under occupied properties to move to a smaller home. (this was to be included when results of the under-occupancy survey were known).
- Additional priority for members of the armed forces and their partners. A recently issued statutory instrument had suggested they should be moved up one band, and this was included in the policy.
- Rewording of the local letting policy to make it clear that local lettings may be considered on a proportion of any rural affordable housing site where a local need can be demonstrated through a housing need survey and the tenants must be on the housing register in bands A – D.

AGREED that the draft Allocations Policy is recommended for approval by Cabinet.

HB42

LOCAL TENANCY POLICY

At the last meeting the Board had considered the stance that it wished to take with regard to the Uttlesford Tenancy Policy. After considering a number of options it had been agreed that as from 1 April 2013, nine year (plus one year introductory) fixed term tenancies should be offered for houses with three or more bedrooms. This would apply only to new tenants. The only reason for ending the tenancy would be because the larger property was no longer required and there would need to be a suitable smaller property available.

AGREED that the Local Tenancy Policy be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

HB43

HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY- SHELTERED SCHEMES

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services reported that a consultant had been appointed to undertake a cost analysis exercise on the council's sheltered sites, looking at a range of options including refurbishment, remodelling and alternative uses. A report on the findings would be submitted to the next meeting.

HB44 **DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS**

The next meeting was scheduled for 10 January 2012 at 2.00pm.
(Now rescheduled for Thursday 24 January 2012 at 9.30 am).

HB45 **URGENT ITEMS**

Members were advised that letters about the new bedroom tax had been sent to tenants this week. This was part of the Government's welfare reforms and applied to working age tenants in council or housing association properties, and would reduce the amount of welfare they could receive if they were deemed to have a spare room. The measures would apply from 1 April 2013. It was requested that information on this matter be circulated to all Councillors.

The meeting ended at 3.15pm.