

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD  
SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.30am on 24 JANUARY 2013**

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

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

Officers in attendance: S Baxter (Housing Enabling and Development Officer), R Dobson (Democratic Services Officer), M Donaldson (Accountancy Manager), P Evans (Housing Business & Performance Manager), R Harborough (Director of Public Services), A Liles (Housing Asset Manager), R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services), J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager) and M Tokley (Principal Accountant – Budgets).

**HB46 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

**HB47 MINUTES**

Subject to the following amendments, the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2012 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

The Minutes were amended to include apologies given by Mr Parish and Councillor Loughlin. Mr Parish said he had also given his apologies for the meeting on 23 October 2012 which had not been recorded in the previous minutes.

**HB48 MATTERS ARISING**

**(i) Minute HB38 – Housing Strategy**

Councillor Menell said she was concerned that the report relating to transfer of land to enable development of a refuge for women fleeing domestic violence would reveal the location of that facility, contrary to the strongly worded request of the CAB that it was imperative not to reveal the location.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the advice received from the Council's solicitor was that this information did not

come within any of the exempt categories and could not therefore be kept out of the public domain.

HP49

## **FINANCIAL REPORTS: RENT AND SERVICE CHARGE 2013/14**

The Board considered a report on the proposed rent and service charge increase for 2013/14.

The Accountancy Manager drew attention to the recommendations to be made to Cabinet. The proposed average rent increase for 2013/14 was 4.57% which was in line with national guideline rent increases and continued to take due consideration of central government guidance for the convergence of local authority rents to Formula Rents by 2015/16. The formula to achieve convergence was based on the application of the Retail Price Index (RPI) of 2.6% plus 0.5% plus a cap of £2.00 for 2013/14.

For garages, sheltered support services and Lifeline, charges were proposed to increase by inflation, 2.6%. All other charges were recharged in line with actual costs and estimated service costs for the forthcoming year.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager put forward a further recommendation in relation to Lifeline charges. It was proposed that from 1 April 2013 there should be three levels of Lifeline service, as the Council's new contract with Carecall allowed for an evening and weekend response service for dispersed Lifeline customers. Another reason for this proposal was that the Council was experiencing an increase in the number of customers requesting extra telecare sensors. As each sensor was an additional charge on the monitoring costs, it was proposed to reflect this charge in the cost to the customer.

Councillor Menell declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Lifeline customer. She said she was content with the proposal.

Officers confirmed that the application of charges would not be means tested.

David Parish said the recommendations had been considered and endorsed by the Tenant Forum, and he proposed the recommendations set out in the report and in the additional paper tabled regarding Lifeline charges. Councillor Mackman seconded the proposal.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet

- 1 in line with the Council's Rent and Service Charge Setting Policy, HRA dwelling rents continue to converge with Formula Rents based on the application of the Retail Price Increase (RPI) of 2.6% plus 0.5%, plus a cap of £2.00 for 2013/14. The proposed average rent increase for

2013/14 is 4.57%, bringing the average weekly rent to £93.41 (52 week rent year)

- 2 garage rents are increased by RPI of 2.6%
- 3 heating, service and sewerage charges are increased in line with actual costs
- 4 service charges for common services in sheltered schemes continue to be fully subsidised for tenants at 31 March 2012 who are not in receipt of housing benefit
- 5 the charge for sheltered support services is increased by RPI of 2.6% and that protection be continued for tenants at 31st March 2003 who are ineligible for supporting people grant assistance
- 6 Lifeline charges are increased by RPI of 2.6% and the tiered level of charging for the Dispersed Lifeline Service is implemented as follows:
  - a) Level 1 – Basic Lifeline  
Basic lifeline unit at a cost of £3.94pw
  - b) Level 2 – Extra Sensors (up to a maximum of 4)  
Basic lifeline unit with up to 4 extra sensors  $£3.94 + £1.00 = £4.94pw$   
(Customers requiring more than 4 extra sensors to be charged at the rate of 50p per extra sensor)
  - c) Level 3 – Evening and Weekend Response  
Basic lifeline unit with evening and weekend response service  $£3.94 + £1.00 = £4.94pw$   
or £5.94pw with up to 4 extra sensors
  - d) The response service initially to be offered to new customers but any existing customers to be able to opt in by paying the extra £1pw charge.

HP50

## **FINANCIAL REPORTS: HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 2013/14 BUDGET AND 5 YEAR BUDGET STRATEGY**

The Board considered the proposed HRA budget and reserves position for 2013/14 and a five year financial forecast for 2013/14 to 2017/18. The Board were invited to determine the 2013/14 budget and medium term financial forecast for consideration by Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Council.

The Accountancy Manager said the HRA was now in the second year of self-financing, that the 2012/13 budget had been taken as a base, and that the report took into account the rent increase just approved. The Council would not until 2017/18 pay back principal on the HRA loan portfolio, but was currently paying interest only on the portfolio. The budget took into account the staffing restructure, and provided for the aspirations set out in the business plan.

The Accountancy Manager said it was also necessary to consider the impact of the welfare benefit reforms which were to take effect in 2013/14. Bad debt provision had therefore been included to take into account the impact of these reforms, and provision was also made to fund a post to support rent collection. Further provision was made regarding the cash incentive scheme to be used to encourage people to move to a smaller property.

The Accountancy Manager explained there was an operating surplus of £2.9 million for 2013/14, which represented 'financial headroom' and was available to finance investment in existing council houses and develop additional affordable housing.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services drew attention to the fact that the installation of air source heat pumps had cost more than anticipated. She reminded the Board that this was a new venture for the Council, and that in future ancillary costs were included in the tender process. These ancillary works included works to block up chimneys, removal of existing oil tanks at properties and compensation for oil in tanks to the homeowner. These additional costs came to £135,000, which would absorb some of the HRA underspend this year. Installing air source heat pumps was still a better option than replacing traditional oil boilers and because there was funding available the process represented good value for money.

The Chairman said the application process for the government grant for installing air source heat pumps had imposed a tight timetable.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said it was also important to look at the potential for saving through investment in the Council's housing stock. She said the painting programme gave the opportunity to replace guttering, soffits and fascias with upvc instead of simply making repairs. In 5 – 6 years this pre-emptive measure would create savings as only externally rendered properties would require painting. She therefore asked the Board for their approval of a suggestion to include a budget in 2013/14 of £200,000 and thereafter £500,000 over the 5 – 6 year period to replace guttering soffits and fascias financed from the projected HRA surplus.

The Board agreed to this suggestion.

The Accountancy Manager said the working balance was £649,000. She said this level was more than sufficient against the minimum balance requirement of £525,000. For 2013/14 it was advisable to keep the working balance at above the minimum level in view of the increased risks associated with welfare reform.

The Accountancy Manager drew attention to the potential projects reserve which was forecast to be £869,000 by the end of 2013/14; to the use of the Change Management Reserve of £23,400 for funding a temporary rent arrears/debt support officer post; and the forecast balance on this reserve which was expected to be £177,000 as at 31 March 2014 and which would be available for future service reviews.

Councillor Perry said the budget allowed for flexibility and benefitted tenants, and he proposed the recommendations in the report.

Councillor Mackman seconded the proposal.

Mr Sproul asked why rent arrears/debt support officer post was needed.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services explained that once the welfare reforms had come into force, Housing Benefit would go direct to the tenant rather than to the Council. The role of the Rent Collector would therefore be to liaise with people to help them set up a direct debit to pay their rent and to offer advice on how to manage their money. At two pilot authorities where direct payments had already been put into effect rent arrears had increased. This Council aimed to be proactive in addressing the anticipated issues, although she still anticipated that arrears would increase.

The Board agreed that the measures suggested were very prudent.

Mr Parish said the Tenant Forum had agreed with this approach.

Councillor Ranger asked about arrangements for those people who had no bank accounts. The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said everyone would have to have a bank or post office account into which money could be paid.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet (19 February 2013):

- 1 the 2013/14 budget resulting in a forecast surplus of £144,000 after uPVC scheme.
- 2 The maintenance of an HRA working balance of £534,000 for the period to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014.
- 3 The use of and contribution to HRA earmarked reserves as detailed at Appendix E to the report.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the Housing Asset Manager would in his report set out some issues which would affect the surplus figure, for the Board to consider.

HB51

## **TRANSFER OF LAND FOR SPECIALIST HOUSING PROJECT**

The Board considered a proposal to transfer land at nil value to Safer Places for the development of a refuge for women suffering from domestic abuse. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the facility which Safer Places proposed building in Uttlesford was something the district had not had before. Safer Places intended to re-configure part of their current provision, located in the neighbouring areas of Harlow, Braintree and Broxbourne. Following discussions with officers a suitable site had been identified which, if the Housing Board agreed, could be recommended to Cabinet to be gifted to Safer Places for providing a refuge facility in Uttlesford.

Councillor Loughlin asked whether there would be provision for men as well as women.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said there were very few refuges for men suffering domestic abuse, and although the housing service had made referrals on occasion there was not such a need for men's refuges.

David Parish reiterated his concern that this item should be kept confidential. Officers said legal advice already given was clear that it was not possible to treat the item as one which could be exempt from being dealt with in public, and that planning application requirements would mean no option but to make public the location.

Councillor Mackman proposed the recommendations set out in the report. Councillor Perry seconded the proposal and said domestic abuse was on the increase and that provision of a refuge in the district was long overdue. He asked whether other agencies such as the police could be asked to contribute to costs of the project.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said funding contributions was something Safer Places would pursue with the County Council.

Councillor Menell repeated her concern about revealing the location of the refuge, particularly in view of the CAB's request. If the Council followed legal advice the refuge would not be a safe place. She asked that officers go back to the CAB and to the Assistant Chief Executive-Legal to check the position regarding keeping the location confidential.

Councillor Mackman said whilst this facility would be based in Uttlesford it would accept referrals from other districts. Similarly people from Uttlesford could be transferred to provision outside the district.

Councillor Loughlin declared a non-pecuniary interest in that her husband had worked for the company that built the refuge facility in Harlow. She said security arrangements for the refuge meant occupants were quite well-protected.

There was further discussion about whether any measures could be taken to keep the location and purpose of the facility from becoming public. The Director of Public Services said the reason for people being accommodated in this development would not be material to planning, but that the type of accommodation and facility would be material.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said inevitably the local community would find out the purpose for which the site would be used. However it would not necessarily house Uttlesford people, as people from this district might well be referred elsewhere. However the facility would not be advertised.

It was agreed to change the wording of the recommendation to omit details about the purpose of the accommodation.

#### RECOMMENDED to Cabinet

- 1 the transfer of land at Newton Grove, Dunmow to Safer Places for a specialist housing project, subject to planning consent being obtained.
- 2 that land is transferred at nil or less than best consideration for affordable housing subject to full financial details being provided to Members in a future report which will detail the actual terms of the sale.
- 3 Transfer of land would be subject to terms and conditions.

HB52

#### **DRAFT DECANT POLICY**

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said she would include a verbal update on the under occupation survey as part of the report on the draft decant policy.

The report invited the Housing Board members to agree a new policy on the process that the Council would undertake and the level of compensation that would be given, when it became necessary to re-house a tenant to allow major repairs to be undertaken or where a property was to be demolished or disposed of. The policy also set out

details of payments to be made to tenants who decided to downsize from a property larger than their needs.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said a telephone survey of tenants had taken place to ask what might encourage them to move from their existing properties. Many said they would wish to stay, even once the 'bedroom tax' came into operation. Some said that if there were to be a sufficiently attractive package to help with the cost of moving that they would consider doing so. She referred members to the disturbance allowance set out in the policy.

With regard to an exceptions policy where tenants were in arrears with their rent, the Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager invited Members to consider three options for how such arrears would be dealt with in decanting tenants.

David Parish said the Tenant Forum supported the option given at paragraph 5.6 of the draft Decant Policy, that is, to deduct any outstanding rent arrears from the disturbance allowance to a maximum of £500. He said this option recognised that although tenants might owe money to the Council, they were being made to move, and this clause enabled a fair approach to be taken. Accordingly he proposed this clause should be included in the policy. Councillor Perry seconded the proposal, which was agreed.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager then drew attention to downsizing incentives for under-occupying tenants at paragraph 18 of the draft policy. She said different views had been expressed by members of the Tenant Forum. Tenants were happy that a payment of £2,500 should be paid to an elderly person who was downsizing, but there were different perspectives for general needs tenants. The conclusion reached by the Tenant Forum was that one single payment should be made, regardless of the size of property from which the tenant was downsizing, but they had agreed the Housing Board should be the final arbiter on this point.

Councillor Mackman said the amount payable to tenants downsizing should be tiered as there were different expenses involved for the different sized properties.

Councillor Ranger said moving expenses tended to encompass the same sort of factors regardless of the size of property.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said it was important that people were in the right-sized accommodation for their needs. The Council needed to free up housing of every size and the higher level of incentive for those downsizing by even just one bedroom might encourage people to move. A single payment would also make the process easier to administer. She had compared what other authorities were offering tenants to downsize, and she could

confirm that the amount proposed was not overgenerous. She suggested that the amount agreed by the Housing Board could be reviewed after one year.

Members agreed that the amount of the cash payment to downsizing Uttlesford general needs tenants should be a single amount of £2,000 regardless of the size of property being left, and that this amount should be reviewed after one year (paragraph 19 to be amended).

It was agreed that the payment to elderly tenants downsizing would be £2,500.

It was agreed that in order to avoid ambiguity, the policy should explicitly state that house-swapping to a smaller property outside the district would be excluded from the downsizing payment.

Members expressed their support for the policy that rent arrears or the cost of repairing tenants' damage to UDC property would be deducted from downsizing payments. Members agreed this was fair as downsizing tenants were not being forced to move.

Members therefore agreed the policy as drafted, subject to the amendments in the Minute above, should be recommended to Cabinet.

It was noted that the policy would be implemented on 1 April.

HB53

## **VOID MANAGEMENT POLICY**

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services presented a report seeking approval of the Void Management Policy and Letting Standard. She said this policy was required by the Council's auditors, and that it tied in well with the downsizing policy. It was desirable to fill void properties as soon as feasible in order not to lose rent. She said the Council had in the past had a re-let standard and this had been reviewed to ensure that properties would be re-let more quickly.

The Housing Asset Manager said the re-letting period was just under 20 days.

Councillor Menell proposed the approval of the Void Management Policy and Letting Standard, and Councillor Mackman seconded the proposal.

Sam Sproul referred to HouseMark benchmarking and said it was important the Council should move towards the ideal.

The Housing Business & Performance Manager said data for the HouseMark standards was available quarterly. The Chairman said this data should be considered first by the regulatory panel so that their intentions could be considered.

The Void Management Policy and Letting Standard was agreed.

HB54

## **SHELTERED HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT**

The Housing Board considered a report tabled by the Housing Asset Manager which set out details of the recent review carried out on sheltered housing by an external consultant. The report included a schedule setting out a “broad brush” appraisal of which properties were deemed suitable for development, retention, modification or disposal. The Housing Asset Manager said if the Council were to take no action it would nevertheless have to spend a significant sum, £20 million, simply to stand still. He also drew attention to what he said was a surprisingly low amount of estimated income if certain properties were disposed of. He suggested that this report be used as a yardstick from which a further more detailed assessment could be made, provided the Housing Board agreed to this course of action in principle.

Sam Sproul said this report had been discussed in detail by the Tenant Forum. It had suggested that the regulatory panel could look at the listed part of Walden Place. He felt it would also be useful to have a working group to look into how to deal with Reynolds Court and Alexia House which still had bedsit accommodation. Councillor Perry agreed with this approach.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that the decision to not repay debt for the first five years of self-financing gave the council an opportunity to improve the schemes with the poorest accommodation. If these problems were not tackled now they would persist for another twenty years and people would continue to live in sub-standard accommodation. These properties were not fit for purpose. If the principle of further appraisal was agreed, the Council would instruct the consultant to undertake a further review from which plans could be drawn up. She acknowledged the fact that this process could ultimately mean a major decant of people from these properties, and this would not be easy.

The Chairman said there was a need for more work to be done before any working group could be set up. It was noted that the Housing Board did not have decision-making powers and could not set up a working group itself, as this was a function of Cabinet.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said tenants in the properties for which development or remodelling was proposed would need to be informed at this early stage. The Chairman asked that local members of relevant properties be informed.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said there was capacity in the planned budgets for the in-depth review but improving housing for older people would have revenue and capital

implications which would be explored in detail as the programme developed. There was money currently in reserves.

AGREED to accept the principle of pursuing retain/remodel/redevelop sheltered accommodation, and approve further in depth appraisals to be carried out in order to continue with the upgrade of the sheltered programme as follows:

- 1 re-development options for the council's remaining two schemes where bedsits predominate (Reynolds Court and Alexia House)
- 2 modification options for all the remaining schemes and in particular those highlighted as having the highest priority - Hatherley Court and the listed building at Walden Place and Parkside.

HB55

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chairman said the new regulatory panel would be looking at the question of whether tenants were getting best value for money. It was agreed that the Chairman of the Panel, Daphne Cornell, should be invited to future Housing Board meetings as a guest.

The Housing Business & Performance Manager gave an update on HousingMark data. She said she would benchmark the data against other authorities and would be working with the corporate performance team to set up a housing performance process and review performance indicators. She suggested that she submit to the Housing Board for review the data relating to Q2, which had only just been released. The regulatory panel would be looking at the data, as it would be a key aspect of their scrutiny of housing. She had also suggested the panel look at the results of the STAR survey to examine the weaker areas of the service. She reported on a training event the team had attended recently with an external consultant, which had been very productive. Further discussions would take place next week to consider how to take this work forward with the consultant's input.

Councillor Menell said she was aware that South Cambridgeshire District Council was able to announce a programme of 100 new houses, and questioned why it could build so many.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that some authorities were investing more on new build under self-financing. Uttlesford's members and tenants had wanted to see a mix of new build and improved maintenance of existing stock and the business plan reflected this. Uttlesford were already delivering new houses and as well as the Mead Court redevelopment have a 5 year new build programme.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said she would circulate a programme of work to be considered by the Housing Board over the next year.

Councillor Menell said the attendance level of some councillors at these meetings was disappointing.

The meeting ended at 12.10pm.