

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.00pm on 22 AUGUST 2013**

Present:- Councillor V Ranger – Chairman.
Councillors J Loughlin, K Mackman, J Menell and J Redfern
(Portfolio Holder for Housing).

Tenant Forum representative: Mr D Parish.

Officers in attendance: R Dobson (Democratic Services Officer), R
Crockford (Housing Asset Manager), P Evans (Housing
Business & Performance Manager), E Fellowes (HRA
Accountant), S Joyce (Assistant Chief Executive-Finance),
R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental
Services) and J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord
Services Manager).

HB1 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A Dean and from
Sam Sproul.

Councillor Ranger and David Parish declared their non-pecuniary interest in
that they were tenants of the Council.

HB2 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2013 were signed by the
Chairman as a correct record.

HB3 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute HB60 – adaptations and disabled facility grant

The Chairman noted approval of Cabinet had been obtained for
a proposal that the Council should employ its own Occupational
Therapist, and asked for an update. The Assistant Director Housing
and Environmental Services said that unfortunately following
agreement of the West Essex Health Board to fund provision of
Occupational Therapy (OT) by districts, there was now some
uncertainty, as Essex CC were carrying out a re-organisation which
would result in staffing changes within the authority . The position
had improved in that the backlog of OT assessments had been
cleared but could improve further if an integrated approach was
adopted. The next step would be for officers to seek an update from
West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group on their proposals for an
integrated approach to OT provision.

(ii) Minute HB65 – Housing Strategy

Officers confirmed that the date of the housing strategy conference was Tuesday 1 October 2013 at the council offices. The landlords' forum would take place on Wednesday 11 September at 7.30pm. Invitations to both events would be sent out soon.

(iii) Minute HB68 – other business – rough sleepers

Councillor Menell asked about the number of rough sleepers in the district. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said although there were a number of homeless people in the district there were usually no rough sleepers, and that any potential instances tended to be reported very quickly.

HP4

DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

Members considered statistics on the affordable housing programme for 2013-14, and an update on the commuted sum.

The Chairman asked about the value of contributions and the dates when these would be available. The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance agreed to provide figures in a further report.

The Housing Asset Manager gave a verbal update on the Council's recent developments. The official opening of Holloway Crescent had now taken place, with Councillor Hicks the Chairman of the Council cutting the ribbon. The development was a great success, eight new homes had been let in Leaden Roding, and the Council could be rightly proud of this scheme.

Work on the development of Mead Court had concluded the design and development stage. The project brief was included in the documents for today's meeting as it would be finalised for use in future developments. Work would commence on site in November 2013. The value of the project was in the region of £4 million, and the exact details of the contract would be finalised in the next month. The first part of the project was anticipated to be completed by November 2014.

The Housing Asset Manager gave a verbal report on a comprehensive review of the Council's sheltered housing. The review had looked into the merits of whether to re-model selected schemes through improvement to existing properties, or whether redevelopment should be preferred, with the aim of eliminating bedsit accommodation from the Council's housing stock. The reason for this was that bedsits tended not to meet modern expectations and this type of accommodation was seen as less desirable than other more up to date housing. Redevelopment would require substantial investment and disruption to existing tenants.

The Housing Asset Manager asked Members to indicate whether they wished to support removing bedsits from the housing stock.

One of the schemes identified for the review, Reynolds Court, had a significant number of bedsits, some of which had been void for many years. Tenants who accepted bedsits tended to be transitory as they were hoping to be able to move on to other types of sheltered housing.

The Housing Asset Manager invited Members to consider indicative designs in relation to possible redevelopment of Reynolds Court. Comments were made as follows: there was potential through careful creative design to achieve nearly the same number of alternative accommodation units as bedsits; there needed to be careful design regarding the proportions of green space and parking spaces; although bungalows were popular, they did not use space efficiently.

Members asked how much space could be used for sheltered housing units in place of bedsits; how an affordable rent would be calculated; whether council tax banding would be affected; and whether taking forward a large development project, such as the Reynolds Court scheme, would prejudice the progressing of smaller developments.

The Housing Asset Manager said the indicative scheme showed how space could be used creatively and effectively, as for example at Reynolds Court, 31 units could reduce by only 2 units to 29 units. Currently 5 properties were unoccupied at Reynolds Court, and one of these had been vacant for nearly 10 years.

The rent level on this model had been provisionally calculated at £125 per week. Regarding progressing smaller schemes, these were included in the budget, whereas this development would utilise an earmarked sum.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said there were some sums in the HRA budget for redevelopment and asked whether these were sufficient to cover the costs for this initiative.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said there was £3 million in the budget which allowed £1.5 million per year over two financial years, which subject to detailed financial analysis, should cover the cost of the scheme.

Councillor Redfern said if a major project such as this went ahead it would take two years, but that there were also garage development sites which could be started at any time. She referred to sites becoming available from planning applications, and that off-site contributions would be made in respect of some applications.

It was agreed that officers would obtain this information from the legal department in order to check the process by which such sites would become available.

The Chairman said normally sites would be developed by a registered provider, but agreed with Councillor Redfern that ideally the Council should be the partner to develop such sites.

Regarding the options for improvement of sheltered schemes, members confirmed their whole-hearted preference for removing bedsits from the housing stock and for full redevelopment over remodelling.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said tenants' relocation during any proposed development would require full member support, particularly regarding the possibility that some might not voluntarily move.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said consultation with those affected would need to take place before any decision on redevelopment and would continue throughout the process.

Councillor Redfern asked that officers involve local members in any consultations.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said officers would bring a full report to the next meeting of the Housing Board in order for recommendations to be made to Cabinet, as Members needed to see full proposals alongside financial analysis.

The Housing Board agreed in principle

- (i) The improvement of the Council's stock of sheltered housing by means of redevelopment involving where possible and appropriate elimination of bedsit units in favour of updated sheltered housing units;
- (ii) That officers be instructed to prepare a report setting out detailed proposals and financial analysis for the different investment options for Reynolds Court to be considered by the Housing Board at the next meeting.

The Housing Asset Manager then gave a verbal update on garage sites. He invited Councillors Ranger and Redfern to attend a meeting with officers to appraise sites suitable for development, and to consider preliminary designs and budget analysis.

Councillor Redfern asked whether there was any money left from the Stansted Area Partnership monies.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said he would provide a summary of the remaining money.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said she would provide information on any additional budget available for the

redevelopment of garage/garden sites, so that as many as possible could be brought forward.

HB5

PROJECT BRIEF

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the project brief for Mead Court would be used in future as a template for all the council's building projects. She invited the Board to comment on the document.

The Chairman said he had a number of comments regarding details, but these were of a minor nature and could be dealt with outside the meeting. Councillor Redfern said she too wished to raise a number of minor details.

Councillor Menell asked about environmental specifications required. The Housing Asset Manager said examples of such requirements were the photovoltaic panels installed at Mead Court on the bungalows, and the standard construction level 3 for sustainable homes which the document required. Unfortunately it was not possible to incorporate all elements but with other sites there would be opportunities to develop environmental measures further.

Agreed to approve the Project Brief as a template for the Council's future housing developments, subject to some minor amendments to be agreed between the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services and the Housing Asset Manager with Councillors Ranger and Redfern.

HB6

PERFORMANCE DATA

The Housing Business & Performance Manager presented a performance summary for the quarter ending 30 June 2013. She invited comments on the format of the document and explained the background to the performance indicators. She said some targets were historically included and where the Council was signed up to Housemark, benchmarking had been conducted so that competitive but realistic targets could be identified. The housing service was 54% on target.

Councillor Ranger commented on the changing of some performance indicators. The Housing Business & Performance Manager said a number of PIs being collected corporately were similar to the Housemark ones, and these were being aligned.

Councillor Ranger noted that average spend on voids was £3,100, and asked about the work involved.

The Housing Asset Manager said this figure represented an average and that sometimes a void required only a statutory utilities test and a clean,

and in other cases putting right structural damage carried out without the landlord's permission. The performance of the Council compared to industry standards was quite good.

Councillor Ranger asked about the budget for the replacement of kitchens and whether the Council re-charged for this cost.

The Housing Asset Manager said historically costs from voids were placed in the voids budget; and that recharge invoices were issued if possible. The process was being reviewed so that tenants were made aware before this stage was reached.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said the Key Performance Indicators went to the Performance and Audit Committee, which had met last week. Members had been delighted at the improvement in void times. He asked a question about the red indicators against the fire safety actions.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said these indicators would provide managers with opportunities to ensure improvements as necessary.

Mr Parish asked that the performance data be supplied to the Tenant Forum.

HB7

BED AND BREAKFAST CHARGES

The Board considered a report on the current contribution made by clients of bed and breakfast accommodation provided by the Council in cases of emergency homelessness.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said charges for bed and breakfast in such circumstances had not changed for many years, and a small sum of only £4 per night per adult, and £2 per night per child had applied. However, a recent case of emergency homelessness bed and breakfast accommodation had highlighted the need for an updated policy, as it had involved someone with savings of a level which disqualified them from receiving benefits.

Officers had carried out a comparison of other councils' policies in this regard, and the Board was now invited to approve proposals that all clients who would normally be entitled to full housing benefit would pay a weekly service charge for B&B accommodation or any other type of nightly let accommodation. It was also proposed that the Council's pricing and concessions policy should not apply to B&B charges because of the relationship between costs and benefit entitlement. Members were therefore invited to approve B&B charges as an exception to the policy. The charges would be set at the level of the standard weekly deductions as set out by the DWP's housing policy. The proposed charges were therefore £21 per week plus £3.15 per person per week for food for one room, and £39 per week plus £3.15 per person per week for two rooms.

These charges would be reviewed each April and would be adjusted according to Housing Benefit and DWP policy.

Clients who were eligible for only partial housing benefit would pay the above charges and would then be invoiced for the shortfall amount between the actual cost of the accommodation and the amount received via housing benefit once their claim was assessed.

Members asked questions on how money was currently collected and whether costs of administering the new policy would be proportionate to the amount recovered.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the B&B owner directly collected part of the charge, and the Council collected the remainder. The amount was not a significant shortfall but administration costs would be proportionate.

Councillor Loughlin asked what was the longest time someone had been in B&B accommodation.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the case mentioned above had involved the maximum legal stay for families in B&B emergency homelessness accommodation, that is, six weeks. Where possible, the council put people into self-contained accommodation, and there was a facility at Harlow, Oasis, which Uttlesford could use.

It was agreed to recommend to Cabinet

- 1 an increase in the contribution made by clients towards the cost of providing them with emergency Bed and Breakfast or nightly let accommodation;
- 2 that B&B charges should be a stated exception to the Council's pricing and concessions policy.

HB8

BUSINESS PLAN ACTION PLAN

Members considered a schedule of the HRA business plan priorities for action showing progress to date.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services drew attention to summary of potential capacity for undertaking new build schemes on identified garden sites. She had discussed with the HRA Accountant the maximum number of work programmes which could be progressed. She had asked whether some of the surplus in the HRA could be used to continue these developments, and whether after six months a review of accrued savings could be carried out to ensure these monies could also be used to progress developments. A report on this surplus would be brought to the next meeting.

Councillor Menell said the progress report was an excellent document and the housing service should be commended. She asked about the involvement of the Citizens' Advice Bureau. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager confirmed there was a close working relationship with the CAB. She had met the CAB this morning regarding the issues of housing benefit and council tax.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services invited Members of the Board to suggest at any time their ideas for the business plan.

HB9

REGULATORY PANEL

The Housing Business & Performance Manager gave a verbal update on the Regulatory Panel, as its chairman, Daphne Cornell, was not able to be present today. She said the Panel were still benefitting from the services of a consultant, Alan Jones, who was providing valuable guidance. The Panel was looking into the voids process and would submit a report with recommendations. The chairmanship was due for renewal in early 2014.

Members agreed the Regulatory Panel was carrying out some very good work.

HB10

WELFARE BENEFIT REFORMS

The Board considered a verbal update given by the Housing Business & Performance Manager, the Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager and the Assistant Chief Executive-Finance on welfare benefit reforms.

The Housing Business & Performance Manager provided data on the number of arrears cases, which showed the percentage of arrears had remained fairly level during the period from April to July 2013. A rent arrears debt support officer on a six month secondment had been doing much work to liaise with partner agencies in order to avoid people falling into arrears. This officer would now be employed full-time on rent arrears.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance gave an update on the welfare reforms. Regarding universal credit, he said this was probably due to come into force in February 2014 and that in Essex this would affect a limited number of people. If it happened, the Council should not expect a migration of housing benefit recipients until late 2015, then this process would taken place over a period of years. Despite the time period, if Universal Credit went ahead the Council could be exposed to major risk. Whilst it would not be for some years, the Council would need to factor in to the HRA provision for bad debt.

Regarding the so-called 'spare room subsidy', the Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said in Uttlesford this would affect 168 households. These were households which had been deemed under the new rules to have one or two spare rooms. The average reduction of housing benefit in

these cases was £16 per week per household, and in view of these figures members could be reassured that there was a fairly limited impact of this change in Uttlesford.

Regarding the benefit cap, only 11 households were subject to this rule, which prevented a household from receiving more than £500 pw in benefit. Where this amount would be exceeded, it was housing benefit which was cut. There were two households which were Uttlesford tenants one of which was a travelling family. The range of housing benefit which could be cut was from £5 - £269.

Regarding the replacement of council tax benefit with localised council tax support, the Council had protected pensioners and the disabled. The number of households affected in the district was 13,050, comprising mainly people of working age.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said all these changes were putting the service under pressure. Many people were applying for benefit who were not necessarily entitled to it, and many appeals were being submitted. There was also a tendency towards more complicated personal finance arrangements and there was consequently a trend now for claims to take more time processing. New claims were taking 22 days on average to process against the target of 20 days. If that trend continued the service would require investment.

In terms of council tax support the Council was consulting the public regarding changes to the scheme next year, on proposals that people of working age who were not disabled should pay more, as well as proposals to remove the discounts those people received for second homes or empty homes. This measure could increase income and also bring long term empty homes into use.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the housing service was working closely with the revenues and benefits service. Some people had been obliged to move as a result of the housing benefit cap. Housing was also working with people who wished to downsize, and approximately six households had qualified for downsizing grants. Of these cases, some had rent arrears, and the grant had been applied to pay off the arrears. Many tenants were saying they did not want to move and that they would manage. However this could lead to a cumulative problem for those people, which could become apparent under pressure for example at Christmas.

In reply to a question from Councillor Loughlin the Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the Council did not have stocks of smaller accommodation units available for those who wanted to move. Councillor Loughlin said the policy seemed cruel.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the Council was fortunate in that the numbers of people wanting to move was small, and

that although the process was slow, their needs could be met eventually by giving them priority on the waiting list.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said the Council had funds to provide discretionary support. The Government had made available £100,000 budget for this purpose and the Council had also made available an additional hardship fund. The policy was attracting many FOI requests and MP letters.

Councillor Ranger asked how many of the Council's rent payers would be affected if universal credit came into force. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said approximately two-thirds would be affected.

Councillor Ranger said he would be willing to give his support for investment in the revenues and benefits service, as Chairman of the housing board.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance expressed appreciation for such support and said the Portfolio Holder for Finance was also supportive and had indicated he would not wish to let the service experience difficulties. Currently two agency staff were employed and the question of recruiting a future permanent resource would be kept under review.

HB11

HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT

The Housing Asset Manager said he had brought a draft version of the housing asset management and development strategy to the previous meeting for comment but no further comments had been received.

Councillor Ranger asked that the following reference in the document should state that it also applied to new housing development: to ensuring that all homes (where possible) should comply with design and quality standards and achieve a minimum of Code 3 for sustainability.

Agreed to recommend to Cabinet the Housing Asset Management and Development Strategy

HB12

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be at 2pm on Thursday 31 October 2013.

The meeting ended at 4.20pm.