

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.30pm on 4 NOVEMBER 2013**

Present: Councillor V Ranger – Chairman.
Councillors A Dean, J Menell and J Redfern
(Portfolio Holder for Housing).

Tenant Forum representative: Mr D Parish.

Also present: Mr G Hall, of Henry Riley LLB.

Officers in attendance: S Baxter (Housing Enabling Officer), R Dobson (Principal Democratic Services Officer), R Crockford (Housing Asset Manager), R Harborough (Director of Public Services), A Knight (Accountancy Manager), D Malins (Housing Strategy Consultant), R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services) and J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager).

HB13 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Freeman and J Loughlin.

Councillor Ranger and David Parish declared a non-pecuniary interest as tenants of the Council.

HB14 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 August 2013 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HB15 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute HB3 – adaptations and disabled facility grant

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the Public Health Consultant had consulted with the Clinical Commissioning Group, Harlow and Epping Forest District Council. Much of the Occupational Therapy backlog had been cleared. All three councils were still keen to have OT within their Housing Services, and this suggestion had been put forward for discussion with the CCG and Essex OT.

(ii) Minute HP4 – Stansted Area Partnership monies

Councillor Dean asked whether there had been a summary of the remaining Stansted Area Partnership money. The Director of Public Services said the rest of the Uttlesford share had been allocated to the Mead Court project.

(iii) Minute HB7 – Bed and Breakfast charges

Councillor Redfern said the report on Bed and Breakfast charges had now been approved by Cabinet.

(iv) Minute HB8 – Business Plan Action Plan

Councillor Dean asked whether a report on the HRA surplus was yet available. The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said this report would now be carried forward to the next meeting.

HB16

DEVELOPMENT UPDATE – NEW BUILD

The Chairman said he would take this item first. Members were asked to note that the commercial information provided was confidential because one possible outcome would be the re-tender of the project, in which case public knowledge of the current figures could prejudice that process.

Graham Halls of Henry Riley LLP presented a tender overview for Mead Court, Stansted. Mr Halls said his report on a fixed price tender proposal by Willmott Dixon for the Mead Court development was intended to protect the Council's interests and help it get the best value from the scheme. Henry Riley LLP had reviewed all of the costs included in the tender, to ensure that the pricing was a fair reflection of the market. The report also set out queries on areas of concern, to which Willmott Dixon had provided a response.

Mr Halls said the tender price had exceeded the original estimated construction budget for the project. This budget had been prepared from scheme drawings without the benefit of site surveys or detailed design. The primary reasons for the difference were the "site abnormalities", which were summarised as abnormal foundations; different site levels; service diversions; road resurfacing and the extension to a phased programme. Building price inflation had also played a part due to the current overheating of the market.

The abnormal foundations comprised a historic pond saturated with methane gas which would need to be dug out; specialist foundations which as a consequence would be required; and diversion of a culvert, foul water drain and a high voltage power cable.

Mr Halls said the Council's options were therefore to accept the Willmott Dixon tender; or to send the proposals out to re-tender. However, as the market was very active the Council might not get a more competitive price, and it was also a possibility that there might not be the appetite to take on the work. A further option was for the Council to refine the proposals in terms of design. However, the abnormal ground conditions and two-phase

approach were still likely to have an impact on the robustness of tenders other contractors might offer.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said not to proceed would be hugely disappointing as the existing substandard housing would remain, and delay would result in greater losses to rental income.

Members asked for the opinion of the finance officer. The Accountancy Manager said as the Council would not be making principal repayments for 5 years there was some flexibility in the budget. The Council could also look at other projects coming up and possibly find some savings elsewhere.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said this scheme was a high priority.

Councillor Dean asked whether there was any alternative to phasing.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said tenants had been consulted and promised the project would be phased, and this had always been a factor in drawing up the tender proposals. In considering this project, one aspect which officers had rationalised into the calculations was the delay and cost which could be caused by potential eviction proceedings, in terms of court costs and delay to rent collection. The people remaining in Mead Court currently had the reassurance that they had a flat or bungalow to go to. Officers could try speaking to them again but it would be difficult to undo what had already been said.

Councillor Ranger said if the Council approached the market again prices might have risen. This was a flagship project which would resolve the problems of accommodation at this scheme for tenants who currently were in unsatisfactory bedsits.

It was agreed to recommend to Cabinet that it should accept a fixed price tender for development at Mead Court, Stansted, submitted by Willmott Dixon, and to approve additional funding over the original estimated budget in order to cover the tender costs, these figures as set out in the report.

HB17

BUSINESS PLANNING

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that the council's consultant from CIH Consult would be meeting with officers to go through the business plan and that a report on business planning would be deferred in order to obtain more up to date information following this meeting.

HB18 REGULATORY PANEL

Councillor Dean asked for an explanation of the role of the Panel, as this was his first meeting of the Housing Board and he had not previously been aware of the existence of this body.

It was explained that the Panel had been set up to improve how the Council operated, following the demise of the Tenant Services Authority and Audit Commission. Its role was to carry out internal auditing of the housing service.

HB19 WELFARE BENEFITS REFORMS

Members considered a report for the first two quarters of 2013/14 on the number of tenants affected by the "spare room subsidy" and how this was affecting rent arrears.

Councillor Perry said he was aware of a distressing case involving a tenant who had moved out of Saffron Walden, where she had lived in her property for 25 years. She had felt she had had no choice but to move. He asked if there was an appeals process.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said there was no obligation to move, and all tenants in this situation went through the Choice Based Lettings process. There was no appeals process because there was no compulsion to move.

Councillor Perry said he would speak further about this case to officers outside the meeting.

Councillor Dean asked a number of questions about information given in the report.

It was agreed that future reports should include information on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).

In reply to a question by Councillor Dean, Councillor Redfern said the hardship fund which had been set up by the Council was separate from the assistance offered to tenants requiring DHP support.

Councillor Dean said these cases should be managed as responsibly and sympathetically as possible. He asked for clarification of a reference in the report to suspension orders.

Officers explained that in arrears cases the judge would normally give a suspended possession order, with the effect that the tenant would remain in their home and would have to pay off an element of arrears in addition to paying their rent.

It was agreed the next welfare benefit report would include information on the number of tenants facing suspended possession proceedings.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services commented on the case described by Councillor Perry. She said she was dismayed to hear about any case where a tenant felt they had been forced to move. Officers were trying to deal sympathetically with tenants and the Housing Service had just taken on a member of staff to help tenants with debt counselling and advice on how to stay in their homes.

David Parish said he too was concerned to hear that any tenant was feeling obliged to leave their home. He asked officers to ensure people knew the process did not mean forcing them to leave. He referred to the challenging prospect of tenants in future being responsible for making direct payments of rent, as they would be doing so in arrears.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said this was a big change and was one of the reasons why the Housing Service had taken on a debt counselling officer to help people to be prepared.

Councillor Dean said he was concerned about cases involving social housing tenants where demands for rent were not synchronised with the payment of benefits in arrears. This situation could lead to cash flow problems and a great deal of stress for tenants.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said officers did their best to keep people in their properties and worked preventatively.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the housing service now had a policy of sending a Housing Officer to visit tenants who were in arrears, rather than just writing to them.

Councillor Dean suggested payment of benefits be synchronised with rent collection by social landlords to minimise the stress for tenants.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said many social landlords asked for monthly rent, whereas the council asked for weekly rent in order to be able to pick up any problems at earlier stages. Evictions arising from failure to pay rent were as much the responsibility of the Council as arrears cases, so all sides of the Housing Service aimed to do everything possible to prevent evictions.

HB20

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING

The Board considered a report by the Head of Environmental Health on initiatives to tackle empty homes in the district. The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the Council was working hard to tackle this issue. A new member of staff, an Empty Homes and Private Sector Housing Officer, had started work today. He would focus on

identifying long-term empty properties working with owners of properties to return them into use.

Members welcomed the report and asked various questions.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the number of empty homes fluctuated, and was inflated by the fact that the Airport owned a significant number of empty properties. Regarding use of money from properties compulsorily purchased, the Council could cover its costs, but the remaining money was subject to certain criteria, so could not be used.

In reply to a question about grants and schemes available to property owners to assist them with returning a property to habitable use, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the Council offered a range of grants from the capital fund; there was also the PLACE scheme under which a grant or a loan could be provided depending on whether homeowners wanted their property to be socially rented.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said if the property was not being declared empty for council tax purposes, sometimes the only way the Council would hear about it was through neighbours. However the new officer would enable the Council to be more proactive, as he would be writing to parish councils and would then contact the owners of such properties.

HB21

DEVELOPMENT UPDATE – SHELTERED SCHEMES

Members considered a report on work commissioned as part of the Business Plan to ensure the most effective use was made of the sheltered housing stock for long-term housing need.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said a consultant had carried out in depth appraisals at five of the Council's worst performing sheltered housing schemes. Members had previously agreed that remodelling bedsit accommodation was a high priority and this intention was now set out in the asset management plan. Members now had the opportunity to use money in the HRA which would otherwise be applied to repayment of debt.

Members were invited to consider whether officers should start consultation at a particular scheme, Reynolds Court where accommodation is very substandard. Any work contemplated may involve "decanting" for residents.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said any proposal for redevelopment would mean ceasing letting to new tenants at this scheme.

Councillor Redfern said she was very keen that such sites should be dealt with, and the Council should spend money on improving them.

Councillor Dean asked whether consultation would take place of a slightly younger group of tenants who were not currently sheltered housing tenants but who might become so in the next 10 years.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said a survey for this age group had been conducted. People did not want institutionalised accommodation, and preferred bungalows.

The Housing Strategy Consultant said what was important to people these days was having their own front door and sufficient storage space. Design was therefore the key factor.

Members discussed other sheltered housing schemes, and noted that Walden Place could be converted into premium accommodation.

Councillor Ranger asked what residents would be consulted on, and said presentation content should be of high quality.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said experience had shown it was better not to initiate consultation with prepared plans, as this could give an impression that decisions had already been made. She would propose officers would start by simply attending Reynolds Court coffee mornings to give residents a series of regular informal opportunities to contribute their comments from an early stage.

Councillor Ranger said he was concerned to avoid any possibility of a flare up.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said officers would reassure residents right from the start that they could talk to officers both as individuals and as a group. After a few initial meetings Members would also be invited to come along to seek their views.

Members asked for changes to the recommendations set out in the report to reflect the discussion.

AGREED to

- (a) note progress with appraisals of the schemes;
- (b) recommend to Cabinet that consultation with residents of those schemes currently providing bedsit type accommodation take place;
- (c) recommend to Cabinet that further investigations on options for Reynolds Court are carried out to enable accurate costs to be established;
- (d) cease letting to new tenants at Reynolds Court.

HB22

HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

Members considered a report giving figures on homelessness in the district for the first two quarters of 2013/14.

Councillor Dean asked about the sudden increase shown in the report for time spent by priority accepted homeless families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which for the preceding three quarters had been less than one week, but jumped to 4.5 weeks.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the increase related to an exceptional case. She said the Council was trying not to use Bed and Breakfast accommodation where possible, and as all its temporary accommodation was full, it was relying increasingly on the facilities provided by Supportworks in Harlow.

Members asked various questions about Supportworks. Officers responded that this service was cheaper than using Bed and Breakfast. The facility was operated in Harlow by a commercial provider, and there was currently no similar business operating in the Uttlesford district.

HB23

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Housing Enabling Officer reported on the recent "Housing for Health" conference.

She said the conference had gone well and had met its objectives, including celebrating the delivery with partners of new homes and gaining a better understanding of the public services needs of an aging population. A forum for private rented sector landlords had taken place, but had not been well attended despite publicity. The next landlords' forum would be held on 9 July 2014 at Saffron Walden Town Hall, with the lead being taken by private lettings agents.

The Housing Enabling Officer provided an update on the affordable housing programme 2013/14 and the commuted sum policy.

Officers explained how such commuted sums were calculated. The monies received provided funding for the delivery of affordable housing which could be used for buying land on which to build, or working with partners to provide housing, or buying a property on the open market for renting out.

Councillor Menell said the process of rural exception sites tended to be very drawn out and asked how it could be accelerated. Officers agreed this issue was frustrating as schemes often took a long time to complete. Events had been arranged with parish councils to seek ideas on how to use commuted sums, but unfortunately had been poorly attended. Officers would continue their efforts in bringing schemes forward.

Councillor Ranger asked that future updates include the monetary values for commuted sums.

HB24

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was currently 9 January 2014, but was subject to possible change due to the Finance Service's timetable for rent setting. The date would be confirmed as soon as possible.

The meeting ended at 4.15pm.