

**HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD  
SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.30pm on 9 JANUARY 2014**

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

Tenant Forum Representative: Mr D Parish

Officers in attendance: S Baxter (Housing Enabling Officer), R Dobson (Principal Democratic Services Officer), P Evans (Housing Business and Performance Manager), E Fellowes (Accountant), A Knight (Accountancy Manager), D Malins (Housing Strategy Consultant), R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services), A Rees (Democratic Services Support Officer), J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager) and S Woods (Housing Strategy Manager).

**HB25 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Loughlin and K Mackman and from Mrs D Cornell.

*Councillor Ranger and David Parish declared a non-pecuniary interest as tenants of the Council. Councillor Menell declared a non-pecuniary interest as a recipient of Lifeline Charges.*

**HB26 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2013 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the addition of Councillor Perry to the list of those present.

**HB27 MATTERS ARISING**

**(i) Minute HB15 – Stansted Area Partnership Monies**

Councillor Dean asked about funds Colne Housing had stated would be reinvested in housing in the district.

The Housing Strategy Consultant said Colne Housing were looking at a five house site in Great Chesterford. This would be handed to a housing trust.

Councillor Dean asked if the houses needed to be re-provided in Stansted under the terms of the housing trust and that he wanted written clarification of this.

The Housing Strategy Consultant said that there were ongoing discussions about this and that he would update members with clarification of the terms.

**(ii) Minute HB19 – Welfare Benefits Reforms**

Councillor Perry thanked officers for speaking to the tenant whose case he had referred to them, due to her feeling forced to move as a result of the “spare room subsidy”. He reiterated his concern about the lack of an appeals process, and wished to be sure the tenant had fully understood the position.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said it was the decision of the tenant whether to move or not.

**(iii) Minute HB20 – Private Sector Housing**

Councillor Menell asked how a parish council would be made aware of empty homes within their parish.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the new officer was in the process of communicating with a wide range of partners, and would be contacting parishes in due course.

HB28

**HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT**

**(i) Proposed Rent and Service Charge increase 2014/15**

The Accountancy Manager outlined the report, which recommended that HRA dwelling rates rise by an average of 5.05% to progress towards convergence with Formula Rents. The report also recommended that garage rents be increased by 3.2%; that heating, service and sewerage charges be increased in line with actual costs and made further recommendations regarding services charges in sheltered schemes, the charge for sheltered support services, and the Lifeline basic charge. The Tenant Forum had agreed the recommendations.

Councillor Barker asked what happened when convergence was reached.

The Accountant said when convergence was reached, rents would be increased in line with the councils rent setting policy which was currently RPI +0.5%.

The Accountancy Manager said the Formula Rent was currently increased by RPI +0.5% +£2, although this was under consultation by the Government and might be changed to CPI +1%.

Councillor Dean asked what was meant by affordable rent. The Accountant said that affordable rent was 80% of the market rent and that the Formula rate was lower than that rate.

Councillor Dean asked why some rents took longer to converge.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that when rent convergence were first introduced, some property rents were identified as being further behind the formula rent than others and consequently would take longer to reach convergence. Councillor Ranger said that a paper had been published when the issue was initially looked at, which he would make available to Councillor Dean.

Councillor Dean questioned a reference in the report to a “fairer” system of affordable rents.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that rent restructuring was introduced to make rents fairer and less confusing for tenants, by applying a consistent formula to align all social rents within districts so that people in the same type of property paid the same level of rent.

The Accountancy Manager highlighted the financial impact of proposed rent increases which showed that rent would increase by an average of £4.73 leading to an average weekly rent of £98.33. She drew attention to the percentage of the HRA’s total tenancies in particular bands of rent increase, an average increase of 3.2% to Garage rents, an increase of 3.2% to each of the three levels of Sheltered Support Service, changes to the eligibility for Transitional Relief Protection and increase of Lifeline Charges by 3.2%. She also said that the Council still managed properties where service and sewerage charges were payable, and that these would be calculated in line with actual costs.

Councillor Menell asked about garage tenancies and notice required to end the tenancy.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that garage tenancies were short term requiring only a week’s notice.

Councillor Dean asked why the costs of services were increasing.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that contracts the Council were tied into also rose with inflation and these costs had to be passed on.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that

- a. HRA dwelling rents continue to converge with Formula rents, and as such the average rent increase in 2014/15 would be 5.05%.
- b. Garage rents be increased by 3.2%.
- c. Heating, Service and Sewerage charges be increased in line with actual costs.
- d. Service charges for common services in sheltered schemes continue to be subsidised for tenants at 31

- March 2012 who are not in receipt of housing benefit.
- e. Charge for Sheltered Support Services be increased by 3.2%.
- f. Sheltered Support Services for tenants as at 31 March 2003, who are not eligible for the Supporting People grant, continue to receive Transitional Relief Protection.
- g. Lifeline Basic Charge be increased by 3.2%.

**(ii) HRA Budget Report 2014/15 and Five Year Business Plan Strategy**

The Accountancy Manager said the report outlined proposals for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget and reserves for 2014/15, as well as the proposed 5 year financial forecast for the period from 2014/15 to 2018/19.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said referring to the HRA Business Plan and five year strategy, there had been lots of extra investment and that this was being spent on schemes which the Housing Board had identified.

Councillor Dean asked whether extra funding might be found from General Fund reserves.

Councillor Barker asked whether there was any integration with the County Council regarding mental health provision and questioned whether these projects aligned with Council policy. She also asked what targets there were, and said that there should be a reference to homelessness. She also asked about the General Fund Recharge, and asked what was being moved. She considered the HRA should not be subsidised by the General Fund.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that the action plan did show targets, and that the document before the Housing Board was a summary of progress only. There were specific projects identified to use the headroom provided by self-financing. The Housing Strategy included Homelessness, but the document attached for consideration at this meeting was the HRA Business Plan.

Regarding mental health provision, the District Council was working with the County Council.

The Accountancy Manager explained that the increase in the General Fund recharge of £44,000 was due to increased resources from managerial, treasury and corporate levels due to the self-financing arrangements. This was likely to remain the case in the future.

Councillor Menell said that there should be a report about the eco housing at Wendens Ambo. She also asked whether there were plans to hold another community event like the one at Stansted.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said there were no plans for another event at present, but that one might be planned with regards to Dunmow next year.

Councillor Dean asked if there was something in the budget that dealt with the problems that arose with Mountfitchet estate.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that the issues that had been raised at the event held this year were mainly matters for Highways. Officers were in contact with Highways and with Councillor Evans, and were aiming to ensure Highways gave priority to this area.

Councillor Barker suggested the Highways Rangers could possibly deal with situations regarding the run-down appearance of some estates, for example, Upper Millfield in Great Dunmow.

Councillor Ranger said this kind of initiative was an area for local members to liaise with their parish councils and with the Highways Rangers.

Councillor Menell asked about the possibility of having two teams of Highways Rangers. Councillor Ranger said that although it was possible, it was initially dismissed at full Council.

Councillor Redfern said ward members could use the £2,000 money awarded to each ward for this type of project.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that if any housing areas needed regeneration that these needed to be identified and if required could be dealt with as a new priority in the business plan.

Councillor Redfern said that she wanted to see if it was possible to come up with something that went across the entire district.

Councillor Dean said that the Mountfitchet estate was 60 years old and needed regeneration so he was happy with The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services' point.

Councillor Redfern said she would work with the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services to identify areas requiring regeneration.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet for approval  
a) The 2014/15 Budget set out in the report.

- b) The use of headroom funds for Business Plan Projects.
- c) The Working Balance and Allocation of Earmarked Reserves.

HB29

## **DRAFT WELFARE GARDEN AND REDECORATION POLICY**

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that the report proposed changes to the Council's Garden and Redecoration policy, such as making eligibility health related rather than age related. She said that this would minimise the impact of having more people use the service by adding a small charge. She said that the Tenants Forum were happy with changes.

Councillor Menell asked whether when property was let, the Council cleared the gardens. She said that the £3 weekly charge seemed to be small.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that gardens were cleared to be at a functional standard. She also said that the £3 charge was cheap, but this meant it would not be unaffordable whilst still recouping some of the cost.

Councillor Menell asked how this Council compared to others. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that prices varied.

Councillor Barker said that the term *growing season* was vague. She also asked how the charge was collected. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the growing season varied from year to year. She also said that the charge would be added to the tenants' rent as a service charge. David Parish said that the charge was not as cheap as it initially appeared.

Councillor Perry asked whether tenants with carers qualified and what happened to people who were in hospital.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that it was not the role of carers to look after gardens, and so tenants qualified if they had a carer. She said that this was also true if the tenant was in hospital.

Councillor Dean said that he could see the charge was there to stop service exploitation, but he wanted to know whether the elderly who were without benefits qualified. He asked whether £3 would act as a disincentive.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that discretion would be used when dealing with the elderly. She also said that the £3 charge would be a sufficient disincentive.

Councillor Dean asked whether the service would be discriminatory. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that it would not, and that a full equality impact assessment had been carried out.

Councillor Dean said that because the draft policy stated one room would be painted every two years, three bed houses would be unfairly penalised.

Councillor Ranger said that there were no three bed houses under the scheme, there was only up to two bedroom designated accommodation.

Councillor Barker said that people should have to provide their own paint and wallpaper.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that tenants were given a selection of stock colours those were free, but that if they wanted another colour they had to provide it themselves. She said that she would add this amendment to the proposal.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the Welfare Garden and Redecoration Policy be adopted.

HB30

## **WELFARE REFORM UPDATE**

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that the report showed the situation was not getting worse. Councillor Dean asked that these reports in future show the amount of people affected by welfare reform who wanted to downsize. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that the figure could be calculated for future reports.

Councillor Menell asked whether the Hardship Fund was being used. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager that it was being used for people who wanted to downsize but were unable to.

Councillor Dean asked whether the Spare Room Subsidy was causing people to go into arrears. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that most people affected were already in arrears before the policy came into effect.

Councillor Redfern said the Council was trying to help those affected by the subsidy.

Councillor Barker asked whether tenants who were in arrears could use the two month period where there was no council tax to clear their arrears. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said it was not possible because most tenants paid over 12 months, not ten months. The Housing Business and Performance Manager said officers were trying to come up with a plan to help those affected.

Councillor Barker asked if there were any refusals to pay the extra charge. The Housing Business and Performance Manager said that there hadn't been any refusals to pay.

The report was noted.

**HB31 DEVELOPMENT UPDATE**

The Housing Strategy Consultant said that Holloway Crescent had been handed over. He said that work on Mead Court should start on 27 January. There should be a 42 week period for phase one, and 43 week period for phase 2. He asked the members if they wanted to do any PR events related to Mead Court. Councillor Redfern said that they should do one and was encouraged that other sites were being looked at. Councillor Barker said that Parish councillors should be invited.

The Housing Strategy Consultant said that they were looking at identifying future schemes, and looking at; site layout plans, budget estimates, how projects return the investment and the informal planning view. He said that the Sheltered Schemes such as that at Reynolds Court were priorities. He said that they were also looking at Alexia House and Walden Place.

**HB32 AFFORDABLE HOUSING UPDATE**

The Housing Enabling Officer said that there was nothing to be added to the Commuted Sum Policy. Councillor Ranger asked when the money would become available from the Commuted Sum Policy. The Housing Strategy Consultant said that it was dependent on the S106 in each case and that there was a trigger point. He said that on smaller units it was fairly early, although it was dependent on properties selling. Councillor Dean noted that Rochford Nurseries had changed name.

**HB33 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that the Council had agreed in principle to transfer some land to Safer Places in Dunmow. She said that they would make provision for smaller units and that these plans would go to a board of trustees. She said that the Council had agreed to fund an outreach programme by Safer Places in the area. She said that support in the area was at full capacity and that if Safer Places created a base in Dunmow that would improve their services.

Councillor Perry asked if there was still a Sanctuary policy. The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager confirmed that there was.

**HB34 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that there was no agreed upon date for the next meeting and that she would liaise with Democratic Services in order to circulate a forward plan for the Housing Board's Work Programme. She said that this would be done as soon as possible.

The meeting ended at 4.15pm.