

HOUSING BOARD held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10am on 9 DECEMBER 2015

Present: Councillor M Felton (Chairman)
Councillors H Asker, A Dean, T Farthing, J Loughlin, S Morris, A Mills and V Ranger

Also present: Mr David Parish and Mrs Daphne Cornell (Tenants' Forum Representatives).

Officers in attendance: D Malins (Housing Development Manager), R Millership (Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services), A Rees (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), J Snares (Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager) and S Wood (Housing and Planning Policy Manager).

HB22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor H Ryles.

HB23 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 21 SEPTEMBER 2015

The minutes were signed and received by the Chairman as a correct record.

It was agreed that the next item would be Item 11.

HB24 DEVELOPMENT UPDATE – VERBAL

The Housing Development Manager provided an update on ongoing housing schemes and began by providing an update on the development at Mead Court. He said that during Phase 2 of the development, the developer had found more asbestos at the site. This had been removed at the developer's expense and the estimated completion date for the scheme was now May 2016.

Progress on the development at Catons Lane had been held up by the need to set up a sewer diversion to enable works to take place. Although the diversion had only taken one week to set up, it had taken six weeks to receive permission for the diversion. Aside from this, the scheme had been progressing well.

The Housing Development Manager said the preferred contractor for the development at Reynolds Court had now been chosen. There were now various sub-contractor packages which would go out to tender. The scheme had attracted funding from the Homes and Communities Agency. The demolition of the existing scheme would need to take place early in the new year to fit in with the HCA timetable.

A meeting had taken place with the preferred contractor for the re-development at Hatherley Court. Due to the need to move residents from apartment to

apartment the scheme was more complex than the one at Mead Court despite being smaller in size. It was hoped work would begin in March 2016.

Regarding the scheme at Walden Place, The Housing Development Manager said internal discussions about procurement had taken place. The next stage was to begin liaising with contractors to gather more detailed information about the likely cost of implementing the scheme. Once more information about costings was available it would be presented to the Housing Board.

Lastly, The Housing Development Manager updated Members about the Right to Buy one for one replacement scheme. Uptake of the RTB was still increasing and he had begun identifying sites to help replenish the Council's housing stock. He would provide an update as more sites were identified and evaluated to see if they were viable.

In response to a question by Councillor Loughlin, the Housing Development Manager said that although the asbestos was a more dangerous type than had previously been found at the site, it was not harmful to residents and the correct procedures for removing asbestos had been followed.

Councillor Dean noted that at the previous meeting it had been agreed that the Tenants' Forum would visit the Manor Road development and asked whether the visit had taken place. In response Mr Parish said the Forum had not yet visited the scheme. It was agreed that a visit would be organised as soon as reasonably possible.

The report was noted.

HB25

HOUSING BILL UPDATE – VERBAL REPORT

Members received an update on the Housing Bill from the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services. She said she had met with the Housing Minister Brandon Lewis. The Minister had said the primary aim of the Housing Bill was to encourage more houses to be built and the Bill was designed to achieve that primary aim.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said she raised numerous points with Minister. The first of these was that the Bill, as currently proposed, stymied potential development from councils. One way to mitigate this was to increase the percentage of the right to buy receipts which an authority retained and could use on a replacement property. If authorities could use a higher proportion of the retained receipt they would be better placed to replenish any stock they had lost to right to buy as well as potentially replacing any properties they were forced to sell when void.

The Minister had asked for details on this to be put in writing, along with any other suggestions. A letter has been drafted proposing that: supported accommodation to be made exempt from the 1% decrease in rents; older persons properties/sheltered properties/stock specifically adapted for significantly disabled be excluded from High Value Sales policy; new build

properties to be excluded from High Value Sales policy; a cap or limit be applied on the number of sales in any one area, particularly rural villages; local authorities be able to retain sufficient receipts to clear all debt relating to the asset, cover reasonable sales admin costs and to fund re-supply of a new property

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services explained that the Government's proposed Pay to Stay policy meant that once tenants started earning over a certain income they would have to pay the full level of rent. There would be no incentive for tenants to increase their earnings if it meant they would be worse off. It would also be difficult to administer the policy due to fluctuating incomes.

In response to a question by Councillor Farthing, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said that currently tenants had to volunteer their earnings.

Members thanked the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services, as well as all the officers involved for their work on the Housing Bill

AGREED that the draft letter to the Minister would be circulated to the Members of the Housing Board for their comment.

HB26

RENT SETTING

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services presented her report on Rent Setting. The Government had announced that it was looking to reduce all social rents by 1% from April 2016. In line with Government guidance it was proposed that the Board recommended to Cabinet that the 1% decrease was implemented. The average rent level in 2015/16 was £100.82 and if the decrease went ahead, rent would be £99.81 in 2016/17.

It was also recommended that garage rents were increased by the RPI which was 0.8% and heating, service and sewerage charges were increased in line with actual costs.

Mr Parish said the Tenants' Forum had debated the report and supported the recommendations.

Councillor Farthing questioned why social rents were being decreased whilst rents in the private sector continued to increase significantly. In response, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Health said the Government had made a commitment to reduce its welfare bill. By reducing the level of social rents it then became possible to cut housing benefits, which in turn lowered the Government's expenditure on welfare.

Replying to further points by Councillor Farthing she said if the Council did not set rents in accordance with Government guidance it ran the risk of a financial penalty which could adversely affect the HRA and General Fund. The Council

had always followed the Government's guidance in the past when making decisions about rent levels.

Councillor Dean said it was possible that if social rents became out of kilter with private rents it could be necessary in the future to significantly increase social rents so it was important rent levels were monitored closely. Councillor Dean suggested the recommendation to Cabinet was amended so that the reduction in social rents of 1% was for one year and would be reviewed before rent levels were set for the subsequent financial year.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that

1. Cabinet approves the rent decrease of 1% for one year and is to be reviewed the following financial year.
2. Cabinet approves the increases in garage rent and service charges as detailed below:
 - Garage rents are increased by RPI of 0.8%.
 - Heating, Service and Sewerage charges are increased in line with actual costs.
 - Service charges for common services in sheltered schemes continue to be subsidised for tenants at 31st March 2012 who are not in receipt of housing benefit. Subsidy reducing by 25% annually.

HB27

SUPPORTING PEOPLE HRS FUNDING

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager presented her report. She began by outlining the Housing Related Support (HRS) currently offered by the Council. HRS currently operated on a three tier system of services, gold, silver and bronze. These provided daily, weekly and no visits respectively.

It was recommended that the bronze level service was no longer offered to new tenants, but continued to be made available for those receiving the service. Sheltered housing was aimed at those who required support and it did not make sense to continue offering a service for those who did not require support. The gold and silver services were also to be withdrawn and were to be replaced by two new services; sheltered and sheltered plus.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said Essex County Council had decided to phase out its funding for HRS. The County Council's justification for cutting HRS funding was that there were benefits which tenants were entitled to claim that could cover the costs of support.

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager explained that all costs relating to the service had been identified and separated into Intensive Housing Management (IHM) and housing support. The advantage of doing this is that the cost of IHM functions can be covered by Housing Benefit whereas support

charges cannot. By separating out the functions those currently receiving funding for HRS will not be as badly affected by any reduction in funding. The report therefore proposed that a specific service charge for IHM be introduced from April 2016 and that the amount charged for support services are reduced proportionately.

In response to a question by Councillor Mills it was explained that the Council currently had just under 400 tenants in sheltered housing, around 170 of those received housing benefit.

In response to a question by Councillor Farthing, the Housing Needs and Landlord Services said that all tenants were currently put on the gold standard service and were then assessed to see whether either the silver or bronze services were more appropriate.

Councillor Felton suggested that a single tier system was operated. Tenants would then be able to choose whether they received weekly or daily visits. Members discussed Councillor Felton's proposal.

Mrs Cornell said the way sheltered housing operated had changed throughout the years. At one point Uttlesford had too much sheltered housing, some that was not fit for purpose, and this had led to a number of people who did not require support ending up in sheltered schemes. A flat rate charge had been in operation before but those who did not use the services complained that they were being charged for something they did not use.

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said the three tier system may have been the best solution at the time it was implemented but since there were no longer any schemes that were not fit for purpose, following the re-development/modernisation programme, it was no longer appropriate.

Councillor Dean said that the two tier system as proposed in the recommendations should be implemented and its progress reviewed in the middle of 2016. Residents should be written to informing them of the changes in funding arrangements and that the bronze service would be phased out in the next 12 months.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that it approves the following

1. the proposed changes to the sheltered housing scheme management service in light of the funding reductions from Essex County Council as follows:
 - i. withdrawal of gold, silver and bronze level of services
 - ii. introduction of two levels of service: sheltered (weekly visit) and sheltered plus (daily visit)
 - iii. continuation of Bronze service for current bronze service tenants (interim)

2. The charges for the council's sheltered housing scheme management service (funded from HRS charges and Intensive Housing Management charges) to be set at:
 - i. Sheltered: £15.80 per week
 - ii. Sheltered plus: £17.80 per week
 - iii. Bronze service (to be continued for existing users): £13.80 per week
3. The changes to the housing related support service are reviewed in the middle of 2016.
4. Residents are written to informing them of changes in the funding arrangements and that the Bronze service will be phased out in 12 months.
5. The cost of community alarms will be fully recovered from users.
6. Notes the further reductions in HRS by Essex County Council in 2017/18.

HB28

ALLOCATIONS POLICY AMENDMENTS

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager presented her report. The Policy set out who was eligible to apply for social rented housing throughout the district, as well as how applicants should apply and how applications were assessed. However, due to recent case law the Allocations Policy needed to be amended in order to meet current legislation.

The first amendment allowed applicants whom the Council had accepted full homelessness duty for, to join the housing register regardless of whether they met the Council's local residency criteria. The second amendment allowed for exceptional circumstances to be considered when an applicant met one of the reasonable preference categories but did not meet the local residency criteria.

The final amendment was for applicants who had been given Band B for serious medical or welfare issues, but had not expressed an interest in all suitable properties for 12 cycles of the freesheet (24 weeks). These applicants would have their Band B award reviewed.

Councillor Dean asked questions regarding paragraphs 9.8.6 and 9.8.7 of the Policy. In response, the Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said the sentence at the end of 9.8.6 was a comment from the Assistant Chief Executive – Legal which had been answered but had not been removed from the Policy in error. In relation to paragraph 9.8.7, the Council could only be

discharged through the private rented sector if a landlord offered at least a 12 month let.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the amended Allocations Policy be adopted.

HB29

HOUSING STRATEGY 2016-2021

The Housing and Planning Policy Manager presented her report. She said that following the previous Housing Board meeting, the Housing Strategy had been out for a six week public consultation. The Strategy set out the Council's aims for housing within the district for the next five years. The Strategy contained an action plan which would be updated every six months.

The consultation had produced a modest response. The CAB had raised concerns relating to the introduction of new Government legislation and the potential increase in elderly men who would require accommodation. The County Council had asked that care leavers were mentioned in the final document.

In response to a question by Councillor Dean about estate generation, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said estate generation was included in the HRA Business Plan and would be added to the action plan.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the Housing Strategy 2016-21 be adopted subject to the inclusion of information about estate generation in the Strategy's action plan

HB30

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2016-2021

The Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager presented her report on the Homelessness Strategy 2016-2021. The final version of the Strategy was now ready following a two month public consultation. The Homelessness Strategy set out how the Council would meet the four strategic priorities which had been set for the Council's homelessness service, as well as what had been already been achieved.

Councillor Dean said he had been informed that Chelmsford was prosecuting people who were sleeping rough but had refused accommodation. He did not advocate that approach, but asked whether rough sleeping was a problem within Uttlesford. In response, the housing Needs and Landlord services Manager explained that rough sleeping was not considered a problem in Uttlesford and the Council had only had to help two people last year.

In response to questions by Councillor Asker, the Housing Needs and Landlord Services Manager said that the Council does work with homelessness support services. Currently Bromfield House was the only supported accommodation within the district.

Councillor Dean highlighted a chart on page 20 of the Strategy which showed the number of cases where the Housing Options team had prevented homelessness and the number of people who had sought in depth advice from the Housing Options service. He noted a reduction in the former and a large increase in the latter. This was a strong indication that homelessness was reaching crisis point, although he felt more work was needed to fully understand the depth of the problem.

Members noted that the main cause of homelessness in Uttlesford had changed from eviction by parents, relatives or friends in 2011/12 to the ending of privately rented Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) in 2014/15. Councillor Ranger said the increase in homelessness caused by the ending of private AST's had been reinforced by the surge in buy to let. In response to Councillor Ranger, Councillor Farthing said the last thing landlords wanted to do was make people homeless. It was, however, a risk to let a house to people on housing benefits.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the Homelessness Strategy 2016-21 be adopted.

HB31 HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2016-2046

The Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services presented her report. The HRA Business Plan had been re-worked in preparation for the introduction of the Housing Bill. The Housing Bill contains four year rent setting guidance which will result in a funding gap of £1.8m over the four year period.

Areas of the HRA budget had been shaved back and this allowed the Council to continue developing agreed upon schemes and deliver emerging ones.

Councillor Dean said that the risk associated with the enforced sale of void properties needed to be quantified. In response, the Assistant Director Housing and Environmental Services said it was not yet known exactly what the regional figures for enforced sales of voids would be and so it was not currently possible to quantify the risk to the Council. She would amend the Business Plan so that it more clearly illustrated the potential risk the enforced sale of voids would have to the Council's housing stock numbers.

Members discussed the potential impact of enforced sale of voids on the Council's housing stock.

AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the HRA Business Plan 2016-2046 be adopted subject to the risk arising from enforced sales being more clearly highlighted.

The meeting ended at 12pm.