

**HOUSING BOARD held at COMMITTEE ROOM - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX CB11 4ER on TUESDAY 14
JUNE 2022 at 11.00 am**

Present: Councillor P Lees (Chair)
Councillors A Coote, G Driscoll, A Khan, M Lemon (virtual) and
S Merifield

Officers in attendance: A Lindsell (Democratic Services Officer), R Millership (Assistant
Director - Housing, Health and Communities) and J Snares
(Housing Strategy and Operations Manager)

Also present: T Chappell (Property Services Manager NORSE Group), D
Cornell (Member of Tenant and Leaseholder Panel) and S
Trimnell (Member of Tenant and Leaseholder Panel)

HB1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dean, Foley and Reeve.

There were no declarations of interest.

HB2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2022 were approved as accurate.

*The Chair agreed to hear agenda item 8 next for the benefit of the Property
Services Manager NORSE Group.*

HB8 NORSE PARTNERSHIP

Councillor Khan questioned the social and added value of the partnership for Uttlesford. He referred to the original Norse proposal and requested an update on the promised delivery of one hundred apprenticeships. He wanted his concerns noted about the lack of evidence of added value and consequential failure to identify success or weakness.

The Property Service Manager agreed that the lack of context was frustrating, and explained that operational practises were complicated during the pandemic. She said that the document Cllr Khan referred to provided a broad brush overview and was a good starting point for further review. She suggested that NORSE should communicate more through the Housing Board to clarify areas of concern.

Councillor Khan read out the agreement detailing the improvements promised in the proposal by NORSE and noted the need to understand the performance of

NORSE and to hold the administration to account. He said that residents report that NORSE are slow to respond to complaints and concerns.

The Chair confirmed that he sat on the Board and that these questions have been put to NORSE. He confirmed that NORSE said that the offer for apprenticeship covers the whole of NORSE, although they would be looking into it in the next nine months. He said that the performance indicators were being worked on and were a new thing not previously undertaken by the administration. He acknowledged that mistakes have been made on both sides, and that these partnerships took some years to bed in. He said that the housing department have worked tirelessly and that he anticipated vast improvements in the next six to nine months.

Councillor Merifield said that young people are finishing school now and needed to be able to access the apprenticeships now. She said that this large company should be able to provide the apprenticeships promised in a timely fashion, cascaded down through their company. She said that the delay was unacceptable.

The Property Services Manager acknowledged that the recruitment team have approached NORSE regarding specific course choices and conversations have been undertaken with the Operations Director of NORSE Group. She agreed that the apprenticeship delivery should be a priority and that she would clarify and report back. She noted that they needed to be able to support apprenticeships with qualified professionals working in the relevant fields.

The Assistant Director of Housing Health and Communities said that loss of staff and general staff retention had been an added complication, and noted that during the pandemic had been a difficult time to start a partnership. She confirmed that every performance indicator had been challenged, and that she has requested that all compliance data is checked by an external Surveyor as well as by the Council's own Surveyor.

The Leader of the Council said that she understood that there were teething issues but the administration were moving forward collaboratively.

Following questions from Councillor Driscoll the Property Services Manager confirmed that residents receive text confirmations advising of arrival times, which triggers the despatch of a satisfaction questionnaire on completion of the job. The questionnaire had an 88% response rate.

A member of the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel reported that the Panel met with Uttlesford Norse staff recently at the Newport depot. She agreed that there was value in the different parties getting to know each other and that more would be achieved working collaboratively.

The Assistant Director of Housing Health and Communities confirmed that the proposed target ratings for 2022/23 have now all been confirmed and that she would circulate them this week.

The Property Services Manager confirmed NORSE`s vision to deliver as much as they can inhouse and her belief that they were consistently delivering. She said that they were moving operationally very strongly using the new system implemented in June 2020 and could now deliver compliance, repair data and have enabled staff to work from homes.

The Chair detailed a successful kitchen replacement project undertaken by NORSE to demonstrate positive action alongside concerns that have been raised.

Councillor Khan agreed that there were occasions where NORSE delivered successfully and said that it was essential that residents were involved in the scrutiny and design of NORSE workings. He noted the importance of receiving the necessary data and asked what the target was for HSG56, what success would look like and how the gap would be closed.

The Property Services Manager confirmed the target as 98% and explained that the biggest issue was tenant expectation which carried a lot of obstacles and was very difficult to manage. She detailed the need for one consistent communication regarding NORSE responsibilities for the handbook and the information displayed on the website.

Councillor Khan agreed that effective communication was key, alongside the need to be proactive. He asked whether NORSE would provide a refund for underachievement.

The Assistant Director of Housing Health and Communities said that there had been some slippages to works when Covid prevented access into properties. She noted that prior to this contract there was little opportunity to influence the contract and that the administration currently have far more influence with the partnership model than with previous contracts. She said that these were very comprehensive performance indicators that would enable the Council to monitor the partnership.

Councillor Khan offered to share the details of the director at Harlow Council who contracted out the same provision very successfully.

The Leader of the Council noted that residents pay a service cost which includes window cleaning, which should be refunded when the service was not provided. She acknowledged that everyone on the Housing Board wanted the best for residents.

The Property Services Manager acknowledged that the window cleaning company had at times historically failed to deliver. She explained that NORSE had got an adhoc company to cover as a one off whilst they built a specification for each scheme which would go out to tender at the end of this month. As a result five local companies were prepared to tender and it was anticipated that NORSE would award the tender by the end of June.

The Property Services Manager left the meeting.

HB3 **DEVELOPMENT UPDATE**

The Housing Strategy and Operations Manager provided an update on the current and proposed development by the Housing Revenue Account across the district.

She noted that the redevelopment of Walden Place already had an agreed budget.

Following questions from Councillors Driscoll and Khan the Housing Strategy and Operations Manager confirmed:

- The right to buy opportunity would not apply to the older person properties
- The bid for the Barratt homes was made on the basis of the properties being offered at affordable rent
- The Council House target was currently short by forty seven properties

The Chair confirmed that Members have the opportunity to challenge policies where they see fit.

The Leader of the Council said that social and affordable rent could be considered.

Councillor Khan said that all new council homes should only be offered at social rent that was truly affordable, particularly given the current cost of living crisis. Councillor Merifield agreed, but noted that there was only so much money and that consideration should be given as to which option would house the most residents.

The Housing Strategy and Operations Manager agreed to ask the Housing Revenue accountant to model both rent systems for comparison.

The Leader of the Council concluded that in principle everyone agreed, but that the financial implications required consideration.

The report was noted.

Councillor Lemon left the meeting.

HB4 **BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE**

The Assistant Director of Housing Health and Communities confirmed that she had requested an urgent update on the Business Plan by the new accountants.

She confirmed that it would be distributed before September 2022.

HB5 **HOUSING ENABLING UPDATE**

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer provided an update on the projected affordable housing numbers for the coming year.

The projected affordable housing completions were noted.

HB6 HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

The Housing Strategy and Operations Manager provided an update on the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan and the current homelessness situation in the district.

She confirmed that there were currently sixteen Council temporary accommodation units but still had to use bed and breakfast hotels to accommodate people, although this was avoided as much as possible. The Council did not have any contracts with specific bed and breakfast hotels.

The report and reviewed Action Plan were noted.

HB7 FIXED TERM TENANCIES

The Housing Strategy and Operations Manager presented a report which recommended the amendment of the council's Tenancy Policy to remove Fixed Term Tenancies.

The Leader of the Council noted that there was insufficient council housing locally which resulted in residents being forced to move out of their local area.

Members resolved to recommend to Cabinet that they revise the Council's Tenancy Policy to remove Fixed Term Tenancies

HB9 UTTLESFORD NORSE SERVICE LEAD PERFORMANCE INDICATOR UPDATES

The Assistant Director of Housing Health and Communities provided an update on the Performance Indicators and invited Housing Board members to visit the Newport depot and view the systems in place.

The Member of the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel reported that the Tenants Panel were back in action meeting with the Safety Partnership and would be visiting Reynolds Court next week.

The Leader of the Council confirmed that the Tenants Panel Forum could meet in the Committee Room at the Council Offices in Saffron Walden.

The meeting finished at 12:51.