

HOUSING BOARD held at THE JUBILEE GARDEN ROOM, SAFFRON WALDEN, on THURSDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER 2022 at 11.00 am

Present: Councillor A Coote (Chair)
Councillors G Driscoll, M Foley, A Khan, P Lees, M Lemon and N Reeve

Officers in attendance: P Holt (Chief Executive), P Kingston (Interim Deputy Director of Housing, Health and Communities), A Lindsell (Democratic Services Officer) and S Russell (Housing Consultant)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dean and Merifield.

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Lemon declared a personal interest as he was a private landlord.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2022 were approved as accurate.

Councillor Reeve asked whether the next meeting of the Housing Board would include the allocation policy for rural exception sites on the agenda. The Leader of the Council agreed that this was correct.

3 UPDATE ON MANAGEMENT OF COUNCIL HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE

The Chair said that he had been very concerned about the partnership with Uttlesford NORSE and wanted to work with them to improve things. He said that he hoped the Chief Executive could help improve the partnership and noted the work that he had undertaken within the last few months and the subsequent recommendations that the Council had now carried out.

The Chief Executive introduced the Housing Consultant who would be joining the Council on 3 October 2022 and the Deputy Interim Director of Housing, Health and Communities who he said would provide extra capacity as housing experts.

He said that the internal audit report had examined how as a landlord the Council managed the function and that he had wanted to see what reporting the Council had in place to fulfil their duty as landlord and what other health and safety checks were in place.

He said that he had identified that:

- Residents said that the Council were a good landlord, who had established trust and confidence over many years
- There were not regular indicators served up in a comprehensible manner around health and safety

Councillor Foley joined the meeting.

- There were six key health and safety factors, and he needed to ensure that UNSL were using the right denominators and numerators for each of the categories of compliance, so that he could be sure the performance being reported was always accurate.
- When it came to compliance, the standards required were 100%. There may be one or two out of compliance at any one time but when this is the case Members should be questioning what actions were being taken to achieve 100%.
- The system was slightly complicated with numbers fluctuating through purchase and sale of properties.
- The reporting had not been exactly what it needed to be and it had been taking this time to get to a point where the numbers could be relied on to demonstrate exactly what was being achieved.

The Chief Executive acknowledged that shortly after staff transferred to the Newport depot in April 2020 the whole world changed due to the pandemic, which made access to homes very difficult to achieve.

He said that there were currently eight Councils that had self-referred and eight who had been put in special measures. A lot more Councils were self-referring as a direct response to the inability to access homes during the pandemic.

He said that there had been some handover issues arising from the transfer from in-house service to partnership service new computer systems, which had resulted in corruption of data and temporary loss of documentation. Some had now been recovered, but there were in the region of 70,000 unscanned documents.

He said that since he wrote the letter of self-referral:

- Four of the six key indicators required additional checks
- One was asbestos, which could not currently be definitively reported
- He was most concerned about electrical checks, where the legal requirement was a ten yearly check, but best practise was five yearly. All orders have been raised and were due to be completed by Christmas. He explained that it was very difficult to achieve 100%, but that escalation plans were in place with imaginative alternative methods to solve the unresolved 2% of expired ten yearly checks. He noted that resident's assistance was necessary to achieve 100% as the failure rate for access to carry out the electrical checks was frustratingly high at 20%

The Chief Executive said;

- That he believed that the council houses were safe, that the Council have 98% of the housing electrically tested, for the 2% the Council cannot locate the electrical certificates

- The housing department worked hard and were dedicated housing professionals that were passionate about what they did
- The Council had a detailed action plan, were meeting the Regulator next Monday, who would decide whether to put the Council into special measures or a whether a lighter touch was more appropriate

A Member of the Tenant and Lease Holder Panel asked whether the properties built in approximately the 1950s required specialist attention due to the potential for asbestos in the properties.

The incoming Housing Consultant said that the Asbestos Regulations 2012 required communal areas of dwellings to be checked for asbestos and that each individual property should have a management plan to identify the presence of asbestos. She noted that asbestos was only dangerous if disturbed and noted the intention to work towards individual properties all having asbestos management plans.

Councillor Khan said that good communication and contract management of the provider was necessary to ensure responsibilities were fulfilled. He asked whether Uttlesford NORSE were being asked to fulfil their responsibilities.

The Chief Executive said that there was unlikely to be the need for new assessments. He said that the contract had not been managed well and that value for money had not been achieved. He said that his priority was ensuring that what needed to be done was done, and that contract management would be addressed in the future.

The Chair agreed that this was a health and safety issue and the clear priority. He said that he was not convinced that the Council were getting value for money in some parts, but that there had always been concern with the type of maintenance received. He said that Uttlesford NORSE were no worse than previous contractors and that he received no more complaints now than he did with the previous contractors.

The Leader of the Council said that the Council were in the process of employing two contract managers to assist with better management of the contract.

The Chief Executive said that Uttlesford NORSE were a third party contractor, and that there was an acute sensitivity that at some point legal action could be taken and that therefore the relationship should be mindfully and robustly managed. He said that any unanswered questions would be followed up in writing and carefully defined to ensure commitment. He said that as an £8 million contract it was commercially sensitive, as the Council's largest contract, and that all figures were taken direct from Uttlesford NORSE to ensure transparency.

Councillor Foley congratulated the Chief Executive for addressing this issue head on and noted that the safety of residents remained the Council's priority.

The Chief Executive said that he had ruled nothing in or out if Uttlesford NORSE do not satisfy the Council and said there were other options to achieve the best outcome for residents.

A Member of the Tenant and Lease Holder Panel said that a new contractor had started to clean the windows in the sheltered housing. She said that she had received calls that only half of the windows were cleaned and that residents had been paying for the service for six months.

Members agreed that this was unacceptable and the Leader of the Council agreed to raise the issue at the meeting on Monday. She said that residents would get the money they have paid refunded and asked the Member of the Tenant and Lease Holder Panel to email her further details.

Councillor Reeve said that it was important that all issues are flagged up and asked for further details of the meeting with the Regulator.

The Chief Executive said that he was meeting with the Regulator with the incoming Housing Consultant and the Interim Deputy Director of Housing, Health and Communities. He said that the purpose of the meeting was for the Regulator to ask technical questions about data and talk about the action plan and timetable and whether the Regulator thought that it was too ambitious.

Councillor Reeve asked why the previous Housing Board team were not being represented at the meeting. The Chief Executive responded that the Regulator had requested that the meeting focus on technical issues and were satisfied that the attendees would fulfil this purpose.

The Chief Executive said:

- That staff annual leave and sickness had impacted availability, that continuity was in place and that expertise was being applied, alongside coping with the scenario as it unfolded.
- The measures now in place represent good contract management, an issue had been identified and a plan had been implemented and worked forward.
- There were broader issues in the Uttlesford NORSE contract, he was reassured that every clause of the contract would be checked and that the two new staff would be doing that for every clause to identify the gaps in the contract to achieve improvement.

Councillor Khan said that the Council had not put in place a robust contract management plan or employed the people with the right skills at the beginning of this process.

Councillor Reeve said that lessons had been learned and that there was a path to go forward. He said that the relationship with the contractor had to also be maintained to move forward. He said that future projects would be improved.

The Interim Deputy Director of Housing, Health and Communities said that this was a key contract for the Council and may not have been as robust as it could have been. He said that they wanted to get to a point where they could move on and leave the council in a robust position.

He said that they need to make sure that work was checked and accurate and that he was confident that a more positive relationship with the partnership could be achieved going forward.

Councillor Driscoll asked whether there was insurance in place for sub-contractors and why evidence of insurance had not been provided.

Councillor Lemon said that the Council need to get the problem sorted then find out how it happened and if necessary, go back to Uttlesford NORSE. He said that he had every confidence that the right route was being taken and that there may not be much action required.

The Chief Executive said that the Director of Finance and Corporate Services was investigating the insurance and may already have an answer.

The Chair said that mistakes had been made on both sides, he noted that it was a partnership not a contract and acknowledged that lots of things in the partnership have worked and were better than the smaller contracts previously held. He said that the Council had to try to make it work with Uttlesford NORSE and that it was important to improve.

The Interim Deputy Director of Housing, Health and Communities said that he did not know a single social housing landlord that didn't have a problem with repairs and maintenance contractors and that lots of landlords were experiencing regulatory issues. He said that Uttlesford NORSE were currently undergoing a restructure which would commence on 26 September and be operational by the end of October.

The Chief Executive shared the plans to host a joint workshop to understand the issues and use multiple perspectives to find solutions.

Councillor Reeve said that Uttlesford NORSE reported 99.38% compliance and of the eleven properties not covered, those addresses had been passed through to the Council in relation to heat poverty inquiries.

The Interim Deputy Director of Housing, Health and Communities confirmed that there are currently eight properties where inspections have not yet been achieved, although three future appointments have been made. He said that he had persuaded the legal team to implement injunctions rather than evictions to help expedite access in more difficult cases.

The Housing Consultant said that there needed to be an effective working relationship in place. There would be a team building event early October and following the event, there would be weekly maintenance touch point meetings, to meet collaboratively to check in together on issues that needed to be resolved. She said that tenants also had an important part to play in the process.

The Chair said that the Council had lacked good governance historically and need to get it right this time. He said that he remained optimistic that the Council

and Uttlesford NORSE would have a good partnership and achieve the best they could for residents.

The meeting finished at 12:01.