

## Runnymede Borough Council

### Housing Committee

10 November 2021 at 7:30pm

Members of the Committee present	Councillors J Gracey (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), A Balkan, J Broadhead, I Mullens, M Nuti, P Snow and S Whyte  Mrs J Hill (Runnymede Council Residents' Association Representative – co-opted non-voting member)
Members of the Committee absent	Councillors M Cressey, S Mackay
Non Members of the Committee present	Councillor R King

#### 263 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

None

#### 264 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 September 2021 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

#### 265 Apologies for Absence

None received.

#### 266 Declarations of Interest

None declared.

#### 267 Housing Services Fire Risk Management Policy

The Head of Housing Technical Services advised that the purpose of the document was to clearly communicate standards of fire risk management throughout the council's housing stock for tenants, staff and contractors.

The policy document was one of a suite that linked in with the Housing Health and Safety document, and would help staff understand their roles and responsibilities.

The policy had been discussed at a recent meeting of the Housing & Enabling Member Working Party and tied in with overall obligations to the wider social housing sector, particularly in relation to new regulations.

Members were updated that confirmation had been received from the Council's Equalities Group that a full screening on the policy would not be required, therefore the recommendations were amended to enable Members to approve the policy on the night.

The local fire officer's professional recommendation was that locations within the borough operated a 'stay put' rather than 'full evacuation' policy. Officers would follow up with the local

fire officer to seek their views on the most appropriate terminology, but would ensure that instructions to residents were explained as clearly and succinctly as possible.

Members discussed the importance of sharing the document and information with building owners and organisations elsewhere in the borough to share good practice, particularly given the myriad of ownership of buildings in the borough.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the Housing Services Fire Risk Management Policy.**

#### 268 **Housing Services Asbestos Policy**

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed that the Asbestos policy was similar to the Fire Risk Management policy and sought to clearly communicate standards of asbestos management throughout the Council's housing stock, for tenants, staff and contractors.

The document was discussed at a recent Member Working Party and received the support from attendees.

Once again the policy document was one of a suite of documents that linked in with the Housing Health and Safety document, and would help staff understand their roles and responsibilities

Members were updated that confirmation had been received from the Council's Equalities Group that a full screening on the policy would not be required, therefore the recommendations were amended to enable Members to approve the policy on the night.

When asked how many of the Council's properties potentially had asbestos, the Head of Housing Technical Services advised that many would have very minor levels of asbestos, such as artex on ceilings and floor tiles, and facias and soffits. Anything that presented a health and safety hazard would be removed as a priority.

Whilst the policy also covered asbestos in garages, the process for removal would be slightly different, as a damaged roof would be disposed of as hazardous waste by a licensed contractor and replaced with cement boards rather than the existing material.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the Housing Services Asbestos Policy**

#### 269 **Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy**

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that the report sought permission to go out to consultation on a draft tenant and leaseholder engagement strategy. This would be a step change in how the council engaged with its residents and the Corporate Head of Housing spoke of his enthusiasm for the positive impact this would have on residents

The value of engaging with tenants was recognised, as well as the importance of reaching out to as many tenants as possible. An engagement officer had recently been appointed to assist with this process.

A range of objectives were evident for the strategy, and officers would utilise as many methods as possible to reach out to residents to ensure any engagement was as wide-ranging as possible, text, phone, emails and focus groups all being utilised.

The intention would be that when a tenant receives a service from the Housing department they would subsequently receive a satisfaction survey in order to understand and develop more insight into tenants' experience in dealing with the Council.

It would also be desirable to encourage tenants to feel sufficiently empowered to find solutions themselves. The consultation would open immediately and run until 14 January 2022, with the full strategy presented to the March Committee, taking account of the feedback received as a result of the consultation.

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed to Members that the consultation would not rely solely on technology – focus groups would play a key part in the process.

Communication channels already existed with all tenants, and the housing online service would soon identify the cohort who do not engage digitally, and a strategy for engaging with them would be devised. This would include the small number of tenants whose first language was not English.

To quell a Member's fear about getting the quality data needed given the admission that the Council has not historically been good at conducting consultations, it was felt advantageous that tenants were specifically being targeted for a response rather than launching a general consultation, whilst officers were liaising with [TPAS](#) (a not for profit Tenant Engagement organisation) around them providing a critical friend role.

It was felt by Members that if the pool of data was insufficient in terms of quality and quantity that would be reflected in what was brought back to Committee in March.

The Runnymede Council Residents' Association Representative reported that the group's social media page was being refreshed and launched in January. This would be a closed group for tenants only and would be made available to all tenants upon sign up.

## 270 **Recharge Policy Consultation**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised Members that permission was sought for consultation on the recharge policy that would involve the Housing Revenue Account being able to make recharges where tenants were in breach of their repairing responsibilities or essential repairs were needed that were tenants' responsibility.

In addition to recovering costs the policy was designed to support tenants to comply with their obligations by providing access to repairs through the Council's contractors, and was designed to assist tenants on low incomes, those suffering damage from domestic abuse and those who had difficulty accessing repairs in the private market to maintain their homes.

It would encourage a culture of reporting repairs and seeking assistance from the Council. It was felt there were currently tenants who would not report repairs which were a landlord's responsibility because they were aware of other issues in their home which they had failed to address.

Discretion would be available to waive recharges where circumstances warrant this. Approval was requested to carry out consultation for twelve weeks commencing on 15 November with a view to bringing the policy back to this Committee in March 2022.

The Chairman added that whilst called the recharge policy, this centred more around having a consistent policy applied fairly to give residents the incentive to keep their properties tidy whilst removing barriers to ensure they could access repairs.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning explained the process for how officers would deal with a tenant who had a hoarding issue, and confirmed to a Member that hoarding

issues in private property would be dealt with through Adult Social Care or Environmental Health if the property presented a statutory nuisance.

A dedicated webpage had been created for the consultation, and a user-friendly leaflet would be produced with the key headlines.

A Member spoke of the importance of linking this to a corporate debt policy. The Corporate Head of Housing would update Members at a future Committee on its implementation and how it related to the Housing Service.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning confirmed that any garden work would only be undertaken on a short-term basis and the Council would generally look to cover the costs of this service. Anything more permanent would potentially lead to the Council being inundated with requests for garden maintenance. If a tenant was unable to maintain a garden the expectation would be that the tenant would move into a property without one.

The Vice- Chairman of the Committee spoke of his comfort that the policy covered both those tenants who wilfully failed to comply with contractual obligations and would potentially restrict them from accessing housing in future, along with those genuinely vulnerable tenants requiring support.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved a consultation exercise on the proposed Housing Revenue Account Recharge Policy.**

#### 271 **Afghan Local Employed Staff Relocation Scheme**

The Corporate Head of Housing provided information on the timeline for the Council accepting families of the Afghan local employed staff relocation scheme, and advised that the first family had recently been welcomed into the borough, with a further family next week.

The Council had attempted to be as flexible as possible to meet the needs of the families.

The Corporate Head of Housing felt that it would depend on the immigration status of those people in the scheme as to whether they could join the housing register – it was believed those on the scheme had sufficiently high status to enable them to join the housing register. The Corporate Head of Housing would investigate whether the armed forces covenant would be relevant when applying for housing.

The number of families being brought in would be reviewed on a regular basis to avoid the scenario of bringing families into the borough and being unable to offer them sufficient support.

**Resolved that –**

**i) Members noted the anticipated date for the arrival of the first household within Runnymede Borough.**

**ii) Members noted that additional households would be received during November.**

#### 272 **Update on Communication with Regulator of Social Housing**

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed that monthly meetings continued with the Regulator of Social Housing, who had deemed that a minimum 75% compliance of Decent Homes standard would be necessary before consideration could be given to lifting the notice. The Council was currently at 62%.

Electrical certification compliance had continued to improve, whilst the number of outstanding fire risk safety actions had reduced significantly.

The Chairman added that the Decent Homes standard percentage had dropped primarily because the accuracy of the data the department collected had improved, whereas the figure comprised partly of guesswork previously.

The Head of Housing Technical Services advised Members that he considered blockages were largely down to not enough capital works being carried out, however budgets and programmes were in place from next year in order to catch up on the works.

### 273 **Purchase of Site for Development**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that the Council's external legal representative was still working to ensure that the correct documentation was in place to transfer the land to the Council.

In addition, issues had been identified with the easements in place with adjacent landowners to access the site for the proposed number of properties and completion could not take place until this was resolved.

Officers would continue providing updates to Members at future Committee meetings.

### 274 **Key Performance Indicators 2021/22 Q2**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning confirmed that voids continued to be a concern, although improvements had been made since the contractor working on voids now covered the entire borough.

There were 68 void properties across the borough, amounting to 2.37% of the entire stock, but only 1.53% of relettable stock. Twelves of those properties had received approval to enter into a lease arrangement, and exchange for agreement of a lease was planned for the coming days.

Rent arrears had increased in the quarter, and an action plan had been devised to improve the situation. This was primarily due to vacancies within the team, although two of these posts had recently been filled and their focus would primarily be on income for the rest of the financial year.

Electrical safety testing continued to improve, and pressure was being put on the remaining tenants to make and then keep appointments. Overall completion had increased to 95.35%.

The IT system upgrade discussed at the previous Housing Committee had received approval at Corporate Management Committee for an additional budget, and consultancy had been arranged for the implementation of phase 2, meaning the Council would be responsible for specifying and design, and the contractor would do the build and support with testing.

The Chairman added that there was a huge demand for skilled housing workers across the sector, and the recruitment process remained ongoing. Currently the Housing Service was carrying eight vacancies out of some 46 roles.

**Resolved that –**

**Members noted the results of performance monitoring.**

275 **Surrey Towers Update**

The Head of Housing Technical Services reported that work continued to the agreed standard, with an expected finish of 22 December 2021.

Furthermore, the Council were in discussions with an external provider to undertake a fire strategy for the building, which would provide a specification for the renewal of the internal fire doors within the block. Once this has been achieved, the award of works would be given to the external provider to proceed, with a likely timescale of January 2022 for issuing the award.

(The meeting ended at 9:40pm)

Chairman