

Runnymede Borough Council

Housing Committee

Wednesday, 12 January 2022 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Gracey (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), A Balkan, J Broadhead, I Mullens, M Nuti, P Snow, S Whyte, C Mann (Substitute, in place of M Cressey).
Mrs J Hill (Runnymede Council Residents' Association Representative – co-opted non-voting member)

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor S Mackay.

In attendance: Councillors R Bromley and S Williams.

366 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 10 November 2021 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

367 Declarations of Interest

None received.

368 HRA Estimates for 2022/23

The Senior Accountant for Housing advised that the current year's revised estimates revealed a difference of some £750k and a slight reduction in the surplus, the primary reason being ongoing repairs to the housing stock.

The revised estimate balance for 31 March 2022 was c£27m, with a further balance of £3m in the Major Repairs Reserve, however there were a number of costs on the horizon, including c£9m in major repairs.

A small repayment to the PWLB would be made in March 2022, which would be coming from capital receipts. Furthermore, it was now envisaged that while the Council would be repaying the PWLB debt to the original timescale, the intention going forward would be to service the original debt, by taking our further replacement loans when the finances required it.

£25m had been earmarked for new builds over the next five years, however approval to release those funds would be sought from this Committee, along with Corporate Management Committee and Full Council.

Current guidance from the government allows providers of Social Housing to increase rents by a maximum of CPI + 1%. Given the high level of Housing repairs required, officers recommended a rent increase of 4.1% with effect from April 2022. This would amount to an average rent increase of £4.50 per week.

However, there was nothing in the estimates to suggest that heating and hot water charges needed to be increased in IRL accommodation, so this would remain unchanged. In response to a Member's query, the potential trajectory had been analysed and officers were confident that an increase was not required. Furthermore, lots of effort was going into making properties more fuel efficient.

Whilst special provision had not been made for inflation, officers were monitoring the

current position, and if needed it would be reflected in the thirty-year business plan, which would be coming to the next Housing Committee.

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that a thorough analysis had taken place of the potential tenants who might be affected by a rent increase. Those on housing benefit or universal credit would not be impacted due to a similar increase in their benefits.

Focus was being placed on those in arrears to try to understand their circumstances. Whilst a small minority in high arrears did not engage with the Council, a large number would potentially be able to benefit from the increase in discretionary housing payments.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning added that it was anticipated that 99% of rent was expected to be collected this year, even allowing for the pandemic. The Council had a decent track record in recent years in collecting rent.

Resolved that –

- i) The draft revenue estimates for 2022/23 were approved, and Full Council were requested to make provision accordingly.**
- ii) The Committee granted permission for officers to seek written consent from the Secretary of State to top up the DHP allocation by a sum of £30,000, which may only be used to assist in providing DHP to HRA tenants in need; and**
- iii) The proposed changes in rents and charges (including those for Housing General Fund services) for 2022/23 be approved to be effective either from the first rent week of April 2022, or 1 April 2022 as appropriate.**

369 Repairs, Maintenance and Voids Contractor Procurement

The Head of Housing Technical Services reported that the tendering process had begun for procurement of a new repairs, maintenance and voids contractor, with the current contractor in place until April 2023.

A market engagement event had taken place today, which was well attended, with the tender award expected to take place in August with a long mobilisation period ahead of the contract commencing. No additional resources were anticipated to help manage the contract award.

The Head of Housing Technical Services added that steps were being taken to ensure that the Council's requirements for the service were aligned to the tenants' aspirations, including getting repairs done first time, whilst there was strong emphasis on "keeping it local" and ensuring there was an end-to-end process for voids.

The Committee chair stressed the importance of getting maintenance right first time, and stated this was a significant step change in ensuring this would happen.

The Corporate Head of Housing added that there were many touchpoints in the current system, which provided more opportunities for mistakes to be made. The proposal for the new contract would involve a scheduling system where residents could book online and thus reduce touchpoints, and the Council would be able to access the intelligence in real time to monitor the KPIs.

A Member asked about contractors' existing applications, and the Head of Housing Technical Services advised that the medium and larger sized contractors would already have the desired applications, whilst the long lead in time would provide the smaller

companies time to obtain the necessary applications.

Officers had opted to appoint one contractor. This was considered less risky as appointing multiple contractors would result in a postcode lottery for residents in terms of quality of repairs. The necessary due diligence would be undertaken, including contractors needing to meet strict financial criteria.

Members felt that communication from the appointed company would be key to the success of the contractor, and given the likelihood of sub-contractors being utilised consistency in appearance would be necessary. Officers confirmed that as part of the tender it would be a requirement for any operative working on a tenants' home to have a branded van and to turn up in uniform in order to be apparent they were working on behalf of the Council.

370 **Tackling Fuel Poverty**

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the Council had been awarded two government grants to improve the energy efficiency of its social housing stock, with the Council needing to contribute £300k in order to unlock part of this funding.

912 units within the housing stock were currently below the energy C rating, and this funding would only cover a maximum of 303 of those units, but would go some way to achieving C rating across the Council's stock by 2030.

Officers were confident of being able to deliver this within the timescales set out by government.

A councillor was keen to see the funding go towards standard build units that had more longevity, however the Corporate Head of Housing advised that the intention was to prioritise the funding on the worst performing stock, despite plans to regenerate the area in the medium term meaning that would see a small number of the properties being demolished.

The Vice Chair of the Committee stressed the importance of pivoting away from policy development work to being an authority that was building homes, but acknowledged that took time and in the meantime the Council needed to do right by its residents.

Resolved that –

- i) Members approved the request for up to £300,000 in capital expenditure to be funded from the HRA Major Repairs Reserve, to support the investment in energy efficiency measures delivering a total of £1.39m of expenditure in Runnymede Borough Council's social housing stock.**
- ii) Members noted the type of work being undertaken and the wards impacted.**

371 **Investment Standard**

The Head of Housing Technical Services advised that the purpose of the report was to provide clarity around the level of work that would be undertaken when delivering capital works programmes.

The capital works investment/procurement program would address the backlog of works and use the Runnymede Investment Standard as the benchmark for future and planned works.

Approval of the standard would ensure the Council could continue its drive to provide good

services to its residents that capitalises on the procurement activities to deliver a sustained capital works programme over the next five years.

The document was constantly evolving to reflect Decent Homes and would be updated when required. The document was not intended to be customer facing, with a version tailored for residents expected to be available in due course.

Resolved that –

Members approved the Investment Standard, which would then be used in the Council’s procurements of capital works.

372 **Quality Policy**

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that proposed Quality Policy would provide an additional mechanism for continuous service improvements as part of the Quality Management System for Housing services.

The implementation of a Quality Policy would be integral to the Housing Service’s upcoming application for ISO9001 certification, and would ensure processes were effective and met legislative and regulatory requirements.

A major part of this would be the ongoing training and development of staff, as well as the commitment to delivering and maintaining a cycle of continuous improvement and monitoring and reporting on customer satisfaction on core services.

Approval of the policy would ensure officers could gather more customer satisfaction data across the service, and would contribute to the review of the performance framework and what KPIs would be reported within the structure.

The Committee chair added that the policy would provide Members with extra tools to hold officers and Members to account.

Resolved that –

Members approved the Quality Policy for Housing Services for implementation with immediate effect

373 **Financial Wellbeing Strategy - Request to Undertake Tenant Consultation**

The draft strategy had been developed to help tenants improve their financial resilience, as well as helping them into education and employment. Successful implementation would save the Council money long-term on management costs.

Initiatives would be brought to Committee on an ongoing basis within the strategy. Approval would eventually be sought on the general direction of travel rather than all initiatives within the strategy. However, approval was being sought on this occasion solely on instigating a consultation with a view to approval being sought on the strategy in June.

The Chair of the Runnymede Council Residents’ Association would liaise with the Corporate Head of Housing to ensure the consultation – and any future consultations – was promoted via the RCRA’s social media.

Previous drafts of the strategy had been discussed at Member Working Parties, and Members were pleased to see the intention to help tenants stay in their homes for longer, whilst the strategy would also support the housing corporate plan.

Resolved that –

- i) Members gave officers permission to commence consultation with Runnymede Borough Council's tenants on the aims of the draft Financial Wellbeing Strategy**
- ii) Members requested that the strategy is brought back to a future meeting of the Housing Committee to consider the consultation responses and approval later in 2022.**

374 **Pet Policy - Request to Commence Consultation**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that the Housing Service had reviewed its pet policy and following a draft that was considered by the recent Housing and Enabling Member Working Party, now sought to consult residents on the proposed updated policy.

Areas that the policy covered included arrangements for keeping a dog, arrangements for IRLs, along with the actions proposed where there are concerns about how a pet was being kept.

As part of the consultation process there would be targeted focus groups with known pet owners and residents of flat blocks, as well as coffee mornings at IRLs.

Resolved that –

- i) Members approved the request for Officers to consult on the draft Housing Pet Policy.**
- ii) Members anticipated receiving the results of the consultation along with the final Policy for approval in June 2022.**

375 **Housing IT Enhancement Update**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that following Committee approval in September 2021 a new contract had been signed for provision of consultancy services to work with the Council on the system design and then provide the technical build and responsibility for the implementation and training through to the launch.

The Council's Digital Innovation and Delivery Manager was project managing the process, whilst the head of consultancy at Northgate was also involved in the project.

Workstreams had been planned with dates booked far in advance. Some modules would be implemented concurrently where they would be utilised by different sections.

Housing On Line was due to launch imminently and work remained ongoing to prepare for other modules.

Resolved that –

Members recognised the progress being made to implement Phase 2 of the Housing IT system enhancement.

376 **Afghan Local Employed Staff Relocation Scheme**

The Corporate Head of Housing updated Members that the three households the Council had committed to supporting had now arrived in the borough and were being assisted in a variety of means such as employment prospects, travel arrangements and access to benefits.

The Corporate Head of Housing thanked the Mayor's charity, who had enabled the households to receive televisions and laptops to assist with language and education.

Whilst there had been resource implications on supporting the three households, officers would be looking into the prospect of supporting an additional intake as part of the scheme.

377 **Update on Communication with the Regulator of Social Housing**

The Head of Housing Technical Services had continued meeting with the Regulator of Social Housing on a monthly basis, and an updated Decent Homes figure would be presented at the next meeting later this month.

The Regulator was very pleased with electrical safety work, and whilst 44 high risk fire actions remained, this was largely due to contractors being unable to gain access to the required properties.

It was hoped that an exit strategy from the Council's relationship with the Regulator would be discussed at one of the next meetings, which Members were pleased with.

378 **Performance Data**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning provided recent performance data in key areas of the Housing Service.

Rent arrears were currently at 2.1%, which was considered a pleasing result given the financial climate and proximity to the Christmas period.

Just four properties remained outstanding on gas certification compliance, whilst electrical certification was currently at 97% compliance. With an expected mandatory five year electrical testing cycle expected to be announced in the near future, Runnymede would be ahead of most of its peers in achieving this owing to the work already undertaken.

Voids continued to be over-target for a variety of reasons relating to staffing resources, particularly Covid related, whilst a number of properties had been returned to the Council in poor condition.

379 **Runnymede Council Residents' Association - Chairman's Allowance**

The Committee were asked to approve the RCRA chairman's ongoing allowance, which amounted to 50% of a Members' allowance.

The current chair was a real asset to both the committee and the borough, and had spent considerable time in recent months revamping the RCRA's social media presence, and also now attended Member Working Parties in addition to Committee meetings.

Resolved that –

- i) The Committee approved the continued remuneration of £2,072 per annum to the Chair of the RCRA to be met from existing HRA budgets, (subject to an equivalent percentage increase, as from 1 April 2022, to reflect any uplift in the Members' Basic Allowance rate); and**
- ii) The Chair of the RCRA's travel expenses be paid in respect of those travel costs associated with meetings taking place both inside and outside the Borough.**

380 **Update on Purchase of Site for Development**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised Members that an issue that had arisen during the conveyancing process around access rights that had diminished the value of the site.

Subsequently the site no longer passes the viability test for an HRA investment and the offer was subsequently withdrawn. Other options were being explored for new social housing which would come to an upcoming Committee.

381 **Urgent Action - Standing Order 42**

Members noted the SO42 completed in October 2021 around the awarding of a contract for the provision of responsive repairs and void management services.

(The meeting ended at 9.40 pm.)

Chairman