

Runnymede Borough Council

Housing Committee

Wednesday, 9 March 2022 at 7.30 pm

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

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor S Mackay.

In attendance: Councillor R King.

503 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 January 2022 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

504 Declarations of Interest

None received.

505 Housing Revenue Account 30 year Business Plan

The Housing Accountant reported that the financial model was calculated in a similar manner to the version submitted to Committee in March 2021 and took account of all known charges over the last twelve months, along with the known impact of other policies and strategies approved by Committee.

The model also took into account the commencement of works to improve the under-investment of the Council's stock whilst parallel work was carried out to assess the level of work required.

Whilst there was confidence of the robustness of the financial aspects over the coming years, the longer-term picture was less clear due to a number of reasons including inflation, government policy changes and the recent turmoil in Europe.

The primary aims of the report was to manage and maintain the Council's stock to a good standard, to improve the energy performance and the provision of new affordable housing in the HRA while simultaneously managing the existing debt.

The Committee Chair thanked the Housing Accountant for the work that had gone into the plan, and was greatly encouraged that it saw the HRA on a more sound financial footing.

Resolved that –

The Housing Revenue Account 30-Year Business Plan was approved.

506 Housing Business Centre Plan 2022/23

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that the Housing Business Centre Plan 2022/23 identified the high-level activity planned by the service for the new financial year.

Many of the proposed activities were a continuation of work undertaken in the current financial year, such as phase two of the IT system enhancement, continuation of the rollout of ISO9001 to parts of the service and delivery of many of the strategic objectives approved by Committee.

Also within the plan were a number of new areas of work, including undertaking a STAR survey, which is a nationally recognised industry standard survey of tenant and leaseholder satisfaction, preparing for further enhancements to Surrey Towers, and reporting on progress against carbon reduction commitments.

Successes of the past financial year were highlighted, and the business plan for 2021/22 had been delivered in its entirety with the exception of the Garage Strategy, which would be going to the June Housing Committee.

In response to a Member question, the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that Magna Carta Lettings was constantly under review to understand if meets the Council's needs and achieves the ambition of helping people who are homeless into the private rented sector. Proposals on the future of Magna Carta Lettings would be brought to a future Housing Committee.

A Member asked about current resources and staff turnover within Housing, and was advised that whilst there remained vacancies the overall situation was currently manageable. Furthermore HR had recently completed a Talent Management Strategy that aimed to be more creative in the way vacancies were filled, which was hoped would be particularly useful when it came to recruiting to technical vacancies within Housing.

The Vice Chair of the Committee praised the work of officers and the role of the Member Working Party attendees, who had received eleven different policies mentioned within the report to various Working Parties over the past nine months and provided useful insight and feedback that helped shape each of the final policies.

Resolved that –

1) Housing Business Centre Plan for 2022/23 was approved, Members recognised that reports for approval will be brought to Committee prior to the implementation of any new initiative.

507 Housing Revenue Account Recharge Policy

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that the proposed Recharge Policy sought to widen the scope of recharges, which would enable tenants to access repairs that were their responsibility through the Council's contractors.

The overall objective would be to assist tenants to maintain their homes to a good standard, and to ensure repairs that were the tenant's responsibility could be carried out immediately if there was a health or safety risk, even if the tenant did not have the funds.

A draft Recharge Policy was discussed at a recent Member Working Party, and a consultation was undertaken after the November Housing Committee.

This consultation, which was the first of its kind carried out in the new format and far exceeded the response rate of any previous consultation exercise, showed a high level of support for recharging tenants for neglect and damage but within a context of considering individual circumstances and vulnerabilities, which had been reflected in the updated policy.

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning added that procedures would be put

in place to monitor the use of recharges and requests for discretionary waiving of the charges would be considered by a panel of senior officers to ensure they were applied consistently. The health and safety of residents would always be the overriding priority, along with living conditions in households where there were children or vulnerable adults.

Resolved that –

1) Housing Revenue Account Recharge Policy approved.

508 Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy

The Corporate Head of Housing reminded Members that the purpose of the strategy was to deliver change in engagement with tenants to gain their valuable input to enable the Council to be more efficient in delivering services and focus activity and finances on the things that make a difference to them.

A range of engagement methods were undertaken to reach out to tenants, and the overall approach was welcomed, with residents keen to see that the Council was demonstrating that it was listening and able to adapt based on their feedback.

A series of amendments had been made to the strategy based on their feedback, and an annual update would be provided on the delivery of the actions within the strategy.

The implementation of the strategy would see the Council become compliant with tenant engagement, one of the Regulatory requirements. However the main driver to its implementation was to be a good landlord.

Members were slightly disappointed with the response rate to the direct emails, although felt this was primarily because of poor historic relationship with tenants, which further emphasised why the strategy was necessary.

Regular feedback in the form of Focus Groups would be vital to the process, which would reflect strengths and weaknesses and serve as a baseline position from which to build on.

Resolved that –

1) Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy for tenants and leaseholders approved for immediate adoption.

509 Request to Approve Implementation of the Housing Services Tree Management Policy

The Head of Housing Technical Services reported that the purpose of the report was to clearly communicate what the Council do to ensure its portfolio of trees was managed effectively.

The policy would take a best practice approach with the intention of mapping and zoning trees based upon their likelihood to cause damage or death. As the majority of trees located on HRA lands were likely to be close to houses and pathways, it was envisaged that Housing would have a higher proportion of trees needing cyclical annual surveys or bi-annual as opposed to every three to five years.

Whilst this would have a greater resource impact and an increased annual tree management budget, it was recommended to take this approach based upon managing and mitigating the Council's risks in a proactive manner.

As soon as the Council had one overarching policy that covered all tree management aspects the policy would cease, and Housing Services would adopt a "one Council"

approach.

A full stock audit would be undertaken with a further Committee report expected at a future Housing Committee to provide further clarity and context.

The Head of Housing Technical Services added that the purpose of any tree management policy would be to preserve trees rather than cut them down. A hazard, risk or decaying would be the only time a tree was worked on, all other occasions they would be managed in situ.

Resolved that –

1) Implementation of the Housing Services Tree Management Policy approved.

510 Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy Update

Further to the Committee's approval of the Rough Sleeping Strategy in 2019, the Head of Housing Solutions provided an update at the halfway stage of that strategy.

Good progress had been made against the four key objectives and 35 overarching objectives, despite the impact of the pandemic. Some of the key highlights included:

- Reduced use of bed & breakfast.
- Successful bids for a number of external grants, totalling over £550,000. These grants had enabled the Council to purchase two emergency sleep pods, cover the costs of supporting individuals into private rented accommodation, funds towards purchasing three one-bedroom properties, to develop a housing led scheme and to appoint staff including a Housing Navigator.
- Reduction in rough sleeping and proactive approach to identify those at risk and intervening early.

The objectives that remained outstanding had been added into the team plan for the coming year.

The Head of Housing Solutions went on to seek Committee approval for the immediate implementation of the Rough Sleeping: No Second Night Out Policy, which was outside of the Council's statutory responsibility but was considered good practise.

Sleeping rough contributed to health inequalities, as well as costs to the health service and criminal justice system, and the policy sought to identify those sleeping rough in the borough at an early stage and give them wraparound care so that no one has to spend a second night sleeping on the streets.

A Member asked for clarification around the number of new units versus the relatively small number of people sleeping rough in the borough. The Head of Housing Solutions confirmed that they were primarily for homeless assistance and those on the housing register.

Members were encouraged to raise any instances of homelessness in their wards offline and a multi-agency approach would be instigated to assist those affected.

It was confirmed that the Rough Sleeping: No Second Night Out policy applied to anyone regardless of their status, and assistance would be provided to help them apply for status of employment or both, along with a pathway to a more settled and secure future. Language and translation services were available as part of the service.

A Member asked about the logistics of each sleeping pod, and was advised that they were

aimed at short-term accommodation with a maximum of an eight-week stay, although most were moved on within two weeks. In the event of the pods being full then alternative emergency accommodation would be considered. The purchase of three additional properties through grants added an extra layer of resilience when encountering incidents of homelessness.

Resolved that –

1) The Rough Sleeping: No Second Night Out Policy was approved.

2) Progress of the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy was noted.

511 **Integrated Care Partnership Step Down Scheme Update**

The Housing Solicitor opened the item with the legal implications, which had been marked 'To follow' within the agenda report.

It was stated that in implementing this scheme, the Council was relying on its General Power of Competence under s. 1(1) of the Localism Act 2011. It had not acted under its duties and powers under either Part 7 homelessness nor Part 6 allocations of the Housing Act 1996 and was not subject to any restrictions in that legislation.

Furthermore, going forward, the grants of licences for occupation of the dwellings would be delivered through an arrangement with one of the Council's wholly owned companies.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning recapped that the Committee approved the use of two Independent Retirement Living flats 12 months ago for participation in a pilot "Step Down" scheme to support the NHS in a partnership with Spelthorne, Woking and Elmbridge Councils.

The scheme was to facilitate discharge from hospital for medically fit patients who could not immediately return home, providing a six-week placement with a care package to enable their own accommodation to be made ready.

Following a successful pilot, the Integrated Care Partnership had approved funding for a further year to extend the scheme, and Committee's approval was being sought to continue the use of the two flats in Floral House that had been used as part of the pilot.

The scheme had proved very successful during its initial pilot and was an excellent opportunity to build on the links between the Council and health services.

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Housing Services & Business Planning confirmed that in addition to saving money this would also play a significant part in the prevention of bed-blocking, and patients' families would also be able to visit them at the stepdown locations.

Members were pleased to agree the policy, and felt this could become much more large-scale to aid with the issue of bed-blocking.

Resolved that –

1) Approval was given to the continued use of two flats in Floral House as part of the North West Surrey Integrated Care Partnership Step Down scheme for as long as the scheme is in operation and associated funding is provided, or demand for IRL accommodation outweighs the benefit of the scheme.

2) The scheme to be reviewed again at Housing Committee in March 2023.

512 **Refugee Resettlement Update**

The Committee Chair opened the item by reflecting on the situation in Ukraine, which had changed drastically even in the short time since the report was written. Subsequently the Council would be pausing any commitment about who it supports, and any available resource would be directed to assist the most people possible. Further information would be provided as more information came to light.

The Head of Housing Solutions updated the Committee on the two ongoing resettlement schemes within the borough.

The task of delivering the **Syrian Resettlement Scheme** was the responsibility of another business unit until recently, and disappointment was noted that only five of the ten families had been resettled so far. However, a sixth family would be arriving imminently and discussions were underway about a seventh family arriving later in the year. The team remained committed to meeting the target of ten families over the next three years.

Of the three **Afghan** families re-housed by the Council, one had subsequently moved into private rented housing. The other two households remain in temporary accommodation, whilst the Housing Team look for suitable private rented accommodation.

The Head of Housing Solutions echoed the Chairman's point urging caution about the prospect of additional families being accepted into the scheme owing to the increased demand for larger properties, as well as having to consider the needs of local people.

Furthermore there was likely to be a further call for properties to re-house uprooted Ukrainian families and the Council did not want to over-commit.

Members were disappointed in the delay in re-housing Syrian families, but were reassured that Housing Officers would now be overseeing the process.

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

The Head of Housing Technical Services reported that the Decent Homes percentage was now at 70%, and that figure would continue to increase as the Council progress into its planned program of works.

Electrical certification was now over 99%, with the 26 outstanding appointments now all scheduled. High risk fire actions remained at 34, which was unlikely to change in the short-term as they owed primarily to fire doors, which was part of a larger program of works.

A meeting was planned the following day with the Regulator of Social Housing, where the discussion will move towards ending the Council's engagement.

The Committee Chair praised the service for the work of the team in being so close to achieving 100% electrical certification success.

The Committee Vice Chair echoed these comments, adding that the purpose of the original notice was in relation to electrical certification and it was only the Decent Homes figure that had prevented an earlier discontinuation in engagement with the Regulator, which had not been part of the original notice.

514 **Housing IT Enhancement Update**

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the project plan was on schedule, with work on the communications, asset management and housing allocations modules underway

and work was ongoing to upgrade the core system.

The scale of the project was extremely large, however the program would be delivered as published within the one-year timescale. At which point additional modules would be requested from Committee to avoid a repeat of the Housing service having an outdated IT system. The Committee Chair confirmed her support for an annual review of IT funding.

The Corporate Head of Housing would continue to update the Committee regularly on the project.

Resolved that –

1) Progress of phase 2 of the Housing IT system enhancement noted.

515 **Key Performance Indicators 2021/22 - Q3**

The Committee Chair opened the item by addressing concerns a number of Councillors had raised relating to the performance of the current contractor.

It was acknowledged that recent service levels had fallen below the standard that the contractor had previously set, and indeed officers had previously recognised this and had implemented an improvement plan to address performance.

The main factors for the drop in performance were around resources – a national issue – as well as the ageing profile and wide range of the Council's boiler stock.

The Committee Chair would share her statement with those Councillors who had raised concerns, and invited any other Councillors with similar issues to raise them with her and they would be investigated.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning added that this also impacted the void performance, which continued to be below expectation.

There had also been a high level of tenancy terminations as a result of death where the tenant had no next of kin or had not left a will, resulting in the Council having to serve notice on the Public Trustee.

Staff turnover had continued to affect performance on rent collection, with a 50% staff vacancy rate in rent collection. However two members of staff had started this week and a third would be joining next week. Focus would continue to be on supporting tenants in difficulty.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning closed by advising that recent data comparing the Council against benchmarked Local Authorities with a similar sized housing stock had revealed a good performance, despite the problems identified within the discussion.

The Corporate Head of Housing also expressed disappointment about void performance however acknowledged the improvements made over the past twelve months, with the average number of days reduced from 162 to 86. The team would continue to strive to reach the targeted 25 days.

Responding to a Member's question about capacity to allow future tenants to arrange for the work on void properties to be done themselves, the Corporate Head of Housing replied that certain legal requirements had to be met before a property can be re-let, such as condition of the kitchen and gas and electrical safety. However, there was some work that could be done once a tenant moved in, and these options were under consideration. This would not only improve re-let time but allow tenants to personalise some aspects of their

property.

516 Exclusion of Press and Public

By resolution of Council, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during discussion of the following report under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the report in question would be likely to involve disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

517 Housing Leased Properties

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that the purpose of the report was an update on the leases the Council currently hold, their expiration, and leases co-owned with charities and social landlords.

The report sought authority to hand some of the properties back and to extend the lease on others.

Of the properties due to be discontinued, the leases on those properties had already expired, and it was intended to end the existing arrangements due to their age and unsuitability. This was being offset by the purchase of additional properties mentioned earlier in the meeting, and utilising the HRA's own stock worked out considerably cheaper than renting privately.

Some of the leases with charities or social landlords were being asked to be extended. These properties were continuing to meet the strategic objectives of allowing residents to access housing and played an important role in housing specialist groups.

Resolved that –

1) Current arrangements under which the Council leases properties noted.

2) Current arrangements under which the Council leases housing properties to supported housing providers noted.

3) Approval given to Officers to agree the terms and enter into new lease arrangements for the properties listed on the agenda.

(The meeting ended at 9.02 pm.)

Chairman