

## Runnymede Borough Council

### Housing Committee

**Wednesday, 8 June 2022 at 7.30 pm**

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Gracey (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), D Coen, M Cressey, M Darby, S Dennett, A King, P Snow, S Whyte and S Williams.

In attendance: Councillors A Balkan and C Howorth.

#### 67 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9 March 2022 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

#### 68 Apologies for Absence

None received – All Committee members present.

#### 69 Declarations of Interest

None received.

#### 70 Pet Policy

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that a consultation exercise seeking tenant and leaseholder views on the draft Pet Policy had concluded at the end of April. A number of approaches had been utilised to seek their views, including newspaper articles, focus groups and a pets in the park event.

This process attracted 108 responses, with consultees broadly supportive of the policy, and subject to Member approval accreditation would be sought from the RSPCA.

The consultation exercise resulted in a number of changes to the finalised policy, including only assistance dogs being kept in retirement living, tenants being expected to make arrangements for their pets to be looked after should they be unable to do so, along with the requirement for tenants to train their dogs.

The Council would also support homeless applicants keeping their cats and dogs in lodgings during the relief period.

The Committee chair thanked those who took part in the survey.

A Member asked whether appropriate resources were in place to enable annual checks, and whilst advising these checks were not currently undertaken, the Corporate Head of Housing stated that the checks would form part of the tenancy audit programme. Resources would be kept under review.

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that an annual check would be carried out to ensure that tenants were complying with the tenancy obligations they had signed up to. The service would provide a fair but robust response in these circumstances, and would be closely linked to the Anti-Social Behaviour policy.

The launch of the policy would go out in the September newsletter, and retrospective permission would be required for pet ownership.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the Pet Policy.**

**71 Compensation Policy - Request to Commence Consultation**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that both the Housing and Local Government Ombudsmen required landlords to have remedies in place where compensation was appropriate and stressed the importance of having a consistent and proportionate approach to compensation within an approved policy.

A draft policy setting out the maximum levels of compensation payable in situations and the management authorisation required had been to a recent Member Working Party and an eight week consultation period was being sought for service users and interested parties. The final policy would be brought back to September's Housing Committee.

Subject to Committee approval, training would be rolled out to staff and there would be oversight to monitored that the policy would be applied consistently.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning confirmed that few complaints were currently received, but they were sporadic with very few requests for compensation. It was anticipated that compensation payments might go up slightly upon approval, but this would help to ensure consistency.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the draft policy for consultation.**

**72 Financial Wellbeing Strategy**

Further to Committee approval in January to commence a consultation exercise, the Corporate Head of Housing reported that the consultation ended in late April and the focus of the strategy was supported by consultees, who also valued the training and use of incentives offered.

Some of the strategies aims included reducing fuel bills, providing debt advice and supporting tenants and their families into work.

An action plan supported the strategy, and actions from within it would be brought back to future a future Committee.

Several amendments had been made to the strategy through the consultation including ensuring tenants had access to essential items, including furniture and bedding and providing advice for seeking a new energy provider for tenants.

The Corporate Head of Housing concluded that the cost of living crisis had intensified since the policy was drafted, and declared his intention to return for Committee approval for certain items.

A Member stressed the importance of linking the strategy to the Corporate Plan, as well as the importance of providing training for residents, either in-house or externally, and the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed this would be linked to a sub strategy within the Health & Wellbeing strategy.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning responded to a Member question about the consequences of refusing support, stating that it was only if a tenant was in arrears and refusing support would enforcement action be taken.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the strategy, noted the actions within along with the intention to bring some of those actions to future Committees.**

**73 Tenancy Policy/Strategy - Request to Commence Consultation**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that The Council had a legal responsibility to publish both a Tenancy Strategy and a Tenancy Policy for use in allocation of its own stock.

Historically the Council only issued secure lifetime tenancies but since the Localism Act it had also been able to offer Flexible Fixed Term Tenancies with a minimum term of two years, which would enable a review at the end of the fixed term to determine whether the household still met the criteria for the property or whether alternative accommodation should be sourced either within social housing or other tenures.

The Council currently offer two, five and ten year Tenancies and secure tenancies for those who held them before 1 April 2012 or those moving into IRL.

It was felt that two year tenancies did not provide adequate security for the tenant as they are let to those people who are perceived to be most at risk of not sustaining a tenancy. It was felt that this was not appropriate as any tenancy breaches should be dealt with using the appropriate legal mechanisms. Officers were recommending that only five or ten year policies were offered in future.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning requested an eight week consultation, with all Registered Providers consulted. The results would be brought back to the September Housing Committee.

The Committee chair stated that this greater security was what the Council should be providing. The Committee Vice-Chair added that the average tenancy lasted 6-7 years, and agreed with the sentiment to remove the two year option. This had been reflected during discussion at several Member Working Parties. Furthermore, both options would continue to be proceeded by a one year probationary term, which would provide a mechanism to deal with any issues.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the draft policy and strategy for consultation.**

**74 Runnymede Borough Council's Garage Strategy 2022 - 2028**

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed the strategy included all garages owned by the Council, and was discussed at a Member Working Party earlier this year.

The purpose of the strategy was to set out a programme for systematically identifying poor performing garage sites, with reviews taking place where occupancy levels were below 80%.

One of the drivers for the strategy was to ensure the financial performance of the garage stock was maintained, and approval was sought to commence a consultation, as well as undertake an appraisal of the fourteen worst performing sites, with the results brought back to the November Housing Committee.

Where sites were identified as needing redevelopment, a more focussed consultation would take place with the local community.

**Resolved that –**

- 1) Members approved the Garage Strategy noting that viability appraisal findings would be reported to the November Housing Committee.**
- 2) Members approved the consultation approach outlined for the garage strategy. Wide consultation on the strategy and a detailed site by site consultation if ‘change of use’ is proposed for a current garage site.**

**75 Mobility Scooter Policy - Request to Commence Consultation**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning described the increased use of motorised mobility equipment throughout the population, and the need for a policy to ensure that the Council manages the use of such items within its buildings to ensure the safety of residents.

A process was necessary for requesting permission to store or charge a mobility scooter within a Council facility to ensure that the Council meets its statutory obligations in relation to Health & Safety and Fire Safety Regulations.

The policy would support tenants to ensure their equipment was maintained and safe for their use, and would be utilised by those residents most in need.

Approval was sought to commence an eight week consultation exercise, which would involve extensive communication with residents of Independent Retirement Living.

The Committee Chair encouraged Members to share details of all consultations with residents.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved a consultation exercise on the new Mobility Scooter Policy with the results of the consultation and a final draft policy to be brought to this Committee in September 2022**

**76 Request to Approve Implementation of the Housing Services Gas Safety Policy**

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed that the aim of the policy was to clearly communicate what the Council would do to achieve gas safety performance that was compliant with the law as well as best practise in its sector.

The policy would be one of a suite of policies that linked in to the key Health & Safety policies, and the Council would adhere to all legislation.

No further resources would be required to maintain the policy, which would supersede the existing policy and be implemented immediately.

The Committee Vice-Chair added that it would form part of the tenancy agreement to allow access upon reasonable request – failure to do so would be a breach of the agreement.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the implementation of the Gas Safety Policy**

## 77 **Request to Undertake a STAR Survey**

The Corporate Head of Housing was seeking Committee approval to undertake a STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents) survey to understand their views on the Housing Service.

The survey would allow the Council to benchmark against other authorities, and could filter by things such as stock size.

From 2023 it would be a government requirement for all Local Authorities to carry out tenant satisfaction surveys, and completing a STAR survey would help the Council identify action plans in advance of that.

Several Members highlighted the prospect of survey-fatigue given the volume of surveys being distributed, and the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the provider earmarked to carry out the survey would guarantee drawing a representative sample to be able to draw accurate conclusions.

Furthermore, the surveys would focus on specific cohorts who were affected by certain policies, however the STAR survey would go to all tenants. The approach would be varied to try and reach as many people as possible. Furthermore, feedback would always be provided to participants to inform them of their impact.

The cost of the survey would be going towards potentially providing hard copies of the survey, along with analysing the results and drawing conclusions.

**Resolved that –**

**Members noted the arrangements planned to undertake a STAR satisfaction survey, with further updates to be presented to this Committee.**

## 78 **Request to Approve Implementation of the Housing Services Legionella Management Policy**

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed the intention to clearly communicate the Council's responsibilities and to ensure the policy covered key details.

The policy took the best practise approach in addition to statutory requirements, and followed all relevant legislation and law. IT formed part of the wider suite of Health & Safety policies.

In response to a Member question, the Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed this policy only affected a handful of properties across the borough, specifically the flats with a communal water supply.

**Resolved that –**

**Members approved the implementation of the Legionella Management Policy**

## 79 **Housing IT Enhancement Update**

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed work remained ongoing to upgrade the Housing IT system, with the implementation of a number of modules underway.

The Asset Management Plan was almost complete, with the old system very soon to be turned off. The quality of the data able to be produced would be reflected in the Asset Management Plan report, which was scheduled for September's Housing Committee.

The Housing Allocations and Communications were also both nearing completion, which would enable text communication with tenants.

The Committee Chair was pleased that the ongoing work meant that tenants could access information online and engage with the repairs service direct, resulting in a streamlined and more transparent process.

**Resolved that –**

**Progress of phase 2 of the Housing IT system enhancement was noted.**

**80 Key Performance Indicators, 2021/22 Q4**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning updated the Committee on rent arrears for HRA tenants, which currently stood at 2.14%. This was considered disappointing but was largely owing to high level of staff vacancies, cases where no action could be taken during Covid and the current economic climate.

Compliance figures continued to be positive and the data, along with progress on an extensive planned maintenance programme to achieve Decent Homes compliance had recently been shared with the Regulator of Social Housing.

Voids had experienced significant issues but it was hoped that the recent appointment of a dedicated Voids Officer would help to improve the situation.

The Corporate Head of Housing added that he had heard from the Regulator in recent days, who had acknowledged the significant Health & Safety improvements but did not feel it appropriate to withdraw the Council's Regulatory Notice due to its performance on Decent Homes. This would be reviewed again in November, and whilst it was unlikely the Council would have achieved the desired figure by then, if it was delivering consistently against the long-term action plan the Notice might be lifted then.

A Member added that achieving a high Decent Homes figure on the Council's stock would be extremely difficult because of the large number of non-standard construction properties, and key to the improvement would be building new properties.

**81 Standing Order 42 - Energy Assessor**

The Corporate Head of Housing updated Members on the need to complete a Standing Order 42 since the previous Committee in relation to the purchase of the Energy Assessor NEC/Northgate IT module.

This was linked to the Housing Services' commitment to achieve a C energy efficient rating by 2030. To fulfil the funding gap a bid would be made to the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. The energy assessor module enables the Council to project what work was required to achieve the C rating and the cost involved.

The Committee Chair concluded this was a £12,000 investment to hopefully secure £2m of funding.

**82 Standing Order 42 - Green Homes Grant**

The Corporate Head of Housing updated Members on the need to complete a Standing Order 42 since the previous Committee, which was again intended to achieve the Energy C rating of the Council's stock.

The Standing Order 42 provided permission to unlock additional Green Homes Grant; £100,000 additional investment would unlock an additional £200,000 of grant funding.

The Committee chair commented that some of the stock would reveal it almost impossible to achieve a C rating, which would help identify the properties where redevelopment could be required.

A Member asked about the prospect of domestic and renewable heat, but the Corporate Head of Housing advised that the Council were currently taking a fabric-first approach, and were not currently looking at solar panels and heating systems – although a request to secure alternative heating sources would come to a future Committee.

**83 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.

**84 Conversion of HRA Property Update**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported on an HRA property that had been converted from its original use to reflect the need for such properties in the borough from both households becoming homeless and applicants on the Housing Register.

During the conversion there were additional items and increased site costs resulting in an overspend on the original contract sum. This was primarily for a new roof and in order to split the utility services.

However, refurbishing an existing property and adding a new one was considered a positive step, income on the properties had now increased, very little work was anticipated on the properties for the next 15 years.

(The meeting ended at 9.16 pm.)

Chairman