

Runnymede Borough Council

Housing Committee

Wednesday, 16 November 2022 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Hulley (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), D Coen, M Cressey, M Darby, R Davies, S Dennett, P Snow, S Whyte and S Williams.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors J Gracey (Chairman).

335 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Special Committee held on 18 October 2022 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

336 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillor J. Gracey.

337 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

338 Tenants' Satisfaction Survey

Throughout October tenants had the opportunity to complete an online satisfaction survey, to give their views on the landlord services provided by the Council.

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that this was the first survey of its type undertaken for ten years, and the 14 industry-standard questions asked were designed to enable benchmarking whilst being quick and easy to complete to encourage participation.

It was acknowledged that the survey was not statistically valid yet it gave a clear impression and direction of travel whilst setting a baseline for future surveys.

Whilst there had not yet been the opportunity to benchmark against other landlords, a report would be provided to a future member working party and subsequent committee setting out a proposed action plan based on the survey's findings.

The results of the survey were presented during the meeting. The committee was impressed with the response rate and reach of the survey, and even allowing for duplicate entries officers were confident that around 1,000 individuals completed it.

The survey was available through a number of social media channels, and the overall results revealed that tenants felt somewhat neutral about the service the Council provides, with room for improvement. Repairs & maintenance and communication with the Council were the top two themes touched upon by residents.

The vice chair thanked the housing team for the time spent on the survey, adding that when the regulation becomes an act of parliament this would become an annual survey.

339 Garage Strategy

The Housing Business Centre Plan 2022/23 commits the housing service to establishing a Garage Strategy. Following June's Housing Committee a consultation and appraisal of the fourteen worst performing sites had been undertaken.

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that work was ongoing with the Council's Assets and Regeneration team to work out which sites had development potential and which sites could be brought back into use in order to generate revenue for the authority.

Appraisals would continue on the remaining 68 sites, and annual updates would be provided to committee on the progress of the strategy.

Committee noted that anecdotally a high percentage of the garages were likely to be used for storage, partially due to modern cars having outgrown traditional garages.

The reason for the detailed analysis was because many of the sites did not have development potential, and therefore they would have to be judged on a case by case basis. Many of the sites were in isolated spots away from the main property, some of which had since been sold and subsequently very few of them lent themselves to better usage.

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning confirmed there was one large garage site in the borough with development potential. A Member suggested putting any application through as outline planning application. It was added that the housing service did not benefit from the income of garage rentals – this went straight into the general fund – but any sites with development potential would be taken back by the housing service.

A Member highlighted bike lockers being popular and a good revenue generator, and the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that all options would be considered for the sites, including sale if appropriate.

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning explained the policy for renting out garages, with priority given to the resident who lives at the location, second priority a local resident, third priority a Runnymede resident, and if all of these options had been exhausted then consideration would be given to someone outside of the borough.

It was felt that automatically applying an uplift to the rental charges in line with inflation would have a detrimental effect due to the likelihood of it driving away potential renters. A Member would follow up with Assets and Regeneration in their capacity as a non-executive director about the prospect of following the example set out in parking charges by keeping fees and charges the same.

Resolved that –

- 1) Committee noted the consultation results and the outcome of the appraisal of the 14 lowest demand garage sites.**
- 2) Committee approved the Runnymede Garage Strategy.**

340 Private Rented Sector Offer Policy

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning advised committee that the policy set out the Council's approach to discharging homeless duties owed to applicants into the private rented sector.

Where possible homelessness in Runnymede would be prevented or relieved through an offer of a private sector tenancy. Where immediate and suitable offers of accommodation could be found in the private sector these would be made to households threatened with

homelessness, thereby avoiding the need for them to go into temporary accommodation which is costly for both applicants and the Council and disruptive for households.

The use of the Private Rented Sector Offer policy ensures that properties are available through the Housing Register for households seeking to access social housing. In assessing the suitability of any offer the Authority will need to consider whether the applicant can afford the housing costs without being deprived of basic essentials such as food, clothing, heating, transport and other essentials specific to their circumstances.

Officers asked for approval for an 8 week consultation, noting that most people seeking assistance with their housing aspire to a social tenancy and do not willingly engage in the process of a private rented property. However, current and recent applicants would be consulted.

In response to a member's concern about the prospect of an A-level age student requiring to move and provisions for their education, the Head of Housing Services and Business Planning advised that given how relatively small Runnymede is education settings could be reached across the borough, and the same principle would apply for families with younger children in need.

A Member asked about the appeal process in the event that an offer of housing is refused given that no second offer is made. The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning advised that residents would always be encouraged to move in to the offer and then seek a review as the Council did not have enough properties to make two housing offers, whilst if that family had children a referral would automatically be made to Children's Services as a further safety net.

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning advised a Member that only under special circumstances would a cross-border referral be accepted from another authority.

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that there were approximately 35 general needs properties across the borough that were currently empty, however they were all in the process of being repaired and reallocated rather than sat dormant. The waiting list of residents looking for new homes was currently around 1,200

Resolved that –

Committee approved a consultation exercise on the PRSO policy.

341 **IRL Communal Lounge Policy**

Following Committee approval in September a consultation exercise on the draft IRL communal lounge policy had recently concluded and no responses were received, which was felt recognised that residents felt the policy reflected what was already happening within the schemes.

Officers confirmed that the consultation was in the form of posters, website updates, briefings, and all residents had been spoken to in person by scheme managers.

The Council would soon begin investment in its communal lounges and it was desired to make them high class and inclusive environments.

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed there would be no intention to prevent residents using kitchens for private events such as birthdays, but added that part of the upgrade would be to provide areas that are safe.

A Member suggested finding alternative sources of information when response rates to

consultations were low, such as intelligence from other Surrey authorities, however the Head of Housing Services and Business Planning confirmed that Adult Social Care were consulted extensively on the policy, whilst legislation was the driver for much of what was in the policy.

Resolved that –

Committee approved the Independent Retirement Living Communal Lounge Policy.

342 Performance Report

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning informed Committee that continued improvement to void timescales were being seen and a significant number of properties were being returned within target.

The number of households in B&B was above target, partly due to the Council's no second night out policy, whilst there was an increasing number of single men with complex histories that require a multi-agency approach and recruitment is very difficult within the sector.

Whilst rent arrears were higher than this time last year the figure had reduced over recent weeks and was expected given the cost-of-living crisis.

Electrical and gas certification continue to be excellent with both currently at 100% compliance, whilst the 34 outstanding high risk FRA actions were inspection of fire doors which would be completed by the end of this quarter.

Following a request for the analysis of potential rent increases, the current rent settlement allows social landlords to increase their rent annually, by CPI plus 1% for 5 years. However a government consultation to limit increases was expected to announce that a 5% increase should be applied.

A Member asked about a potential scenario where a person does not qualify for the housing register when they have a housing need. Eligibility and qualification criteria, including financial threshold. This would be reviewed as part of the housing allocations scheme.

A Member highlighted an increase in ASB being high in their caseload, and was keen to encourage the implementation of a Joint Enforcement Team. Housing officers encouraged Members to notify them about any incidents of ASB, which would be followed up by the appropriate officer.

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that the Council were increasingly receiving presentations of people who straddle a range of complex issues such as mental health, alcoholism, etc. Whilst it is right that the Council are there to support them, housing such people in long-term accommodation was not possible with such challenging needs, which was why the short-term accommodation such as B&B was so high.

The Committee chair asked about engagement with the Regulator of Social Housing, and the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that a letter had been submitted requesting that the notice was rescinded. Whilst electrical and gas safety was now at 100%, decent homes standard was also now extremely close to the desired 75%.

343 Housing IT System Enhancement Update

The Head of Housing Services and Business Planning reported that phase two of the IT system enhancement was nearing its conclusion and significant work had been undertaken

to specify each new module and then build and test it, a number of which were now in use.

There was no one-size-fits-all for the modules, it was needed to be specified how the Council wanted the system to look and how it would integrate with existing systems, This involved extensive building and testing.

At the conclusion of this phase additional modules would be under consideration to add to what had already been obtained, whilst a substantial amount of work was needed to coordinate with the communications suite to enable the sending of text messages, therefore lots of work on the efficiencies of the modules would remain under consideration.

(The meeting ended at 9.43 pm.)

Chairman