

Runnymede Borough Council

Housing Committee

Wednesday, 7 June 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors M Nuti (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), M K Cressey, M Darby, S Dennett, S Jenkins (In place of S Williams), R King, I Mullens, M Smith and P Snow (In place of N Prescott).

Members of the Committee absent: None.

In attendance: Councillors S Whyte.

1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2023 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

2 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

3 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

4 Boilers in Floral House

Further to the report at the March 2023 Committee, the Corporate Head of Housing reiterated the need to replace the existing boiler in Floral House IRL. There was provision in the budget for this to take place, and the building was already relatively energy efficient, coming in at an energy efficiency rating of C, which was the desired standard for all 3,000 of the Council's housing units by 2030.

Of the four options to replace the boiler, a like-for-like replacement of a gas boiler was the only one without unbudgeted costs, and was the only option that would not increase residents' fuel bills should usage remain unchanged.

The proposed fabric measures to improve energy efficiency were unbudgeted, and would not take the property beyond its current C energy efficiency rating.

In response to a Member's query, the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the other three IRLs in the borough not discussed at the previous two Housing Committees all had storage heaters, whilst due to the need to go out to tender any fabric first measures were unlikely to be in place by the coming winter.

A Member highlighted that should Committee approve the installation of a gas boiler then offsetting would need to be part of the strategy in order to achieve carbon neutrality, and suggested that the Council's Environment & Sustainability Committee took this on as a case study to see what measures would be achievable. The Committee was supportive of this suggestion.

Whilst officers' initial recommendation was to instal additional fabric measures alongside a new gas boiler, which would primarily be cavity wall and loft insulation, the Committee asked officers to consider whether the amount proposed would be better spent across the

entire housing stock. This would be reported back at the next meeting as part of the Asset Management Plan.

Resolved that:

- A. A new gas boiler would be installed in Floral House to reduce emissions from the scheme and reduce residents' fuel bills.**
- B. A further report would come back to Housing Committee to advise on whether it would be appropriate to expend £95,000 on insulation measures at Floral House or across the whole housing estate.**
- C. Refer Environment & Sustainability Committee to carry out a test study on what carbon offsetting measures could be undertaken.**

5 Building Safety Act Update

The Housing Services Compliance Manager advised that the aim of the Act was primarily to improve building safety, particularly in high-rise buildings following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, setting a new standard for accountability, transparency and resident well-being.

Resident engagement was also emphasised in the Act, with building owners required to develop and implement a resident engagement strategy that sought resident feedback on safety related decisions. A draft strategy relating to Surrey Towers was currently out for consultation, whilst a building safety case report was also being prepared and would be presented to the next Housing Committee.

The Housing Services Compliance Manager added that an additional surveyor was being sought to ensure that building safety elements were adequately covered and addressed. This would require Housing Committee's recommendation to Corporate Management Committee for approval.

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that he was hopeful that a suitable candidate would be identified based on the requested salary band.

Resolved that –

- A. Committee noted the additional obligations placed on landlords as a result of the Building Safety Act 2022 and Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022**
- B. Committee noted it would receive an update on the Housing Service's work to submit a Building Safety Case to the new regulator at the September 2023 meeting of the committee.**
- C. Recommended an addition to the Housing staff structure – the appointment of a Compliance Surveyor – to the Corporate Management Committee to agree the new post at its next meeting in June 2023.**

6 Establishing a Housing Systems Team

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised Committee that after many years of limited investment the Housing Department was coming to the end of phase 2 of an extensive upgrade of existing systems and implementation of new modules to provide the services required by tenants and the Regulator of Social Housing.

The Housing Service Area Plan for 2023 approved by committee in March 2023 included a growth item of £50,000 for these modules and officers were seeking permission to enter

into a contract with the current provider NEC to implement these modules, which fell into five distinct areas: -

1. Housing Advice
2. Housing Allocations
3. Tenancy and Leaseholder management
4. Income Collection
5. Technical Services

The proposal would create a centralised team with increased capacity and generic roles that could support all the system modules and income streams.

Corporate Management Committee approval would be required due to the need for additional posts on the establishment using the £135,000 provision set aside in the HRA Revenue Budget and Business Plan for 2023/24.

A Member sought clarification on the impact of removing the Homelessness Officer from the staff structure, and was advised by the Head of Housing Services & Business Planning that this post had initially been created from the Homelessness Reduction Act but remained unfilled based on the caseloads of existing staff being manageable. However, this would be kept under review and a request would be made to Committee in future in the unlikely event there was a need to re-establish the role.

Resolved that –

Housing Committee recommended to Corporate Management Committee:

i. The business case for:

a. The purchase and implementation of the Anti-Social Behaviour and Customer Service Modules (as contained within the Housing Service Plan for 2023/4 and Capital Programme) to be funded from HRA Revenue Reserves

b. The establishment of a centralised Business System and Revenue function as contained within the Housing Service Plan for 2023/4

ii. The release of:

a. £50,000 provision set aside in the Capital Programme and Business Plan for this purpose.

b. £135,000 provision set aside in the HRA Revenue Budget and Business Plan for this purpose.

7 Runnymede Borough Council's Home Improvement Policy

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that the Ombudsman had recommended that the Council's Adaptation Policy, approved in 2021, should adopt a tenure neutral policy. It was therefore intended that the Home Improvement Policy would supersede this following a public consultation.

It was added that this was likely to have resource implications owing to the increased volume of applications and greater chance of approval, which could in-turn have cost implications. This would be kept under review.

A Member asked about potential risks of working in partnership with Woking Borough Council given their well-documented financial troubles, and was advised that the HomeLink Handyperson service was a Surrey County Council grant and not dependent on Woking's

own finances.

Resolved that –

Members approved the proposed Home Assistance Policy and the move to a tenure neutral service for residents, led by the Home Improvement Agency.

8 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Update

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on every local authority to develop and publish a Homelessness Strategy, with rough sleeping added to the original remit by government in light of the rise in homelessness.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning commented that the council's current strategy was approved by Committee in 2019, and the report provided an update on the strategy's action plan for years four and five. A refreshed strategy would be brought to Committee in March 2024.

Despite the low levels of rough sleeping in the borough there was an increasing cohort of single adults with complex needs who do not meet the priority need threshold under which the Council would be responsible for accommodating them. However these individuals still require high levels of support to relieve or prevent homelessness, and the Housing department were currently recruiting for a Housing Navigator to work with rough sleepers to identify pathways into housing and establish channels with the agencies who would provide them with vital support.

Resolved that:

Committee noted the update on the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-24

9 Housing CCTV Policy Update

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that the policy set out where requests for CCTV within the domestic dwellings of the Council's housing stock would be approved.

The policy would enable the housing service to enforce breaches of policy and legislation. The policy had been discussed at a Member Working Party, and a consultation had recently concluded where only one response had been received.

Under normal circumstances residents would be expected to adhere to rules such as no CCTV covering the area outside of their property – and privacy zones could be created to help achieve this – and exceptional circumstances would be treated on a case by case basis.

A Member was keen to ensure that the policy dovetailed with the Tenancy Agreement, and the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the Tenancy Agreement was currently being revised, and legal advice would be sought on the proposed wording to ensure that surveillance was covered.

When asked about the enforceability of the policy, particularly in the context of the volume of Ring doorbells and CCTV at residential properties, the Corporate Head of Housing felt that sufficient resources were currently in place, and remedies would be sought in consultation with colleagues from Legal services.

Resolved that:

Committee acknowledged the results of the consultation with stakeholders and approved the Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) Policy for Council Housing Estates.

10 Housing Estate Improvement Policy

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that there had historically been a limited budget for estate improvements, with additional works being carried out through the reactive and planned maintenance programmes.

The proposed policy and an increased budget would enable a more focussed and planned approach to estate improvements that would enable residents to be involved in the process and would give more priority to communal areas and estate environments.

Proposals could be put forward by council tenants and leaseholders, Councillors and Council Officers and would be considered using set criteria and decisions on programme will be made by a panel of senior officers to ensure consistency.

Officers were seeking approval to go out to consultation with a view to bringing a final policy back to September's Committee.

The Committee Vice Chair emphasised that Councillors would play a key role in promoting and proposing areas within their wards that would benefit from the policy, and officers would work on a mechanism to ensure Councillors were aware of the policy and what was in the pipeline.

Resolved that:

Members approved an 8 week consultation exercise with tenants and leaseholders on the draft Estate Improvement Policy

11 Garage Allocation Policy Consultation

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that garages played a key role in the Council's income, with some £800k in revenue generated on an annual basis. A formal policy for how those 1,014 garages were being let was now being sought, with key emphasis on how garages were allocated and prioritised.

Whilst the policy was already in operation, a consultation exercise was being requested with a view to approval of a final policy being sought at a future Committee.

In response to a Member's concern about many modern vehicles being too large for traditional garages, the Corporate Head of Housing stated that changing the terms and conditions to incorporate general storage would severely affect usage, with many insurers not covering belongings in garages.

It was added that the Council let garages on certain conditions and if those conditions were not adhered to then it would be the other party who would be liable should any instances occur. Enforcement of the policy does occur, particularly where intelligence is received to state they were not being used for their intended purpose and it was causing an inconvenience to local residents/businesses.

Resolved that:

Committee approved the consultation exercise on the garage policy.

12 **Private Rented Sector Offer**

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that the Localism Act 2011 introduced offers within the Private Rented Sector as a lawful means of discharging a homelessness duty.

Where possible homelessness would be prevented or relieved through an offer of a private sector tenancy, thereby avoiding the need for individuals to go into temporary accommodation which was both costly and disruptive.

A recent consultation with stakeholders, which included targeted contact with applicants who had approached the Council as homeless, as well as current applicants on the Housing Register had seen 191 views to the dedicated webpage and a short questionnaire which 6 people completed.

As a result of the consultation a change would be made to the process where applicants would be asked to sign to confirm that have had the policy explained to them.

Resolved that:

Members approved the private rented sector offer.

13 **Surrey Towers Local Lettings Policy**

The Corporate Head of Housing advised that the report proposed an amendment to the Council's allocation policy for Surrey Towers, primarily owing to the lower demand for properties, resulting in empty property voids taking longer to let and impacting on rental income.

The Local Lettings Policy would see all properties advertised in the normal way, with additional options to provide an additional bedroom and then actively seek out key workers.

A Member highlighted that antisocial behaviour was often cited as a reason for low uptake of properties, and a number of disparate matters needed to be addressed to improve the reputation. Officers added that the policy was not intended to provide a quick fix for social issues, but would provide more flexibility for the management of the Council's housing stock and would be reviewed after one year.

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that a consultation event had been held with residents to promote the policy, whilst prospective residents would need to be made aware of the potential to have to pay more in social size criteria.

Resolved that:

Members approved the Local Lettings Policy.

14 **Housing Damp & Mould Policy**

The policy set out how the Council would deal with instances of mould and damp, and Head of Housing Technical Services advised that it was aimed to take a proactive approach, and set out specific guidance to ensure that damp and mould was managed effectively.

The main aim was to ensure that tenants had a safe home to live in, and any damp and mould was managed effectively so to not cause any long-term damage to the structure of the building.

Open lines of communication with residents would be key to the success of the policy, and all actions would be captured on the NEC housing system. It was concluded that the policy was recommended for immediate approval without any consultation due to the potential for significant health and safety risks associated with damp and mould.

The Corporate Head of Housing added that it was heavily publicised on the Council's website and via newsletters about the need for residents to report cases of damp and mould, and monitoring took place of previous reports at properties to check that the issue had not reoccurred.

Resolved that:

Members approved the Housing Damp and Mould Policy

15 Safer Streets Update

The Corporate Head of Housing reminded Committee that the Council had received a Home Office grant to reduce antisocial behaviour on the Garfield Road estate, on condition that the amount was match funded by the Council.

Some £67k had so far been spent on crime prevention measures, whilst the children's charity Eikon had been commissioned for prevention and diversion work, with contracts expected to be signed imminently.

16 Housing Quarter 4 2022/23 Performance

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported on the current performance information for the Housing Service, including Corporate key performance indicators and those that were required by the Regulator of Social Housing.

This comprised re-let times, Decent Homes standard and rent arrears. Bed & breakfast accommodation was significantly higher than previous updates, and this was primarily due to the volume of cases of single people with a history of mental health problems and substance misuse. Bed & breakfast has been utilised in these cases to ensure they were not homeless whilst a more permanent solution was found for them.

A Member asked about the trajectory of achieving Decent Homes standard for the entirety of the housing stock. The Corporate Head of Housing advised that the number had improved from 41% in January 2021 to under 25% non-compliance now. It was hoped to achieve 98% compliance by March 2027 and further details would be in the Asset Management Plan coming to September's Committee.

In response to queries about continuing to spend money on Parkside properties, it was advised that no decision had been made to cease spending on properties in light of the potential redevelopment, and officers would not be recommending this given that many components in properties in Parkside were coming to the end of their life, and in the event of redevelopment being approved some properties would still have some ten years to wait until being redeveloped.

17 Complaints Analysis

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that all complaints about the housing services were logged and monitored in line with the Housing Complaints policy and dealt with at Head of Service level. Where appropriate compensation is offered within the remit of the Compensation Policy.

There had been an increase in the number of complaints received between April 2022 and

March 2023 (48) compared with the same period in the previous year (31). In addition, a slightly higher proportion of these complaints had been upheld, which was highly likely to be linked to increased communications with tenants on how to complain. Due to the relatively low level of formal complaints no trends had been identified.

When investigating complaints, there was a requirement on managers to consider making recommendations for service improvements such as revised procedures or staff guidance. Complaints continued to be analysed at management team meetings.

Whilst acknowledging that complaint numbers were relatively low in the context of 3,000 properties in the Council's housing stock, a Member was keen to establish whether this could be partly attributed to a lack of resources. The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning felt it was more down to occasional examples of staff not showing sufficient compassion when contacting residents about rent arrears. The Committee Chair advised Members to study Standards & Audit Committee papers for a more in-depth breakdown of complaints across the borough.

18 **Parkside Regeneration Update**

The Housing Development Manager reported on the outcome of the multi-disciplinary Building Consultancy, with the chosen contractor coming out with both the highest score and lowest bid. Many of the roles they had been asked to cover would be done so internally within their practise.

The Housing Development Manager highlighted an error within paragraph 2.6 of the report, which should have highlighted RIBA stages 1-3 rather than RIBA stage 1 repeated three times. The conclusion of each of these stages would be the decision gateway for Councillors, with identified budget only released at the conclusion of the previous stage in the process. The first key milestone would be January 2024, which would report on the feasibility and viability of the scheme.

Density and design discussions were also underway to be reported back to a future Committee.

The Corporate Head of Housing acknowledged slippage in progress compared to previous expectations, this was largely down to the tender exercise taking longer than expected. Residents continued to be kept up to date via both the dedicated website and newsletters.

19 **Standing Order 42**

Standing Order 42 proformas 1,015 (Local Authority Housing Fund) and 1,020 (Safer Streets Funding Release) were noted.

A Member queried the accuracy of whether the eight homes purchased through the Local Authority Housing Fund contributed towards the Council's target of 125 new affordable homes within five years. Following consultation with the Committee, the Committee Chair agreed to remove these homes from the overall target.

20 **Exclusion of press and public**

By resolution of the Committee, for the reasons set out in the agenda, the press and public were excluded from the remainder of the meeting during the consideration of the remaining matters under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as set out in Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

21 Procurement Request for Roofing and Rainwater Goods Contractor

The Head of Housing Technical Services advised that Committee were being asked to approve a procurement exercise to secure a primary contractor to replace roofs and rainwater goods over the next five years. This aligned with the Asset Management Plan and the tender would be issued by open tender expected to be completed within two months.

Upon completion of the tender exercise Committee approval would be sought on the appointment of the chosen contractor.

Resolved that:

Members approved the procurement for the replacement of roofs and rainwater goods over the next five years, which was budgeted for in the 2023/24 Housing Revenue Account and the 30-year Business Plan.

(The meeting ended at 10.02 pm.)

Chairman