

Runnymede Borough Council**Housing Committee****Wednesday, 11 January 2023 at 7.30 pm**

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Gracey (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), D Coen, M Cressey, R Davies, S Dennett, P Snow, S Whyte and S Williams.
J Mrs J Hill (Runnymede Council Residents' Association Representative – co-opted non-voting member)

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor M Darby.

425 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 November 2022 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

426 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

427 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

428 Housing Service Area Plan 2023/24

The Corporate Head of Housing provided an update on the delivery of the 2022/23 Housing Service Area Plan, with 19 of the identified 28 actions in the service plan completed and a further five to be completed by the end of the quarter.

Key service activities for 2023/24 had been identified, some of which would require growth, and business cases for these would be brought to future Committees.

A service mission statement had been established in consultation with both staff and the chair and vice chair of the Committee, which was hoped was both tangible and accessible.

In response to a Member's question about environmental improvements including insulation, AV confirmed that a number of environmental initiatives would be presented to future Housing Committees.

Resolved that –

i) Members approved the 2023/24 Housing Service Area Plan

ii) Members noted any business cases requiring growth were subject to approval by Housing Committee (or full Council depending on sums).

429 Housing Revenue Account Estimates 2023/24

The Senior Accountant advised Committee that the setting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) estimates was largely based on the assumptions included in the HRA business plan unless specified in the report. The proposed 7% increase in rents was consistent with Government guidance and also ensured that the Council would not be penalised through the loss of Rent Rebates subsidy entitlement.

The large increase in the Housing Repairs budget was the continuation of a multi-year programme reversing many years of low expenditure and includes deferred expense for the current year.

Committee were advised that in the current year's budget a provision was included to enable the transfer of up to £30,000 of HRA funds to help top up the DHP contribution received from the DWP. It was proposed that the Council continued to increase the DHP contribution by a sum of £30,000. Members were advised that any contribution from the HRA could only be used to help HRA tenants who required assistance, and this assistance was granted using the same criteria as set out in the Council's DHP policy.

Although considerable balances remain in the Housing Revenue Account, consideration was needed to cover current and future spending plans plus the need to service the £100m of borrowings over the next 20 years.

The Senior Accountant concluded that whilst the estimates only covered the next financial year, an updated 30-year finance plan would be presented to the March Committee.

The Committee Chair added that despite the backdrop of financial pressures the Council was facing, the Housing service was still making plans for delivery of services having identified risks, along with strategies to manage those risks.

The Committee Vice Chair expressed concern about the provision of £20,000 to help households in financial difficulties not being sufficient, but was reassured by the proposed increase to the Housing discretionary fund. It was added that further means to support tenants would be kept under review and proposals brought back to Committee if necessary.

Resolved that –

i) the draft revenue estimates for 2023/24 were approved and the Full Council were requested to make provision accordingly; and

ii) the proposed changes in rents and charges (including those for Housing General Fund services) for 2023/24 were approved to be effective either from the first rent week of April 2023, or 1 April 2023 as appropriate.

430 **Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy: Annual Update**

As part of the annual update on tenant and leaseholder engagement, the Corporate Head of Housing advised that significant progress had been made in a number of areas of tenant engagement, including consultation activities from policies, the creation of a consultation planner, engagement toolkit, and improvement to tenants' newsletters and web pages.

These activities had been successful in engaging a high percentage of tenants, meeting regulatory standards in the process and ensuring their views were heard. However work remained ongoing and a number of actions remain, including accreditation from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service.

The Corporate Head of Housing went on to praise the role of the Runnymede Council Residents' Association (RCRA), however as it was no longer operating within its constitution due to dwindling membership numbers and alternative ways of seeking engagement, the Council would be seeking to end its relationship with the RCRA this financial year.

A number of Committee members praised the positive and insightful work of Mrs Jenny Hill

of the RCRA for providing a voice for Runnymede tenants, adding that a nomination would be put forward for a community award to highlight her work over a number of years.

Resolved that –

i) Members noted the progress made against the Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy Action Plan.

431 Parkside Regeneration

Following full Council's approval of the budget to progress the Parkside regeneration project from RIBA stage one to RIBA stage three, the Housing Development Manager advised that on progress since then, which included a detailed invitation to tender that had received significant interest from a multitude of nationally recognised consultants.

The deadline for tenders was later in January, which would be followed by an assessment period. It was hoped to appoint consultants on around 1 March 2023.

The Housing Development Manager stressed the importance of a robust communications plan, which included the launch of a dedicated webpage and in-person and online events with residents.

An indication of cost of removal of the overhead power lines had been received from UK Power Network, whilst external legal support was in the process of being appointed.

The Housing Development Manager concluded that regular updates would be brought to Committee, and it was anticipated that reporting on the first stage of surveys would take place in autumn 2023.

The Committee Chair stressed the importance of the project to the local area, highlighting that the area was the poorest quality and most energy inefficient housing stock in the borough, with a large number of properties currently long-term void.

A Committee Member was extremely keen to ensure that lessons were learned from the previous, aborted regeneration exercise in the area. The Committee chair confirmed that the terms of the agreement would be much more closely drawn than previously, and the necessary scrutiny would be applied throughout the project.

432 Continuing the Stepdown Scheme

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that in March 2021 Housing Committee approved participation in a pilot scheme to be funded by the Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) to provide accommodation either with care on site, or where a short-term agency package could be provided through Adult Social Care. The pilot scheme had seven properties, including two from Runnymede.

Following a successful first year, the scheme was approved for a further year from April 2022, and the ICP had now requested the continuation of the scheme as it had proven beneficial in providing accommodation for patients who no longer need medical care but did not have a suitable home to be discharged to.

There had been a variety of reasons for placements and the team would work to identify a move-on solution prior to the placement to ensure that the bed blocking had not just been moved out of the hospital and where necessary they will liaise with Local Authority homelessness sections on their duties.

The utilisation of two properties for Step Down in the borough did not have a significant

impact for people on the Housing Register waiting for IRL where access was relatively quick. Should the situation change the use of these properties would be reviewed.

Whilst acknowledging the need to focus on Housing matters, a Member was keen to use the information and data to highlight to government the impact of bed-blocking.

Resolved that –

i) Members approved the continued use of two IRL flats for Step Down Accommodation; and

ii) the Use of IRL properties for Step Down would be reviewed in three years, or sooner at the request of the Corporate Head of Housing or the Chair of Housing Committee.

433 **Update on Engagement Activities with MCP (New Repairs Contractor)**

Following the appointment of a repairs contractor at a previous Housing Committee, the Head of Housing Technical Services advised Committee that pre-mobilisation was on track ahead of their commencement in April, with a number of meetings held to look at tenant engagement opportunities, track key timelines, identify risks and ensure IT integration.

No new risks had been identified, and should any arise Committee would be appraised. It was asked that if any ward councillors became aware of any issues during the transition that they were fed back to officers.

Resolved that –

Members noted the content within the report.

434 **Update on position with the Regulator of Social Housing**

The Corporate Head of Housing provided Committee with a timeline of the Council's activity with the Regulator of Social Housing, following the notice being served on the Council in October 2019. A request was made in March 2022 for the notice to be withdrawn based on significant progress on electrical safety and fire safety actions.

This request had been declined based on the Council's need to achieve 75% Decent Homes Standard. The Council was now at 76% Decent Homes Standard, whilst a series of Health & Safety audits had yielded positive results, and a response to a request made before Christmas asking for the withdrawal of the Notice was currently awaited from the Regulator. The Corporate Head of Housing would update Committee once a response had been received.

Resolved that –

i) Members noted the request made to the Regulator of Social Housing to review Runnymede Borough Council's Regulatory Notice.

435 **Complaints and Compensation Annual Update**

Following approval of a new Compensation Policy by Committee in September 2022 Officers agreed to monitor compensation payments as well as the level of CPI.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that CPI rose by 11% in the 12 months to October 2022, up from 10% in September 2022 and it was therefore recommended that Committee approved an increase of 10% on the amount of

compensation payable under the Housing compensation policy. This would not have any budgetary implications due to the small quantity of pay-outs.

Whilst the number of complaints had increased last year it was viewed as a positive step towards making the complaints process accessible and transparent.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning clarified a small error in the report, which stated that eight complaints had been upheld last year when the correct figure was five. No specific trends or consistent service failures had been identified, and a lessons learnt exercise took place after all complaints to try to identify improved communication or processes.

The Committee Vice Chair added that the 10% increase ensured consistency with the Housing Ombudsman's standards.

Resolved that –

i) Members noted the information on complaints and compensation.

ii) Members approved an increase of 10% to the compensation payable to service users.

436 Safer Streets Funding

The Corporate Head of Housing advised Committee that the Council had made a bid of £321,000 to the Home Office under Safer Streets funding to provide improvements to the Garfield Road estate, along with additional security measures and youth diversion activities. The report had already been to Community Services Committee earlier in January, and details on implementation of the fund would be brought back to both Committees in March.

The Committee Chair highlighted the positive example of partnership working, and thanked officers from both services.

437 Balcony Safety Policy

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised that several Council-owned blocks within its Housing Revenue Account possessed individual balconies, which amounted to some 200 homes. A public consultation was being sought on a draft policy to ensure that these were properly maintained and utilised.

The emerging policy was considered by the Housing Member Working Party on 13 December 2022, where the impact of smoking on a balcony was discussed. The draft policy includes a choice of alternative clauses relating to smoking.

Should the consultation come back in favour of banning smoking on balconies it may be necessary to provide smoking areas on estates, which would be difficult to enforce and may prompt complaints. The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning emphasised the importance of resident feedback on the policy.

Committee acknowledged the matter was a sensitive and divisive issue, and there was concern about the Council's ability to enforce a no smoking policy, whilst the potential for it to cause local issues amongst residents was also acknowledged.

All current tenants with a balcony would be consulted as part of the exercise – with officers prepared to go door-to-door if necessary to ensure an appropriate level of feedback, and a final version of the policy would be brought back to Committee after the consultation had

concluded and the final policy had been to a further Member Working Party.

Resolved that –

- i) Members approved an 8-week consultation with residents with a finalised policy to be brought back to this Committee with the results of the consultation.**

438 Estate Improvement Budget Policy

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that funding had been identified for environmental improvements across the Council's estate for the coming year. Proposed projects and expenditure suggestions included CCTV, pathways and recycling facilities.

Following discussion at the Housing Member Working Party on 13 December a number of additions to the draft policy had been made, including having a pipeline of projects reported to Housing Committee, the level of ward member involvement and ensuring there was a fair split in expenditure across the borough. Permission was now being sought for a public consultation exercise, with the results coming back to a future Housing Committee.

The Corporate Head of Housing concluded that the work was considered good news as it would address both Decent Homes and improving the environment of the Council's estates.

Resolved that –

- i) Housing Committee approved an 8-week consultation with residents with a finalised policy to be brought back to this Committee with the results of the consultation.**

(The meeting ended at 8.59 pm.)

Chairman