

Runnymede Borough CouncilHousing CommitteeWednesday, 8 March 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Gracey (Chairman), J Hulley (Vice-Chairman), M Cressey, S Dennett, C Howorth (In place of D Coen), R King (In place of R Davies), P Snow, S Whyte and S Williams.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors D Coen, M Darby and R Davies.

563 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

564 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Cllr M Darby.

565 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

566 Damp & Mould Consultation Response Update

The Corporate Head of Environmental Services advised that the response to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) covered three main aspects:

- 1) Hazards, as outlined in the health & safety rating system
- 2) Assessment of damp and mould issues affecting properties privately rented in the borough
- 3) Assessment of any actions identified relating to damp and mould.

Very few premises within the borough had issues based on the criteria set out, however issues had been identified relating to excess cold rather than repair, which had not been drawn out within the assessment.

There was acknowledgment that the Council was generally only in a position to be reactive to complaints against private sector landlords rather than proactive. Whilst Committee was reassured that measures were in place to protect Housing Association residents, it was felt there was currently a gap in protection when it came to the private rented sector, with private landlords not yet subject to Decent Homes standard.

The Corporate Head of Environmental Services added that Councils did not have sufficient capacity or resources to routinely inspect private properties, but would check on the legal framework around the Council's powers to take action in the event of a third party raising concerns, whilst attention would be given to making sure residents were aware of their rights and how to complain about sub-standard living accommodation.

567 Review of HRA Business Plan

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that following approval of the budget estimates for 2023/24, the business plan provided the narrative which accompanied the financial plan.

The plan would be updated annually to reflect the current position and a full review of the HRA Business plan was scheduled for 2026.

A Member was keen to clarify the number of additional units the Housing Service intended to provide by 2026, stating that 125 should be the net figure. The Committee Chair pledged to consider the language used, but did not favour putting uncostered measures into the plan.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning clarified the figure of 145 additional Council homes, stating that this was an assessment by planners as part of the 2030 Local Plan.

The Committee Vice Chair stated his support for the plan, adding that it encompassed the current legal requirements and provided an emphasis on good quality, safe homes and the importance of engaging with tenants.

The Corporate Head of Housing concluded that the HRA Business Plan would continue to be reviewed annually and would be updated to reflect additional cost pressures and additional expenditure. Whilst there was a legal requirement to prepare the document, it also demonstrated sensible financial management.

Resolved that –

Committee approved the 30-year business plan

568 **Options Appraisal for IRL Heating Systems**

The Corporate Head of Housing explained that the communal heating systems at two of the Council's Independent Retirement Living (IRL) properties were at the end of their life, and provided three options for their replacement.

- 1) A like-for-like replacement of gas communal boiler replacing gas communal boiler
- 2) Gas boiler to be replaced by an air source heat pump
- 3) Gas boiler to be replaced by a ground source heat pump

Options two or three would significantly reduce carbon emissions and assist in moving the Council towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, however the increased electricity use of these options would increase residents' fuel bills, despite residents being individually metered and having more control over usage.

A long debate of the options ensued, and whilst many Committee members initially favoured one of the heat pump options, a number of factors complicated the matter.

The IRL at Heatherfields sits within the proposed Parkside regeneration area, and officers explained whilst it would be technically possible to move a heat pump into a different location should the building be demolished as part of the regeneration, it was unlikely that anyone would be prepared to carry out the work due to invalidating the warranty.

Furthermore, heat pumps are designed for the buildings they serve and were highly unlikely to be effective in a different building, particularly with considerable additional measures required to make it efficient, which would be expensive and disruptive to residents. Officers acknowledged the difficult balance between energy efficiency, use of taxpayers' money and the need to be energy efficient, and believed there would be other

measures that could be taken – such as the investment in solar panels and insulation – that would provide a greater environmental gain.

Officers emphasised the urgency of the work required, with the boilers already past their sell by date and replacement parts increasingly difficult to obtain. It was added that replacement gas boilers would be a significant upgrade on the existing boilers, with SMART systems in place to make them more efficient.

The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that budget was in place within the Asset Management Plan to replace gas boilers like-for-like, and whilst it was aimed to bring all properties in the borough to an energy C rating by 2026 – four years ahead of target – there were currently no plans or available funding to take properties beyond a C rating.

The Committee Chair confirmed that enquiries had been made about having gas boilers with interchangeable parts to enable a future move to a hydrogen supply, however this technology was still around a decade away.

Committee concluded that they had sufficient information to make a decision on Heatherfield IRL, but asked officers for more information before making a decision on Floral House IRL, which would be heard at a Special Committee. Officers confirmed that delaying the decision by around a month would not have a significant impact on the overall timescale.

Committee asked officers to provide information in a future report for Floral House of the considerations when taking a fabric first approach, including cost, heat efficiency, level of work and disruption, as well as an assessment of other measures that could be used as part of carbon offsetting.

A Member also asked for information on an electric option similar to the solution at Grove Court to be provided within the options.

The Committee Chair asked officers to arrange a retrofit assessment on Floral House. Whilst officers were sceptical that the assessment would prove viable for heat pumps, and the cost of such an assessment was unknown, it was confirmed that the lessons learned from such an exercise could be utilised at future locations.

A named vote was requested on each of the proposed recommendations, and the voting was as follows:

Recommendation 1:

Due to the potential redevelopment of the area and limited lifespan of alternative solutions, Committee resolved to proceed with a gas boiler replacement for Heatherfields IRL.

For (8)

Cllrs J. Gracey, J. Hulley, S. Dennett, C. Howorth, R. King, P. Snow, S. Whyte, S. Williams

Against (0)

-

Abstain (1)

Cllr M. Cressey

The recommendation was passed.

Recommendation 2:

Officers to bring back comparisons for other environmental efficiency measures and

further information on the potential impact on cost for heating options for Floral House IRL.

For (7)

Cllrs J. Gracey, S. Dennett, C. Howorth, R. King, P. Snow, S. Whyte, S. Williams

Against (1)

Cllr J. Hulley

Abstain (1)

Cllr M. Cressey

Cllr J. Hulley wished for it to be recorded that he voted against the recommendation as he did not wish to consider an option that would result in increased fuel bills for residents.

The recommendation was passed.

569 Support with Moving Policy

Following a recent public consultation, the Head of Housing Services & Business Planning presented the final policy for approval and implementation.

The policy aimed to create more movement within the social housing stock to reduce the level of under-occupation and make more family size and adapted properties available to current applicants.

To achieve this, tenants would be able to access support with a move to a smaller property, which included a payment to reflect the number of bedrooms given up, practical support with arranging a move and settling into a new property, and dependent on a means test, additional financial support with the cost of moving and setting up a new home.

Whilst the response to the consultation was limited, targeted phone calls were made to tenants who might access the scheme, and some of their comments and overall points were reflected in the revised policy.

Resolved that –

Committee approved the Support with Moving Policy

570 Tenant Satisfaction Survey

The Corporate Head of Housing reminded Committee that from April 2023 social landlords must provide the outcome of a series of tenant satisfaction measures to central government.

There is a prescribed methodology for capturing the tenant satisfaction measures data. Following an initial survey in October 2022 a company would be carrying out a survey on the Council's behalf, the results of which would be reported to a future Committee.

A satisfaction action plan had been devised, which would be closely monitored to establish the impact of this on tenant satisfaction. It was added that improved engagement was likely to lead to increased satisfaction.

A Member queried the relatively high number of responses expected by government. The Corporate Head of Housing advised this was to make the survey valid and representative, and if necessary multiple attempts would be made to conduct the survey to ensure an appropriate level of response was received.

Resolved that –

Committee noted the plans for undertaking the next Tenants' Satisfaction survey, as required by the Regulator of Social Housing.

571 Discontinuation of Runnymede Borough Council's Interaction with the RCRA

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning advised Committee that since 2005 the Runnymede Council Residents Association (RCRA) had been the formal body representing tenants, however in recent times there had not been sufficient engagement to hold meetings, reflecting a national decrease in traditional forms of tenant participation, particularly face-to-face meetings.

Therefore from April 2023 the RCRA would no longer be recognised by Runnymede Borough Council. Instead the Council would focus on other forms of resident engagement, including surveys to collect data on the 22 new Tenant Satisfaction Measures that the Regulator of Social Housing now required social landlords to collect.

The Committee expressed its thanks for the contribution that Mrs Hill has made as Chair of the RCRA since its inception, and this was recognised at the recent Civic Awards where she was given a special award for 'Services to Council Tenants'.

572 Update on Mobilisation of Repairs and Empty Property Contractor

Following Committee's approval of the appointment of MCP to deliver a comprehensive and digital day-to-day repairs and empty property delivery contract, the Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed that regular progress meetings were continuing and everything was on track for the start of the contract in April 2023.

The IT interface would be up and running by the time the contract started, and it was hoped for the transfer to be as seamless as possible for customers. To aid this a series of customer events would be taking place over the coming weeks.

It was hoped that the ability to book repairs online and request a specific time and date would hugely benefit residents. It was confirmed that one of the tendering requirements was the ability to access this service through a smartphone.

573 Tenancy Agreement Review

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that the Council last reviewed its Tenancy Agreement for its social housing stock in 2013, with some elements in significant need of review.

An out-of-date agreement would leave the Council open to legal challenges, and an urgent refresh would commence in March 2023 with a target to seek approval to implement the new agreement in March or June 2024.

External specialist legal advice would be required and budgetary provision had already been approved by Committee.

The Committee Vice Chair highlighted the importance of looking at some of the clauses within the agreement, particularly around access both for repairs and assessing living conditions.

Resolved that –

Committee approved the review of the Tenancy Agreement issued to tenants of properties held within the social housing stock.

574 Annual Housing Equality Review

The Corporate Head of Housing reported that the Housing Service were committed to carrying out an annual review of how its service were accessed by residents, and would continually evolve.

Further research would be undertaken to understand why some age groups access services more than others, and the results of this analysis would be presented to a future committee, along with options for interventions.

A Member commented that it would be useful to closely monitor any change in the data when reporting was moved online.

Resolved that –

Committee noted the actions identified for addressing the discrepancies in the tenant profiling information.

575 Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme - Homes England Audit

The Housing Development Manager reported that following a Homes England grant in October 2021 the Council purchased three properties in the borough to be used specifically to house rough sleepers.

Following an audit by Homes England, it was found that the Council had complied fully with all programme requirements and guidance. This outcome could also potentially remove a small barrier when applying for future grants through Homes England.

A Committee member highlighted a recent local press article which stated that Runnymede was the only Council in Surrey to record an annual reduction in rough sleeping.

Resolved that –

Committee acknowledged the outcome of the report.

576 Performance Report, Q3

The Regulator of Social Housing had now finalised the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures that social landlords were required to collect. These comprised 12 Tenant Perception Measures and 10 Management Information measures, and would make it clear which measures were being reported to the Regulator of Social Housing.

The Head of Housing Services & Business Planning reported that the performance of rent arrears continued to be outside of target, however the approach remained one of containment with the emphasis on sustainment and support rather than proceeding with legal measures.

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed to a Member that the outstanding fire risk assessment actions had remained unchanged for some nine months, however they all related to fire door inspections and were being worked through by a consultant. All remaining actions were expected to be completed by the end of March 2023.

577 Update on the Housing Service's position with the Regulator of Social Housing

Following a request in November 2022 to remove the Notice placed on the Council some three years before, the Corporate Head of Housing advised that the Regulator of Social Housing had now accepted that the issues within the Notice had been addressed, with electrical safety compliance now at 100% and Decent Homes Standard beyond 75%.

A number of positive audits had also been received, as well as external validation via ISO9001. The Regulator had therefore agreed to withdraw the Notice.

The Corporate Head of Housing added that officers remained committed to further improve the service, but the removal of the Notice was a significant step in delivering the housing service's aims of a quality, empathetic and compassionate service.

The Committee passed on their thanks to the entire Housing team for the work in turning the service around, particularly coupled with delivering so many other services and policies during that time whilst having to contend with the backdrop of a pandemic.

Whilst grateful for the work of officers, Cllr King and two other Members opted to abstain from voting on the recommendation due to the word "celebrate" – instead stating that should be reserved for 2025 when 100% Decent Homes Standard compliance was targeted to be achieved.

Resolved that –

Committee celebrated the removal of Runnymede Borough Council's Regulatory Notice and thanked those involved for achieving this outcome.

578 Parkside Regeneration Update

The Housing Development Manager advised that since Committee approval of progression of RIBA stages 1-3 lots of work had gone into establishing a clear and transparent contract, with the price broken down into stages with clear decision gateways.

Assessment of bids for a multi-discipline building construction consultancy to work through RIBA stage 1, to the completion of stage 3 was currently under consideration. Greater detail of the overall project would be known after the completion of RIBA stage 1, which was targeted for autumn 2023.

Keeping residents up to date was a key part of the project, and the first newsletter had recently been published. The Housing Development Manager concluded that the project was currently progressing in line with expectations.

The Committee Chair and ward member highlighted an issue that had arisen locally around the language used as part of the resident update, and the Committee were supportive of reassuring residents in the next newsletter that it was the intent of the Council that no existing community groups would be displaced as a result of the project, with community buildings built around the need of tenants.

579 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.

580 Review of External Façade of Specific Housing Properties

The Head of Housing Technical Services advised that following an invasive survey to the façade of several buildings in the borough defects had been discovered on the original construction design.

It was proposed that the original façade was replaced, and officers proposed foregoing any section 20 consultation with leaseholders as the Council intended to fully fund the works. Specification for the works and draft tender documents were currently awaiting input from the Council's legal team.

Officers pledged to keep ward councillors up to date with works, and a communications plan would be devised to keep residents informed.

Resolved that –

- 1. Committee approved for Housing Technical Services to go out to tender for a suitable contractor to undertake the works set out in the report.**
- 2. Upon tender completion, officers to report back to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Housing Committee for approval to appoint the successful contractor.**
- 3. Committee approved forgoing the section 20 consultation with leaseholders due to the nature of the works and original construction designs.**

581 Appointment of Contractor to Deliver Windows and Doors Replacement

The Head of Housing Technical Services reported that following a thorough assessment of a tendering exercise for door and window replacement programme, a decision notice was proposed for the winning contractor, who would commence this summer for a five-year programme that was fully budgeted for.

It was added that the programme would replace a significant amount of the stock by the time the contract concluded, and obtaining the raw materials for such a large job was generally prohibitive for smaller companies.

The Council would continue to follow a fabric first approach and continue to invest in all properties to achieve Decent Homes standard. However the project would align closely with other projects such as Parkside regeneration to ensure the full picture was taken into account when carrying out the work to avoid replacing stock that was in line to be demolished.

The Head of Housing Technical Services confirmed to a Member that the Council would monitor closely to ensure that windows were correctly installed and insulated, and the contractor had confirmed that the same standard window profile would be applied for the life of the contract.

Resolved that –

- Committee approved the appointment of the chosen contractor to deliver a windows and door replacement programme over the next five years to the value set out in the report.**

