

Runnymede Borough Council

Housing Committee

Wednesday 20 September 2023 at 7.00pm

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

Members of the Committee absent: None.

1. Notification to changes to Committee Membership

Cllr P. Snow substituted for N. Prescott

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 7 June 2023 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

3. Apologies for Absence

None.

4. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

5. 2023 Review of the Asset Management Plan, 2021-26

The Corporate Head of Housing reiterated the aims of the Asset Management Plan. This included achieving and maintaining the Government's 'Decent Homes Standard' through improving the energy efficiency of Council owned homes. Whilst he acknowledged that it was not possible to achieve 100% energy efficiency on all Council owned homes because of the complexities of the Parkside estate, the ongoing Parkside Regeneration which was attempting to combat these issues. The Asset Management Plan also included upgrading the lifts and repairing estate paths.

Whilst a member praised the efforts of the Housing team for their achievements over the last three years under the current corporate head, he felt that the plan to deliver 125 decent homes was not ambitious enough and would abstain from the vote on that basis.

Resolved that:

Members voted to continue to support the aspirations set out within the current Asset Management Plan and identified the progress currently being made to deliver the long-term goals.

6. Balcony Safety Policy

The Head of Housing and Business Services advised that the objectives of the Balcony Safety Policy was to ensure the safety of residents through minimising the risk of fire, which meant that smoking would be banned on the balconies of council stock. Whilst the current tenancy agreement referred indirectly to the use of balconies, a separate policy document was needed which outlined prohibited items and activities on balconies and provided clarity to residents. It would also enable enforcement if required. The policy stated that balconies should remain clear, window and door restrictors should remain engaged when there were small children on the property.

Tenants had been engaged in the consultation process through posters being placed in communal areas and 174 emails were sent to tenants for whom the Council held an email address. There was a 23% response rate, which was higher than usual for consultations. 83% of responses were from nonsmokers, of whom, 40% were in favour of a total ban on smoking in balconies and 50% if it caused a nuisance to other residents. The Head of Housing and Business Services clarified to a member that the legal basis for the policy would be that it constitutes a nuisance to others. Whilst members raised concerns about the Council's ability to enforce such a policy, and that it would create animosity between neighbours, the Head of Housing stated that a written policy would remove ambiguity and avoid making any reports personal.

Whilst members were asked to approve the proposed Housing Balcony Safety Policy, one member abstained on the libertarian view that they believed that people should be able to do what they wished in their own homes, and that if tenants could not smoke on the balconies, they might smoke inside where there may be children or those with health conditions.

Resolved that:

Members approved the proposed Housing Balcony Safety Policy.

7. Review of Housing Allocation Scheme

The Head of Housing and Business Services reminded councillors that every local authority is legally required to have a housing allocations scheme. As there had been no change to the relevant legislation since the scheme's implementation in June 2021, there had been no need to significantly change the criteria. The intention was to look at the discretionary elements and consider whether they needed updating to reflect current circumstances. Therefore, the review focused on the strict need for a prospective tenant to have either lived or worked within the borough for three consecutive years as circumstances may mean that a prospective tenant had been forced out of the borough for work or housing and would therefore become ineligible for Council housing. Amendments such as living in the borough for three of the past five years may be more beneficial. A draft policy would be brought to the November 2023 Committee, which would be followed by a formal consultation exercise, and a revised scheme would be brought back to Committee in March 2024.

Members thanked officers for their work and agreed this change would be beneficial to prospective tenants, and asked if external organisations such as housing charities and external organisations would be consulted. Officers confirmed that this would occur.

A Member felt that changes to the scheme would make the Council's approach more flexible and pragmatic, and help to avoid any prospective challenge in the courts.

Resolved that:

Members noted the commencement of the review of the Housing Allocation Scheme.

8. Building Safety Act Preparation

The Corporate Head of Housing updated members on the Building Safety Case for Surrey Towers which identified one high risk, five medium risk and 17 low risk items. In response to a member's question, the Corporate Head of Housing confirmed that the high-risk item had been an object in a communal area which had since been removed. The medium and low risk items were confirmed to be compartmentalisation issues which were on track to be fixed within the prescribed timescales. The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed the appointment of a compliance officer and compliance safety officer, and that he would update councillors on the fitting of fire doors within Surrey Towers.

Resolved that:

Members voted in favour of delegating authority to the Corporate Head of Housing to approve and authorise submission of the Building Safety Case for Surrey Towers to the new Building Safety Regulator.

9. Review of the Older Persons Strategy

The Corporate Head of Housing provided an update on the Older Persons Strategy which focused on improving the support and accommodation available to residents to enable as great a level of independence as possible. This included modernising current living areas, landscaping and digital upgrades.

Members praised the strategy for its ambition and the quality of the proposed amendments to the independent living areas.

Resolved that:

Members noted the update.

10. Parkside Regeneration Update

The Housing Development Manager provided the Committee with an update on the Parkside Regeneration project. The potential for flooding within the area continued to constitute a significant risk to the project, although this was based on out-of-date data and would need to be looked into before committing to further work. Legal advisors had also been appointed, and mobile home agreements were currently being reviewed. There was also a hope of increasing the housing density in the initial proposal of 450 homes to more than 500, which would increase the feasibility of the scheme. However, all such issues would be clarified in a future committee.

A member raised concerns about the risk of flooding to the area, as this would impact the project's ability to continue. He also stated concerns about the upper expected cost for the

project which was currently estimated at £300million given the current economic situation. The Housing Development Manager replied that the potential building costs considered all unknowns, and that the Council would not increase its borrowing, adding that the full cost bracket was currently £175m - £300m.

The member also reported that significant concerns around the communications strategy for the project. The Housing Development Manager replied that lessons had been learned on the communications strategy, which would be revised with the consultants. Furthermore, sign ups to the newsletter appeared to peak before publication which suggested interest. Preserving the good aspects of the existing community would be crucial to the overall success of any potential scheme.

Members asked about the feasibility of the funding being utilised to improve the units already on the Parkside Estate. The Corporate Head of Housing replied that a significant amount of the properties needed a lot of work doing to them to bring them up to a C energy rating from E or F ratings. This would include putting a brick skin around them, which can cost up to £200,000 and many needed new roofs which brought costs up to £280,000 per property, which would be broadly similar to building new properties.

A member asked how the Council planned to work with external partners on the project, and if this would not mean that profit would go to them. The Housing Development Manager clarified that profit would go back into the HRA but would clarify in the next report how such arrangements could work.

The Chairman stated that future reports would provide greater detail and clarification for members.

Resolved that:

Members noted the report.

11. Performance Report

The Head of Housing and Business Services advised members of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) required by the regulator of Social Housing. The first four items on the report were compliancy measures so would either be red or green. The next twelve were to do with tenant satisfaction. The Head of Housing and Business Services noted that H7 was below 100% at 99.96% as this applied to one property where the tenant had died and the next of kin was refusing to allow entry to carry the relevant gas safety checks out. This had been referred to the legal team and was expected to be resolved soon.

A member asked if future reports could show the previous quarter's data for comparison and asked about the reason for why the first four compliance items had not been met. The Corporate Head of Housing explained that some aspects of the new contractor's performance had been disappointing, which was primarily down to recruitment issues, however steps had been taken to mitigate this and early signs suggested that the performance was now stabilising.

Resolved that:

Members noted the information in the report.

- 12.** 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.

13. Procurement of Lifts for Surrey Towers

The Corporate Head of Housing outlined the need to procure two new fireman's lifts for Surrey Towers.

Members asked if it was possible to lease lifts rather than buy them, and if the type of lifts used throughout the borough could be standardised, potentially through using UK sourced parts. It was stated that the cost of leasing a lift was exceptionally high, and that lifts appear not to be made and serviced within Britain.

A member asked if there was an intention to consult with leaseholders of the property to share the costs. The Corporate Head of Housing confirmed an intention to carry this out, adding that repayment plans would be offered.

Resolved that:

Members approved the procurement of a supplier to replace 2 fireman's lifts in Surrey Towers.

14. Tree Audit Proposal

The Corporate Head of Housing stated that there are an estimated 35,000 trees in the borough. He explained that the need for a tree audit was largely a compliance issue to ensure that the Council was aware of the condition of its trees. Data would then be analysed to identify future work.

Members were supportive of the proactive approach to manage the trees based on risk.

Environment and Sustainability Committee had already approved the release of budgeted funds, and Housing Committee approval was required to release budgeted funds for trees within the HRA.

Resolved that:

Members approved the business case for undertaking an audit of all trees owned by RBC in public spaces.

Members approved the release of budget provision to undertake this audit.

Members approved a procurement exercise to recruit a 'suitably qualified organisation' to undertake the audit.

15. Procurement of an External Decoration Contractor

The Corporate Head of Housing outlined the need for an external contractor to decorate the woodwork and PVC on Council owned buildings. The amount being requested had been budgeted for within the housing service business plan.

A member asked if it would be possible to do the work in-house. The Corporate Head of Housing explained it was not possible as the current contractor did not have capacity and it would be more expensive due to being charged at schedule of rates cost and therefore the procurement route was the recommended option. The Corporate Head of Law and Governance added that this was part of a general move by local authorities to move away from in-house labour to outsourcing. The replacement of woodwork with plastic would also ensure that future decorations would not be as cost or labour intensive.

Resolved that:

Members approved the procurement process to tender for a new contractor to deliver a range of decoration services to HRA properties over the next five years.

16. Housing Revenue Account Development 1

The Housing Development Manager outlined early-stage potential sites and options identified to help the Council achieve its target of delivering 125 new homes. The officer explained that not all sites listed would be chosen due to budgetary constraints, and the focus would be on achieving highly energy efficient homes that meet the needs of those seeking affordable housing locally.

Resolved that:

Members noted the information.

17. Local Paths Business Case

The Corporate Head of Housing outlined the need for a proactive strategy to ensure all Council owned paths were maintained appropriately. The proposed works would be around 2.5miles in total and require the release of a one-off budgeted sum. A future Committee report would focus on the need for a capital budget to improve paths, which had been neglected for a considerable amount of time, and this draw-down focused primarily on the paths in the worst condition.

A member asked if the work could be done internally. The Corporate Head of Housing explained that the most cost-efficient way was to go to tender. This had been part of a growth bid that had already been budgeted for and agreed, the money just needed to be released, whilst joining up with other functions of the council had been ruled out as it was rare for HRA and other council assets to share commons boundaries.

Resolved that:

Members approved the release of funds within the growth bid to replace and or repair estate paths to maintain or improve standards.

18. Housing Revenue Account Development 2

The Housing Development Manager outlined the background for two potential development sites that had been chosen to contribute to the Council's 125 homes target. A multi-disciplinary team would be appointed separately to the architects as part of the procurement route.

Concerns were raised about any potential developments eventually falling into the hands of buy to let landlords who would rent such properties out to students at the nearby university to be used as HMOs. A member stated that there was a significant shortage of family homes within the area because of this and asked if there were mechanisms to ensure this did not happen to any potential future developments. The Head of Housing and Business Services stated there are mechanisms in place in certain circumstances, although the longevity of these will be minimal.

Addressing concerns around right-to-buy, the Corporate Head of Housing advised that covenants are put in place on right-to-buy properties the Council sells with stipulations on how properties can be used that remains on the property through subsequent ownerships.

Resolved that:

Members approved a supplementary revenue estimate to be spread over the next 4 years for both projects to proceed from RIBA Stage 1 to 3 to be presented to Full Council.

19. Grant Funding to Improve the Energy Efficiency of Council Homes – ECO4

The Corporate Head of Housing outlined the benefits of procuring an external contractor to access ECO4 funding to improve the energy efficiency of 59 of the ‘hardest to treat’ properties. This would enable the Council to work towards its target of ensuring all Council owned homes have an energy rating of at least a C by 2030 and would enable residents to save a significant amount of money on their energy bills.

The outlay required by the Council was modest in the context of the available grant from government.

The Chairman praised the Corporate Head of Housing and his team for getting the grant funding from the Government, and all members agreed this was a positive scheme to pursue.

Resolved that:

Members approved and referred the proposal to Full Council for the procurement of a contractor to implement energy efficiency measures to 59 Council owned homes, via the ECO4 programme.

Chairman

Meeting ended 21:23