

HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 March 2015

5.30 - 7.30 pm

Present:

Scrutiny Committee Members: Councillors Todd-Jones (Chair), Ashton, Bird, Blackhurst, Gawthrope, Holland, Pitt

Executive Councillor for Housing: Councillor Price

Tenant/Leaseholder Representatives: Diane Best, Kay Harris, John Marais, Diana Minns and Caroline Oriokot

Officers:

Director of Customer & Community Services: Liz Bisset

Head of City Homes: Robert Hollingsworth

Head of Strategic Housing: Alan Carter

Head of Legal Service: Simon Pugh

Head of Estates and Facilities: Trevor Burdon

Housing Advice Service Manager: David Greening

Business Manager & Principal Accountant: Julia Hovells

Committee Manager: Claire Tunncliffe

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL**15/47/HSC Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Avery; Councillor Pitt attended as the alternate.

Apologies were received from Councillor Baigent; Councillor Gawthrope attended as the alternate.

Apologies were also received from Councillor Robertson and Tenant Representative, Terry Sweeny.

15/48/HSC Declarations of Interest

Councillor Bird	15/55/HSC	Personal: Alternate Member of the Planning Committee Personal: Tenant of Cambridge Housing Society
Councillor Holland	15/55/HSC	Personal: Alternate Member of the Planning Committee

15/49/HSC Minutes

The minutes of 14 January 2015 were approved and signed as a correct record.

15/50/HSC Public Questions

This item was chaired by Councillor Todd-Jones.

The Chair welcomed Mr Colin Dickens who addressed the Committee on the new Heat Network (Metering and Billing) Regulations 2014 and handed round an information sheet to Members.

Mr Dickens explained that he had only learnt of the regulations in late February 2015. It was his understanding that all existing communal energy systems would have to be checked in the first instance to ensure all tenants paid the correct amount of money for their heating, lighting, hot water and gas services. Individual monitors would have to be installed to measure the units used for each separate utility.

Mr Dickens acknowledged that this seemed a fair way for individuals to pay what they used. But the checks and installation would be disruptive, particularly to the more elderly and vulnerable tenants while this work was carried out.

Mr Dickens asked how much the work would cost and if there was any external funding that the City Council could apply for.

It was Mr Dickens understanding that the deadline for submissions was 30 April 2015.

The Head of Estate and Facilities, Trevor Burdon, responded that he did not think that the regulations would too onerous for the City Council to undertake. The deadline for submission was the end of April 2015. A list of City Council

properties that shared communal energy and heating sources would be minimal. If any changes were required to those properties the deadline of completion and feasibility tests was 31 December 2016.

Mr Burdon explained that there were properties with communal boilers that could simply have flow meters added to the outlet of the boiler. This would measure the flow away from the boiler into the individual dwellings. A single gas bill was currently issued to the Council and an administrative procedure would have to be considered on how to break down the bill, but there was sufficient time to investigate this.

Mr Dickens asked if a flow meter would have to be fitted into every single property in the sheltered housing scheme, as it was his understanding that a monitor would have to be fitted into each individual dwelling. He then went to ask how would the Council ensure that the billing system would be fair and how much disruption there would be when the work started.

Mr Burdon explained that the installation of a flow meter was not a complex procedure but there could be issues during installation. It was not possible to give a guarantee that disruption would be to a minimum, but based on the literature read would only affect a small number of properties.

Diana Minns, Tenant Representative, asked if those individuals in sheltered housing who paid an inclusive rent would then be billed. Would this become too complex to finalise a bill. Could the Council put a case forward for exemption on those properties?

Mr Burdon explained that there was provision that if the cost of providing that information exceeds £70 a year then exemption could apply.

Diane Best, Tenant Representative, asked if the regulations did apply to gas, water and electricity, if so would tenants require three separate meters?

Mr Burdon responded that the legislation applied to any shared energy service.

Mr Dickens concluded that he believed that there could be five individual monitors on each property for gas, water, heating, electric and cooling systems.

The Chair thanked Mr Dickens for his comments and asked if a report could be supplied to the Committee for further details.

15/51/HSC Write Off of Former & Current Tenant Arrears

This item was chaired by Diana Minns (Vice Chair / Tenant Representative).

Matter for Decision.

To write off twelve cases of former tenancy arrears totalling £41,581.25

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. Approved the twelve cases of former tenancy arrears totalling £41,581.25 as detailed in the attached appendix be written off.

Scrutiny Considerations.

This item was not requested for pre-scrutiny but in response to questions from the Committee, the Business Manager / Principal Accountant made the following comments:

- i. Where the Council had been awarded court costs in anti-social behaviour cases, the cost was then added to the rent account as the tenant was deemed liable to pay the cost. Therefore the write off costs were higher than normal.
- ii. Acknowledged it was difficult to advise when the backlog of cases would be cleared. The level of former tenant arrears totalled £900,000 across the Housing Revenue Account and dedicated officers had been appointed to quicken the process of clearing the backlog.

The Committee:

The Executive Councillor for Housing approved the recommendation.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).

No conflicts were declared by the Executive Councillor.

15/52/HSC Outcomes of the 2014 Tenant & Leaseholder Satisfaction Surveys and Proposals Going Forward

This item was chaired by Diana Minns (Vice Chair / Tenant Representative).

Matter for Decision.

To consider the Tenant and Leaseholder surveys that had been carried out in June 2014 and the proposals going forward.

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. Agreed the approach to further exploring perceptions of and reasons for any lower levels of satisfaction across the range of housing services, and methods to address them, as outlined in Appendix A of the Officer's report.

Scrutiny Considerations.

The Committee received a report from the Resident Involvement Facilitator who presented the results of the Tenant and Leaseholder surveys that had been carried out in June 2014. In total 1888 tenants and 191 leaseholders had responded to the survey: response rates of 28% and 18% respectively.

In response to the Committees' comments, Officers, the Director of Community and Customer Services stated the following:

- i. The areas of pavements, fencing, pathways and communal areas were in the programme of works for the next financial year and had been pre-surveyed.
- ii. Work had started on looking at parking, including garages, many of which were not fit for purpose.
- iii. Acknowledged that it was important not to drop the standards of cleaning as the tenant and leaseholders paid for this service unlike other areas of the City Council's contract.
- iv. The handling of complaints would continue to be dealt with in a transparent and honest environment.
- v. Various information was available with regards to repairs, such as the Star Survey which had showed a slippage in customer satisfaction. This related mainly to the planned works programme. In context the first ten months over 1400 repairs had been undertaken with a good satisfaction follow up survey that did necessarily match the response in the original survey. A follow up survey also highlighted any issues which could be resolved quickly.
- vi. The number of returns to the survey was sufficient to give confidence in the results.

- vii. In terms of the focus group a random sample would be taken to communicate to those individuals who had completed the survey. Efforts would also be made to contact those people who would not usually respond to surveys such as young people.
- viii. Agreed it was pleasing to note that the tenants felt that additional social housing was required.

The Committee:

Resolved unanimously to approve the recommendation.

The Executive Councillor for Housing approved the recommendation.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).

No conflicts were declared by the Executive Councillor.

15/53/HSC REVIEW OF FINANCE, PROPERTY AND HUMAN RESOURCES DELEGATIONS

This item was chaired by Councillor Todd-Jones

Matter for Decision.

To consider changes to officers' delegation on property matters, finance delegations and powers to buy and sell some property.

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. Approved the amended revised limits for writing off bad debts set out in paragraph 3.1 of the Officer's report.
- ii. Delegated powers to the Director of Customer and Community Services, in consultation with the Head of Finance, Head of Property and the Executive Councillor for Housing, to purchase vacant properties for the HRA subject to the availability of resource (including right to buy capital receipts) for this purpose, and provided that the acquisition meets the criteria set out in any acquisition policy set by the Executive Councillor for Housing.
- iii. Noted the request to the Leader:

To clarify that the Executive Councillor for Housing has responsibility for decisions on:

"the freehold or leasehold disposal and the terms for disposal, of Right to Buy dwellings sold under the Housing Act 1985, properties in shared equity schemes and other land or property held for housing purposes or for the provision of facilities and amenities for local residents or tenants".

Scrutiny Considerations.

The Committee received a report from the Head of Legal Services. The report referred to the Strategy and Resources Committee who would consider aspects of delegated powers to officers to make decisions about finance, human resources and property matters. It proposed some changes to finance delegations and to powers to buy and sell some property.

The changes to finance delegations proposed include increases in the delegated authority to officers to write off bad debts and to acquire assets for rental. The proposed changes would include Housing Revenue Account debts issues around the acquisition and disposal of housing assets.

In response to the Committees' comments, Officers, the Director of Community and Customer Services stated the following:

- i. Increasing the delegation to £25,000 would allow debts to be processed without delay. A report would come back to the Committee every June for discussion and consideration.
- ii. £25,000 was the delegated write off debt level agreed at South Cambridgeshire District Council
- iii. Agreed to the proposal that a report be brought to Committee when the acquisition or disposal of a property had taken place.
- iv. The delegation of powers to the Director of Customer and Community Services for the acquisition or disposal of a property would speed up the process but would still be transparent.
- v. It would be very unlikely that a domestic dwelling rent debt would exceed £10,000.
- vi. Any debt higher than £10,000 would be in relation to a commercial property within the Housing Revenue Account, such as a lease of a shop at £10,000 per quarter.
- vii. To the knowledge of the Principal Accountant / Business Manager there had only been one occasion where a debt of £20,000 had been written off in relation to a HRA commercial property in the last ten years.
- viii. The reporting process to the Committee would remain the same.

The Committee:

Councillor Blackhurst proposed and Councillor Pitt seconded an amendment to the recommendation of 3.1 of the Officer's report (additional text underlined)

HRA Debt	Business Rates, Council Tax and Housing Benefit.	Other Debts	Decision-maker
	Up to £2,500		Head of Revenues and Benefits
Up to £25,000	Over £2,500 to £25,000	Up to £25,000	Head of Finance (<u>in consultation with the Executive Councillor</u>)
Over £25,000			Scrutiny Committee (Housing) and Executive Councillor
	Over £25,000	Over £25,000	Scrutiny Committee and Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources)

Resolved (5 votes to 2 votes) in favour of the amendment to 3.1 of the Head of Legal Services' report.

Resolved (unanimously) in favour to endorse the recommendations.

The Executive Councillor for Housing approved the recommendation.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).

No conflicts were declared by the Executive Councillor.

15/54/HSC Review of Social Lettings Agency Pilot

This item was chaired by Councillor Todd-Jones

Matter for Decision.

To review the Social Lettings Pilot after one year from the point at which the first property was secured by the social lettings agency, which was established with a brand name of Town Hall Lettings (THL) and obtained its first property in March 2014.

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. To continue with the Town Hall Lettings (THL) until April 2016, applying lessons learned to date and with a particular focus on reducing rent arrears and collecting rent.
- ii. Agreed for Officers to bring an updated review report to the Housing Scrutiny Committee in September with options for the future of THL after April 2016 including any ongoing financial implications
- iii. To align THL with any existing and new Council initiatives, serving a wider range of customers, such as family housing, and explore additional procurement options.

Scrutiny Considerations.

The Committee received a report from the Housing Advice Manager.

The report referred to the key outcomes, learning points and value-for-money comparators emerging from the project. The recommendations from the report were critical because government funding would have been exhausted by March 2016 and it was clear that the Council and other partner authorities, who wished to continue to be involved, would need to commit resources to the scheme if it is to continue beyond this point.

In response to the Committee's comments, Officers, the Director of Customer & Community Services and the Executive Councillor for Housing made the following statements:

- i. Acknowledged that Universal Credit being paid to the individual and not direct to the landlord could be an issue in terms of rent collection not just for the social letting agency but social landlords in general.
- ii. Best practice would be considered to ensure that rent collection was maximised.
- iii. Figures for the age profiles of those customers who were benefitting from referral into the single homelessness service and Town Hall Lettings would be supplied outside of the meeting.

- iv. The City Council kept their own record of the number of rough sleepers but had also commissioned the organisation 'Cambridge Crime Reduction Initiatives' to provide records. The organisation counted the number of individuals each month and took an average yearly figure. Weekly figures were also sent which were cross matched with the City Council's figures.
- v. Data from the last two years had shown that the number of rough sleepers had not increased.
- vi. THL related to the general fund housing activity. Any write offs at the point which they were deemed unrecoverable would go through the Finance and Resources general debt process.
- vii. Many tenants in THL were private tenants.
- viii. Unaware of other Local Authorities who had used the original funding to set up a social lettings agency, therefore it was difficult to benchmark.

Committee Mangers Note: Figures for the age profile are as follows:

Age profile of **Single Homelessness Service (SHS)** clients
(age of SHS clients at point of first contact with the service)

18-24	100
25-34	88
35-44	51
45-54	42
55-64	18
65+	2

Note that over half of SHS were aged 30 or under at the point of first contact.

Age profile of THL residents

(age of THL residents at time of signing tenancy agreement)

18-24	7
25-34	10
35-44	5
45-54	7
55-64	2

The Committee:

Resolved (unanimously) to endorse the recommendations

Councillor for Housing approved the recommendation.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).

No conflicts were declared by the Executive Councillor.

15/55/HSC New Social Housing on Housing Revenue Account Garage and Infill Sites 2015/16 Programme

Matter for Decision.

The report gave details of the next programme of sites to be brought forward in the Council's social housing programme, for inclusion in the capital budget for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as Garage and In-fill sites 2015/16.

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. Approved the sites to be included in the HRA Garage and Infill Sites 2015/16 Programme.
- ii. Noted the indicative mix, design and layout of the new sites and approve that they be progressed for planning approval
- iii. Approved the capital budget of £3,030,000 for the HRA Garage and Infill Sites 2015/16 Programme.
- iv. Approved that delegated authority be given to the Director of Customer and Community Services following consultation with the Director of Business Transformation and the Head of Legal Services enter into a legal agreement with building contractors for each individual site in the HRA Garage and Infill Sites 2015/16 Programme.

Scrutiny Considerations.

The Committee received a report from the Head of Strategic Housing.

The report provided details of the next sites to be brought forward which were a series of HRA garage and small in-fill sites. As each site could only accommodate two or three new homes, approval was requested to proceed on a programme basis rather than a scheme by scheme basis. Approval was therefore requested for an overall budget for the programme to deliver a minimum of 18 new homes.

The programme had been based on sites that had already been identified in the 3 Year Rolling Programme, however, it also included some plots that were adjacent or nearby the sites in the 3 Year Rolling Programme. The Tedder Way site had been identified following an enquiry to Property Services. None of the sites required the redevelopment of existing housing.

The list of sites recommended to be approved in the HRA Garage and Infill Sites 2015/16 Programme to progress to planning application were as follows;

1. Cadwin Fields and Nuns Way garages
2. Cameron Road garages
3. Wiles Close garages
4. Tedder Way infill
5. Kendal Way infill
6. Uphall Road garages

In response to the Committee's comments, Officers, the Director of Customer & Community Services made the following statements:

- i. All of the new housing had been assessed as being for rent at Local Housing Allowance levels.
- ii. All of the homes were planned to be built to lifetime home standards.
- iii. None of the homes were planned to be wheelchair accessible. The aim for the Council's overall programme is for a minimum of 2% wheelchair accessible.
- iv. The rent would be based on the Local Housing Allowance which was close to target rent.
- v. Explained that affordable rent was a social housing product in which there was three levels that could be charged. These were;
 - Target rent which was currently at 45% of the market rent.
 - Local housing allowances which was 60 to 65% of market rent.
 - Maximum affordable rent which was 80% of market rent.
- vi. Stated an agreement had been made with the Void team that any empty properties that have the potential for development on the surrounding land would be fenced off for consideration.
- vii. Confirmed that there would be public consultation on the development.

The Committee:

Resolved (unanimously) to approve the recommendations.

The Executive Councillor for Housing approved the recommendations.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).**15/56/HSC Housing Portfolio Plan**

This item was chaired by Councillor Todd-Jones

Matter for Decision.

To consider the Housing Portfolio Plan 2015-16.

Decision of the Executive Councillor for Housing:

- i. Approved the Housing Portfolio Plan 2015-16 and agreed that a reference would be made to the Housing Scrutiny Tenant / Leaseholders in the Plan.

Scrutiny Considerations.

The Committee received a report from the Head of Strategy Housing which set out the strategic objectives for the portfolio for the year ahead, described the context in which the portfolio was to be delivered and detailed the activities required to deliver the outcomes and the vision.

In response to the Committee's comments, Officers, the Director of Customer & Community Services and Executive Councillor for Housing made the following statement:

- i. Agreed that a reference would be made to the Housing Scrutiny Tenant / Leaseholders in the Housing Portfolio Plan 2015-16.

The Committee:

Resolved (unanimously) to approve the Housing Portfolio Plan 2015/16.

The Executive Councillor for Housing approved the recommendation.

Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted).

No conflicts were declared by the Executive Councillor.

The meeting ended at 7.30 pm

CHAIR