

HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 June 2023

5.30 - 8.11 pm

Present: Councillors Pounds (Chair), Robertson (Vice-Chair), Griffin, Holloway, Martinelli, Tong, Thittala Varkey, Wade and Porrer

Executive Councillors: Bird (Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness)

Tenant/Leaseholder Representatives:

Agate (Tenant Representative), Best (Leaseholder Representative), Powell-Hardy (Tenant Representative) and Minns (Tenant Representative)

Also present (virtually) Tenant Representative: Christabella Amiteye

Officers:

Assistant Director, Assets and Property, leader Place Group: Dave Prinsep

Interim Assistant Director, Development, Place Group: Ben Binns

Director of Enterprise and Sustainable Development: Fiona Bryant

Property Compliance and Risk Manager: Renier Barnard

Committee Manager: Sarah Steed

Meeting Producer: Chris Connor

Others Present:

Director, City Services Group: James Elms

Head of Housing: David Greening

Interim Director, Communities Group: Suzanne Hemingway

Housing Services Manager – City Homes: Anna Hill

Assistant Head of Finance and Business Manager: Julia Hovells

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL**23/22/HSC Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Lee and Councillor Porrer attended as alternate.

Tenant Representative Christabella Amiteye attended the meeting via Teams which meant that she could contribute to debate but could not vote on any of the agenda items.

23/23/HSC Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

23/24/HSC Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 were approved as a correct record subject to the removal of three Tenant Representative's names which had been included in error within the Executive Councillor attendance space at the top of the minutes. The minutes were signed by the Chair.

23/25/HSC Appointment of Vice-Chair (Tenant/Leaseholder Rep) for 2023/24 and introduction of Tenant and Leaseholder Representatives

Diana Minns was appointed Vice-Chair Tenant Representative for Municipal Year 2023/24.

Tributes were paid to Colin Stevens Tenant Representative who sadly passed away shortly after the last Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting.

The Committee were advised that Lulu Agate Tenant Representative would be stepping down from the Committee. David Greening thanked Lulu for her time, dedication and contributions she had made at Housing Scrutiny Committee meetings.

23/26/HSC Petition - Save St Thomas's Play Park

Three petitioner representatives spoke to the Committee setting out background information regarding St Thomas's Play Park.

Two members of the public attended the meeting and with the Chair's permission were permitted to comment on the petition. One spoke in support of the proposals and the second spoke against the proposals.

The Interim Assistant Director Development (Places Group) said the following in response to the petition and Members' questions:

- i. Noted that points had been raised regarding the provision of information as part of a freedom of information request. The Council was organising the provision of this information but as it related to anti-social behaviour care needed to be taken to redact personal information before the information was released.

- ii. A report had been taken to Housing Scrutiny Committee in September 2022 regarding proposed development at St Thomas. Garage tenants were written to ahead of that meeting to alert them to the Council's development proposals. Other engagements also took place including by telephone, email and in person on site, ahead of the voluntary pre-app consultation which took place in July 2022.
- iii. A lot of feedback had been submitted on the original development proposal, which proposed 11 homes and preserved the overall amount of public open space. Two options were provided for where the open space could be located.
- iv. The council was going to undertake a further consultation exercise in July 2023 on revised development proposals before a planning application was submitted. Noted that once an application was submitted a consultation exercise would be undertaken as part of the planning application process.
- v. Engagement was carried out with garage leaseholders and those in the immediate area of the proposed development (ie: those with gates on to the open space).

The Executive Councillor for Open Spaces and City Services responded:

- i. Thanked the Petitioners for attending the meeting.
- ii. Reassured the Petitioners that the proposals did not include the removal of the play park. Whilst the development would require equipment to be removed during construction the equipment would either be returned or replaced with new equipment.
- iii. Noted concerns about underinvestment in the play park and felt this would be an opportunity to bring in new equipment.
- iv. Noted that in the July 2022 consultation, the majority of residents felt development would enhance the local area. Noted there were concerns about there being 11 houses on the site. Officers took this away and revised the proposals for 7 houses on the site. The new proposals proposed the retention of 69% of the open space on site (2000sqm retained). The play park would be retained but may have to be relocated on the site.
- v. The green space was protected and recognised the importance of green space for the public. The remaining 31% of open space would be provided over the road at the eastern garages sites in the form of a new high quality community garden.
- vi. Noted next steps was a pre-application consultation, followed by a submission of a planning application which would include a consultation as part of that process. Noted that anyone who submitted written

representations would also be able to speak at a future Planning Committee.

- vii. Would be happy to meet with the Petitioners outside of the meeting to discuss their concerns.

The Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness said:

- i. Was familiar with the area as had previously lived close by to it.
- ii. Noted that the play park would be rejuvenated as part of the proposals.
- iii. The community would be involved in the proposed development of the community garden area.
- iv. Had attended the consultation event which took place July 2022.
- v. Noted that a formal decision on the development had not been taken.
- vi. Residents would be kept informed regarding the progress of the matter. Advised that residents could contact her to discuss the matter further.

23/27/HSC Public Questions

Question 1.

- i. Resident of Ekin Road speaking to agenda item 11 'Update on new building council housing delivery'. Spoke on behalf of the 'Save Ekin Road' community group, which comprised over 60 people from Ekin Road.
- ii. Continued to oppose any proposals to demolish their estate.
- iii. Urged the Council to fully investigate and pursue an 'upgrade and refurbishment' plan.
- iv. Requested in March 2022 that a 2-stage timeline for the project was adopted. This had been outlined to residents, however felt communication with residents since then had been poor.
- v. The timeline and a list of options had been provided at the Liaison Group meeting on 16 March. The Ekin Road website was updated soon after, but residents were only written to on 14 June, 3 months later.
- vi. The last time residents were written to with project details was January, a 5 month gap. There was an undertaking to write to all residents again in April which did not happen.
- vii. Felt attempts to engage with officers was frustrating.
- viii. Wrote to the Council on 21 February, recommending maintenance and improvements for the estate.
- ix. Wrote again on 3 March, with questions about how the project might be carried out.

- x. Then wrote on 3 April, with questions about the project options presented in March. A response was not provided until 5 May.
- xi. Felt the Ekin Road information website was not a good or effective resource.
 - a. Documents were poorly labelled and difficult to find.
 - b. Hyperlinks were not clear.
 - c. Much of the information was now inconsistent or out of date.
 - d. Many residents were not internet-connected.
 - e. Often encountered residents who said they had no idea what was going on.
- xii. Asked the Council to:
 - a. write to all residents within a week of each liaison group meeting, or of any substantial progress milestones, informing them directly of key updates.
 - b. That in such letters it was made clear where on the Ekin Road website supporting material could be found, and specifies that residents may request paper copies sent out to them by calling a given number or writing to a given address.
 - c. To respond to project queries, from the community group or any resident, within 3 weeks of receipt.
 - d. Redesign the Ekin Road website to make it more useable and regularly review it.

The Interim Assistant Director Development responded:

- i. The upgrade and refurbishment of Ekin Road properties was one of the options which was being considered for the site.
- ii. Acknowledged that there had been a communications gap but noted that several questions had been raised which required input from a number of teams across the Council and the County Council. Also noted that a number of individuals had also raised questions. The Council tried to provide responses to questions as quickly as they could but some of the questions were complex and therefore took time to respond to.
- iii. There had been 21 incidences where residents had been written to, had a flyer sent to them or events had been held where residents could attend and ask questions. This did not include the 'Thursday events' being run with the Housing and Repair Teams.

- iv. Residents were able to contact the Development Team by email, in writing or by phone. Paper copies of documents could be made available to residents and copies were always provided in the Barnwell Library and Abbey People hub.
- v. Officers would try to respond to queries within 3 weeks of receipt of questions, but this would depend on the complexity and number of questions asked.
- vi. Was happy to discuss the issues raised regarding the Ekin Road website at the next Resident's Liaison Group.

Supplementary Question:

- i. Noted a reliance on the Ekin Road website to communicate with residents about the project. Advised that there were residents who were not internet connected and would not see updates posted there. Also noted that the website needed to be kept up to date.
- ii. Asked why residents had to wait until the liaison group meetings to raise issues / provide feedback as these took place every 3 - 4months.

The Interim Assistant Director Development responded:

- i. Letters would be sent to residents who were not internet enabled and paper copies of documents could be requested or viewed at the Barnwell Library and Abbey People Hub.
- ii. Responses to some queries took time because of the complexity of the issues. Officers would try to provide responses quicker where they were able to.

23/28/HSC E&F Compliance Update

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

Matter for Decision

The report provides an update on the compliance related activities delivered within the Estates & Facilities Team, including a summary on gas servicing, electrical testing, and fire safety work.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness

- i. Noted the progress of the compliance related work detailed within the officer's report.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

The Committee received a report from the Property Compliance and Risk Manager.

The Property Compliance and Risk Manager said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. Noted Councillors' concerns about council properties that officers were unable to gain access to undertake gas /electrical inspections. Officers within the council were working together to improve meaningful engagement with tenants as appreciated the disruption that inspections could cause to tenants.
- ii. Confirmed that work had been undertaken with the Home Ownership Team to undertake some inspections of fire doors for leaseholders. Further work was also to be undertaken.

The Executive Councillor reassured members that further steps could be taken to gain entry to properties where tenants had refused access to ensure other tenants were safe where necessary. She also noted that tenants were required to allow access as part of their tenancy agreement with the council.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the recommendation.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendation.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

23/29/HSC Damp and Mould Self Assessment and Policy

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

Matter for Decision

The Council completed a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's recommendations from their spotlight report on Damp and Mould. A specific policy on managing damp and mould was drafted.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness

- i. Acknowledged the self-assessment and subsequent action plan.
- ii. Approved the Council's Damp and Mould Policy (as amended) that sets out the framework of activities and responsibilities in response to mould and damp reports and complaints.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

The Committee received a report from the Director of City Services.

The Director of City Services advised that an additional paragraph (set out below) was proposed to be added into the Policy as new paragraph 11 and then all subsequent paragraphs would be renumbered sequentially.

11. Leaseholders' Responsibilities

Damp and mould can be caused by condensation and may adversely affect your health and your home. Whilst the Council is only responsible for the external building elements and structure of the building Leaseholders are requested to make sure that they take appropriate steps to prevent significant amounts of condensation that results in damp or mould growth. This preventive action includes:

- to adequately heat rooms – ideally between 18° and 21°C
- regularly check for any leaks, or faulty heating, windows, or extractor fans.
- To keep extractor fans uncovered.
- to keep their property well ventilated by keeping windows slightly open especially while cooking or bathing, ensuring that extractor fans are in working condition and vents are clean and left open.
- Leaseholders are asked that extractor fans are not turned off in kitchen & bathroom
- ensure windows vents and wall vents are not blocked or closed.

- the Council actively encourages leaseholder to take out household contents insurance, leaseholders are responsible for arranging adequate household contents insurance, to protect their home from damage caused by damp, mould, or condensation.

The Council has a responsibility in maintaining the structure of the building that may contain leasehold properties, in these instances there may be a shared responsibility for both leaseholder and the Council depending on the location and cause of the problem.

Leaseholders that have concerns can report this either by phone, report it on the repairs page [Request a repair for your council home - Cambridge City Council](#) or by emailing: condensation@cambridge.gov.uk. The Council Surveyor will make an inspection and discuss where the responsibilities lie.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the amendment.

The Director of City Services said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. Improvements to communication with tenants required a combination of active engagement (going out and speaking to people), online engagement and written engagement. Hoped to have a formal tenant engagement policy as soon as was practicable.
- ii. A private company had been engaged to respond to in-house treatments regarding damp and mould. Officers would no longer be required to redirect their time to damp and mould as this work was being covered by an external company.
- iii. The Environmental Health Team investigated complaints against private landlords (for example regarding overcrowding of housing) where issues were reported. Officers were looking to see how help could be provided to tenants to set up stronger engagement mechanisms for private tenants.
- iv. Damp, condensation and mould (DCM) work tended to reduce during the summer because of dryer, warmer weather. Work was currently being undertaken to proactively treat houses which had DCM. An education programme was also being run to try and assist tenants to know what to do in order to reduce the risk of DCM occurring. Housing Officers should also be checking for and reporting issues of DCM if these were observed during any property visits / inspections.
- v. Timescales for a surveyors visit to be undertaken within the DCM Repair Request Flowchart would be added.

- vi. Large national Housing Associations were unlikely to record data regarding DCM by Local Authority area. Asked Councillors, Tenant and Leaseholder Representatives to let the Council know if they became aware of any tenants (housing association / private tenants) who were having problems with DCM.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the recommendations as amended.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations as amended.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

23/30/HSC Leaseholder Income Management Policy Changes

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

Matter for Decision

The report provided background information about how service charges were levied against the Council's Leaseholders and details the Council's statutory obligation to provide interest-bearing loans to Leaseholders.

The Leaseholder Income Management Policy had been updated to reflect the statutory rights Leaseholders have under legislation if they meet the criteria.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness

- i. Noted the Council's statutory obligation to provide Service Charge Loans to Leaseholders as detailed in the officer's report.
- ii. Approved the offer of retrospective loans to be offered to a limited number of Leaseholders who would have been entitled to a loan in previous years.
- iii. Approved the proposed amendments (as updated at Committee) to the Leaseholder Income Management Policy.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

The Committee received a report from the Housing Services Manager (City Homes).

The Housing Services Manager (City Homes) proposed the following amendments to the Policy published in the agenda (additional text underlined and deleted text ~~struckthrough~~):

4.1 There are ~~three~~ potential options for paying charges:

- To pay the full amount within 14 days.
- To apply to pay by interest free monthly instalments over a period of up to 18 months.
- To apply for an interest bearing loan, subject to eligibility, with repayment terms of between 3 and 10 years, depending upon value.

Additional paragraph 4.4 and then renumbering of old paragraph 4.4 to 4.5 and 4.6.

4.2 Interest bearing loans are available to any leaseholder who has acquired their property directly from the Council in the 10 years leading up to the service charge demand notice. A leaseholder must pay an initial contribution, with the value reviewed annually, before a loan can be awarded. There is a minimum and maximum loan value applicable each year, and the term of the loan is between 3 and 10 years, dependent upon the loan value. These annual values can be requested at any time from the Home Ownership Team.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the amendments to the Leaseholder Income Management Policy.

The Housing Services Manager (City Homes) and the Assistant Head of Finance and Business Manager said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i.If the changes to the Policy were approved, the five members of the public identified as being affected by the policy changes would be contacted in the next couple of weeks and offered a loan based on the changes outlined in the Policy. Information regarding leaseholder loans would also be included in future service charge letters.
- ii.Confirmed that the loans would be secured loans.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the recommendations as amended.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations as amended.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

23/31/HSC HRA Outturn Report 2022/23

Recommendation i was chaired by Diana Minns (Vice Chair) and recommendation ii was chaired by Councillor Pounds.

Matter for Decision

The report presented for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

- A summary of actual income and expenditure compared to the final budget for 2022/23 (outturn position).
- Revenue and capital budget variances with explanations
- Specific requests to carry forward funding available from both revenue and capital budget underspends into 2023/24
- A summary of housing debt which was written off during 2022/23.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness

- i. Approved carry forward requests totalling £334,670 in revenue funding from 2022/23 into 2023/24, as detailed in Appendix C of the officer's report.
- ii. Recommends to Council the approval of carry forward requests of £15,880,000 in HRA and General Fund Housing capital budgets and associated resources from 2022/23 into 2023/24 and beyond to fund re-phased net capital spending, as detailed in Appendix D of the officer's report and the associated notes to the appendix.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

The Committee received a report from the Assistant Head of Finance and Business Manager.

The Assistant Head of Finance and Business Manager said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. Delays had arisen in relation to the Water Conservation Project; these were due to delays in procuring the water analysis work and the implementation of the project as the Council had been unable to recruit a Corporate Energy Manager for over a year. The external consultant's report had now been completed. Staff in the teams were working up the pilot activity to implement work from the consultant's report.
- ii. A number of void properties had been returned to the Council which had required significant expenditure and had resulted in an overspend on repairs. With these particular properties the Council had to consider whether it was financially viable to cover the costs of the repairs or whether it was more prudent to sell the property. The tenancy audit programme should enable the Council to monitor the condition of properties and therefore reduce the number of voids returned in a poor condition. Officers needed to review whether to continue using sub-contractors to undertake housing repair work or whether this should be delivered in-house.
- iii. Sub-contractor capacity to undertake housing repairs should improve; delays had arisen due to a procurement exercise being undertaken. The incumbent contractor had been re-awarded the contract so service levels should return back to normal quicker than if a new contractor had been awarded the contract. Advised that there were still problems sourcing materials as a result of Brexit.
- iv. The Council struggled to recruit into certain roles where there was competition for similar roles in the private sector for example the Energy Manager Post.

The Committee resolved by (10 votes to 0 with 3 abstentions) to endorse recommendation i.

The Committee resolved by (6 votes to 0 with 3 abstentions) to endorse recommendation ii.

The Executive Councillor approved recommendations i and ii.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

23/32/HSC Update on New Build Council Housing Delivery

This item was chaired by Councillor Pounds (Chair).

Matter for Decision

The report provided an update on the housing development programme.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing and Homelessness

- i. Noted the continued progress on the delivery of the approved housing programme.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

The Committee received a report from the Interim Assistant Director Development.

The Committee made the following comments in response to the report:

- i. Welcomed the work done regarding the provision of homes for Ukrainian refugees.
- ii. Requested that future reports provided information on wheelchair accessible homes by bedroom size.

The Interim Assistant Director Development said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. The tables within the report showed the different stages the various housing developments were at. Agreed to work with councillors to see if different descriptions of the stages of development could be used, so that this information was more user friendly.
- ii. Archaeological investigations (referred to on p123 paragraph 6.3 of the agenda) were sometimes required as part of a planning application approval. Officers worked with the County Council's Archaeological Department and consultants to comply with any planning conditions regarding a site's archaeology.

The Committee unanimously resolved to endorse the recommendation.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendation.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

The meeting ended at 8.11 pm

CHAIR