

HOUSING MANAGEMENT BOARD

5 March 2013
5.30 - 7.20 pm

Present:

Scrutiny Committee Members: Councillors Blackhurst (Chair), Blencowe, Bird, Brierley, Johnson, Pippas, Price, Rosenstiel

Executive Councillor for Housing: Councillor Smart

Tenant/Leaseholder Representatives: Diane Best (Vice Chair), Allen Champion, Kay Harris, John Marais, Diana Minns and Terry Sweeney

Housing Regulation Panel Chair: Stan Best

Officers:

Director of Customer & Community Services: Liz Bisset

Head of City Homes: Robert Hollingsworth

Resident Involvement Manager: Marella Hoffman

Committee Manager: James Goddard

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL

13/8/HMB Apologies

No apologies were received.

13/9/HMB Declarations of Interest

Name	Item	Interest
Councillor Rosenstiel	13/14/HMB	Personal: Council garage tenant.

13/10/HMB Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2013 were approved and signed as a correct record.

13/11/HMB Public Questions

There were no public questions.

13/12/HMB Standard Item: Write-Off of Former Tenant Arrears**Matter for Decision**

The Officer's report set out details of 11 cases of current and former tenant arrears together with a summary of the action taken to try to recover these debts.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing

- (i) Approved that the three cases of current tenant arrears totaling £6,479.73 detailed in the attached appendix be written off, due to the expiration of a Debt Relief Order.
- (ii) Approved that the eight cases of former tenant arrears totalling £24,188.51, also detailed in the attached appendix, be written off due to recovery activity being exhausted.

Reason for the Decision

As set out in the Officer's report.

Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

Not applicable.

Scrutiny Considerations

Committee did not request this item for pre-scrutiny.

In response to the report Councillor Rosenstiel commented there was a lack of liaison between local authorities and care homes, plus City Council Housing and Benefits Teams. He encouraged better join up in future so that properties could be freed up faster for new tenants when not required by previous ones.

In response to Members' questions the Head of City Homes stated the following:

- (i) Former tenant arrears had not been given the same priority as current ones; this is why a significant sum had arisen. Former tenant arrears were now being looked at in a different way and would lead to better officer join up in future. Debts could mount up quickly and it was difficult to validate if someone died if there was no next of kin.

- (ii) Invited all HMB Members and Tenant Representatives to make an appointment to see City Homes staff and work through tenant arrears cases to see how the process worked.

The Head of City Homes undertook to liaise with interested HMB Members and Tenant Representatives post meeting.

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

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

13/13/HMB Housing Portfolio Plan 2013/14

Matter for Decision

The Officer's report covered the draft Housing Portfolio Plan 2013-14, which sets out the strategic objectives for the portfolio for the year ahead, describes the context in which the portfolio is being delivered and details the activities required to deliver the outcomes and the vision. Performance measures and risks are also shown for each strategic objective.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing

Approved the draft Housing Portfolio Plan 2013-14.

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 Executive Councillor for Housing and Director of Customer & Community Services regarding the Housing Portfolio Plan 2013/14.

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

- (i) Expressed concern that the least well off were most likely to be affected by changes to the benefits system.
- (ii) Councillor Bird had been contacted by tenants with care needs who were concerned about the impact of the 'bedroom tax' as a room allocated to a carer was perceived to be spare and so incurred a loss

of benefit under the new system. Councillor Bird sought clarification on how the Council would address this.

- (iii) The Council needed to provide sufficient numbers and types (eg 1, 2 and 3 bedroom properties) of housing for tenants. This also had to be maintained to decent homes standards.
- (iv) Tenant Representatives suggested there was insufficient funding available for a discretionary payment to help tenants move if they wished to downsize in response to benefit changes.

In response to Members' questions the Executive Councillor for Housing and Director of Customer & Community Services confirmed the following:

- (i) Officers were monitoring the impact of changes to the benefits system on Strategic Objective HSO1 (delivery of sustainable housing). Some tenants would be affected ie those whose sole income was benefits; whereas others would not be eg pensioners.

It was normal practice for the Council to allocate larger houses to couples with young children or those who were just starting a family in order to enable them to stay on an estate.

- (ii) Officers were trying to estimate the impact of legislation changes. The Council had some flexibility on the type of accommodation it could offer to tenants (eg 1, 2 and 3 bedroom properties), so it was hoped the impact of benefit system changes could be mitigated. For example, 24% of council housing was 1 bedroom properties; 11% of benefit claimants required 1 bedroom properties.
- (iii) A 3 year rolling program to better adapt existing properties to tenants' needs would be reported to Community Services in future.
- (iv) There were a number of cases where people had more bedrooms in their properties than they needed. The Council would give them the opportunity to move so that others in overcrowded accommodation could better use the larger properties.
- (v) If tenants wished to downsize properties to reduce their rent, the Council could pay a discretionary payment to tide people over whilst they actively searched for an alternative property.
- (vi) In response to suggestions there was insufficient funding available for a discretionary payment to help tenants move, the Head of City Homes said Area Housing Manager (North) was working on a fund to move scheme. A report would come to HMB in future setting out options on how to assist people. This could include using the

discretionary payment to subsidise rents so that tenants could stay in their properties instead of being assisted to move.

- (vii) The Council had limited housing stock to invest in. The benefits of adapting old properties or building new homes would have to be considered.
- (viii) The Council was undertaking negotiations to increase its supply of temporary housing. It was desirable to house more people in the city and council managed properties than in hostels and out of town venues.

Some general needs properties had been converted into temporary housing, but this was a trade off as increasing one decreased the other. Purpose built temporary housing was preferable.

- (ix) The Council had considered various options for increasing its temporary housing stock, but these were subject to legal considerations amongst others. It was not council policy to move people into houses allocated for demolition in future on a temporary basis eg Lichfield Road and Water Lane.
- (x) The Executive Councillor for Housing had liaised with Julian Huppert MP regarding the 'bedroom tax'. She would write to him prior to lobbying the Minister to seek flexibility for disabled people in the legislation.

The Executive Councillor for Housing undertook to liaise with Councillor Bird concerning joint lobbying to seek flexibility for disabled people in the benefit legislation.

The Executive Councillor for Housing asked if tenants wished to volunteer themselves as case studies to be given as examples in the lobbying process.

- (xi) The Housing Portfolio did not cover debt advice, but the Council worked in partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau amongst others to provide this.
- (xii) The Director of Customer & Community Services undertook to liaise post HMB with Councillor Brierley concerning the text of HSO1 regarding the appropriateness of wording and performance measures in the Operational Plan (specifically regarding maintenance).
- (xiii) The Director of Customer & Community Services undertook to provide Mr Sweeney with details concerning physical counts of rough sleepers in the City.

Councillors requested a change to the wording of Strategic Objectives.

Councillor Brierley formally proposed the following amendment (shown in bold text):

HS03.1 Focused our housing advice **and support** to keep homelessness to a minimum and help prevent homelessness by offering early advice on alternative housing options.

The Committee approved this amendment unanimously.

Councillor Blencowe formally proposed the following amendment (shown in bold text):

HS03.2 Increased the range of temporary housing available **in or close to the city** to minimise the impact on households who become homeless or who are threatened with homelessness and reinforced our work with partner organisations to support people with a history of homelessness to find a settled home.

The Committee approved this amendment unanimously.

The Committee resolved unanimously 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.

13/14/HMB Progress Report From Residents' Housing Regulation Panel on Their Inspection of Services

Matter for Decision

In 2010, the Housing Management Board approved the creation, with the help of the Chartered Institute of Housing, of a residents' co-regulation panel in Cambridge. The Officer's report introduced (as Appendix 1), a progress report on the positive outcomes achieved by residents' Housing Regulation Panel in their second year of activity, and looks ahead to the next steps.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing

- (i) Noted the positive outcomes achieved by residents' Housing Regulation Panel in their second year of activity.

- (ii) Approved continuing to support residents' co-regulation and the constructive challenge provided by residents' Housing Regulation Panel.

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 Principal Tenant Participation Officer regarding the Progress Report From Residents' Housing Regulation Panel on Their Inspection of Services.

The Committee received a report from the Housing Regulation Panel Chair regarding activities during 2012/13.

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

- (i) Thanked the Housing Regulation Panel (HRP) and noted members good working relations with council officers.
- (ii) Bikes and buggies stored in public areas were major concerns as they caused obstructions.
- (iii) Suggested there was a lack of secure cycle parking for council properties.

In response to Members' questions the Housing Regulation Panel Chair and

Head of City Homes stated the following:

- (i) No smoking signs should be put up in public areas, it was the Council's responsibility to do this. Permanent signs could prevent sticky ones being removed or vandalised.
- (ii) Rubbish dumping had been identified as an issue, particularly in Hazelwood Close. HRP were working with City Homes plus Streets and Open Spaces staff to address issues. The Council could charge people for the removal of rubbish they have dumped once they have proved to be the culprits.

- (iii) Secure cycle parking would be provided where required. Enforcement action would be taken against people leaving bikes/buggies etc in communal areas as these were hazards.

The Committee resolved unanimously 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.

13/15/HMB Regulatory Changes to the Ombudsman System for Handling Tenants' Unresolved Complaints About Their Landlord, and Local Actions Required to Implement Those Changes

Matter for Decision

From April 2013, there will be two regulatory changes to the system for handling tenants' unresolved complaints about their landlord, namely that:

- (i) Local authority tenants will now take their unresolved complaints to the Housing Ombudsman (rather than to the Local Government Ombudsman, as they used to do).
- (ii) There will be a new middle stage or local 'buffer' between tenants and the Ombudsman, technically referred to as a 'Designated Person', who can be a local councillor, an MP or a designated Tenant Panel.

The Officer's report explained the changes and made recommendations for how the Council might implement the regulatory requirements locally. Any steps taken locally would be in line with the Council's corporate complaints procedure.

Decision of Executive Councillor for Housing

Approved the following plan of action as a way forward for Cambridge under the new scheme:

- (i) Run a Freepost postal survey in the spring 2013 edition of Open Door magazine, sent to all Council tenants, asking whether they want a Tenant Panel for complaints.
- (ii) Work with resident representatives to design a Tenant Panel for complaints, if the Open Door residents' survey indicates that tenants want one.

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 Principal Tenant Participation Officer regarding the Regulatory Changes to the Ombudsman System.

In response to Members' questions the head of City Homes and Principal Tenant Participation Officer confirmed the following:

- (i) A consultation was proposed to ascertain if people wanted a Tenant Panel. If so, the Council would have to reflect how the Tenant Panel would fit into its current process.
- (ii) A report would be brought back to HMB in future regarding activity on the Tenant Panel. If one were implemented, Officers and Tenant Representatives would develop a suitable process and ensure resources were in place for the Tenant Panel to operate.
- (iii) The proposed Tenant Panel would have influence rather than powers, so it would operate like the Housing Regulation Panel.
- (iv) The Tenant Panel would be welcomed by council officers, as it should enable complaints to be dealt with in a more efficient way and avoid the need to involve the Housing Ombudsman. It should also enhance the service provided to tenants.
- (v) The Tenant Panel should work well with HMB and the Housing Regulation Panel.
- (vi) Guidance was emerging on how the Tenant Panel would operate. Tenants could approach the Tenant Panel to resolve issues before formally complaining to a landlord. If people did not like advice from, or did not wish to take advice from the Tenant Panel, they could approach the Ombudsman (following the process timeline).
- (vii) The Tenant Panel would provide a mediation service. It would be made up from local representatives and be independent to the Housing Ombudsman. The Council would set the Tenant Panel's 'powers'/roles.
- (viii) Only 6 complaints had been made to the Local Government Ombudsman, most had been resolved locally.

The Committee resolved unanimously to endorse the recommendation.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendation, subject to review at a future Housing Management Board.

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 7.20 pm

CHAIR