

Cabinet Housing Panel
15 September 2020

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Tuesday 15 September 2020 at 7.30 pm in the .

PRESENT: Councillors N.Pace (Chairman)
J.Boulton (Vice-Chairman)

M.Birleson, E.Boulton, M.Cook, A.Dennis, M.Holloway,
T.Jackson-Mynott, H.Quenet and F.Thomson

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors R.Paris, Independent Representative
C.Andrews, Tenants' Panel Representative

OFFICIALS PRESENT: S.Russell, Corporate Director (Housing and Communities)
S.Chambers, Head of Community and Housing Strategy
S.Pearson, Head of Housing Operations
P.Gray, Head of Property Services
C.Humphrey, Housing Development Manager
S.Kiff, Income and Home Ownership Manager
S.Keenlyside, Governance Services Officer

49. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Lass.

50. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2020 were approved as a correct record and noted by the Chairman.

The hard copy of the minutes would be signed by the Chairman as soon as it was reasonably practicable or alternatively, electronic signatures would be arranged after the meeting.

51. ACTIONS UPDATE

The status of actions agreed at the Panel meeting on 14 July 2020 in the report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) was noted.

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Corporate Director (Housing and Communities), Head of Community and Housing Strategy and Head of Property Services declared an interest in Agenda Item 10 by virtue of being Directors of Now Housing Limited.

53. RENT SETTING POLICY

Members considered the Report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) which recommended the adoption of the new Rent Setting Policy as set out in Appendix A.

The aim of the policy was to set out how the Council would calculate, consult and determine the rent charges for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) owned Council housing stock that the Council had a responsibility to manage and maintain.

The Regulator of Social Housing set a new Rent Standard for registered providers of social housing with effect from 1 April 2020. This advised that the rent charges could be increased by up to Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1%.

Social rent charges must be calculated in line with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) policy statements on rents for social housing.

The Council would issue a rent charge letter to all tenants giving at least 28 days' notice of the new rent charge taking effect.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members enquired as to how rent was calculated. Officers explained that rent was calculated through the 1999 value. Through this Rent Standard, there was a set calculation and the Council was bound by the gross value of the properties set by Central Government. Rent charges had to go through budget monitoring and be approved at Full Council.
- This policy only related to the Council's secure tenure types.
- Because of the financial impact of Covid-19, Members wanted assurance that the rental increases were necessary due to Government guidelines rather than being a local decision. Officers confirmed that it was due to Government guidelines and legislation. The original 2016 Welfare Reform had come to an end in 2019 and the new Rent Standard was introduced before the Covid-19 pandemic.
- In addition to the rent reduction of 1% between 2016-2019, the Council had planned rent increases over four years which amounted to an average of 5-6% per year. This was because, prior to 2016, the Council needed to raise rent to bring it in line with the Rent Re-structuring Regime which was Central Government policy. The effect on the Council's income

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had been a loss of 6-7% per year, over the last four years. Against a rent debit of £50M per year, it was a significant loss.

- The rent on a mutual exchange would remain the same because as Council tenants, they would already have received a rent increase within that year. The rules on rent setting of mutual exchanges and void tenancies was set by Central Government.

RESOLVED:

(9 in favour, 1 abstention)

That the adoption of the new Housing Rent Setting Policy (as set out in Appendix A) be recommended to Cabinet.

54. AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMME UPDATE

Members considered the report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) which provided an update on the Council's Affordable Housing Programme (AHP).

Members received a presentation on completed and forthcoming Affordable Housing projects.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members thanked the Head of Community and Housing Strategy and the team for their hard work.
- Members asked whether 500 new houses would be enough with the likelihood of further redundancies due to the economic situation and if not, how the Council would fill the gap. Officers agreed that it was very likely that there would be a rise in demand. There were also forthcoming plans for Affordable Housing with the Now Housing Company and Section 106 sites where the Council may be able to get additionality, both of which had not been included in the report. The team had brought in a new Business Manager to find new business opportunities.
- Members enquired about the type of heating the new properties would have. Officers advised that heating was a subject that was currently under review. The Council was passionate about delivering good quality homes that were environmentally sound. For new projects, the Council was looking at alternative heating systems such as electric boilers and others, so that by the required timelines the Council would not be using fossil fuels. Solar panels, car-charging points and low fossil fuels were the three base items that the Council was pushing forward.
- Members asked what impact the planning changes, coming in September, would have on for the Affordable Housing Programme in terms of Section 106's. The Head of Community and Housing Strategy would research this and report back to Members.
- Members asked how the Council could provide more amenity space on restricted sites. Officers said that amenity space was an important factor

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in the design of the sites and wherever possible individual access to the properties and designated outdoor space were given.

RESOLVED:

That the Affordable Housing Programme report be noted.

55. UPDATE ON NOW HOUSING LIMITED

Members considered the report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) which provided an update on Now Housing Limited.

In January 2019 the Cabinet of Welwyn Hatfield Council approved the creation of Now Housing Limited, a new wholly council-owned housing company to provide housing for local people whose needs cannot be easily met through the private or social rented sectors.

Cabinet appointed a shareholder representative group to oversee the set-up of the Now Housing, on behalf of the council. Members of the Shareholder Group consist of the Council's Head of Paid Service, Section 151 Officer, Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) and Monitoring Officer.

The business plan for Now Housing Limited was approved in October 2019 and as part of the shareholder monitoring arrangements, regular updates on Now Housing's performance against the business plan are required to be presented to Cabinet Housing Panel.

The first proposed housing scheme for Now Housing Limited will be available for let in October 2020 and the loan agreement between the council and Now Housing is in the process of being finalised, prior to the handover of this first development to Now Housing.

Whilst Now Housing has therefore not yet started trading, the required progress has been made in preparing the company for operating.

A meeting between the Chair and Vice-Chair of Now Housing Limited and the Shareholder Group took place on 4 September. An update report on the progress of Now Housing was presented to the Shareholder Group.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members felt that this was a fantastic scheme which would allow residents to access secure housing and they looked forward to seeing the company progressing.

RESOLVED:

That the report of the Chair of Now Housing Limited (as shown in Appendix A) be noted.

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56. PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR HOUSING PERIOD QUARTER ONE - 2020/21

Members received a report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) which provided a summary of the strategic Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) and comments about performance by exception for Quarter One 2020/21. The KPI's were monitored monthly by Heads of Service.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- BPI 29 – Members enquired as to the outcome of the 29 households who were confirmed as not being owed a duty of care. Officers advised that the Council had tried to ensure that every household in the 'Everyone In' campaign were housed. Some went on to the Council's housing register, others were referred to various projects and Housing Associations and some to the private sector. There were currently 16 customers left but the original numbers were far higher than 29. The Council managed to find successful solutions for the majority of households.
- Members asked how Welwyn Hatfield figures for households in temporary accommodation compared to other boroughs. Officers advised that numbers in Welwyn Hatfield were high and were similar to numbers in Stevenage and Dacorum. Welwyn Hatfield had a higher demand than some areas in Hertfordshire such as East Herts and Three Rivers.
- BPI 34 – Gas safety checks - over the last 6 weeks, the Council had been 100 per cent compliant.
- Members said that the numbers were extremely good and wanted to thank the team for all their hard work in difficult times.

RESOLVED:

That the performance report be noted.

57. WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

The pro-forma setting out the Panel's work programme had been updated since the last meeting to enable the forward planning of items to be considered.

RESOLVED:

That the updated work programme for the Panel be noted.

Meeting ended at 8.22 pm