

Cabinet Housing Panel
18 July 2022

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Monday 18 July 2022 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors J. Cragg (Chair)
F. Thomson (Vice-Chair)

M. Birleson, D. Jones, R. Lass, G. Moore, T. Rowse, T. Travell and R. Trigg

ALSO Residents Panel C. Andrews
PRESENT: Representative

OFFICIALS Executive Director, Finance & Transformation (R. Baker)
PRESENT: Head of Community and Housing Strategy (S. Chambers)
Commercial Manager (I. Hancock)
Compliance Manager (E. Manzie)
Housing Development & Strategy Service Manager (H. Sarohi-Pahor)
Private Sector Housing Manager (J. Smith)
Housing Options Manager (D. Trewick)
Democratic Services Assistant (B. Taylor)

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1. APOLOGIES
Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L. Crofton and S. Tunstall.
 2. MINUTES
The minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2022 were approved as a correct record by the Chair.
 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
Councillor F. Thomson declared a non-pecuniary interest in items on the agenda as appropriate by virtue of being a Member of Hertfordshire County Council. Councillor R. Trigg declared an interest in item 4 (agenda item 7) as appropriate by virtue of being a member of the accredited landlords within the Welwyn Hatfield Borough and recused himself from the meeting for this item.

4. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY REVIEW

Report of the Chief Executive reviewing the new Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy. Officers stated that new grants had been added and some old one had been removed due to the low take-up. Officers outlined that between January and May 2022 the following grants had been approved: 24 Mandatory Disabled Facilities, 3 Safe As Houses, 2 Disabled Facilities Top-Up, 1 Abortive Fees and helped 4 assessed contributions. Officers stated that small changes have been made to the policy for clarity.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members asked whether there were challenges in allocating the grants due to the underspend. Officers stated that the poor take-up was down to the previous grants not being tailored to Welwyn Hatfield residents.
- Members queried if £5,000 was enough for housing repairs. Officers stated that provisions to increase the amount were included in the policy.
- Members asked if grants were available for empty properties that may need bringing back to standard. Officers stated that there was no take up of previous grants, so it was removed from the new policy.
- Members asked if there was a deadline for spending. Officers confirmed that the money rolled over, but they would like to spend more.
- Members asked if there were case workers. Officers stated there were three officers and admin support.
- Members asked if there were ways to help more people access the funding. Officers stated that Hertfordshire County Council signpost people towards the grants such as the Disabled Facilities Grant. The Healthy Hubs, Libraries alongside GP Practices were being utilised to raise awareness.
- Members expressed that the report was good, and the additional changes to the policy would reach a greater number of residents.

RESOLVED

(**unanimous** of members present – 8 in total)

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) Members recommend that Cabinet agree the proposed amendments to the policy, as set out in Paragraphs 3.5 to 3.9 of the report.

5. HOMELESS PREVENTION SCHEMES

Report of the Chief Executive on the Homeless Prevention Grants and activity. Officers stated that the Housing Options team were responsible for homelessness prevention. Officers outlined the government-provided ring-fenced funding for homelessness and the council was successful in acquiring additional grants to increase provisions against homelessness. The report identified five areas in which the funding was used (outlined in appendix B:

- Homelessness Prevention Fund was used to lead to action against homelessness;
- Tenancy Assistance was changed from a repayable loan to a grant;

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- Rent Guarantee was helpful to landlords;
- Support Projects such as Rough Sleeper and Housing First;
- Staffing which allowed an increase in resources.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members asked about the tenancy assistance and what support was given to those that received the loan. Officers stated there were affordability issues due to debts owed. Therefore, the loan amounts were small and checked against an affordability assessment.
- Members asked if the scheme would cover mortgage payments. Officers stated they would look at what type of assistance was needed and what schemes would be appropriate.
- Members sought clarification over figures listed in appendix B stating that some figures have increased and what comparisons were available. Officers stated some of the figures were good such as Prevention Fund had improved year on year and that the number of people approached had increased due to more promotion of the service.
- Members asked if work was being done to find root cause of issues. Officers explained the partnership with Citizens Advice and affordability assessments would help find the root cause
- Members expressed thanks to the team for their work against homelessness and felt the partnership working was a strength.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

- 1) That Members note the information provided regarding the Homelessness Prevention Grant and expenditure of the Grant.
- 2) That Members note the information provided regarding the successful funding bids for various Homelessness Schemes, and the use of that funding.

6. AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMME UPDATE

Report of the Chief Executive providing an update on the Council's Affordable Housing Programme (AHP). Officers gave an overview of the Affordable Housing Programme highlighting the partnership work, best value for money and green technology. Officers outlined the design brief for the council for best practice methods for construction and green technology. Green technology was being used on all the sites. Officers stated there was a pipeline of 500 affordable homes. Members were shown visuals of several projects from appendix A of this report and a video walkthrough of Minister House. Officers informed Members of the review of the current Assisted Transfer Scheme with the aim of downsizing residents from family sized homes into schemes such as Minister House. There was a targeted promotional campaign to residents and there had been interest in the scheme. Officers asked if a report could be circulated via email to get member recommendations before being taken to Cabinet in September.

The following points were raised and discussed:

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- Members asked about the timing for the email report and what the reduction in payment was regarding the Assisted Transfer Scheme. Officers stated that the report would be emailed soon to give members time to respond ahead of the September Cabinet. Officers explained that the payment went from £3,000/£4,000 for one downsize dependent on the size of the dwelling to £500 for one bedroom and £250 for any extra bedrooms due to budgetary restrictions.
- Members sought clarification on the scheme to provide a financial incentive and assistance to move. Officers stated the budget was £40,000 and are looking at ways to enhance the budget if people need greater financial help.
- Members asked how additional funding can be acquired for those that need it. Officers stated that the subsequent report will detail the funding available and outline any options.
- Members felt there was good work on projects involving green technology and asked how many have EV charge points. Officers stated there were EV charge points at all the schemes and they are looking to increase the number.
- Members asked about parking facilities at Minister House. Officers stated the parking was at the front of the site and there were areas for scooters.
- Members felt that residents would benefit from moving to Minister House due to lower energy costs from a larger home to a smaller dwelling.
- Members asked about the lack of signage at sites across the borough. Officers stated that signage would be installed so people know that the Council was building affordable housing.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

- 1) Email correspondence for the 'Assisted Transfer Scheme' report be circulated to members for recommendations before going to Cabinet.
- 2) That the report be noted.

7. COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Report of the Chief Executive providing an update on the Housing Compliance position and the improvement plan. Officers stated that the update followed on from the previous CHP and confirmed that an update would be provided at every CHP meeting. Officers stated that the action plan had been completed and that Fire was now 100% compliant. All type 3 risk assessments would be completed by the end of the month, and medium risk assessments would be completed by the end of September. Water hygiene, asbestos and lifts were 100% compliant with rolling programmes to ensure compliance stayed at 100%. Electrical; communal was 100% compliant and domestic was 98.7% compliant with no access to 118 properties. Gas; communal was 100% compliant and domestic was 99.99% compliant with 1 property in the legal process. Officers stated there would be more member development sessions when required.

The following points were raised and discussed:

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- Members asked whether health & safety risk assessments were carried out on communal blocks. Officers confirmed that these are carried out by a different team.
- Members asked about structural issues on houses. Officers confirmed a survey would need to be completed.
- Members asked for an explanation on the no access. Officers confirmed that around 30% no access for gas and was more difficult with electric which may be down to the checks being intrusive and can take a long time to be completed. The council follows the Access Process which was a legal route to gaining access that can take 12–14 weeks. Officers stated they would continue to try and gain access.
- Members felt it was reassuring to see 100% compliance in a lot of areas.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

That the report be noted.

8. HOUSING COMPANY UPDATE

Report of the Shareholder Group providing an update on Now Housing Limited after 18 months. Now Housing Ltd had twelve units and there had been 100% rent collection and no voids. The Company had a loss however this was part of the business plan. The asset valuation was lower than the market value, however if the assets sold at market value would mean a gain. There were changes to legislation to avoid annual charges and advice was being sought on this. Officers stated that further updates will be provided

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Members asked to see the Risk Register. Officers stated there are two and they would be available to share
- Members asked if there was a reserve fund for repairs. Officers stated that the business made a loss, so nothing had been set aside presently.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

That the report be noted.

Meeting ended at 8.49 pm
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