

Cabinet Housing Panel
7 August 2017

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Monday 7 August 2017 at 7.30pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors J.Boulton (Chairman)
M.Perkins (Vice-Chairman)

M.Birleson, M.Cook, J.Cragg, B.Fitzsimon (substituting for F.Thomson), M.Holloway, K.Holman, S.Glick, H.Quenet

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Co-opted Members:-
Tenants' Panel Representatives

R.Read and B.Robbins

Independent Representatives

R.Paris and S.Smith

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Executive Director (Housing and Communities) (S.Russell)
Head of Housing Operations (S.Pearson)
Head of Property Services (Housing) (P.Gray)
Principal Housing Development Manager (J.Morton)
Governance Services Officer (M.Lowe)

12. SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitutions of Committee Members had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 19-22:

Councillor B.Fitzsimon in place of F.Thomson.

13. APOLOGY

An apology for absence was received from Councillor F.Thomson.

14. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 26 June 2017 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

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Responding to a request from a Member, the Head of Property Services provided a brief update on Fire Safety in Flats (Minute number 6 refers) and undertook to circulate the action plan to all Members of the Cabinet Housing Panel.

15. ACTIONS STATUS REPORT

The status of actions agreed at the Cabinet Housing Panel meeting on 26 June 2017 in the report of the Executive Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) was noted.

16. PROGRESS OF NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS IN WELWYN HATFIELD

Members received a detailed presentation from the Principal Housing Development Manager, on behalf of the Housing and Community Services Team, on the progress of new housing developments in Welwyn Hatfield.

Officers responded to questions from Members as followings.

- There was a balance to be struck between providing garages for rent in the Borough and using those sites for affordable housing.
- The garage sites being considered for housing development were either redundant, in poor condition or both.
- Officers were aware of the knock-on effect of using garage sites for housing and the impact on parking.
- There were often additional parking spaces available on a completed site than there had been previously.
- A considerable number of garages rented from the Council were used for storage. Many garages were too small to accommodate a car.
- For every development site full consultation took place with residents, Members and the Planning department.
- Viability assessments were carried out by the Corporate Property and Finance departments.
- The sites the Council developed were often more difficult to develop due to their size, shape and additional complications such as asbestos or main sewer pipes.
- The build cost for Council developments tended to be more expensive due to the standard to which the properties were built or to other issues.
- Council development projects were always benchmarked against other comparative organisations to ensure the development was competitive and gave the best value for money.
- Certain aspects of associated work for the developments was currently outsourced (i.e.: employer's agents, CDM feasibility work, surveys, site assembly) The Council project manage its own developments.
- There were a number of ways to finance the developments and to calculate the chargeable rent. The Right to Buy continued to apply to any Council owned property and tenant.
- Consideration was being given to, how in the future, a wider offer could be made to residents. These included other rental models, tailored to meet

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the different needs of people, based on their financial circumstances and to enable people who did not qualify for the diminishing supply of social housing to have access to high quality, secure, rented housing.

- The selection process, through the Choice Based Lettings Scheme is applied generally to all applicants irrespective of the age of the property. However in some cases local lettings policies are put in place so that new-builds can be prioritised, for example to transferring tenants.
- All tenants are made aware of their contractual obligations when they are allocated a property
- Ideally, the allocation of a newly built property would benefit more than one household, and this can happen when a household transfers, freeing up their previous property.
- Currently there were 2,800 people on the waiting list.
- There were very strict guidelines applied to Government monies (Right to Buy receipts) monitored closely by the Affordable Housing Programme steering group, on a monthly basis.
- It was the Council's intention to maintain the number of properties in its portfolio and in order to achieve this more homes needed to be built and acquired.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation from the Principal Housing Development Manager on behalf of the Housing and Community Services Team which provided an update on the progress of new housing developments in Welwyn Hatfield be noted.

17. PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR HOUSING. PERIOD QUARTER 1 2017-18

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) provided a summary of the strategic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for quarter 1 for 2017-18, and included comments about performance by exception. The KPIs were monitored monthly by the Heads of Service.

In response to a question from an Independent Representative regarding KPI 29 – The Maximum Number Of Households Living In Temporary Accommodation In The Borough (where the Council have a duty) reported that no applications had been made recently.

A Member raised significant concerns regarding the block of flats in the Hollybush Ward which had been bought by a London Borough and was being used as temporary accommodation for their residents. The question was put as to whether these residents, generally who were very vulnerable, were receiving the level of support they needed and whether this was provided and funded by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council? A further question was put as to whether this Council could prevent this now and in the future as a second block of flats in the Borough was understood to have been purchased for a similar purpose?

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Officers confirmed that there were a number of such cases in the Borough and the Council were unable to prevent other Local Authorities from purchasing properties in this area. Residents who had been placed there by another authority were entitled to access the services available in the Borough. These services included Children's Centres, schools and medical provision and was funded by this Council or a number of other agencies.

Officers went on to advise that there was very little, if anything, this Council was able to do to stop this from continuing or reoccurring, as legally all Local Authorities had a duty of care to its homeless and vulnerable residents. However where another Borough places a person in Temporary Accommodation in Welwyn Hatfield they, as the originating authority, retain the homeless duty to that household. One of the main reasons other Local Authorities, particularly the London Boroughs, placing their homeless residents in Welwyn Hatfield was due to the price of property which was lower when compared to London. It was understood that London Boroughs were starting to look further afield in areas where property prices were significantly lower than Welwyn Hatfield.

A Member raised grave concerns regarding the person who was sleeping rough on the pavement on Wigmores North whose possessions had been affixed with a 'Fly Tipping' notice. The notice stated that the items would be removed and destroyed on a certain date unless removed. Surely this was not the way in which the Council dealt with the most vulnerable people in our society?

The Member reported that he had tried to report the matter to the Council but had been unsuccessful. What was the best thing to do when homeless people were seen sleeping on the street?

The Executive Director (Housing and Communities) explained that the Housing Needs Team took every measure possible to approach and help the most vulnerable people in the Borough. Leaflets containing contact details at the Council and other agencies were distributed to shops and businesses in the immediate vicinity. Every effort was made to provide the right support to the homeless person as possible.

The Executive Director (Housing and Communities) undertook to investigate the reported incident and to advise the Panel.

In response to a question regarding single homeless people and those who were 'sofa surfing', Members were advised that, single people generally, unless considered to be vulnerable, were not eligible or able to obtain accommodation through the Council. They did not automatically satisfy the homelessness criteria. In order to be given priority a rough sleeper would need to be assessed. Being street homeless in itself is not a criteria for the homeless duty to apply.

RESOLVED:

That the performance report for Housing for period quarter one for 2017-18 be noted.

18. TENANT'S PANEL UPDATE

Rose Read, Chair of the Tenants' Panel provided a verbal update on the work undertaken by the Tenants' Panel.

"On the whole the Tenants' Panel are not very far off where I had envisaged them to be from last year. Our numbers, at the moment, have dwindled from our full complement of 27 in total and we are currently 14 tenants and 2 leaseholders.

Our attendance at events like Waste Cage Days is a wonderful way of giving a face to the Tenants' Panel and from there hopefully getting people interested in the work we do, which will enable us to get back up to our full quota at the next Tenants' Panel elections. We are also looking at co-opting a few residents who have shown interest in our team.

Sub-Groups

Since the re-integration our Sub-Groups have each been rewording their 'working documents' (Terms of Reference etc.) that are used as reference for codes of best practice. All Sub-Groups are taking this opportunity to look through the documents to change wording or phrases which are not viable for the Tenants' Panel now working in conjunction with the Council.

As each of the documents are finalised they are then passed to the Governance Sub-Group to enable them to do last checks and a quick fine tune. They are also working on creating a Handbook to explain about the Tenants' Panel and its processes and policies for our new members.

The Environmental Sub-Group has just closed the 'Blooming Good' Annual Garden Competition and the presentation party for the winners to collect their trophies will be in mid-September. Meanwhile they will be looking at the improvement bids received from our tenants alongside any other environmental matters.

Working closely with the Council's media department in producing the 'Your Voice' magazine, the Communications Sub-Group are also involved with the content of the Tenants' Panel website and have recently whittled down the many options of the new Tenants' Panel Logo presenting the Tenants' Panel with a choice of three which the new Logo was the one chosen.

The Scrutiny Sub-Group is starting their repairs contact centre telephony service scrutiny and contact with the relevant department manager and staff have been made. There is also a Scrutiny Masterclass training session in October which all of the Tenants' Panel have the opportunity to attend.

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Council Meetings

The Tenants' Panel now have two representatives who attend on SOSC (Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee), EOSC (Environmental Overview and Scrutiny Committee), ROSC (Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee) and also the (CHP) Cabinet Housing Panel. At our AGM held on 26 July I encouraged all the representatives to make sure our voices are being heard and through us the voices of the tenants and leaseholders that we represent. The Tenants' Panel need to enhance their presence in each of these groups with a pro-active approach which I hope will enable us to work in a cohesive manner with the Councillors".

The Tenants' Panel Representatives responding to a question from the Chairman replied that they considered the most pressing matters for the Tenants' would be the new properties being built and the future of affordable housing in Borough.

RESOLVED:

That the update report of the Chair of the Tenants' Panel be welcomed and noted.

19. CABINET HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME 2017/18

The pro-forma which sets out the Panel's work programme has been updated since the last meeting to enable forward planning of items to be considered to take place.

RESOLVED:

That following the meeting the updated version be circulated to Members and Officers with the minutes.

20. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That under Section 100(A)(2) and (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be now excluded from the meeting for Agenda item 14 (Minute 21 refers) on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of confidential or exempt information as defined in Section 100A(3) and paragraph 4 (consultations or negotiations relating to labour relations) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the said Act (as amended).

In resolving to exclude the public in respect of the exempt information, it was considered that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

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21. HOUSING OPERATIONS CUSTOMER FIRST TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) asked the Cabinet Housing Panel to consider and recommend for approval the proposed remodelling of the Housing Operations Service through the Customer First Transformation Programme (the Programme). Members noted that the proposal had been developed in-line with the broader Customer Service Strategy vision and the wider Housing and Communities Transformation.

During the discussion which ensued, some Members raised a number of concerns regarding proposed remodelling of the Housing Operations teams, which in their view would have a significant detrimental impact on both the employees and that this would affect the service. The view that was generally expressed was that the impact should be kept to a minimum.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet Housing Panel endorse the proposals for the Programme as set out in the report and recommends to Cabinet that the Programme be approved.

Meeting ended at 10.15pm
ML