

Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel
19 April 2017

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the CABINET Housing and Planning Panel held on Wednesday 19 April 2017 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

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

D. Bell, D. Bennett, H. Bromley, A. Chesterman
(substituting for G Hayes), M. Cowan, B. Fitzsimon
(substituting for N Chapman) M. Holloway and P. Shah

OFFICIALS Executive Director (Housing & Communities) (S. Russell)
PRESENT: Head of Planning (C. Haigh)
Head of Community and Housing Strategy (S. Chambers)
Interim Head of Property Services (P. Gray)
Head of Housing Needs (D. Murphy)
Principal Housing Development Manager (J. Morton)
Parking and Cemetery Services Manager (V. Hatfield)
Governance Services Officer (G. Paddan)

93. SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitution of a Panel Member had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 19-22.

Councillor B Fitzsimon for N Chapman
Councillor A Chesterman for G Hayes

94. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors N Chapman and G Hayes.

95. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2017 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

96. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS

Councillor M Cowan declared a non-pecuniary interest in items on the Agenda as appropriate by virtue of being a Member of Hertfordshire County Council.

97. PARKING SERVICES UPDATE AND FUTURE WORK PROGRAMMES:

Report of the Executive Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) on the yearly work programme was considered and covered both parking restrictions and parking improvements, which helps the Council manage and achieve public's requests and expectations. It was important for Parking Services to ensure that a consistent programmed approach, that assisted in the efficient management of Traffic Regulation Order (TROs) work and provided transparency to the public.

The report noted that Hatfield town centre was currently being re-developed and as part of the Hatfield 2030+ project it would be looking at how the Council could unlock further development sites which have been highlighted within the town centre. With most sites being utilised for car parking, the Council would be looking to submit a planning application this year to construct a multi-story car park on The Common. The proposal would be to re-provide the current parking provision into the multi-storey. It was considered practical to cease further consultations with immediate area of the town centre until a decision had been made on the planning application.

Member raised and discussed the following points:

- Knightsfield and Haldens – noted that parents parked outside the school on the single yellow line and waited for their children. This generated a problem for vehicles during school hours. The Officer advised this situation is a common problem around schools throughout the Borough. Double yellow lines permit vehicles to drop off and pick up passengers for a short period, in most cases there will be an observation period of 5 minutes before we will begin to issue a parking ticket. In addition, if parents are handing over a child to a school staff member they are permitted to leave the vehicle to carry out this task.
- Possibility of creating a one way system during school hours. The direction of traffic is a Hertfordshire County Council responsibility.
- Garage blocks – the renovation, cost and timescales to make the site safe. It was noted that the garage blocks were beyond repair and that both schemes would be progressed in the new financial year. Tenants would be notified of alternative sites and works accordingly. Concerns were raised that a number of garages have been broken into and what would be done in the 'new parking areas' to improve safety. The Officer advised that it would be reasonable to assume with the removal of the garages this would improve the safety of the area. Most vehicles come with their own alarm systems which would be heard if a vehicle was been tampered with (which the garages do not have) and this would reduce the possibility of vehicles been broken into.
- Noted that S106 funding would not be part of the parking work programme.

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- Off Street Traffic Regulation Order – work was underway on a map based off-street order for the charging of car parks in Welwyn Garden City and Cuffley. The ANPR managed the payment side of things but reports have been received that vehicles were not always displaying blue badges when utilising disable parking bays and with this new order the Civil Enforcement Officers would be able to patrol and issue parking tickets to those vehicles they witness parking in such bays.
- Areas will be assessed with a view to construct parking improvements in advance of further consultations with residents for parking restrictions. It was noted that timescales may vary due to the approval processes. Parking Services would continue to assist Housing Services with any schemes they wished to construct.
- Construction of vehicular crossovers and hard standing for Council tenants – the Team was more focused on creating additional communal parking rather than improving the parking provision for individual properties, unless they met a criteria which confirmed mobility issues.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Panel notes the update on the current 2016/17 work programme and recommend to the Cabinet the proposed 2017/18 work programme for parking restrictions and improvements as attached to the report as Appendix A.
2. That the Panel recommend for the remainder of the Lemsford Road scheme and French Horn Lane scheme (both in Hatfield Central and East – Area 3 and 4) be placed on hold, until a decision has been made about the planning application for building the multi-storey car park in The Common.

98. HOUSING WHITE PAPER CONSULTATION RESPONSE:

Members considered the report of the Executive Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) and the Executive Director (Housing and Communities), which provided the consultation response on the Housing White Paper which the Government published in February 2017 and the consultation response to be forwarded by 2 May 2017.

The published Housing White Paper, called 'Fixing our Broken Housing Market', which was introduced by the Prime Minister described the broken housing market as one of the greatest barriers to progress in Britain today; it set out four strategic objectives to address the current housing crises:

- a) Planning for the right homes in the right places
- b) Building homes faster
- c) Diversifying the market
- d) Helping people now

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The overall emphasis of the Housing White Paper was on increasing the supply of housing over the longer term primarily through changes to the planning system. In particular, the Government proposes to introduce a standardised assessment of local housing need; to encourage cross-boundary working; open up the development market to small builders and those who embrace innovative/efficient methods of housebuilding, improving safeguards in the private rented sector doing more to prevent homelessness.

Officers were concerned that these add further complexity to the planning system and made it even more un navigable for non-professionals. There could be many reasons why the Council may not get an up to date plan and agreed housing target in place and many reasons why housing may not come forward at the rates currently anticipated, all of which could result in far less desirable sites being developed (such as tall building and high densities on constrained brownfield sites, rural exception sites in villages, on previously developed land in the green belt, etc). From a housing perspective the White Paper was a summation of funding streams, initiatives and policy change that has been proposed throughout this administration.

Members considered the 38 consultation questions and the proposed answers together with other comments that officers considered that could be made to the Government.

The main points raised and discussed were:

- The consultation mainly focused on technical issues within planning and housing.
- The social housing rent policy from 2020 for housing association and local authority landlords 'to help them to borrow against future income' and therefore investment in development. The Paper confirmed that the 1% rent reduction mandated for social housing from 2016/17 for four years would stay in place until 2020.
- Housing Associations would continue to be considered as part of the private sector and pressurised to build and to release funds for development through efficiencies.
- Backing small and medium sized builder to grow. Government would like to bring forward more small sites for development which could be more easily accessed by these firms.
- Government's support for Build to Rent – making it easier for Build to Rent developers to offer affordable private rental homes instead of other types of affordable housing.
- Starter homes – definition of starter homes was considered. The need for a system to be in place to ensure that developers only offer starter homes to eligible households.
- Pre-application discussions with developers – inappropriate to take an applicant's track record into account. There would be nothing to prevent an applicant gaining planning consent and then selling the consent to a developer with a different track record. Could result in further workloads

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for local planning authorities in assessing and reviewing viability and deliverability exceptions.

- Council's response to Question 31 (a) Yes. (b) If starter homes are to be a form of affordable housing then an income cap is essential to prevent homes being bought for purchasers who could otherwise buy on the open market. Council's response is correct but needs to be more comprehensive. (c) If private rent was to help ease the housing crises and meet housing need then it needs to be justly affordable in relation to local incomes, based on a resilient local affordability assessment.

RESOLVED:

That Members authorise the Head of Planning and Head of Community and Housing Strategy in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning, Housing and Community to make any requested changes and submit the Council's formal response.

99. AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMME MONITORING REPORT:

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

The report noted that on 4 December 2012 Cabinet agreed a range of methods to deliver the Council's Affordable Housing Programme and that a monitoring report would be presented to this Committee, setting out the budget and progress in delivering new affordable homes. An overview of progress to date and a more detailed monitoring report setting out current schemes were attached to the report as Appendix A and B.

A strategic review of the Affordable Housing Programme was completed in February 2016 and in June 2016 Cabinet approved the proposed Vision Statement, key aims and a delivery plan to deliver 600 affordable homes by 2021.

In summary there had been 383 Right to Buy sales to date and retained receipts of £24,927,460. The plan is to fully utilise these receipts during the programme period. The capital budget for the programme this financial year was updated at the September half year capital expenditure review to £19,046,212 (which included a roll forward from last year of £9,496,690). The expenditure and commitments at the end of Quarter three were £16,190,366.

The Council had signed an agreement with the Government to deliver the AHP using the available Right to Buy Receipts in accordance with the rules in the agreement. It was noted that the budget for the programme was monitored through the normal budgetary control reports and by the detailed review each quarter, prior to the quarterly returns made to the Government, as illustrated in Appendix C attached to the report.

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Members sought clarification on the monitoring report in particular the used receipts to date and total expenditure 2016/17. Officers explained that funds not spent had to be paid back with a penalty. The graph in the appendix illustrated the committed spent and where receipts had not been retained. It was agreed that this was a complicated accounting mechanism and utilised a lot of Officer time. Officers were thanked for their explanation of the accounting system.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

100. HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY REVIEW:

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) on the Council's Housing Allocation Policy which set out the rules for the Council's Housing Needs Register (HNR) and how priority was awarded to households, based on their housing needs. The Housing Needs Register consists of a list of all applicants looking for affordable, rented and low cost home ownership accommodation in the Welwyn Hatfield Borough. It reflects issues such as overcrowding, health problems and homelessness.

The report noted that the Housing Allocation Policy was reviewed in 2012 in response to changes brought about by the Localism Act 2011, which gave councils greater freedom in the way in which they operated their HNR. The revised policy was approved by full Council in January 2013 and the changes implemented that month.

The Housing and Planning Act 2016 came into force on 12 May 2016 and introduced numerous changes to housing law and planning law, mainly intended to promote homeownership and boost levels of house building in England. A key element of this was the introduction of a 'Pay to Stay' policy for council tenants, which stated that increased rental charges were to be made to tenants of council housing, based on incomes above £31,000. The Government later amended the 'Pay to Stay' policy but the review was already underway and it was agreed to continue with this as other proposed changes were being put forward for consideration.

All the proposed changes aimed to ensure that there would be greater fairness and transparency in the way in which priority was awarded. In some areas, the proposals sought to better manage expectations of applicants, where the current policy may have risen expectations that could not be met.

Members considered the proposals set out in Appendix A – in summary:

- a) To no longer allow older home owners on the HNR unless in financial hardship or other exceptional circumstances would warrant this

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- b) To amend the local connection criteria, so that a person establishes a local connection via employment in the district if they have had that employment for up to a minimum of five years
- c) To not award any priority or bedroom eligibility as a result of a pregnancy, but defer awarding additional priority until the baby is born and birth certificate received
- d) Applicants who have access to children are currently able to bid for 2 bed properties above the 3rd floor, remove this option as it does not result in an allocation
- e) To remove the current priority awarded where someone is living in unsanitary conditions, however to commit to an assessment of homelessness if someone is living in very poor circumstances or their home is potentially insanitary and award any associated priority based on this assessment
- f) To not allow those with current or former tenant arrears on the HNR unless exceptional circumstances exist. If there is a tenancy breach for a current tenant, they should not be allowed to join the HNR
- g) To give tenants living in properties that are to be decommissioned (that is changed from sheltered to general needs usage) the same priority as those moving from general needs housing to sheltered accommodation

Members sought clarification on (a) Home owners accepted on to the HNR – previously noted that over 60+ had sold family home and registered on the list. (b) Local connection – extend the period of employment up to a minimum of five years. (c) Consideration of maternity Certificate – the eligibility for a two bedroom rather than one was considered. (d) Contact with children - Larger properties may sometimes be offered to customers depending on the level of housing demand and the customer’s individual circumstances. There are no regulations for 3rd floor bedrooms for families with children. (e) Living in unsanitary conditions – mostly applied to private rented properties due to poor maintenance. (f) Tenants in breach of their tenancy conditions – the following table was circulated after the meeting which provided clarification:

Tenants in breach of their tenancy agreement (through rent arrears or anti- social behavior) are able to register and bid to move to alternative accommodation	Do not allow those with current arrears or current tenancy breach to register on HNR.
Former tenants with a housing need who have a debt outstanding to the council are able to register and bid for alternative accommodation.	Only allow those onto the HNR who meet the levels of repayment set in the Councils Former Tenant Arrears Policy

(g) Decommissioning of Sheltered Housing – providing tenants living in properties would be decommissioned the same priority as those moving from

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General Needs to sheltered. Most of the sheltered housing requires modernising and some not fit for purpose so require demolishing and reconstructing.

Further discussion ensued on rent arrears and the action been taken to ensure fairness for those tenants that fall into arrears. Officers advised that policies were in place to combat such circumstances and that the Council provided appropriate advice to vulnerable tenants.

RESOLVED:

That the proposed changes set out in Appendix A of this report for wider consultation with applicants and stakeholders.

101. MEASURES TO INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH THE GAS SERVICING, BREAKDOWN AND NEW INSTALLATIONS PROGRAMME - UPDATE:

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) provided an update on the actions being proposed to improve customer satisfaction levels resulting from work carried out by the Council's contracted gas service and breakdown contractor – TSG Ltd. It also highlighted current customer satisfaction levels across the three areas:

- gas boiler installations
- annual servicing
- responsive repairs

An explanation of the current satisfaction levels and the steps proposed to increase satisfaction levels during 2017/18 was provided.

It was noted that a simpler method of capturing customer satisfaction would soon be piloted. This would utilise text messaging, a simple 'Yes'/No' response regarding the satisfaction of the gas servicing or repair will generate a personal response to the customer in the form of a telephone call from a member of the Property Services team to discuss the reason for the dissatisfaction. If successful this format of customer satisfaction survey would be deployed across other areas of work including responsive repairs and planned works. Alternative survey methods for customers with no access to mobile phones would be available, using a revised written survey.

Members asked about the life of a new boiler, installing and meeting targets. It was noted that issues arose when gaining access to properties and this was reflected in the data provided. The work has been spread over the year and TSG know the cycle and prioritise accordingly.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

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Meeting ended at 9.30pm
GP