

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
HOUSING MANAGEMENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

3.00pm 24 MARCH 2009

COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Caulfield (Chairman); Simpson (Opposition Spokesperson), Allen, Davey, Mears, Pidgeon, Simson, Wells and Randall (Opposition Spokesperson)

Tenant Representatives: Chris El-Shabba (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), Stewart Gover (North & East Area Housing Management Panel), Ted Harman (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), Heather Hayes (North & East Area Housing Management Panel), Chris Kift (Central Area Housing Management Panel), Beryl Snelling (Central Area Housing Management Panel), Beverley Weaver (West Hove & Portslade Area Housing Management Panel), Muriel Briault (Leaseholder Action Group), Tom Whiting (Sheltered Housing Action Group), Colin Carden (Older People's Council) and John Melson (Hi Rise Action Group)

PART ONE

61. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

61.1 Declarations of Substitutes

61a.1 Councillor Randall for Councillor Fryer

61a.2 Jean Davis noted that she was in attendance to support Beryl Snelling and would take no part in the meeting.

61b Declarations of Interest

61b.1 Councillors Simpson, Wells, and Randall, Tenant Representatives; Ted Harman and Heather Hayes declared personal interests as Board Members of 'Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes'.

61c. Exclusion of Press and Public

61c.1 In accordance with section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, it was considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of any items contained in the agenda, having regard to the nature of the business to be transacted and the nature of the proceedings and the likelihood as to

whether, if members of the press and public were present, there would be disclosure to them of confidential or exempt information as defined in section 100I (1) of the said Act.

61.4 **RESOLVED** - That the press and public be not excluded from the meeting.

62. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

62.1 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2009 be approved and signed by the Cabinet Member.

63. CABINET MEMBER'S COMMUNICATIONS

63.1 The Chairman informed the meeting of an announcement from Government about a reduction to the guideline rent increase for 2009/10. The announcement had been made without supporting guidance and at an awkward time. While the Chairman supported any initiative to reduce rent increases for tenants, it was not possible to determine how to respond to the announcement. Therefore the current rent increase of 5.45% approved by Cabinet on 12th February and by Council on 26th February remained until further notice.

63.2 The Chairman reported that Local Lettings Plans were being developed. These would be drafted in three phases; the initial Plan would be for Sheltered Housing, with plans for better balanced communities and age restricted lettings developed later.

63.3 The Chairman welcomed a proposal from the High Rise Action Group that the council publish its procedures for the handling of emergencies during 'out-of-hours' periods. Officers had been instructed to review the emergency procedures to ensure that they were robust and consistently applied. Information on the procedures would be included in the revised Tenant Handbook and Tenant Representatives' Handbook.

63.4 The Chairman noted that the Audit Commission had visited earlier in the month to advise and assist on assessment. They had examined resident involvement and income management arrangements, and reviewed the HRA business plan. The inspector had been impressed with the commitment of the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group and had praised the work of residents following visits to meetings of the Asset Management Panel and the 'Our Neighbourhood' local base steering group. A full report on the visit and the recommendations made by the audit commission would be presented to a future meeting.

63.5 The Chairman reported that the Area Panels had confirmed their tenant board members to 'Brighton & Hove Community Seaside Homes'. Further project developments including a number of key elements would be settled by end of March; including drafting legal documents, incorporating the company, and appointing a number of independent members to the board.

63.6 The economic situation had made it more difficult to secure funding within the original timeframe; however a number of funders had expressed interest. Consent was required from the Secretary of State to allow the council to lease properties to the company and meetings with the Communities for Local Government) had been held to progress this.

63.7 The Chairman paid tribute to Ted Kitchen and John Jolliffe both of whom had recently passed away. The committee observed a minutes silence in respect.

63.8 The committee noted that the Senior Democratic Support Officer was taking a secondment to the Policy Team for a few months. In wishing him well they noted that Caroline De Marco and Kirsty Walker would be covering his work in the interim.

64. ITEMS RESERVED FOR DISCUSSION

64.1 All items were reserved.

65. PETITIONS

65.1 There were none.

66. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

66.1 There were none.

67. DEPUTATIONS

67.1 There were none.

68. LETTERS FROM COUNCILLORS

68.1 There were none.

69. WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

69.1 There were none.

70. NOTICES OF MOTIONS

70.1 There were none.

71. ALLOCATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS POLICY REVIEW

71.1 The committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing that detailed amendments to the current Allocations and Adaptations policy (for copy see minute book).

71.2 Heather Hayes noted that many families were overcrowded. Some families with children were living in one-bed roomed accommodation yet rated as 'Band C'. The parents could be working and find it difficult to find time to bid for a new home.

71.3 The Chairman noted there was not enough housing stock to cope with the current volume of tenants. Officers added that there were be separate strategies to assist working families and overcrowded families. This would include training for Housing Officers.

- 71.4 Stewart Gover felt that tenants needed to be informed that there were differences between the old Brighton Council Tenancy Agreements and the more recent Brighton & Hove City Council Tenancy Agreements. He also felt it important that tenants realised that policy debarring persons from becoming housed due to poor behaviour could be annulled by the council's duty of care under the Children's Act.
- 71.5 John Melson felt it inequitable that some retiring council employees should be afforded 'Band A' status because their tied accommodation ceased with their employment. He noted that many non-council employees in a similar position did not benefit from similar schemes.
- 71.6 Officers and Members noted that this point had been widely consulted on and had also been custom and practice for many years. It affected only a small (and reducing) number of staff.
- 71.7 John suggested that the 'downsizing' policy should include some flexibility that recognised the size of the property being relinquished.
- 71.8 John felt that the practice of holding multiple viewings for properties could be difficult for home seekers who were less confident or uncomfortable in the presence of others. Officers explained that those attending a viewing with others were made aware that there was a 'priority' homeseeker and that they had first choice. The viewings were carefully handled so as not to cause discomfort and arrangements could be made for 'one-to-one' viewings if requested. The benefit of multiple viewings was that it saved time and increased the letting rate of properties.
- 71.9 John was concerned about the six-month review that was carried out if persons in 'Band A' had not been successful in finding a home. Officers commented that the review was undertaken to see if there were reasons deterring the homeseeker from finding appropriate accommodation.
- 71.10 Councillor Simson noted that there had been occasions when the 'priority tenant' had not attended the viewing and others present felt that they were therefore afforded priority. Officers recognised the situation and had dealt with this in the past. These were exceptional circumstances and had demanded a deal of diplomacy and sensitivity in speaking to the affected parties.
- 71.11 Councillor Wells was concerned about the proposal to change the age-threshold for sheltered housing. He also felt that there ought to be an age threshold for bungalows.
- 71.12 The Chairman noted that these issues would be considered when developing Local Lettings Plans.
- 71.13 Ted Harman was concerned that, as a Tenant Representative, he received no information about people moving in or out of the area. Communication from the local housing office was very poor.
- 71.14 The Director noted that the issue of communications was being addressed. This would be discussed with the Area Panels.

- 71.15 Sue Hansen asked for clarification on the role and communication for the Tenant Disability Network Representative. The Assistant Director offered to put Sue in touch with the Accessible Housing Officer.
- 71.16 Councillor Randall welcomed the policy but noted that it didn't provide any additional housing. He noted that there had been an estimated ninety thousand fewer lettings nationwide last year because of the chronic shortage of properties. He hoped that the policy would be enacted with sympathy and sensitivity to client groups.
- 71.17 Councillor Randall welcomed the proposals for Local Lettings Plans and noted the need to develop 'bespoke' lettings plans also.
- 71.18 Councillor Randall noted work carried out by Islington Council. They had upgraded a block of flats, making it more attractive to people in their fifties. This had acted as a catalyst to encourage many to downsize and free their under-occupied homes for families.
- 71.19 Councillor Randall reported the appreciation of the Women's Refuge for the work the council carried out in response to domestic violence. He reported that incidents of domestic violence were increasing in relation to the economic downturn. There would be pressure on the council to provide accommodation for victims, and for those suffering other forms of abuse.
- 71.20 Councillor Randall recognised the work of Tenant Representatives in welcoming new residents to their communities. He suggested this ambassadorial role be capitalised upon and given greater support.
- 71.21 Councillor Simpson was concerned that the council were unable to respond adequately to overcrowding issues. She also felt that more assistance should be offered to those who found the bidding process difficult; she felt that this was an under-reported problem.
- 71.22 Councillor Allen noted that the new policy proposed that '*an applicant with outstanding rent arrears or other housing-related debts owed to the City Council or to other social landlords in Sussex will not be allocated housing if there are other applicants eligible for housing under this policy*'. He asked if this was legal.
- 71.23 The Senior Lawyer advised that a policy which precluded a tenant with rent arrears or other housing related debts from ever being re-housed would be unlawful. However, the inclusion of the words, "In exceptional circumstances" prevented the proposed policy from being absolute. As such, there would be no unlawful fettering of the Council's discretion.
- 71.24 Beryl Snelling felt that Sheltered Housing should be removed from the Choice Based Letting system. She noted that there already existed an Assessment Officer for sheltered housing.
- 71.25 The Assistant Director replied that the Choice Based Letting system was the most transparent system that the council had used (to date) for letting properties.

- 71.26 Heather asked if the six-month review applied to those people willing to downsize. Officers explained that it did not apply to them.
- 71.27 Tom Whiting felt that Choice Based Letting was a more costly and less efficient way of allocating properties. He felt it should be at least as efficient than the previous system.
- 71.28 Tom supported Councillor Wells' in monitoring the age threshold of some properties, noting that social compatibility could be managed in this instance, leading to greater harmony amongst communities.
- 71.29 John Melson noted that age restrictions might be difficult to manage in blocks where flats had been sold. The council had no right to limit the rights of leaseholders as to whom they sold their property to.
- 71.30 Stewart noted the comments made by Councillor Randall at a previous meeting that alluded to the fact that Choice Based Letting worked well when there was a surplus of housing but was less successful when housing was at a premium. Stewart felt the latter scenario was relevant to Brighton and that Choice Based Lettings should be discontinued.
- 71.31 Chris Kift felt that the proposed opportunity for sheltered housing residents to move within their own schemes should be extended citywide. This would enable tenants to free-up properties but benefit from the support networks they had developed within their communities.
- 71.32 Chris was frustrated by the slow progress of the proposals developed by the Chairman's Allocations Working Group. The Chairman noted that progress was being made and that some of the delay was due to the requirement to consult with Registered Social Landlords in the City.
- 71.33 **RESOLVED** – That, having considered the information and the reasons set out in the report, the Housing Management Consultative Committee accepted the following recommendation

(1) That the Allocations and Adaptations Policy be endorsed as amended.

72. HOUSING MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE REPORT

- 72.1 The committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing that provided information on the performance of Housing Management (for copy see minute book)
- 72.2 Councillor Randall noted that the information relating to empty properties did not include those undergoing major works.
- 72.3 John Melson asked if future reports could include information about anti-social behaviour and the persistence of perpetrators.
- 72.4 John praised the work of officers in respect of works carried out at Wiltshire House and Somerset Point. He felt that the consultation with residents had been excellent and

hoped the stance taken by the project managers could be adopted wholesale for all large repairs works.

- 72.5 Officers suggested that as well as reporting on prescribed targets, future reports could include information specifically requested by the committee.
- 72.6 Heather asked why empty properties were not being bought up to Decent Homes Standard while they were unoccupied. Officers commented that this was done where possible, but had to be affordable.
- 72.7 Heather felt that all repairs should be surveyed to ensure quality and value for money. Officers noted that this was being addressed; one option being considered was to include Tenant Representatives in the process.
- 72.8 Councillor Allen noted the improvement in rent arrears. He felt however that the 7.6% target for persons in more than seven weeks arrears was too low. Officers agreed to revisit this target.
- 72.9 Councillor Davey noted that there were lots of complaints about quality of work. He asked when this situation was likely to improve. The Chair noted that recent figures indicated that performance was improving and the trend was positive. She was sure that the new repairs contracts would be more robust than present and that quality would improve.
- 72.10 Ted Harman felt that there was plenty of evidence that current repairs work was poor. He was frustrated that reports of poor work did not appear to be responded to.
- 72.11 Chris noted that reports of poor work at St. James House had been responded too. He was pleased with the officer response and hopeful that the problems would be rectified. Councillor Mears had visited St. James House and was aware of the situation. She praised officers for their response.
- 72.13 Stewart asked if a new stock survey was taking place. Officers explained that specific surveys were taking place to examine particular issues; this alongside a general 'rolling' survey examining the fabric of buildings.
- 72.14 John felt that information should be provided about the maintenance of buildings alongside information about their repair.
- 72.15 Beryl asked how the council were affected if contractors downsized due to the recession. Officers explained that the 'partnering arrangement' with contractors meant that the recession had a negligible impact on the council in this respect.
- 72.16 **RESOLVED** – That the report be noted.

73. SHELTERED HOUSING FOCUS GROUP UPDATE

- 73.1 The committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing that reported the work of the Sheltered Housing Focus Group. This group had examined

issues raised by tenants concerning council owned sheltered housing in the City (for copy see minute book).

- 73.2 Stewart was concerned that there remained several empty flats at Ainsworth House. Officers commented that these were difficult to let because of the shared facilities on site.
- 73.4 Beryl suggested that, should the building be used for other purposes in future, consideration should be given to a safe space for women.
- 73.5 Councillor Simson noted that there were residents in situ and that any discussions about the future use of the property would need to include them and be mindful of the sensitivities demanded by the situation.
- 73.6 Tom welcomed the report and the visits to Sheltered Schemes that officers and Members had carried out.
- 73.7 Tom requested a written record of the jobs yet to be carried out in respect of sheltered housing.
- 73.8 **RESOLVED** – That, having considered the information and the reasons set out in the report, the Housing Management Consultative Committee accepted the following recommendation

(1) That the progress of the Sheltered Housing Focus Group, following visits to sheltered housing schemes detailed in the report, be noted.

74. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT - UPDATED 2009/10 CAPITAL PROGRAMME

- 74.1 The committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing that sought approval for the revised 2009/10 Capital Programme for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), this took into consideration the current resources available and investment priorities (for copy see minute book).
- 74.2 The Chairman asked if issues identified by the current electrical survey could be incorporated into the Capital Programme. Officers explained that this was possible.
- 74.3 The Chairman asked if it would be possible for a rough timetable noting the proposed dates for the installation of new kitchens, bathrooms and front doors, this would help Councillors and Tenant Representatives deal with queries from tenants. Officers offered to provide a 6 month programme.
- 74.5 Councillor Simson suggested that better use could be made of the car park at St. James House, though it was available for public use there was little knowledge of this fact.
- 74.6 John asked how recent Decent Homes improvements were being paid for, he understood that these were to be funded by the LDV. Officers explained that there was a budget for the current work. The monies raised by the LDV would be in addition.

- 74.7 John felt that greater emphasis was required on sustainability. The Chairman noted that the 'Energy Efficiency Group' had recently held its first meeting and would be focussing on such issues.
- 74.8 Stewart was concerned about the lack of fire risk assessments being carried out. Officers commented that progress was being made, though it was recognised that more needed to be done. Heather and Chris noted the need for appropriate fire signage in buildings; many were dangerously out of date or gave incorrect advice.
- 74.9 Stewart asked how the salaries of those managing the Capital Programme were paid. Officers explained that this was funded from the Housing Revenue Account.
- 74.10 Ted noted that the new front doors provided were very heavy and difficult for some people to manage. The Director noted that there were solutions available.
- 74.11 Councillor Simpson requested that any slippage was reported back to the committee.
- 74.12 Councillor Simpson asked if there was a programme of works waiting to be launched as and when the LDV was bought into being. The Chairman explained that there was a plan in place.
- 74.13 Beryl noted that Capital Works were sometimes carried out by moving them to the Estate Development Budget. She felt this was inappropriate and asked if it could be monitored.
- 74.14 Officers commented that the increased Capital Programme would remedy some of the bids to EDB and that discussions had been held with the EDB project team to monitor the situation.
- 74.15 John suggested that Tenant Associations be given better information as regards the Capital Programme. This should be supplied as appropriate to each block and would help Tenant Associations in making more appropriate bids to the EDB.
- 74.16 The Assistant Director noted that improved training for those involved was available and might be appropriate for new Tenant Representatives.
- 74.17 Councillor Randall asked about the budget for Adaptations was committed if there were enough Occupational Therapists. The Assistant Director noted that the budget was fully committed and that O/T capacity was good.
- 74.18 Chris suggested that solar panels should be placed on the roof of St. James House; it was the largest roof in Brighton and was south facing.
- 74.19 The Chairman noted that funding had been set aside to investigate solar energy for appropriate buildings.
- 74.20 Ted noted that there were at least two Major schemes in Coldean that remained incomplete; one from 2003. The Chairman requested officers investigate.

74.21 Ted felt that if the current poor quality of work was not addressed it would negatively impact on the aspirations of the LDV.

74.22 **RESOLVED** – That, having considered the information and the reasons set out in the report, the Housing Management Consultative Committee accepted the following recommendation

(1) To recommend to Cabinet approval of the HRA revised capital programme of £20.613 million for 2009/10.

The meeting concluded at 6.15pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of