

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
HOUSING MANAGEMENT CONSULTATIVE SUB-COMMITTEE

3.00pm 29 OCTOBER 2013

COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Randall (Chair); Councillor Peltzer Dunn (Opposition Spokesperson), Farrow (Opposition Spokesperson), Davey, Kennedy, Mears, Pidgeon and Pissaridou

Tenant Representatives

PART ONE

19. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

19(a) Declarations of Substitute Members

19.1 Councillor Pissaridou declared that she was attending as a substitute for Councillor Wilson

19(b) Declarations of Interests

19.2 Councillor Randall and Mr R Crowhurst, as board members of Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes, declared a Disclosable pecuniary interest and a personal interest respectively in item 32 and said they would leave the Council Chamber during consideration of that item.

19.3 As Councillor Randall was not able to Chair item 32, and as there was no Deputy Chair for the Housing Management Consultative Sub Committee nominations were requested for the position. Councillor Farrow nominated Councillor Kennedy, and Councillor Mears seconded. No other names were put forward and so Councillor Kennedy was appointed Chair for item 32.

19(c) Exclusion of the Press and Public

19.4 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.

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

20. MINUTES

20.1 The Sub Committee considered the Minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2013.

20.2 RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the Housing Management Consultative Sub Committee held on 3 September 2013 be agreed and signed as a correct record.

21. CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

21.1 The Chair informed the Sub Committee that due to personal reasons Jean Davis, representative for the Central Area Housing Panel, had resigned from her position. He thanked her very much for all her work and said she would be missed and wished her all the best for the future. Councillor Peltzer Dunn, Councillor Mears and Mr Melson added their thanks and best wishes. Ms Davis thanked everyone for their kind words, and said that although she would no longer be an elected representative she would continue to support her fellow tenants.

21.2 The Chair was pleased to advise the Sub Committee that Mears Brighton Branch, had been selected by the National Apprentice Service as a finalist for Regional Winner – Employer of the Year (South Central Region). They later won the award at a ceremony at Fareham College. Mears will now be recognised at the National Level Awards Ceremony, which is due to be held at the Skills Show at the NEC Birmingham on 14 November 2013.

22. CALL-OVER

22.1 **RESOLVED** – That all items be reserved for discussion

23. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

23.1 (a) There were no petitions
(b) There were no written questions
(c) There were no deputations

24. ISSUES RAISED BY MEMBERS OF THE SUB COMMITTEE

24.1 There were no petitions, written questions, letters or notices of motion.

25. SUSTAINABLE TENANCIES STRATEGY (WELFARE REFORM)

25.1 The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing on Sustainable Tenancies Strategy (Welfare Reform). The report was presented by Ms Dafe, the Head of Income, Involvement & Improvement

(Housing). The report provided information on the sustainable tenancies strategy, which outlined the work being undertaken in response to welfare reform.

- 25.2 The Chair thanked officers for the report, and for the work the housing department were doing in response to the substantial changes taking place.
- 25.3 Councillor Farrow referred to Table 2 in the draft strategy and asked for clarification on how the 'most deprived lower super output areas' were identified, and why his ward of Moulsecoomb and Bevendean was not included in the top five areas. Officers explained that areas of deprivation were identified nationally using a set formula which looked at things such as health, education, income etc. The Department of Communities and Local Government provided a report every four to five years listing deprived areas. The draft strategy listed the most deprived areas in the city and Moulsecoomb and Bevendean was not one of those. Officers said they didn't have the information with them at the meeting, but would let him know after the meeting where his ward was ranked.
- 25.4 Councillor Pissaridou referred to Appendix 1 and asked how many tenants would be affected by the welfare reforms. Officers said that it wasn't possible to provide the exact number but it was likely that it would have an effect on all tenants of working age. Tenants who were in employment and those over 65 would be least affected.
- 25.5 Councillor Mears referred to Appendix 1 and noted that for the review of the closure of Manor Place 21 residents had been spoken to, and asked if more information on the review could be provided. Officers agreed and said a report would be brought to a future meeting.
- 25.6 Mr Crowhurst said that it was likely that the under occupancy benefit reduction would apply to the over 65s from 2015, and asked if work was being done now to mitigate the impact it may have. Officers said that they were focusing on tenants affected by the changes currently in force, but if further reforms were brought in it would impact on Sheltered Housing and that would need to be looked at. Councillor Farrow said that he was also concerned about the possible impact on the over 65s and requested that officers collect statistics on those who could be affected. The Chair accepted the concerns but said that at the moment officers were too busy to take on further work.
- 25.7 Mr Penrose questioned the current sheltered housing policy and was concerned that someone in full time employment, or under 65, qualified for the housing. Mr Crowhurst said that it might appear that someone didn't qualify for sheltered housing, but all those allocated the accommodation would have a support need. The policy to allow those over 50 to be considered for sheltered housing had been in place for a number of years. The Chair said the sheltered housing allocation policy may need to be reviewed in the future.
- 25.8 **RESOLVED: That the draft Sustainable Tenancies Strategy be noted.**

26. INCOME COLLECTION AND ARREARS MANAGEMENT

- 26.1 Ms Dafe, the Head of Income, Involvement & Improvement (Housing) gave a presentation on Income Collection and Arrears Management. Area Panels had received the same information at their recent meetings.
- 26.2 Councillor Farrow said that he would have preferred to have a written report on this matter and not a presentation. He noted that one of the reasons given for tenants not paying their rent was that they 'wouldn't pay', and asked for evidence that that was true. Officers said at the previous meeting information had been provided on income collection as part of the performance report, and members had asked for a presentation providing further details. A report could be brought to a future meeting if required, and that could include anonymised examples of those in arrears.
- 26.3 Councillor Farrow said that the Housing Committee had previously agreed that those in arrears from the reduction in Housing Benefit due to under occupancy would not be evicted, and was concerned that some tenants were having recovery action started against them. Ms Dafe said that it had been agreed that where arrears were solely due to the under-occupancy penalty, officers would use all means other than evictions and bailiffs to recover rent due and officers were acting in accordance with that. The Chair confirmed there had been no change in policy.
- 26.4 Councillor Pissaridou asked where tenants would go if they were evicted. Ms Dafe said that officers worked tirelessly to assist tenants in arrears and eviction was very much a last option.
- 26.5 Councillor Mears was concerned that a high number of tenants were up to £1000 in arrears. The Chair said that many of those were only a few pence in arrears, and he had now asked for very small amounts to be written off as it wasn't economical to recover. Some of those with higher arrears included those where the Court of Protection was involved, and it wasn't possible to pursue the shortfall.
- 26.6 Councillor Peltzer Dunn noted that they had been told that there was arrears of £138k relating to arrears accrued from changes to Housing Benefit, but from the information provided it should only be arrears of £72k.
- 26.7 Mr Penrose suggested that if tenants were paying by Direct Debit the rent may be paid two weeks in advance or in arrears and that could impact on the figure given for the level of arrears.
- 26.8 **RESOLVED: That the presentation be noted.**

27. HOUSING OFFICE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY

- 27.1 Ms R Chasseaud, Head of Tenancy Services, gave a presentation on Access to Housing Services, the Housing Office Accommodation Strategy. Ms Chasseaud said that Area Panels had been consulted and a report would be going to the next Housing Committee on this matter.
- 27.2 Councillor Peltzer Dunn noted that there was an intention to allow tenants to pay their rent by credit card, and was concerned that it was encouraging people to get into debt and that there would be cost implication to the authority. Officers apologised and said

that was an error and it was only debit cards that they were considering as a payment option.

- 27.3 Councillor Mears noted that the proposals had been discussed at Area Panels but their comments had not been included in the presentation. Councillor Mears was concerned that the needs of tenants were being overlooked and they needed the housing office at Selsfield Drive to pay their rent and speak to officers when needed.
- 27.4 Councillor Farrow said the office served a number of wards and it was important to have a physical presence in the area. He was concerned that with the forthcoming cuts the future of libraries was not certain, and therefore questioned whether the housing office should move to the library.
- 27.5 Councillor Pissaridou felt that tenants should lead on this, and their comments and feelings should be included in any report on the relocation of the housing office.
- 27.6 Councillor Kennedy said that she had recently chaired an Area Panel and the tenants had been generally happy with the proposals. It had been an omission not to include the feedback from Area Panels, and that would be included in the forthcoming report. Councillor Kennedy reminded the Sub Committee that the housing office at Selsfield Drive only served an average of 16 customers a day and staff would be able to speak to those who used the office on a one to one basis.
- 27.7 Mr Melson was concerned at the proposals and felt that tenants were being isolated and marginalised with a constant diminution of services.
- 27.8 The Chair said that in the current economic situation they had to look at the services provided and make tough decisions. Moving the office to the library would also help to keep the library open. Officers would be available at the library for tenants, and a service would be maintained. He agreed that feedback from the Area Panels should be included in the report to the Housing Committee. If the proposal to close Selsfield Drive office was agreed it would release the site to build additional social housing. The Chair confirmed that a report would go to the Housing Committee and, if the proposals were agreed, to the Policy & Resources Committee.
- 27.9 **RESOLVED: That the presentation be noted.**

28. ANNUAL REVIEW OF REPAIRS PARTNERSHIP 2012/13

- 28.1 The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing on the Annual Review of Repairs Partnership 2012/13. The report was presented by Mr Huelin, Partnering Business Manager (Housing).
- 28.2 Councillor Farrow thanked Mr Huelin for the report, and asked if an interim report could be provided to look at the performance of the repairs desk and with resident's satisfaction with the service. The Chair agreed.
- 28.3 Mr Crowhurst referred to paragraph 3.2, regarding properties meeting the government's Decent Homes Standard, and asked whether that was achievable when elderly people in sheltered housing were still sharing communal bathrooms. The Chair said there were

some properties with shared facilities, but that was acceptable within the Decent Homes Standard.

- 28.4 Mr Melson thanked officers for the report and asked whether Mears would need to employ more people to implement the action plan, and if so what the cost implications would be. Mr Cryer (Mears Ltd) said there shouldn't be an increase in staff costs, and gave an example of changes to the helpdesk. A review had shown that the great majority of calls were received on Mondays and Tuesdays. The company currently had six members of staff dedicated to answering the phone, and those staff members hours were changed to ensure they were working during the busiest times. An additional member of staff would be employed to assist with taking calls, but the changes in working hours would lead to a reduction in overtime payments, and the financial savings would pay for a new member of staff and so there would be no cost implications.
- 28.5 Councillor Peltzer Dunn noted that previously Councillors had questioned the method used to assess customer satisfaction and asked if that had been looked at. Mr Cryer said that it had, and Mears would soon be providing customers with a survey card which they could complete and returned by Freepost, so there would be no cost implications for the customer. Completed surveys would be entered into a prize draw, which they hoped would encourage people to return the survey.
- 28.6 Councillor Peltzer Dunn referred to paragraph 3.10 and was concerned that the target for 'percentage of repairs completed right first time' was 97% and suggested that the target should be 100%. Officers said that there would always be cases where it wasn't possible to fully complete a job in one go. For example, a leaking roof might not be able to be fully repaired at one visit but a temporary repair may be made whilst waiting for material to be available to fully complete the job. Officers said they would ensure that a better explanation would be provided in the next report.
- 28.7 Mr Penrose asked if there was any way that Mears could take control of sub contractors. Mr Cryer said that a percentage of sub contractors work was inspected, and the team which carried out the inspection had recently been strengthened with the employment of a surveyor.
- 28.8 The Chair thanked officers for the report, and suggested that the recommendations be amended to reflect the interim report agreed in 28.2.
- 28.9 **RESOLVED –**
- (1) That the Sub Committee note the report
 - (2) That an interim report be provided to look at the performance of the repairs desk and with resident satisfaction.

29. HOUSING MANAGEMENT PETS POLICY

- 29.1 The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing on Housing Management Pet Policy. The report was presented by Ms Hitchens, Senior Neighbourhood Officer. The report provided information on the proposed new pet policy.

- 29.2 Councillor Farrow thanked officers for the excellent report. He referred to paragraph 9 of the policy relating to keeping reptiles, amphibians and spiders and asked whether the authority should consider not allowing reptiles to be kept as pets. Councillor Peltzer Dunn referred to paragraph 4.8 and noted there was some confusion over neutering of pets. Officers agreed that the wording was confusing and that it would be amended. With regard to reptiles, the policy did recommend that tenants did not keep them and if they did, would need to prove they would be kept appropriately. The RSPCA would be involved in any assessment.
- 29.3 Ms Hayes asked what would happen to tenants who currently kept reptiles. The Chair confirmed that the policy was not retrospective.
- 29.4 Councillors Davey and Peltzer Dunn both felt that it would be inappropriate to ban the keeping of reptiles, and whilst they may not agree with it, it was for individual to decide if they wanted to keep them as pets.
- 29.5 **RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the comments of the Sub Committee be noted
 - (2) That the Sub Committee recommends to the Housing Committee that the Pet Policy be adopted.

30. FIRE SAFETY IN TOWER BLOCK

- 30.1 Mr Ben'Okagbue, Head of Property and Investment (Housing), and Mr Richard Fowler, Fire Officer, gave a presentation on Fire Safety in Tower Blocks.
- 30.2 Councillor Peltzer Dunn thanked officers for the presentation. He asked what action was being taken on providing suitable storage of mobility scooters. Mr Ben'Okagbue said the programme was in its early stages, and he didn't have all the information with him but he could confirm that four locations had so far been completed. Officers were looking at other sites such as storage units which were not being used, empty garage sites etc. Ms Gray was aware that one unit had been finished, but was not available for use and asked why. Mr Ben'Okagbue said he wasn't able to confirm why it couldn't be used now, but would find out. The Chair asked that a written answer be provided for members of the Sub Committee.
- 30.3 Ms Gray said that in the reception area where she lived all the chairs had been removed on the understanding that they would be replaced with pull down seats, but to date no new ones had not been installed. Ms Davis said that in Leach Court all the seats had also been taken out, and they were supposed to be replaced with fire-proof ones. They had now been told that there was no money to replace and the cost of replacing them would have to come from the EDB budget. Ms Gray said that a bid had been submitted to EDB for 18 new seats, but was told there would only be sufficient funds to pay for 3 seats. The Chair said that matter would be looked into.
- 30.4 Mr Fowler said that Brighton & Hove City Council and the Fire Authority were working in partnership to look at the installation of sprinklers in high rise flats. Sprinklers were an effective way to tackle the early stages of a fire and would improve safety for both residents and fire fighters. There was a cost implication of installing the sprinklers, but if

there was fire damage to a property the cost of repairs could be below the threshold and therefore would need to be borne out of the Housing Revenue Account. The cost of installation could therefore be offset by any potential fire repairs. It was hoped that there would be some match funding from the Fire Authority to finance the installation. A pilot project was being looked at.

- 30.5 The Chair asked Mr Fowler how disruptive installation could be for tenants. He was advised that a recent project in Sheffield for a building with 47 flats over 13 floors, had taken one month to complete.
- 30.6 Mr Melson asked what would activate the sprinklers and whether they would be interconnected. Mr Fowler said they would be connected, but to set one off there would need to be a fire directly underneath with a heat source which had reached 70°; smoke alone would not activate the sprinkler.
- 30.7 The Chair referred to the match funding and asked if the Fire Authority were also working with other authorities. Mr Fowler said the funding would be allocated where the greatest risk was, and that was currently with high rise buildings.
- 30.8 **RESOLVED** That the presentation be noted.

31. HOUSING AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 16-25 JOINT COMMISSIONING STRATEGY

- 31.1 The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing on Housing and Support for Young People Aged 16-25 Joint Commissioning Strategy. The report was presented by Ms Sundar, Head of Housing Support. The report had already been considered by the Housing Committee and the Children and Young People Committee, and was coming to this meeting for information.
- 31.2 Members thanked her for the report.
- 31.3 **RESOLVED: That the Sub Committee note the report.**

32. UPDATE ON BRIGHTON & HOVE SEASIDE COMMUNITY HOMES BATCHING AND REFURBISHMENTS

- 32.1 The Chair and Mr Crowhurst left the room prior to the presentation of this item.
- 32.2 The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing which provided an update on Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes batching and refurbishment. The report was presented by Mr Ben'Okagbue, Head of Property and Investment (Housing). The report set out the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) position with regards to the batching of dwellings for lease to Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes (BHSC) in Batch 8, and provided an update on the progress of current refurbishment of BHSC properties. The report set out the proposals for bringing forward one of the batches from May 2014 to March 2014.

- 32.3 Councillor Peltzer Dunn thanked officers for the report, and said that it made sense to transfer properties as soon as possible.
- 32.4 Councillor Mears asked for clarity that officers had delegated powers to approve the variation to the contract. Ms L Woodley, solicitor confirmed that they did. The solicitor said that the deal had originally been agreed by a Special Cabinet meeting on 16th September 2011. The Special Cabinet authorised the Strategic Director of Place, the Chief Executive and the Director of Finance, after consulting the Deputy Leader (Executive) and Cabinet Members for Housing and Finance to:
- (a) Settle any outstanding or new issues that may arise during negotiations,*
 - (b) Settle the terms of the required suite of documents with Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes Limited and the Funders,*
 - (c) Decide on the properties to be leased to the company; and*
 - (d) Take all steps necessary or incidental to completion and/or implementation of the overall transaction.*
- The Head of Law was authorised to draft, finalise and execute all documents necessary to completion and/or implementation of the overall transaction. The deal as completed a week later recognised that batches could be brought forward with the agreement of the parties (BHCC, Seaside and Santander) and if Batch 8 was to come on stream earlier it would not trigger a Deed of Variation. Provided that the Strategic Director of Place, the Chief Executive and the Director of Finance were happy to exercise their delegated authority, there would be no need for a further committee report.
- 32.5 Councillor Peltzer Dunn asked whether a further report on this matter would come to the next Housing Committee meeting for a decision. The solicitor said that would not be necessary as there was no decision to be made as officers had delegated powers on this matter.
- 32.6 **RESOLVED** – That the report be noted.

The meeting concluded at 6.55pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of