

**BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL**

**HOUSING MANAGEMENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE**

**3.00pm 8 FEBRUARY 2010**

**COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillors Caulfield (Chairman); Allen, Carden, Davey, Fryer, Mears, Older, Pidgeon and Wells

**Tenant Representatives:** Stewart Gover (North & East Area Housing Management Panel), Ted Harman (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), Chris Kift (Central Area Housing Management Panel), David Murtagh (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), Beverley Weaver (West Hove & Portslade Area Housing Management Panel), John Melson (Hi Rise Action Group) and Barry Kent (Tenant Disability Network)

**PART ONE**

**58. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS**

**58A Declarations of Substitute Members**

58.1 Councillor Older substituted for Councillor Barnett. Councillor Allen substituted for Councillor Simpson. Trish Barnard substituted for Beryl Snelling.

**58B Declarations of Interests**

58.2 Councillor Wells, Ted Harman and Trish Barnard declared a personal interest in any discussion on the LDV as they are Board Members of Brighton and Hove Seaside Community Homes (the Local Delivery Vehicle).

**58C Exclusion of the Press and Public**

58.3 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.

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

## 59. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

59.1 Councillor Allen referred to paragraph 44.3 and questioned whether the Special meeting of the HMCC had been held and if so why minutes were not available. The Chairman confirmed that an informal meeting of the HMCC had been held on 8 February 2010 and that minutes had been circulated. Some members said that they had not received the minutes and they were re-circulated to these members. The Senior Lawyer confirmed that her instructions were that the meeting was just an update and not a formal meeting. Therefore the normal access to information rules did not apply. Councillor Allen expressed the view that the discussion on the LDV should have been at a formal meeting of the HMCC. John Melson concurred.

59.2 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2009 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

## 60. CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS

### Local Lettings Scheme

60.1 The Chairman explained that residents had expressed concern the local lettings scheme was not working as they would wish. The Chairman had asked the Assistant Director, Housing Management to investigate this matter and ensure that tenants received the service that had been agreed at a previous HMCC meeting.

### Joy Hollister

60.2 The Chairman explained that Joy Hollister, Director of Adult Social Care & Housing was leaving the council. As a result, there would be changes at director level. Scott Marshall would become the Director of Housing, Culture and Enterprise.

### Grounds Maintenance

60.3 The Cabinet Member reported that good progress continued to be made on the review of the Grounds Maintenance service.

60.4 Meetings had been held with Estates Service Monitoring Group before Christmas and in January. The group had been enthusiastic about being involved in the project and were working to develop a service to meet the needs and aspirations of residents.

60.5 The group would be:

- reviewing the current service,
- looking at how other housing organisations provide their service, and
- developing a specification for the new service.

They would also work with city parks to explore new and innovative ways of maintaining the council's green spaces (such as opportunities for conservation, wild flower planting, food growing and allotments)

60.6 A detailed report would be brought to a future meeting.

### **Mobility Scooter Policy Update**

60.7 The Cabinet Member reported that officers were working with a focus group of tenants to develop a mobility scooter policy. This would be presented to the next HMCC on 29 March 2010.

60.8 The Fire Authority had said that mobility scooters must not be stored or charged in common parts of buildings. As a landlord, the council needed to respond to this important safety advice, but also work with residents to find alternative solutions for those who use scooters.

60.9 A scoping exercise was being undertaken by Community Wardens to identify where mobility scooters are currently being stored in common parts. Where residents already have mobility scooters, solutions would be sought on a block by block basis, including site specific risk assessment.

60.10 Robert Keelan, Housing Manager, was leading this work.

### **Choice Based Lettings**

60.11 The Cabinet Member informed members that she was proposing a review of the Choice Based Lettings system, with a view to moving away from it. She suggested that a working group of tenants was set up to investigate what was happening in other local authorities.

60.12 Members welcomed the Chairman's proposals and there was general agreement that Choice Based Lettings were not working. Councillor Mears suggested that this matter be discussed under Chairman's Communications at the Area Panels and that facilities be set up for voting on the issue.

60.13 The Assistant Director, Housing Management explained that a limited number of local authorities were not using Choice Based Lettings, although the majority are. Locally it was important to look at how the council can make best use of all the housing available, including the private rented sector.

## **61. CALLOVER**

61.1 The Chairman asked the Committee to consider which items listed on the agenda it wished to debate and determine in full.

61.2 **RESOLVED** - That all items be reserved for debate and determination.

## **62. PETITIONS**

62.1 There were none.

**63. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

63.1 There were none.

**64. DEPUTATIONS**

64.1 There were none.

**65. LETTERS FROM COUNCILLORS**

65.1 There were none.

**66. WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

66.1 There were none.

**67. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET 2010/11**

- 67.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing and Director of Finance & Resources which presented the Housing Revenue Account Forecast Outturn for 2009/10 as at month 6 and the proposed Budget for 2010/11 as required by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Members were required to consider the budget proposals including changes to rents, fees and charges as well as savings and service pressures.
- 67.2 Councillor Mears drew attention to paragraph 3.10 and expressed concern that the overall subsidy position was an increase in "Negative Subsidy" (the transfer of resources to the government) of £1.590 million to £3.321 million. Councillor Mears stressed that this was money that should be spent on housing stock.
- 67.3 Stewart Gover suggested that a strong letter be sent to the government about the issue of the increase in "Negative Subsidy" to £3.321 million.
- 67.4 Chris Kift expressed concern about the rise in heating costs, particularly in Whitehawk. He complained about the overheating of St James House and stressed that tenants were paying for this service. There was a need for better insulation.
- 67.5 The Assistant Director Housing Management reported that heating costs were higher in blocks with gas central heating following a 53% increase in the gas contract in 2008. This contract would be ending soon. Officers would need to ensure there was better value for money with the contract in future. Meanwhile, there were proposals for overcladding blocks in Whitehawk with high heating costs. A project group would look at funding opportunities via the Community Energy Savings Programme.
- 67.6 **RESOLVED** – (1) That Cabinet be requested to recommend Council to:
- (a) Approve the budget for 2010/11 as shown in Appendix 1.

(b) Approve individual rent increases and decreases in line with rent restructuring principles as determined by the Government.

(c) Approve the changes to fees and charges as detailed in paragraph 3.14 to 3.23 of the report.

(2) That a letter be sent to central government about the issue of “negative subsidy”.

## **68. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2010 - 2013**

- 68.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing and the Director of Finance & Resources that sought approval for the 2010/11 capital programme and provided a provisional capital programme for the following two years, 2011/12 & 2012/13, for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report took into consideration the latest resources available and investment priorities.
- 68.2 The council’s Housing Revenue Account (HRA) related to the council’s landlord duties in respect of approximately 12,300 properties and 2,230 leasehold properties.
- 68.3 Stewart Gover stated that he had not been aware that the council were funding the use of the Super Centre for the use of Mears Limited. He referred to the Estate Development Budget and stated that £88,000 worth of EDB work had not been carried out. He asked why tenants in the north area had been given new doors or kitchens, while EDB money had not been used for redecoration. Chris Kift expressed similar concerns about the EDB.
- 68.4 The Chairman explained that the Super Centre would be used for a number of purposes, including a training academy for trade apprentices. Mears Limited would be based there. Planning permission was being sought for change of use. The Chairman agreed that there were general concerns about the EDB and these needed to be investigated before the next round of area panels.
- 68.5 The Assistant Director, Housing Management stated that changes and improvements needed to be made with the EDB. Officers would work closely with Mears to obtain best value. There would be an improved programme next year.
- 68.6 Ted Harman mentioned that there had been a three year EDB backlog. He asked if Mears would guarantee to do the work when they took over. The Chairman stated that it would be helpful for officers to look at the last three years of EDB work and see what work had been carried out and what work was yet to be completed.
- 68.7 Beverley Weaver asked when there would be a local office for the West area. The Chairman replied that once the Super Centre was up and running, there would be discussions with tenants about a local base for the West area.
- 68.8 Councillor Mears informed the Committee that the executive summary relating to the Mears contract would soon be available. This explained the contract and highlighted tenant’s concerns.

68.9 **RESOLVED** - That Cabinet be recommended to approve the capital programme budget of £23.975 million and financing for 2010/11 as set out in paragraph 3.7 of the report.

## 69. HOUSING MANAGEMENT CUSTOMER ACCESS REVIEW

69.1 The Committee considered an update report on the review of customer access arrangements for the Housing Management Service and presented 'broad principles' for taking the work forward. The Housing Management division provided a range of services to the residents of council managed properties in Brighton & Hove. Customers currently accessed services through a number of different channels (e.g. face to face, telephone, email, website etc) and through a range of teams (e.g. housing offices, income management and repairs desk), as set out in Appendix 1 of the report. Reviewing customer access and developing a strategy for the future was a key project in the Housing Management Improvement Programme 2009-2012.

69.2 John Melson made the point that some front line services were improving but stressed that the response time from back room staff needed to be improved. Queries were taking a long time to be answered. Action needed to be taken when staff first received queries.

69.3 Chris Kift mentioned that when phoning the council, the auto response came on too quickly and after 20 minutes the phone went dead. People were fed up waiting for a response. He felt that too many calls were being channelled through the 292929 number, and that there should be more use of officer's direct line numbers.

69.4 The Chairman said these points would be taken on board. She mentioned that there was also a need to look at facilities that would enable people to report online. The IT system would improve under the Mears contract.

69.5 John Melson mentioned that he had had emails unanswered from two years ago. It was up to officers to take action. He considered that a standard STD number should be used for repairs. Ted Harman spoke of problems he had experienced when trying to get his boiler repaired. He had taken 20 minutes to have his initial call answered. The boiler had broken down a second time two months later. The Chairman asked for these comments to be taken on board.

69.6 The Senior Projects Manager assured the Committee that he would take these comments on board and would look at the system as a whole.

69.7 David Murtagh mentioned a practice whereby officers were issuing separate orders for work not carried out. Contractors were sometimes being paid 2 or 3 times for the same job. The Head of Repairs and Maintenance stated that this practice was unacceptable and would be dealt with.

69.8 **RESOLVED** - That the Cabinet Member for Housing be recommended to approve that:  
(1) the customer access review work to date be noted, and the next steps be agreed.  
(2) the "Broad Principles" detailed in points 3.6 to 3.27 of the report be approved.

**70. FOOD GROWING ON COUNCIL LAND**

- 70.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Adult Social Care & Housing which explained that Councillor Mears had requested the report at Sustainability Cabinet Committee on 8 May 2009 to explore issues around food growing on council housing land in relation to the Citywide four year project 'Harvest Brighton & Hove' (Brighton & Hove Food Partnership) which aimed to extend food growing and consumption of local food in the city.
- 70.2 Chris Kift informed the Committee that the Bristol estate had been the first to have a community allotment. He mentioned that it had not been permitted to sell produce from the allotment at a local market and asked if this could change.
- 70.3 The Head of Housing Management (Brighton East) explained that selling produce from city allotments was not allowed. However, if people were using council land and had an abundance of produce, there were schemes in place to enable produce to be offered to shops and restaurants in the city, in return for funds, which could be used for buying seeds and equipment. Volunteers could also be paid with produce.
- 70.4 Stewart Gover raised the issue of neglected gardens and suggested that when people were allocated council housing they should be asked if they needed the garden. If they did not require use of the garden, then it could be offered to other tenants to use. The Chairman asked the Head of Housing Management to pass this comment on to the relevant officers.
- 70.5 Members all welcomed the scheme and agreed they would like to be kept updated.
- 70.6 **RESOLVED** - That the contents of the report be noted as an update on work within the council to encourage local food growing.

The meeting concluded at 4.30pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of

