

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

HOUSING COMMITTEE

2.00pm 5 MARCH 2014

COMMITTEE ROOM 1, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Randall (Chair)

Also in attendance: Councillor Peltzer Dunn (Opposition Spokesperson), Wilson (Group Spokesperson), Duncan, Farrow, Fitch, Mears, Rufus, Bowden and Wells

PART ONE

51 PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

51(a) Declarations of Substitute Members

51.1 Councillor Bowden declared he was substituting for Councillor Kennedy
Councillor wells declared he was substituting for Councillor Barnett

51(b) Declarations of Interests

51.2 There were none

51(c) Exclusion of the Press and Public

51.3 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.

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

52 MINUTES

52.1 Councillor Farrow referred to paragraph 40.2 and asked whether the protocol had been set. The Chair said that a draft protocol had been written but hadn't yet been signed off. Children's Services were leading on this.

- 52.2 Councillor Farrow referred to paragraph 40.3 and asked for an update on the provision of women's hostels. The Chair advised that this had been considered at a Hostel Manager's meeting when they had discussed women only areas in the hostels. At the moment there was some provision in place. As part of the Integrated Support Pathway, Band 2 accommodation, which took women in a mixed setting, were New Steine Mews, Phase One, William Collier House and St Patricks. At St Patricks the women had five units on their own landing and George Williams Mews (which was divided into separate blocks) had one block with five units for women only. Within Band 3, accommodation was self contained and all projects were mixed with no women only properties. Consultation with allocations and hostel managers suggested that currently there was no additional demand for women only accommodation in Band 2. Both St Patricks and George William Mews were willing to set aside more accommodation to women if demand was there. For young women at risk, Stopover 1 and 2 provided seventeen women only accommodation units. For vulnerable women with mental health problems the Brighton Housing Trust ran a supported housing project with five units for women. For women at risk of domestic violence, fifteen units were provided at a refuge.
- 52.3 Councillor Farrow referred to paragraph 49.4 and asked if the Severe Weather Emergency Provision would now include provision for heavy rain and high winds. The Chair confirmed it would.
- 52.4 Councillor Mears referred to paragraph 45.5 and said that comments of the Head of Income, Inclusion and Improvements of what was said to them by members of the High Rise Action Group were factually incorrect. The lawyer asked whether the words used were a reflection of what was said and the officer confirmed they were.
- 52.5 **RESOLVED** – That the Minutes be agreed and signed as a correct record.

53 CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

- 53.1 The Chair said that he had to inform them that Mr Don Turner, a former councillor and Chair of the Housing Committee, had sadly passed away. The Committee sent their condolences to his family and friends.
- 53.2 The Chair informed the Committee that the Institute of Housing were currently holding their conference at the Brighton Centre, and that both he and officers had had the opportunity to speak to delegates.
- 53.3 The Chair advised that there had recently been an assault on a member of staff who had been visiting St James House. As a result of that incident a meeting had been held to discuss what had happened, what security was needed and to agree a plan of action to reduce the likelihood of such a situation occurring again. Officers advised that one of the strategies put in place was a trial of personal security devices. These were personal alarms carried by individuals, which could be activated with the push of a single button. Once activated direct contact with a call centre would be made. The person at the call centre could then monitor any conversation, and if they heard raised voices or had any cause for concern the police would be called without the need for the individual to call 999 themselves. Any voices heard would also be recorded, which could then be used for any subsequent investigation or court proceedings. Councillor Wilson asked if the device allowed for the individual's location to be known. Officers advised it would.

53.4 All members of the Committee were concerned for the safety of staff and welcomed the strategy put in place. The Chair said that officers' safety was paramount, as was that of tenants, and that one of the suggestions to come out of the meeting was to ask residents to provide feedback on safety.

53.5 The Chair said that a report on safety would come to a future meeting of the Committee.

54 CALL OVER

54.1 It was agreed that all items be reserved for discussion.

55 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

55(a).1 There were no Petitions

55(b).2 There were no Written Questions

55(c).3 There were no Deputations

56 ISSUES RAISED BY COUNCILLORS

56(a).1 There were no Petitions

56(b).2 There were no Written Questions

56(c).3 A Letter was received from Councillor Hawtree. Councillor Hawtree attended the meeting to present his Letter which stated:

'I am concerned at the continuing situation at numbers 15 and 17 The Drive.

These are splendid houses, south of Courtlands Hotel, which have been empty for a very long time. As such, they are decaying – witness the state of the windows – and are not providing the varied housing which is so much needed in the area.

They are now a blight.'

The Chair gave the following response:

'The Council has an active and award winning Empty Property Team based in Housing Strategy, which works to return privately owned empty residential property to use through our Empty Property Strategy. More than 150 homes are returned to use each year, through a system that works with the owners of the property as a starting point escalating from advice through assistance (when available) to enforcement action. The Team works closely with other departments like Planning; Private Sector Housing and Building Control to ensure all options are investigated, as well as external partners like

potential investors and landlords. The focus is residential property but other property types are reported through the team and investigated as required.

The properties at 15/17 The Drive are known to the team, having been reported previously by Councillor Hawtree and investigated. These two houses are commercial properties previously run as Hovedene Hotel. This hotel has been closed since at least 2002 when the property was removed from ratings / domestic and business as being 'incapable of beneficial occupation'.

There were several planning applications between 1999 and 2006 – all relating to the business of the hotel. The last one was to extend at the rear and also put a health club in the basement – this was refused. There have been no further planning applications since 2006.

The Empty Property Team have written to the owner on at least two occasions asking what plans there are for the building. There has been no response from the owner. Conservation, Planning, Building Control and Council Tax colleagues have been asked for any updates but there is no current action outstanding or pending. The council does have various enforcement powers relating to the appearance of buildings, pests etc but there have been no reported incidents or problems at this property where these would currently apply.

Frustration at the non-use of such buildings is understandable but available actions are limited, the issue being limitation on enforcement options that can be used against this privately owned, non-residential building. We would not easily be able to Compulsory Purchase through housing legislation as the properties are not listed as housing. A potential action would be Planning S215 which relates to the appearance of the building. We understand that the condition is not at the stage to warrant action at this time as it is boarded up in an orderly manner.

The Empty Property Team will attempt to establish whether there are any firm plans for the buildings and keep Councillor Hawtree informed in this respect.'

56(d).4 There were no Notices of Motion

57 HOUSING CARE LEAVERS

57.1 The Committee considered the report of the Executive Director Environment Development and Housing on Housing Care Leavers. The report was presented by the Head of Temporary Accommodation and Allocations, Housing.

57.2 Councillor Mears referred to the Financial Implications information in the report and the identified potential pressure of £5k to £6k to the HRA fund due to rent arrears. Officers advised that there was a small number who were in arrears and so there was a potential pressure, but support was being provided to those individuals and so it was hoped that there would be no impact on the HRA.

- 57.3 Councillor Mears asked what would happen if any of those individuals did not pay their rent and had to be evicted. Officers said that they hoped that wouldn't happen; they did not want anyone to be made homeless and so as much support as possible would be provided to anyone in that situation.
- 57.4 Officers suggested that a further report come to a future meeting of the Committee providing more information on those who were at a potential risk of eviction. The Chair agreed.
- 57.5 Councillor Duncan noted that eviction action was being taken against three tenants who were in arrears, and asked if that course of action would be taken against someone who was only £109 in arrears. Officers said notices would be issued if arrears were increasing and the amount owed was not being addressed. The Chair added that eviction would be a last resort.
- 57.6 Councillor Mears asked what floating support the young people received. Officers advised that children up to the age of 18 would have the support of a social worker, and once they turned 21 they would have a personal adviser. All care leavers up to the age of 21 would have a Pathway Plan of support.
- 57.7 Councillor Mears recalled that it had previously been agreed that all housing allocations to care leavers would be signed off by a Director and asked if that was being done. The Chair said he would look into that.

57.8 **RESOLVED** – That the Housing Committee note the report.

58 **NEW HOMES FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS - SMALL SITE STRATEGY**

- 58.1 The Committee considered the report of the Executive Director Environment Development and Housing on New Homes for Neighbourhoods, Small Site Strategy. The report was presented by the Housing Programme Manager.
- 58.2 The Chair thanked the officer for the report, and said that it was important that these proposals be taken forward as soon as possible and asked that a timeline be provided. The officer agreed and said that if the proposals were approved a full project plan would be provided.
- 58.3 Councillor Peltzer Dunn suggested that there be four competitions, one for each site.
- 58.4 Councillor Peltzer Dunn noted that the projected cost for the 27 units seemed high. The officer said that the 27 units related to the garage sites, and at the moment the cost was anticipated to be £3.6m but that may change as the costing was done last year. A more detailed model and costs would come to a future meeting of the Committee.
- 58.5 Councillor Mears was concerned at the speed at which things were progressing, and said that these proposals were first made in 2010 and nothing appeared to have been delivered since then.

- 58.6 Councillor Wells was surprised that there had been a lack of interest with contractors to develop the smaller sites, and suggested that priority be given to local builders to undertake the work.
- 58.7 Councillor Fitch said that if there were smaller sites which financially were not suitable for development by a commercial contractor that those sites be set aside for self builds. Councillor Farrow supported that idea and said that the city had a good record of providing sites for self building. The Chair agreed.
- 58.8 Councillor Farrow said that Passivhaus homes were a great scheme, but he had concerns on the cost of construction. The Chair advised that many housing associations had erected these buildings and they had all been completed on budget.
- 58.9 Councillor Bowden said he welcomed the idea of a RIBA supported design competition, and hoped that any winning designs would not fail when it was considered by Planners. He suggested that it might be useful to have a Planning Officer on the panel of judges.
- 58.10 **RESOLVED:** That the Housing Committee agreed to
- (i) Delegate authority to the Executive Director Environment Development and Housing (in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance and Resources) to enter into the necessary contract(s) to secure the design and build of housing on small site(s) following a RIBA supported design competition as described in paragraphs 3.8 to 3.12 in the report.
 - (ii) Approves the Pilot 2 proposal set out in the report for development of a small site by a housing co-operative represented by Co-operative Housing in Brighton & Hove.
 - (iii) Approves the Pilot 3 proposal set out in the report for the design and build of housing on small site(s) using Passivhaus principles.

59 THE BRIGHTON & HOVE PROPERTY STANDARD

- 59.1 The Committee considered the report of the Executive Director Environment Development and Housing on the Brighton and Hove Property Standard. The report was presented by the Performance Manager, Property and Investment Team.
- 59.2 Councillor Mears noted that the cost of installing a hearing loop would be £7,800 with an additional annual service cost of around £55 per system and asked if that cost would impact on the service charge for residents. Officers advised there would be no impact on the service charge.
- 59.3 Councillor Bowden was aware that the hearing loop in Leach Court was quite old and often didn't work. Officers advised that repairs would be carried out where required and that the equipment at Leach Court would be looked at.
- 59.4 Councillor Duncan referred to recommendation 2.6 in the report which said that a pilot scheme would be run for six to twelve months to consider the installation of level access showers rather than baths to all one bedroom ground floor flats when they became

empty, and asked whether tenants housed in those properties could express a view on such installation after they'd moved in. Officers advised that those properties which had a level access shower installed would be ring fenced for those with mobility issues. Councillor Rufus suggested that some people with mobility issues may prefer a bath. Officers said that tenants right to have a survey undertaken to look at adaptations needed would not be removed, but this scheme would be monitored to see whether making adaptations before a tenant moved in would reduce the need for adaptations to be made at a later date.

- 59.5 Councillor Peltzer Dunn asked why the pilot scheme was being run for six to twelve months and not for a fixed period. Officers advised that was because they didn't know how many properties would become empty during any given period. Councillor Peltzer Dunn proposed that the scheme be run for an agreed twelve month period. The Chair seconded that proposal. The Committee agreed to the amendment of recommendation 2.6.
- 59.6 Councillor Farrow referred to recommendation 2.3 and proposed that it be reworded to state 'That all council homes with a street entrance be fitted with an external security light, when upgrading the electrics to that property.' Councillor Bowden seconded that proposal. The Committee agreed with the proposal but Councillor Rufus noted that the amendment would impact on the financial advice provided with the report. Officers agreed and said that a report would be provided for the next Housing Committee meeting which would set out the costs of that proposal.
- 59.7 Councillor Peltzer Dunn referred to recommendation 2.4 and proposed that it be reworded to state 'That all council housing schemes with a communal lounge be fitted with a working hearing loop'. Councillor Bowden seconded that proposal. The Committee agreed with the amendment. Officers suggested that as that proposal would impact on the financial information provided that a further report detailing the costs of fitting hearing loops be provided for the next meeting.
- 59.8 The Chair agreed and said that the Committee would consider Recommendations 2.1, 2.2, 2.5 and 2.6 at that meeting and the other two recommendations be considered at the next meeting of the Housing Committee.
- 59.9 **RESOLVED:** That the Housing Committee approves that:
- (i) That all residents be offered additional choice of coloured wall tiles, when having a kitchen or bathroom installed.
 - (ii) That all residents be offered additional choice of kitchen cupboard doors and handles when having a new kitchen installed.
 - (iii) That a change in policy is agreed to allow tenants who have installed their own kitchen or bathroom to have the other room modernised by the council, if its old or in disrepair (as per the age and condition requirements of the governments DHS).

- (iv) To run a twelve moth pilot enabling all one bed ground floor flats that become empty and require a bathroom replacement, to be considered for the installation of a level access shower instead of a bath.

60 RESPONSE TO TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL REPORT ON STANDARD LETTERS

- 60.1 The Committee considered the report of the Executive Director Environment Development and Housing which provided a response to Tenant Scrutiny Panel report on standard letters. The report was presented by the Head of Head of Income, Involvement & Improvement.
- 60.2 The Chair thanked the members of the Panel, Miriam Binder, Liz Collard, Mbye Sohna and the observer for their report and for all the work they'd undertaken in producing it. Mr Sohna wanted to add his thanks to all his colleagues who assisted in preparing the report and to the scrutiny officers who had supported the Panel. Ms Binder added her thanks to the officers and to the Housing Team for the way they had received the report, and hoped that this would be the start of a fruitful relationship.
- 60.3 Councillor Bowden welcomed both the report from the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and the response from officers.
- 60.4 Councillor Peltzer Dunn added his thanks for the excellent report from the Tenant Scrutiny Panel. He added that it was important to ensure that the receiver of a letter understood what was being conveyed, and suggested that a standard sentence be added to letters to say that if the contents weren't clear the recipient should contact the sender for further clarification.
- 60.5 Councillor Mears thanked those involved and asked how further scrutiny issues would be considered. Ms Binder said that tenants would decide what areas to look at. Residents Associations and individual tenants could put forward suggestions and it would then be for the tenants to consider the proposals.
- 60.6 Councillor Wilson thanked everyone for the report, and suggested that the recommendations of the Panel be passed to all Council departments for their consideration. The Chair agreed.
- 60.7 Councillor Bowden noted that the Government had suggested that a translation service to those whose first language was not English would no longer be provided as a matter of course. Officers and the Chair said that there were no plans to reduce that service in the city.
- 60.8 **RESOLVED:** That the Housing Committee:
 - (i) That the evidence, findings and recommendations of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel relating to standard letters used in Housing be noted.
 - (ii) That the actions proposed in this report in response to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's recommendations be agreed.

61. **IMPACT OF REDUCTION IN HOUSING BENEFIT RESULTING FROM WELFARE REFORMS (COPY TO FOLLOW)**

61.1 This item was removed from the agenda but would be included on the agenda for the next meeting of the Housing Committee. The Chair apologised, but said that finance officers were currently heavily involved with work relating the Council's Budget for 2014/15 and had not been able to assist with preparing the report in time.

62 **TIME LINE FOR CITY WIDE HOUSING STRATEGY**

62.1 The Head of Housing Strategy and Development and Private Sector Housing gave a presentation on the Time Line for City Wide Housing Strategy. A copy of the presentation was provided at the meeting.

62.2 Councillor Mears thanked officers for the presentation and in particular commended Priority 3 regarding improving housing support to prevent homelessness.

62.3 Councillor Peltzer Dunn asked when the draft strategy was likely to come to Housing Committee, and was advised that that would be provided later in the year. Officers advised that there would be three reports; the first one would outline the consultation process, the second would be to report back after the consultation and the third one which would come to the November meeting would set out the draft strategy.

62.4 Councillor Farrow was concerned over the suggested timeline given the current housing crisis in the city, and suggested that a one day conference be held for all interested groups in the city to get together to discuss a strategy on what could be done. Councillor Fitch said he would support the idea of holding a conference to look at the best way forward.

62.5 The Chair agreed in principle, but said the cost of holding such a conference would need to be looked at.

62.6 **RESOLVED** – That the Housing Committee note the presentation.

63 **ITEMS REFERRED FOR COUNCIL**

63.1 There were no items to be referred to the next Council meeting.

The meeting concluded at 4.30pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of