

HOUSING MANAGEMENT BOARD13 November 2007
5.30pm – 6.50pm

Present: Councillors: Blair, Blencowe, James, Kightley, Levy and Pitt
Tenant Representatives: Tony Barnes (Chair), Diane Best, Brian Haywood, John Marais, Anna Vine-Lott.

Also Present: Councillor Smart, Executive Councillor for Housing.

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL

07/HMB/43 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 2 July 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

07/HMB/44 Apologies For Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong and Downham and from tenant representative Terry Sweeney.

07/HMB/45 Declarations Of Interest

Diane Best: personal interest – (07/HMB/47) as a leaseholder in a block of flats with a communal TV aerial.

Councillor James: personal interest – (07/HMB/47) as his employer manufactures set-top boxes.

07/HMB/46 Public Question Time

A question from a member of the public was taken just before minute number 07/HMB/49 to which it related.

07/HMB/47 Communal TV aerials

Members of the committee made the following points:

1) General Comments on the survey and the results

- Although had an input into the draft survey questionnaire, contact with tenants indicated that many had difficulties in understanding the questions. The survey had also been mistaken for junk mail. Disappointed in the low response rate. In relation to the analysis of the returns for Form A, 358 were returned but only 341 had responded to Options 1 and 2. So what was the situation of the 17 who did not respond to these 2 options? The

analysis also gave no indication how many of the tenants and leaseholders in blocks of three or more storeys had their own TV services independent of the Council.

- Those who had contributed views on the draft of the survey questionnaire had had no acknowledgement of their input from the editor and had not seen the final questionnaire before it had been sent out. This was not best practice.
- How would the majority referred to in recommendation 2.3 be determined?
- Concern about the identification of the discrete locations mentioned in 2.3 especially if there were not a clear majority.
- Even though the response rate was low, 1200-1300 tenants would lose their council TV service and they needed to know that as soon as possible. New tenants also should be informed in their introduction letter.

The Director of Community Services acknowledged that the input from those who had looked at the draft had been helpful. Because of the low response rate and the other issues mentioned, the officers were aware that more work needed to be done.

2) Questions about the timescale when the switch off of the analogue system will not be until 2011.

Officers said that commissioning the new system needed to happen soon to allow for the time for procurement etc. and the likelihood that quality providers would be in demand.

In reply to a question, officers indicated that the installation provided would not be multi-service.

Members said it was important to let tenants know 12-18 months before the shut down of the analogue system and the Chair suggested that an article in Open Door would be desirable to which officers agreed.

The Executive Councillor expressed regret that people who had helped with the draft questionnaire had felt unacknowledged and side lined. She reminded members that the main reason for procuring the new system was the unreliability of the current system. Providing the new system was not a requirement for a landlord but, for the reason given, it was important to press ahead with the provision of the new system. There were plans to help the older and more vulnerable tenants by, for example, setting up a help line.

Councillor Blencowe pointed out that for consistency, the third category mentioned in 2.3 should read "large blocks of flats/maisonettes three storeys in height and over".

The Committee approved the recommendations (2.2 by 11 votes to 0; 2.3 by 8 votes to 2; 2.4 by 10 votes to 0 and 2.5 by 11 votes to 0)
The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations.

07/HMB/48 Rent Arrears Policy

Members commented on the results of the survey:

- That 37% of those in arrears said that they had borrowed from a doorstep lender was very worrying.
- Equally worrying was that 83% of those in arrears said they could not afford to pay off their debt or did not have the money.
- To address these concerns it was important that those specialist services able to help those tenants with arrears such as the Cambridge Law Centre should continue to be grant aided by the Council.

Members were positive about the idea of a seminar/workshop in the New Year which would focus in more detail on performance indicators, the rent survey and an action plan coming out of the findings of the survey.

The Executive Councillor suggested that part of that seminar might also consider the organisations the Council had links with and note what they could not provide to tenants in arrears.

The Committee approved the recommendation unanimously.
The Executive Councillor approved the recommendation.

07/HMB/49 Housing Revenue Account Service Plan Performance Review and Revised Budgets 2007/08

Mrs Kay Harris addressed the meeting on behalf of Hawkins Road Residents Association. She referred to a payment into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) from the sale of some Council housing land beside the Rees Thomas School site to the County Council. The County Council had sold the school site to Ranc Homes who now had planning permission to build a care home on the site. The former City Council land would be used to construct the access road. Mrs Harris asked whether some of the money in the HRA could be earmarked for spending in the local area eg to refurbish the garages.

The Director of Community Services and the Acting Business Manager explained that the resources anticipated would be housing capital monies and all decisions relating to spending of housing capital were made at Community Services. The Council's policy was not to ring fence such capital receipts for specific localities, but instead, to earmark the money for investment in affordable housing across the authority. The Council did recognise that there was a need for environmental

improvements and a £1m fund over a five year period had been set aside to be used across the city.

The Executive Councillor replied to Mrs Harris and said that she was willing to consider whether the fund which was used to refurbish garages might be used to improve the garages at Hawkins Road. She emphasised that she could not guarantee this.

The Committee then considered the officer report and the Service Plan Performance Review.

Members raised the following:

- Concern that year on year the day-to-day repairs budget was consistently overspent. It was important to set the budget more realistically.
- Was the overspend due to the cost of repairs increasing or to a high number of repairs?
- Concern at the size of the spend on void repairs. Why was this? Were some properties subject to repeat voids?
- Some of the Council's policies went against common practicality. For example, tenants were expected to mend broken windows but if they could not afford to then the property became damp and in the longer term the repair budget had to pay.
- What effect is implementing the Decent Homes standard having on the day-to-day repairs budget?

The Head of Technical Services and the Head of City Homes explained that there were some accounting anomalies which needed to be sorted out in the weeks leading up to the next year's budget setting eg some repairs that had been carried out that meet the Decent Homes programme but that had not been allocated to the correct budget. The figure for repeat voids was 5% which was a reasonable figure. An estimate had been done to determine which void repairs were as a result of deliberate damage. These were then followed up to recover the money spent. There were a few void repairs that cost thousands of pounds but these were often associated with tenants with mental health problems.

The Head of City Homes asked that members let officers know if there were any properties where windows had not been repaired by tenants over a period of months. Officers used their discretion to repair the windows to avoid the longer term damage that could result to the property.

There were no questions about the Service Plan Performance Review.

The Committee approved the recommendation by 11 votes to 0.
The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations.

07/HMB/50 Housing General Fund Service Plan Performance Review

The Committee noted the Performance Review.

The meeting ended at 6.50pm.

Chair