

**HOUSING MANAGEMENT BOARD**8 July 2008  
5.30pm – 7.35pm

**Present:** Councillors: Armstrong, Blackhurst, Blencowe, Levy, Pitt (Chair), Shah, Taylor, Todd-Jones, Wright and Ward

Tenant Representatives: Tony Barnes, Diane Best, Beverley Dennis, Brian Haywood, John Marais and Terry Sweeney

**Also Present:** Councillor Smart, Executive Councillor for Housing.

|   |
|---|
| <b>FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL</b> |
|---|

**08/HMB/21      Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting on 18 March 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair

**08/HMB/22      Apologies For Absence**

No apologies were received

**08/HMB/23      Declarations Of Interest**

- Diane Best: personal interest – (08/HMB/32) as a leaseholder
- Terry Sweeney: personal interest – (08/HMB/29) on the management committee of The Cambridge Federation

**08/HMB/24      Public Question Time**

A Coleridge Ward Councillor raised the following question:

*How many prospective buyers have expressed an interest in the Tiverton House site and what steps have been taken to encourage mutual or social housing organisations to bid?*

The Director of Community Services responded that, since the report went to the Strategy and Resource Scrutiny Committee, RSLs had been made aware that the site would be marketed. Agents had done some preliminary advertising/soft market testing and there had been interest from 4 RSLs and 2 other accommodation providers to date. The closing date for bids was September

**08/HMB/25 Appointment of Vice-Chair**

The Chair announced that Tony Barnes would be the Vice Chair for 2008/09

**08/HMB/26 Nomination of three Tenant/Leaseholder Representatives to Community Services Scrutiny Committee for Municipal Year 2008/09**

The Chair announced that Diane Best, Anna Vine-Lott and Brian Haywood would be the representatives for 2008/09

**08/HMB/27 Revenue and capital outturn, carry forwards and significant variances for 2007/08**

The Acting Business Manager introduced the report. She informed the Committee that the position in relation to the Housing Capital Investment Plan would be reported to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee and that it was recommended that carry forward requests (totaling £595,240) be recommended to Council for approval. It was also noted that the underspend of £267,978 represents a 0.7% variance in expenditure and a 0.1% variance in income

It was confirmed that the underspend in staffing costs was not associated with any one particular area. Current staff had worked hard to ensure that there was no loss of service

Areas of underspend in staffing costs included:

- Caretaking: savings due to number of staff not in the superannuation scheme
- Technical Services: 1 long term vacant post that had now been filled
- General vacancies as a result of the Customer Access Project (resulting in no ongoing impact to service)

In response to questions from the Committee the Acting Business Manager confirmed that a) the Housing Revenue Fund does make a contribution to the Customer Access Centre and b) the additional carry forwards on Repairs and Maintenance are due to work not yet being completed

Tony Barnes asked how long the posts had been vacant and what affect there had been on the quality of service provided to tenants and leaseholders

The Acting Business Manager stated that with 1 vacant post at the City Homes Cost Centre (out of a staff of 50) there was minimal direct impact on the service provided or other staff

The Director of Community Services confirmed that whilst vacancies do have an impact on other staff the Council does its best to manage this. It was also noted that the Technical Post had taken three rounds of adverts before being filled

Tony Barnes then questioned whether, as the services had been operating unaffected for a year, the staff needed to be replaced. It was obvious that rent payers had been overcharged and these savings could be offset against rates for next year. In order to get a fair deal these inefficiencies had to be looked at

The Head of City Homes highlighted that the pressure on housing staff was significant and that individuals were already doing more than their fair share. It was also noted that rent charges are set at a national not local level

Councillor Levy commented that being understaffed for long periods of time could result in the remaining staff becoming resentful and therefore also leaving. It was also noted that the total underspend of £267,978 divided by the number of council properties would only equate to a very small saving for rent payers

The Head of City Homes informed the Committee that in a recent Audit Commission Report highlighting comparisons of expenditure the Housing Service came in the bottom half of the lowest quarter for spend. It was therefore felt that there was little scope for ongoing savings. The Director of Community Services agreed to circulate this Report to all members

Councillor Blencowe questioned whether it was normal for posts to take so long to be filled and felt that as a Council more work was needed to attract and keep good staff

The Director of Community Services confirmed that Technical Staff were traditionally harder to recruit but the Council was continually looking at better ways to recruit and retain staff

The Committee approved the recommendations by 12 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

## **08/HMB/28      Review of Neighbourhood Caretaking Services**

The Area Housing Manager (City Homes South) introduced the Report. The objective of the review was to adopt a more modern approach and look at and learn from examples of good practice. The service had not been reviewed for some time and it was felt that the benefits would be:

- To create direct and local lines of communication
- Motivation, with staff taking responsibility and being able to see the job through
- A local presence, which could encourage the involvement of residents in the care and improvement of their neighbourhood

The recommendations were noted as:

- To commission a full value for money review on the caretaking service, based on best practice from other housing providers
- To implement mystery shopping exercises on the areas currently receiving caretaking services and to use existing residents survey feedback to assess satisfaction with the service area
- To implement performance measures and scope for Gershon efficiencies as well as cash savings where possible

In response to a question from Councillor Taylor regarding the 'mystery shopper' exercises, the Area Housing Manager confirmed that residents had been used as sounding boards and also assisted with face to face and telephone interviews. The quality of services would also be checked through these exercises

Councillor Todd-Jones agreed with 3.10.12 of the report and highlighted the importance of caretakers feeling a sense of ownership and pride in their work. It was also felt that leaseholders were particularly dissatisfied with the cleaning of communal areas on their estates

The Head of City Homes echoed this point and stated that dissatisfaction and the inconsistency of the service was the reason for the review. The Standards Group had been in place for 2-3 years and had gathered lots of information regarding cleaning services. The review hoped to provide consistency and value for money

Councillor Blencowe welcomed the review and felt that enhancing the caretakers role would result in more job satisfaction and was a positive step forward

The Chair also welcomed the review as he was aware of issues with the service

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the recommendations

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

### **08/HMB/29      Service Level Agreement for The Cambridge Federation**

The Area Housing Manager (City Homes South) introduced the Report which presented the 2008/09 service level agreement between City Homes and the Cambridge Federation. The purpose of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) was to ensure that measurable value for money services were provided in return for the funds given to the Federation. The SLA is based on value for money and deliverables

It was confirmed that The Cambridge Federation was fully involved in the process and happy with the document

Terry Sweeney commented on the broad scope of the SLA and highlighted that the Federation had only 2 members of staff - this could be a huge amount of work for a small organisation. Whilst he was in favour of the SLA it needed to be realistic. Item 2.4 in the document was given as an example - the Housing Sounding Board consisted of over 2000 names and getting a 10% return per survey would be extremely hard. Street Forums also involved a lot of work and it was suggested that City Homes should be flexible and assist by providing a Housing Officer for each patch

The Head of City Homes confirmed that he would be happy to provide some more assistance to the Federation in order to meet the SLA and that discussions would be ongoing with the Manager

In response to a question from Councillor Todd-Jones, the Head of City Homes confirmed that the level of funding was around £70,000 and that it was in the interest of both parties to meet the SLA. It was noted that City Homes and The Cambridge Federation had a good relationship and a progress report would be published towards the end of the year

The Executive Councillor welcomed the SLA and felt that it would benefit both parties – clarifying expectations and ensuring realistic demands

The Chair confirmed that the issue of reviewing employment and disciplinary procedures (as raised by Councillor Blair at the meeting on 18 March 2008) had now been resolved

In response to a question from Councillor Shah, the Area Housing Manager confirmed that Welcome Packs were now in place and provided new tenants with a variety of local information

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the recommendations

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

**08/HMB/30          Cambridge Standard Funding 2008/2009 Capital Budget –  
Hawkins Road and Maitland Avenue – Neighbourhood  
Improvement Project**

The Area Housing Manager (City Homes North) introduced the report. It presented a proposal for allocation of the remaining budget of the 2008/09 works towards the Cambridge Standard Capital Funding in respect of a Neighbourhood Improvement Project at Hawkins Road and Maitland Avenue

Street Forums and walkabouts had highlighted priority areas and a plan of work had now been suggested. This was shown in appendix 6.1 of the report

In response to a question from Diane Best, the Area Housing Manager confirmed that out of 112 properties 12 were leasehold and details would not be given out to residents until the project had been approved

Councillor Blencowe expressed his support for the project but felt that the significant spend on clearing fly-tipping rubbish and repairing vandalism (as noted in 3.4 of the report) should come from the General Fund

The Director of Community Services confirmed that the Capital Investment Programme would be looked at fully at the next meeting and the Acting Business Manager confirmed that 100% of the cost of fly-tipping was charged back to the General Fund

In response to a question from Councillor Taylor, the Director of Community Services confirmed that all the projects were focused on residents and do not go through the bidding Programmes as decided at Area Committees

The Head of City Homes confirmed that residents are signposted to the Area Committees for non housing environmental improvement projects

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the recommendations

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

**08/HMB/31      Respect Standard for Housing Management**

The Area Housing Manager (City Homes North) introduced the report and highlighted the recommendations:

- To agree the approach by City Homes as landlord to work towards the Respect Standard for Housing Management
- To agree to “sign-up” to the Respect Standard for Housing Management jointly with tenants at this years’ Tenant Festival day in early October 2008.

The six core commitments were noted as:

- Accountability, leadership, and commitment
- Empowering and reassuring residents
- Prevention and early intervention
- Tailored services for residents and provision of support for victims and witnesses
- Protecting communities through swift enforcement
- Support to tackle the causes of anti-social behaviour

It was confirmed that some areas were not yet fully developed but would be further explored through workshops held at the Tenants Festival. Working with the Community Safety Partnership work would help develop some aspects

The Acting Business Manager confirmed that the ASB Team funding is split between the Housing Revenue Fund and the General Fund and that this was reviewed annually depending on caseload

Councillor Todd-Jones asked what control the Council had over private landlords and the Head of Strategic Housing Services stated that the Community Safety Forum had been discussing this issue and an action plan was being developed

In response to a question from Councillor Wright regarding the ‘blurred line’ of responsibility between ASB Teams and the Police, The Director of Community Services stated that whilst there were no exact guidelines, they did work very closely together and formal meetings were regularly held

It was also confirmed that court action was always seen as a last resort and early intervention was the preferred option. For a ‘reactive’ response it was suggested that the police be called, whereas a ‘planned’ response would be the responsibility of a partnership approach

The Head of Strategic Housing Services also stated that the Community Safety Strategy and associated Action Plans had been approved and set out clearly the agreed partnership approach. Copies were available on request

In response to a question from Councillor Wright, the Director of Community Services stated that the Council had a lot more control over their own tenants, as appose to non-council tenants, as they were bound by binding agreements

John Marais asked whether Registered Social Landlords (RSL) were also involved and was informed by the Area Housing Manager that 1 large RSL had recently signed up to the standard and others were being encouraged to

The Committee approved the recommendations by 14 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

## **08/HMB/32      Leasehold Services Review**

The Area Housing Manager (City Homes North) introduced the report which pulled together all the policy issues with regards to service charges for all the Council's leaseholders as part of the on-going review of Leasehold Services

It was noted that the Council had worked closely with leaseholder representatives in order to make the charges clearer (a full list was noted in Appendix 1 of the Officers Report) and this renewed interest had resulted in more enquiries and also more complaints. As a result a Complaints Procedure had been developed and was noted in Appendix 2 of the Officers Report

Under the new proposals leaseholders would pay extra charges if they purchased property in certain flats with extra facilities, for example:

- Caretaking services
- Cleaning shared areas
- Window cleaning to communal areas
- Lift services
- Street cleaning within the boundaries
- Electricity and communal lighting
- The door-entry system
- Communal TV Aerial

A Leaseholder Satisfaction Survey had been conducted in April 2008 and the results were noted:

- 74% Of leaseholders were satisfied with the overall leaseholder service
- 94% Of leaseholders were satisfied with the ways to pay charges
- 34% Of leaseholders were not satisfied with the cleaning in communal areas
- 29% Of leaseholders were not satisfied with the grounds maintenance
- 30% Of leaseholders were not satisfied with repairs and maintenance

Four Forums had been held in different locations around the City in order to consult residents and this process would be done annually

In response to a question from the Committee, the Area Housing Manager acknowledged that the 12% response rate was low but, as many leaseholders did not actually live at the address, it had proved difficult to get a high response

Diane Best praised this process as an excellent example of involvement and confirmed that the leaseholders were in full support of the recommendations

In response to a question from Councillor Levy regarding the proposed list of charges, the Area Housing Manager confirmed that each charge accurately reflected the level of admin work required to complete it. For example – the 'Retrospective consent for improvements' charge of £10 would be for something small like a satellite dish

Councillor Todd-Jones asked what would be done to satisfy concerns about the new charges and he was assured that leaseholders were being worked with closely to ensure the definitions and their understanding was clear

In response to a question from the Committee, the Area Housing Manager confirmed that there were currently 12 different methods of paying – which included direct debit, swipe cards and standing orders. 650 leaseholders currently paid by direct debit

John Marais questioned why, if the property was sublet, the address of the leaseholder could not be found. The Area Housing Manager stated that under the 2002 Act leaseholders did have to provide their address – but only if it was in the United Kingdom

Clarification on 3.7.4 of the Officers Report was sought and it was confirmed that:

- under the 2002 Act separate service charge invoices *had* to be sent out. It was also felt that this was more transparent
- the cost of the work had to be over £250 in order for payment by installments
- interest was not charged when paying by installments

Diane Best pointed out that the areas identified through the survey as needing further work (cleaning in communal areas, grounds maintenance and repairs) were the 'visible' areas and it was understandable that these be picked up on. It did not mean that the service on the whole was not good

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the recommendations

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

### **08/HMB/33          Briefing Paper to note – Affordable Housing Programme Management Framework**

The Head of Strategic Housing Services introduced the briefing paper and explained that a full report would be taken to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee on 24<sup>th</sup> July (not on 17<sup>th</sup> as indicated in the paper)

He was pleased to announce that funding had been received to progress on the Simons House and Elmfield Road schemes which would benefit older people

The briefing paper described improvements in the way Council housing sites were brought forward for development – using a new approach to known as the Affordable Housing Programme Management Framework. It proposed a 3-year rolling programme showing sites being considered for development or redevelopment and, once approved by the Executive Councillor, this would be made available to the public.

The programme would be reviewed annually in the summer committee cycle and additions would only be made mid-year in specific circumstances, or in the event of a site dropping off the programme

A weighted method would be used to consider the merits of their potential and ease or difficulty of development and would work as an audit trail for the overall development programme

It was confirmed that consultation would work in a 2-stage process as noted below:

Stage 1 – Executive Councillor approves 3-year Programme annually and ward members, tenant representatives and any tenants affected would be advised

Stage 2 – Detailed consultation with all stakeholders including ward members, tenant representatives and any tenants affected on a scheme by scheme basis prior to final decision on a scheme

The aim was to make the decision making open and transparent and advise people early on before any in-depth consultation was undertaken

John Marais felt that this was a positive approach after the recent experience involving the Colville Road/Augers Close bungalows

The Executive Councillor raised concerns about sites being added 'mid year' and felt that if the programme was reviewed annually this should not happen. The Head of Strategic Housing Services noted the comments

Councillor Blencowe highlighted the need for more information on the weighting system and also the possible need for a preliminary stage where residents are informed *before* their properties are added to the programme

In response the Head of Strategic Housing Services explained that stage 1 was seen as the preliminary phase but maybe the wording could be improved to reflect this. It was also noted that the weighting would work on a traffic light system on the following six specific areas:

- land use
- land assembly
- restrictions on site
- accessibility
- locality
- already identified uses

It was agreed that this information would form an appendix to the final report

In response to a question from Councillor Wright regarding the inclusion of gardens on the list, the Head of Strategic Housing Services confirmed that all options would be looked at on a site by site basis

Councillors were asked to contact the Officer direct with any specific requests about potential sites

Whilst a decision on this item was not required the Chair suggested that a vote of support be taken and forwarded on to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee in time for their meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> July. The Committee agreed

The Committee supported the recommendations by 13 votes to 0

**08/HMB/34      Write-Off of Tennant Arrears**

The Acting Business Manager introduced this regular item and highlighted the four cases under consideration

Members of the Committee raised concern that the local press had only picked up on this item from the whole HMB agenda and made a big story out of it

The Head of City Homes confirmed that as the Council collects over £27 million a year in rent the amount written off is a very small percentage and only done for very good reasons

Councillor Shah questioned whether the next of kin would be liable to cover the costs and it was confirmed that they would only be traced to see if there was funds left in the deceased's estate

John Marais took the opportunity to highlight a MPs Briefing on Negative Subsidy on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> July 6pm at Portcullis House, London. Three tenant representatives were attending and further members were welcome

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the recommendations

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

**08/HMB/35      Housing Cash Collection Services –  
Procurement Approval Report**

As the item has not been publicly available for the required 5 days prior to the meeting the Chair ruled that under 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 the tender for the Housing Cash Collection Services be considered despite not being made publicly available five clear days prior to the meeting

The reason why this report had not been available beforehand was because the value of the contract was not expected to exceed the £75,000 threshold requiring member approval, and that threshold has now been reached

The Executive Councillor was recommended:

To authorise the Director of Community Services to invite competitive tenders in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and to award a three-year contract (with a one-year extension at the Council's option) for the provision of an external cash collection service for payment of rent and service charges

In response to a question from Councillor Blencowe regarding the cost of the existing contract, it was confirmed that as it was a variable contract it would depend on the number of transactions. It was also confirmed that the £75,000 would be over the total 3 year period and not for *every* year of the contract

Councillor Levy asked whether the use of AllPay.net would be continued with the new contact and the Acting Business Manager stated that, although the specifications had yet to be written, they were hoping to keep all the current methods of payment

The Committee approved the recommendations by 14 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations

The meeting ended at 7.35pm

**Chair**