

HOUSING COMMITTEE

16 September 2014

7.00 pm – 8.56 pm

Council Chamber, Ebley Mill, Stroud

Minutes

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Membership:

Councillor Mattie Ross (Chair)	P	Councillor Gary Powell	A
Councillor Doina Cornell (Vice Chair)	P	Councillor Lesley Reeves	P
Councillor Gordon Craig	P	Councillor Mark Rees	A
Councillor Caroline Molloy	P	Councillor Steve Robinson	A
Councillor John Marjoram	P	Councillor Emma Sims	A
Councillor Liz Peters	P	Councillor Debbie Young	P

P = Present A = Absent

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Geoff Wheeler	Councillor Tom Williams
Councillor Nigel Cooper	Councillor Nigel Studdert-Kennedy

Officers Present:

Carl Brazier - Strategic Head (Tenant Services)
Tim Power - Head of Housing Management
Kevin Topping – Tenancy Operations Manager
Mark Humphries - IHP Project Manager
Ian Garrett - Principal Accountant
David Stanley - Accountancy Manager
Leonie Lockwood - Business Development Manager

Before the business of the formal meeting began the Chair made two announcements.

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting.

The Chair read out a statement regarding a death in a sheltered housing unit on 5 May 2014

The Chair announced an HQN award for Income Management. The Chair thanked the officers and congratulated everyone involved in attaining this award.

The Chair asked the meeting if it was willing to hear an update on the Sheltered Housing Review, as this item was not on the Agenda. It would be taken after Agenda Item.9.

HC.015 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Steve Robinson, Gary Powell, Mark Rees, Emma Sims

HC.016 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None received.

HC.017 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED **That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 June 2014 are confirmed and signed as a correct record.**

HC.018 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

None received.

HC.019 **WORK PROGRAMME**

It was agreed that the following items be added to the work programme for 2014/15.

- Briefing Paper on the impact of the removal of the spare room subsidy – ‘Bedroom Tax’.
- Oral Report on quarterly performance – monitoring of performance of projects and contractors – key performance indicators.
- Report on Tenant Involvement and Community Development Update – to include discussions on tenant scrutiny to be given at Housing Committee on 28 October 2014.

RESOLVED **To note the work programme, subject to the inclusion of the above in the 2014/15 work programme.**

HC.020 **BUDGET MONITOR REPORT 2014-15 Q1**

Ian Garrett, Principal Accountant presented the above report for the first 4 months of the year.

The following key points were made:

- Quarter 1 – includes the first four months of the year up to 31 July 2014.
- £14.3m is the estimated capital spend - broken down as £10.4m on Major works £3.9 m on new build and development.
- £3.3m on revenue planned, responsive and void maintenance and repairs. £1m on none new build works.
- £5.7m of capital slippage (net of a transfer of £1.5 million to reserves) of which £4.7m is new build and £1m non new build. £3.4m of new build slippage

relates specifically to Top of town, Stroud, all funding remains committed and will be spent in 2015/16.

- Early identification of slippage means £5.4 of borrowing not required this year. This will avoid £160,000 in interest.
- New Build - dramatic increases in build costs over the last 3 months due to a shortage of labour and materials £1.5m earmarked reserves to address the increased costs. £900,000 of capital funding reallocated between programmes to deliver schemes and work within budget.
- £5.9m of grant secured for meeting 'decent homes' funding. In Q1 received £1.48m which will boost HRA resources.

During the discussion the following comments were made:

- Concerns over contracts awarded 2-3 years ago and rising costs.
- Shortage of bricks – other methods of construction have been considered – such as timber frame. This is a national trend.
- Need to ensure value for money for our tenants
- Have identified the potential cost increases and earmarked reserves.
- Need to have an assurance that provision of renewable energy will not be comprised in new housing, as bills must be kept low for tenants.
- Earmarking £8m on renewal projects over a 4 year period
- Stroud Council Housing Forum and Housing Committee would always be kept up-to-date of progress.

There was a debate on the following

- Councillor Caroline Molloy proposed a sum of £40,000 be added to the Contingency fund, to investigate matters being raised by people relating to Welfare reforms. Tenants may not be aware they can claim for arrears. Legal test cases are progressing through the courts at the moment and when the outcome of these are known the Council needs to be ready to act for our tenants.
- Councillor Mattie Ross commented that this should firstly be discussed at Stroud Council Housing Forum. There is an agreed procedure of taking issues to Services Development Groups – Stroud Council Housing Forum – Housing Committee
- There has been a fund put aside which has been agreed by Housing Forum in cases of emergency.
- The Council has a contingency of £35,000 for issues surrounding spare room subsidy.
- Officers advised Councillor Molloy of the extensive work undertaken in this area to support tenants and offered the opportunity to meet to discuss this matter further

Councillor Molloy then proposed an emergency Housing Committee which was seconded by Councillor John Marjoram - to discuss the issue of the spare room subsidy and how the Council can help tenants.

This was taken to a vote but was not agreed by Committee.

- RESOLVED**
- (a) to note the outturn forecast for the Housing Revenue Account and the Capital Programme for 2014/15**
 - (b) Housing Committee to recommend to Strategy and Resources committee to approve the virements and transfers to earmarked reserves as set out in Table 4.**

HC.021 **IN-HOUSE PROVIDER**

Mark Humphries, IHP Project Manager updated the committee on the progress of in-house provider for gas servicing and maintenance ad hoc boiler replacements and servicing of renewable energy installations.

There will be three SDC project teams working on the approval process – Human Resources, Information and Communication Technology and Procurement.

Key critical milestones are detailed in the report.

The following comments were made:

- A Customer Project Team would be set up, tenants would be involved in the approval process
- The in-house service would need support from Finance, HR and Legal relating to staff being transferred to SDC.
- Committee would receive updates on a regular basis as this project develops, and an update would be given at Housing Committee on 16 December.

- RESOLVED** **To implement the in-house provider for gas servicing and maintenance, ad-hoc boiler replacements and servicing of renewable energy installations.**

HC.022 **NEW BUILD PROGRAMME**

Leonie Lockwood, Interim Business Development Manager gave an update on the programmes.

- Leonard Stanley – There is a slight delay, although tenders are now out with a return date of the 22 October. By Housing Committee on 16 December there will be an update on progress.
- Four small sites are also out to tender with a return date of the 14 October.
- Top of Town, Stroud there will be two phases – Phase 1 will be completed, and then tenants from phase 2, who have not yet been decanted will be moved to phase 1.
- Build costs have increased due to shortage of labour and materials.

The following comments were made:

- Stroud District Council are one of the few Councils delivering a new build programme.
- Housing to arrange an information evening for Members to explain all these schemes.

- Housing to arrange to a trip to Minchinhampton for the topping out of the houses.

RESOVLED **to note the current progress of the New Build and Development Programme**

HC.023 **MOVING TO A 52 WEEK RENT CHARGE**

Kevin Topping, Tenancy Operations Manager advised the Committee of the need to change to a 52 week rent charge.

It is proposed that this system would be up and running by 1 April 2015 so the pitfalls are identified ahead of implementation. Further communication and awareness raising with tenants will take place in the new year.

Universal Credit will be applied in Stroud during 2015. Rent will be collected by Direct Debit, so all tenants will have to be set up with a bank account to receive payments. Universal Credit currently only affects those people of working age – 18 – 65. Universal Credit will be administered by DWP replacing local benefit departments.

The Tenancy Management Service Development Group and Stroud Council Housing Forum have been updated on this change.

The following comments were made:

- Universal Credit would change the way money is paid to tenants.
- SDC are working with tenants to make sure that they would not be disadvantaged by the change.

RESOLVED: **That the report is suitable for implementation subject to tenant consultation.**

HC.24 **UPDATE ON SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW**

Tim Power, Head of Housing Management gave an update on Sheltered Housing Review.

His presentation included the following points:

- Staff and Unison have been consulted and informed of the changes.
- Pre transfer notice has been served to Veolia to end the contract. Staff from Veolia would transfer to SDC.
- Recruitment of staff to the new posts is currently taking place.
- Policies and procedures are up-to-date and in place, in consultation with the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH).
- Staff will be introduced to tenants in all 21 schemes
- Progress reports will be given to future Housing Committee meetings.

The following comments were received:

- Staff should be clearly visible to residents, uniforms will assist in this which has been agreed.
- Members appreciated the hard work undertaken with cross party working and officers.

HC.25**MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

The following questions were received from Councillor Gordon Craig

Question 1 – Local Lettings Policy

Would officers please provide an update of progress regarding a move towards a local lettings policy and include a gantt chart outlining key stages and time lines. This is an important issue for members across all political groups which on the surface seems to be going nowhere.

Answer:

Your question refers to a local lettings 'policy', but I wonder if you mean 'local lettings plan'?

A local lettings plan must be specific to an individual location, and will serve to support a community on any given issue, for example, seeking applicants to be over specific age, where there is good cause to require this. As a result, a local lettings plan will be drafted on an ad hoc basis; by way of an example, a local lettings plan covering the Council's new build properties in Minchinhampton has been drafted and will be consulted upon with relevant members shortly. This approach will continue to be adopted, as further new build properties are built throughout the district, again with relevant member consultation.

Our current lettings 'policy', is the Glosomeseeekers choice based lettings process. To change this would be a far greater undertaking and would have significant implications on the Council's lettings arrangements. Replacing Glosomeseeekers, would require us to develop new policies, consult on these with the community, publicise a wholly new way of advertising and receiving bids for vacant properties, as well as purchasing our own allocations and lettings software, to replace our current IT, provided via our partnership within the Glosomeseeekers system. It is questionable whether this would bring significant benefits that would justify such a radical change.

I cannot provide a Gantt chart for the development of a local lettings plan, as these can and will be developed quickly on an ad hoc basis, specific to any new build scheme.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Craig commented that he was surprised by answer as the Chair and previous Vice-Chair had intimated personal support across the whole of SDC housing stock. There is huge support locally, a lot of local people want to live locally and want to have priority as a local person.

Answer:

Letting policies are the remit of Community Services and Licensing Committee, a possible joint meeting with the Chair and Vice Chair of both Housing and

Community Services and Licensing Committee could be considered to discuss this issue.

Question 2: Advertising available Council Property

I feel that in parishes, local people are not necessarily as aware as they could be of soon to be available local council properties. Would it be possible to consider sending monthly lists of soon to be available properties "ie before they become void" to parish councils and ask them to post the list on their parish notice board and or publish in their parish newsletter to give local people a heads up, create interest and put pressure on fast completion of voids.

Answer:

A list of current vacancies is provided to parish councils now, along with other community hubs throughout the district. A list of these locations is attached.

Providing a list of properties that will soon become vacant, or 'before they are void' would not be appropriate, for the following reasons:

- There lettings status or availability may change, i.e. by being directly matched, which we do in cases where a tenant requires an urgent decant, or a social services referral for a specific property, such as a disabled adapted one, is received, meaning that a vacant property would then not be advertised.
- It may raise unreasonable expectations for some applicants. Where the current process is transparent and equal to all, prior notification, may 'get a residents hopes' up, leading to potential disappointment. Allocations will only be made in line with stated policy and an applicant's priority.
- At what point do we regard a property as nearly ready to let (it may fail a completion inspection, or some other reason for delay and require further work thus having to then be removed). This would add additional complication and process to the void process, with additional stage targets being added, which could prove counter productive.
- It is unclear what real benefit this would offer to customers. The current system, does advertise with certainty, to do so before this is the position, would create a less certain position, potentially damaging the credibility of the letting process.

Supplementary Question:

Could direction be given to parishes on advertising the vacancies – perhaps on their website or parish notice boards - many lists are not advertised widely enough.

Answer:

The Chair replied that this could be investigated.

The meeting closed at 8.56 p.m.

Chair