

MINUTES OF HOUSING COMMITTEE HELD ON

4 February 2010

7pm-7.53pm

PRESENT

COUNCILLORS

Lee Dangerfield (Chairman)

Sarah Jane Dangerfield

Bob Davis
Clive Souter

Lesley Rideout

APOLOGIES

Shona Johnson

John Strachan

SUBSTITUTIONS

Andrew Johnson substitute for Shona Johnson

ALSO PRESENT

Simon Carter

CO-OPTEEES

Jane Steer

Daryl Thomas

38. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

39. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2009 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

40. **MATTERS ARISING**

- (a) Matters of Urgent Business – Tenant Voice
(Minute 37(i))

Members noted the tabled report on the work of Tenant Voice.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

41. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS**

- (a) Written Questions

A copy of the written questions and the Chairman's response is attached at Appendix A of these minutes.

- (b) Petition - Council Rent Subsidy

A petition had been presented to the Council meeting on 10 December 2009 requesting the Council to consider accepting the Government's offer to halve rent increases for Council tenants this year.

Council had resolved that this issue would be considered by the Housing Committee upon receipt of further information from CLG.

Members noted that a report on this issue appeared later in this meeting's agenda (See Minute 44).

42. **NON-CONTENTIOUS BUSINESS**

RESOLVED that the Committee Forward Work Plan be taken as an item of non-contentious business.

43. **COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN**

RESOLVED that the Committee Forward Work Plan be noted.

44. **HRA SUBSIDY DETERMINATION 2009/10 – AMENDING**
DETERMINATION 2009 (THE RENT OFFER)

Following the presentation of a petition to the Council meeting on 10 December 2009, the Housing Committee was requested to consider whether to accept the Government's "rent offer" for Council tenants.

As further information had now been received from the CLG on the final rent setting proposals for 2009/10, the Committee received a report on the “rent offer”.

RESOLVED that it be recommended to the Policy & Resources Committee that

- (a) the “rent offer” made by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) be rejected;
- (b) the above decision be exempt from call-in as any delay that may result from call-in would be prejudicial to the interests of the Council as set out in paragraph 19 of the report.

45. **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES 2010/11**

The Committee received a report on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2010/11 and forecast outturn for the current year.

Proposed amendments to this report were tabled and agreed, together with a proposal at the meeting to amend paragraph 62 of the report to include reference to leaseholders.

RESOLVED that it be recommended to the Policy & Resources Committee that

- (a) the rent increase for individual dwellings be agreed, as set out in paragraphs 10 to 22 of this report and be effective from 5 April 2010. This equates to an average weekly rent of £73.56, an average increase of 0.86%;
- (b) service charges for individual dwellings be agreed, as set out in paragraphs 23 to 31 of this report and be effective from 1 April 2010 for leaseholders and 5 April 2010 for tenants. This equates to an average weekly service charge to tenants of £2.00;
- (c) heating charges be increased/decreased, as set out in paragraphs 32 to 37 of this report and be effective from 1 April 2010 for leaseholders and 5 April 2010 for tenants. Average weekly general needs charges move to £6.33 per week (leaseholders £14.78 per week equivalent) and for sheltered accommodation £9.18 per week;
- (d) garage rents be increased to £7.65 per week (for a standard garage) and proportionate increases for other garages, car

ports and car spaces, from 5 April 2010, as set out in paragraphs 38 to 39 of this report;

- (e) other charges be increased, as set out in paragraphs 40 and 41 of this report, with effect from 1 April 2010;
- (f) the growth and savings outlined in paragraphs 50 and 51 be approved;
- (g) the HRA budget, as set out at Appendix A (as amended*) of this report, be approved and the variances in Appendix B (as amended*) be noted;

* as set out in amendment sheet 1 (with the addition of reference to leaseholders in paragraph 62).

- (h) a minimum HRA working balance recommended by the Section 151 Officer of £1,230,000, as set out in Appendix C, be approved;
- (i) the above decisions be exempt from call-in as any delay that may result from call-in would be prejudicial to the interests of the Council, as set out in paragraph 4 of this report.

46. **HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2010/11 TO 2014/15**

The Committee received a report which set out the Housing Capital Programme for 2010/11 to 2014/15.

RESOLVED that it be recommended to the Policy & Resources Committee that

- (a) a revised Housing Capital Programme 2009/10 be approved, as set out in paragraphs 3 to 8;
- (b) the Housing Capital Programme 2010/11 be approved, as set out in Appendix B (as amended **);

** as set out in Amendment Sheet 2.

- (c) borrowing of £3.409m in 2010/11 be agreed to support the 2010/11 capital programme and a contribution of £325,000 from the Housing Revenue Account be made towards the Housing Capital Programme during 2010/11;

- (d) the policy in respect of allocating 50% of Right to Buy receipts after pooling to the Housing Capital Programme, be amended to 0% in 2009/10 only;
- (e) any garage receipts and receipts from miscellaneous housing land transfers be utilised to support the Housing Capital Programme with effect from 1 April 2009;
- (f) the forecast 2011/12 to 2014/15 be noted, as set out in Appendix B (as amended **);

** as set out in Amendment Sheet 2.
- (g) the above decisions be exempt from call-in as any delay that may result from call-in would be prejudicial to the interests of the Council as set out in paragraph 10 of this report.

47. **HOUSING REPAIRS FIXED PRICE**

The Committee received a progress report on moving towards a fixed price for the housing repairs element of the Kier Harlow Annual Service Charge (ASC).

RESOLVED that the recommendations, as outlined in paragraphs 9 to 12, be approved.

48. **REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES**

None.

49. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE

APPENDIX A

WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

Q1. **Mr M Patrick**

With reference to Housing Services Asset Management Strategy 2009-2014, when did Harlow Council know of the life span of the properties in Northbrooks, Old House Croft, St Edmunds Way, Fold Croft, Linford Close and when were the tenants informed of the information?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

The average designed life span of a dwelling is normally classed as 60 years, although many last beyond this with a good maintenance regime. The properties in Old House Croft, St Edmunds Way, Fold Croft and Linford Close are pre-cast reinforced properties which are designated defective dwellings under the Housing Defects Legislation (Part 16 of the Housing Act 1985).

Harlow Council has not determined the life span of these properties, although it recognises that for estates like Northbrooks it is likely to require major refurbishment to prolong their longevity, and consultation is currently taking place with residents to identify options for the future.

For the other estates mentioned, the Council will undertake on-going structural surveys on these properties.

Northbrooks estate was identified as a priority estate in 2007 when the Area Investment Renewal Framework (AIRF) was published which identified that Northbrooks, with other estates, should form part of the Priority Estates Regeneration Programme.

Consultation with residents on the AIRF and the Regeneration Strategy was held in 2007.

Q2. **Mr M Patrick**

Could Harlow Council tell me for how long has the £10,000 trigger sum for stock condition review been set at that amount and why has it not increased?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

This trigger sum has been at the £10,000 limit since 2004. This was reviewed in 2007 when the Housing Asset Management Strategy was first published. It's purpose is to provide a management trigger point at which empty properties that may cost over this limit to bring back into occupation, are considered for possible disposal. This figure has been kept at this level in view of the downturn in housing property prices and that repair costs have not increased significantly due to the impact of the recession.

Q1. **Mr G Roberts**

Why was Kier Harlow Ltd allowed to sub contract 35% of the Decent Homes project work to private building companies and how much has that cost tenants?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

Kier Harlow Ltd competitively bids for and wins some decent homes contracts that are let by Harlow Council. Most of the work is carried out by Kier Harlow Ltd's own staff. Any work that is needed to be sub-contracted is still managed by Kier Harlow Ltd under the Council's service standards and performance management framework.

The Council, in partnership with Kier Harlow Ltd, encourage Kier Harlow to maximise the level of work it undertakes by its own staff. However, a number of factors impact on their ability to do this. This includes, for example, peaks in workloads and availability of specific skills at any given time. As Kier Harlow Ltd has been awarded this work in accordance with the Council's procurement rules which ensure best value, the employment of sub contractors does not increase the costs to the Council or its tenants.

The use of sub contractors is a common practice in the building maintenance industry with many main contractors sub-contracting a much higher proportion of their workload.

Q2. **Mr G Roberts**

Why was the Rent Card scraped without any consultation with tenants?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

The rent card was not removed without consultation. The consultation period ran over the course of 18 months and included :-

- a) Housing Management Service Improvement Team
- b) Tenant Forums
- c) The annual Tenant and Leasehold Conference
- d) Harlow Town Show
- e) Harlow Homes editorial
- f) Quarterly rent statement

Q1. Mr V Hurley

Why do Harlow Council Housing Officers tell couples who are in Housing Band 2 that they should be bidding on 2 bedroom flats and then look to go on to the transfer list after a year if they would like to move into a 2 bedroom house; when on 13 January 2010 Bidding List, 189 people bid for a 2 bedroom house which was given to a single non-working mum with 1 child who had already been housed by Harlow Council in a 1 bedroom flat?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

All housing applications (Homeseeker, Internal Transfer and Homeless) form the Council's Housing Register and available properties are let to those applicants in accordance with the Council's Choice Based Lettings Policy (Allocations Scheme).

All applications are placed in one of four bands in accordance with their housing needs and these are then ranked in date order within the four bands. The date order ranking is determined by the date that an application is placed in a particular band. Applications will move between bands as their housing needs change when reassessed against the Council's Allocations Scheme.

The Council's policy does not differentiate between single parents and couples and no regard is taken in respect of the employment status of applicants.

In those cases involving two bedroom accommodation, Housing Officers currently advise applicants to bid for flats in the first instance if they are anxious to place a successful bid. Analysis of recent bids shows that there are considerable differences in the band dates of successful Band 2 applicants between property types i.e. between flats and houses.

New tenants of the Council are offered an introductory tenancy which normally lasts for one year. During that time, they cannot register for transfer to alternative accommodation.

Q1. **Ms G White**

Can you tell me the demographics of the allocation of available properties to single parent families compared to two parent families?

Reply from the Chairman, Housing Committee

As previously stated the Council's policy does not differentiate between single parents and couples, and all bids for available properties are ranked according to the applicants current banding and band date. Consequently, the Council does not record this information.