



STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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HOUSING COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 5 December 2023

7:00 – 9:38pm

Council Chamber

Minutes

Membership

Councillor Mattie Ross (Chair)

Councillor Natalie Bennett
Councillor Stephen Davies
* Councillor Katrina Davis
* Councillor Colin Fryer
Councillor Lindsey Green
*Absent

Councillor Lucas Schoemaker (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Christopher Jockel
Councillor Gary Luff
Councillor Jenny Miles
Councillor Loraine Patrick
Councillor Rich Wilsher

Tenant Representatives

Mike Richter

Officers in Attendance

Strategic Director of Communities
Strategic Head of Housing
Head of Housing Solutions
Accountancy Manager
Head of Assets & Investment (Council Housing)

Principal Accountant
Regeneration Delivery Lead
Democratic Services & Elections Support Officer
Democratic Services & Elections Officer

HC.036 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Davis and Fryer.

HC.037 Declaration of Interests

There were none.

HC.038 Minutes

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2023 were approved as a correct record.

HC.039 Public Questions

There were none.

HC.040 **Members' Questions**

There were none.

HC.041 **Affordable Homes at Brimscombe Port, Brimscombe**

The Regeneration Delivery Lead introduced the report and explained that approval was needed to purchase affordable homes on the Brimscombe Port redevelopment from St Modwen Homes. One of the key requirements was the delivery of 30% affordable homes with 50% shared ownership and 50% rent.

The Regeneration Delivery Lead advised that the advantage of making the commitment meant that it would be included in the new homes programme budget in the current budget setting round and would give certainty to St Modwen over the funding of the units which would assist with the projects cash flow and viability. The Regeneration Delivery Lead explained that the scheme had not been submitted for planning permission and therefore the final number of property types was unknown.

The purchase agreement would set out the mechanism for calculating the purchase price when the final scheme had been agreed, with the payment to be made as a series of stage payments as the properties were built, a grant would be requested from homes England through their affordable homes programme as required. A figure of just over £7.5 million had been included within the HRA budget report. The figure was based on 30% of the Local Plan allocation and once the final figures were agreed a further report would be brought to Housing Committee. The properties would be additional homes for the new homes programme and would be delivered through a development agreement with the developer, enabling the Council to comment on the specification, size and mix of property types at an early stage.

Councillor Miles asked whether the rent would be affordable rent rather than social rent as the funding could come from Homes England. The Regeneration Delivery Lead responded confirming that it would be unknown until the final planning permission had been granted, the mix of units was confirmed and what the policy was at the time.

Councillor Green asked when the information would be available on the final number of properties, the property types, and the affordability of the homes as the Section 106 agreement had not been determined. The Regeneration Delivery Lead confirmed that the Section 106 agreement would be negotiated when the planning application was prepared.

In response to questions from Councillor Schoemaker's and Councillor Ross, the Regeneration Delivery Lead confirmed that the homes would be energy efficient and that they would be built to the Council's requirements.

Councillor Patrick asked how much each home would be. The Regeneration Delivery Lead confirmed that the final figure was unknown however estimated that a one bed property would be around £190k and that once the figure had been agreed it wouldn't change.

The Regeneration Delivery Lead responded to Councillor Wilsher's question confirming that a competitive dialogue procurement process was undertaken to select St Modwen Homes.

The Regeneration Delivery Lead responded to Councillor Davies question confirming that the decision was made to not normally acquire units from developers as other Registered Providers would be delivering these units anyway and it was felt that the Council should be putting their funding into developing the schemes that wouldn't get delivered otherwise. However, the council had recently looked to acquire units in Wotton-Under-Edge and had been approached by other developers too.

The Accountancy Manager responded to a question from Councillor Davies confirming that the revenue position for the HRA was stable and that the project wouldn't affect the Councils financial position over the next 30 years.

Following a question from the Tenant Representative the Regeneration Delivery Lead confirmed there would be approximately 45 homes.

Councillor Luff Proposed and Councillor Jockel Seconded.

Councillor Jockel advised that the new homes programme was a low risk and had enormous potential benefits.

Councillor Patrick asked that the progress was regularly reviewed.

Councillor Luff stated that there was a desperate housing shortage and there would be a good range of different types of homes as part of the development as there weren't many one bedroom properties on the market.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED To

- a) **commit to the purchase of the affordable homes at Brimscombe Port from St Modwen Homes and to include them within the New Homes programme, subject to funding from Homes England, budget being approved and subject to contract;**
- b) **delegate authority to the Head of Property Services in consultation with the Strategic Director of Resources and Chair and Vice Chair of Housing to agree the Forward Purchase Agreement with St Modwen Homes setting out the mechanism for the calculation of the purchase price**

HC.042 Safe and Legal Routes to the UK

The Head of Housing Solutions introduced the report and explained that latest pages had been published online and circulated to Members. The government had asked all councils including Stroud District Council to pledge how many migrant households, arriving in the UK via safe and legal routes, could be housed by the Local Authority in 2025.

The Head of Housing Solutions advised that as part of the Pledge process, councils had been asked several questions with relatively short deadlines. The Council had been asked to engage with other organisations, evidence the reasons for our pledge, state who the Council would accept, who the Council would accommodate in terms of household types, state what the impact of the current funding arrangements had and speak to other public services such as education and health as part of our response by 15th December. The Head of Housing Solutions added that it was important to note that the Council would be

held to the pledge and made to accommodate a certain number, however the figure could be increased in the future.

The Head of Housing Solutions highlighted the information contained with the published late pages in detail.

Councillor Green asked whether the Council would monitor how other Councils had responded. The Head of Housing Solutions confirmed the Council would be and that they had also had discussions with Southwest Migration Partnership. The Head of Housing Solutions also confirmed that other Councils within Gloucestershire were starting with a lower number with the potential to increase.

Councillor Luff asked whether there was an option to specify ages due to school availability. The Head of Housing Solutions confirmed she was unsure at this stage.

The Head of Housing Solutions confirmed, in response to Councillor Davies, that if the pledge number were to increase it would be brought back to Housing Committee to agree.

Councillor Wilsher asked whether other organisations for example Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS) had advocated for a higher amount. The Head of Housing Solutions added that their response was pragmatic and that they could potentially support another 25 households in the county in 2025.

Councillor Ross asked whether the additional funding was sufficient. The Head of Housing Solutions advised that she had hoped so.

Councillor Jockel Proposed and Councillor Bennett Seconded.

Councillor Davies stated it was important and that it would be difficult as it got closer to the time deciding what the number should be increased to.

Councillor Wilsher added that the turnaround time given was unreasonable and that he felt uneasy choosing between the people that need somewhere who already live within the Stroud District and refugees.

Councillor Miles echoed comments from Councillor Jockel regarding the difficulties in choosing between those already living within the district who need a home and those fleeing conflict.

Councillor Luff commented on the short time frame and stated that he would have liked the opportunity to be able to consult with residents of the district.

Councillor Bennett added that the lack of housing, social care and schooling was not down to refugees. She added that she believed the Council could offer more but was glad the Council were able to offer two and could look at increasing the number in the future.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL That a pledge of 2 housing units for migrants arriving via safe and legal routes in 2025 is made to Government with the pledge to be reviewed by this committee during 2024/25 to determine whether it should be increased.

HC.043 **Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24 Quarter 2**

The Principal accountant introduced the report and highlighted the following areas:

- General Fund Revenue Budget Position

The budget monitoring position for quarter two showed an underspend of £87K, housing advice and homelessness showed a £50K underspend, the forecast at quarter two showed an increased variance in housing benefit and recovered costs of £60k. It was proposed that approximately £142k (dependent on the outturn position) was transferred to earmarked reserves to fund an additional post within the Housing Advice Team following additional grant funding. Housing Strategy had a £36K underspend, £192K had been transferred to earmarked reserves for future usage requirements.

- The General Fund Capital Programme

The Disabled facilities Grant Scheme had a £390K overspend. Sustainable warmth, LADS 3 had a £345K underspend due to the Green Homes LADS 3 scheme energy efficiency and heating improvements to homes on the gas network. Sustainable warmth Home Upgrade Grant shown a £506K underspend.

- Housing Revenue Account Budget Position

The Forecast Outturn position included an increase in respect of the pay award (which was determined nationally). This had been agreed with an additional £1,925, or 3.88% whichever was higher, applied to all grades and backdated to 1 April 2023. The monitoring position for the service showed a projected net underspend of £344K. There was an expected £114K loss of income as a result of the reduction in the voids, there had been an increase in let properties and therefore rental income, however the small reduction in income variance was as a result of the timing of rent notifications. A projected £301k underspend for Supervision and Management, the bulk of the variance related to role changes and vacancies.

- HRA Capital Programme

The HRA capital programme had been revised to £21,620k for 2023/24.

Councillor Luff commented on the disabled grants variance being caused by a back log and asked whether it would return to a better level in the future. The Principal Accountant confirmed that it would level out in the long term, and he would find out timescales and report back.

Councillor Davies queried the loss of income and the improvements made for void properties. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed voids had improved and added that the process had been broken down to see where the barriers were to address performance. This included looking into the time frames of Housing to complete the survey, then to the contractors to complete the work and then back out to be let. He also confirmed that performance of completing the repairs had improved significantly, some of the works had been completed by Property Care. The Strategic Head of Housing added that the Housing department were investigating an implementation phase and an action plan. The Head of Assets and Investments added that minor voids had been focused on and were delivered through in-house staff.

Councillor Davies stated no figures highlighting improvements had been provided and felt that Housing Committee should be given the information to show how much the void time had shortened by and how many long term voids there now were. The Head of Assets confirmed that the information Councillor Davies requested was recorded and the performance report contained an average however she could share the breakdown of the whole process.

Councillor Green added that voids data had been previously requested to Housing Committee on a quarterly basis.

Councillor Patrick asked when more staff would be recruited. The Strategic Head of housing responded to confirm that a review had been undertaken of the tenancy management team and that the service structures were being investigated to ensure they were fit for purpose and budgeted.

Councillor Schoemaker Proposed and Councillor Bennett Seconded.

Councillor Davies stated that there was a £301k underspend in supervision and management which wasn't good for the staff involved and workloads and asked whether the whole area could be re-looked at to see if income could be generated to ensure efficiencies.

Councillor Schoemaker added that this was a challenging time and that the staff were doing their utmost to face those challenges. The Council was doing a good job of keeping within the budget.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED To note the outturn forecast for the General Fund and HRA revenue budgets and the Capital Programmes for this Committee.

HC.044 Housing Committee Budget Estimates – Revised 2023/24 And Original 2024/25 and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Medium Term Financial Plan 2023/24 – 2027/28

The Accountancy Manager presented the report and explained that the report set out the draft budget for both the General Fund Housing budgets and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Accountancy Manager then highlighted the following key parts of the report.

General Fund Housing Budget

- Table 1 set out the overall position of the General Fund Revenue Budget.
- The budget had been revised for the current year and 2024/25 as the pay award was higher than the budget.
- An increase of £87K within the housing general fund budgets for items funded from reserves which included grant money to fund additional staffing posts.

General Fund Housing Capital

- There was an increase in the home upgrade grant which could be seen in Table 2 on page 60 of the report.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

- Table 3 set out the key changes
- £1.868m would be transferred from HRA reserves.
- It was proposed that rent and garage rent would be increased by 7.7%. Independent Living and District Heating Charges had been considered separately.
- The report included a proposal to consider charging higher rents on very highly energy efficient properties.
- The cost of systems was proposed to increase to £169k, this was a fixed term increase due to the planned upgrade of the housing management system.

- Property care had a proposed increase of £221k to support some of the changes, particularly around regulations.
- Paragraph 8.6 of the report introduced the housing regulator for the HRA.
- The proposed transfer from reserves of £1.8 million in the current financial year to £0.6m in the following financial year.
- The provision for repayment of debt was growing as planned, a contribution of just over £1m would be made in both the current financial year and the next financial year. These transfers along with the forecasted underspend in quarter 2 would mean at the end of 2024/2025 there would be £1.9m in the HRA General Reserves. This was above the minimum recommended balance however a plan needed to be created due to the predicted unbalanced budget in 2025/26.

Councillor Wilsher left the meeting at 20:31.

The Accountancy Manager informed the Committee that most of the Councils rent was below formula rent. The difference between the rents that the Council charge and the actual calculation for formula rent was in the region of £1.3 million per year. There were also other areas, such as some service charges, that the Council could charge on top of social rents which was being investigated. She further added that grants were being applied for and the Council had been successful in attracting grants particularly for energy efficiency works.

HRA Capital Programme

Across 2023/24 and 2024/25 there was £6.7m for the Social Housing Decarbonisation works. There was also an additional £1.8m included for 2024/25 for work at Nouncells Cross.

The Strategic Head of Housing stated that there were many unprecedented changes coming forth within the sector including a new regulatory regime, potential changes to decent homes standard and the impact of damp and mould legislation. He added the social housing sector changes led to pressures for the service therefore they were currently reviewing the staffing structure of the tenancy management team to ensure that there were adequate posts available for any additional responsibilities.

Councillor Miles asked whether the rent for high energy homes would still be under the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). The Accountancy Manager confirmed that the proposal for affordable rents would be over the LHA, which was due to increase in April, but it was unknown what it would increase to. Tenants could claim housing benefit in universal credit over the LHA rate. Councillor Miles asked a further question regarding the Capital Programme being put back and how this would affect duties under the new Social Housing Regulation Act. The Accountancy Manager confirmed that the impact of the future changes including decent homes was unknown, but the proposed rent budget set out a plan that was affordable for 2024/25 and continued to meet the current standards.

Councillor Davies asked whether there was any detail on the projects that had slipped and the cause of the slippage under point 4.1 of the report. The Accountancy Manager confirmed that the projects that had slipped were the county wide grant funded schemes because they were extended to go into this financial year. He further questioned whether there was logic behind increasing private housing HMO licensing by 42.9% and private housing immigration accommodation certificate by 33%. The Accountancy Manager confirmed that both of those charges were based on a cost recovery basis and an exercise had been undertaken to determine the cost of providing those services. Councillor Davies

asked when the exercise last took place as it would imply that they drifted more than inflation which the Accountancy Manager agreed to investigate outside of the meeting.

Councillor Patrick commented on 11.2 of the report and asked whether damp and mould being reported to Housing Committee could be changed to years to correctly reflect the report stated 6 months. The Accountancy Manager confirmed that this could be investigated and that the report was written with the Strategic Head of Housing who had only been presenting damp and mould at Housing Committee for 6 months.

Councillor Schoemaker Proposed and Councillor Luff Seconded.

Councillor Luff commented on the divergences which had put pressure on the budget in the long term and that the Council had the duty to resolve that over the long term. He added that the report set out ways that slippage could be stopped.

Councillor Patrick added that bathrooms and kitchens shouldn't be replaced if they are still working and are in acceptable condition which she was pleased to see in the report.

Councillor Schoemaker commended the Officers for the report and stated that he felt this was the start of maintaining a path to stay viable.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried with 6 votes in favour and 3 abstentions.

- RECOMMENDED TO STRATEGY & RESOURCES AND COUNCIL** **That**
- a) **The revised General Fund Housing revenue budget for 2023/24 and original budget 2024/25 are approved**
 - b) **The Fees and Charges list in Appendix A is approved**
 - c) **The revised HRA revenue budget for 2023/24 and original budget 2024/25 are approved**
 - d) **The movement to and from HRA balances and capital reserves as detailed in Appendix C and section 11 are approved**
 - e) **That from 1 April 2024:**
 - i. **Social rents and affordable rents are increased by 7.7%, in line with national rent guidance**
 - ii. **Garage rents are increased by 7.7%**
 - iii. **Landlord service charges are increased by 7.7%, except Independent Living Scheme charges and district heating charges which are increased as set out in Appendix B**
 - iv. **Shared ownership rents are increased as set out in each lease**
 - f) **That the HRA Capital Programme for 2023/24 to 2027/28, as detailed in Appendix D, be included in the Council's Capital Programme**

The meeting was adjourned for a short comfort break.

HC.045 Tenant Support Fund

The Strategic Head of Housing introduced the report and explained that the fund was not a statutory requirement and was instead, best practice. The fund was created for the Council to support their tenants with financial hardship due to cost of living increases. The fund was to support any tenants, Social Housing, general needs, or shared ownership.

Applications would be considered by a panel and assessed on a case by case basis, payments of up to £1,500 could be granted. The focus of the fund would be to support tenants with rent and service charge payments.

Councillor Miles asked whether a tenant representative would be sat on the panel. The Strategic Head of Housing explained it wouldn't be appropriate due to the sensitivity of applications.

Councillor Green asked how many tenants were behind on their rent payments. The Strategic Head of Housing agreed to investigate what the figure was and respond to Councillor Green outside of the meeting.

Councillor Green asked whether the payment would need to be paid back. The Strategic Head of Housing explained that it would either be a grant or a loan however each case would be assessed individually. Councillor Green expressed concerns that not having consistency may cause problems. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed that there would be an application form and process that the panel would follow to document the rationale or the decision that was made. For example, whether it was a grant or a loan and the amount. During the application process it would be reviewed whether the tenant support fund was the correct avenue or whether the tenant should be sign posted elsewhere.

Councillor Bennett asked whether the tenant support fund would lower the number of cases of enforcement action for nonpayment of rent. The Strategic Head of Housing stated that enforcement was a last resort, and the team would see where they could support tenants first.

Councillor Jockel asked whether it would be possible to involve tenant representatives without disclosing personal information. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed that the option could be explored however he worried it could cause delays and lead to further hardship or disengagement.

Councillor Patrick asked how quick the grant could be given. The Strategic Head of Housing responded to say the panel would be weekly or bi-weekly if needed and it would depend on how urgent the case was.

Councillor Ross stated that it was in addition to the other work that the Council already do to support tenants.

Councillor Luff asked how the tenant support fund could coordinate with other organisations for example Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). The Strategic Head of Housing added that Housing Officers were part of the cost of living group which tied in with CAB and other partners. If the tenant support fund was approved, it would be taken to the next meeting to notify them that it was available. Councillor Luff also asked how it would be promoted. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed it had been included in Councillor Ross' blog that it was coming to Housing Committee this evening and it would also be advertised on Stroud District Councils website.

Councillor Schoemaker asked what the Council gave out in total in discretionary actions and how it complemented the support that the Council gave to the Community Hubs which didn't fall under housing. The Accountancy Manager confirmed that this would need to be investigated outside of the meeting.

Councillor Miles asked whether the managers of community hubs would be contacted with information. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed he would take it forward.

Councillor Jockel Proposed and Councillor Bennett Seconded.

Councillor Luff debated that the tenant support fund would allow the Council to work proactively and avoid arrears.

Councillor Bennett commented that the tenant support fund was positive, and it would really benefit the tenants. It would prevent things from escalating, it would be flexible and help people that can't get to job interviews.

After being put to a vote, the Motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED To

- a) Approve the Tenant Support Fund with immediate effect**
- b) Delegate authority to the Strategic Head of Housing to make changes to the policy in consultation with the chair and vice chair of Housing Committee**

HC.046 Swedish Timber Houses - Future Options

A report was circulated prior to the Committee meeting, there were no comments.

HC.047 New Homes Programme

A report was circulated prior to the Committee meeting, there were no comments.

HC.048 Tenant Representatives

Mike Ritcher attended a repairs and maintenance event with 59 tenants in attendance and voiced that their priorities were communication with Housing Services. The tenants were also given the opportunity to report their repairs new and outstanding.

Tenancy Fraud week was between 20-25th November where the Housing Officers carried out 120 welfare checks on tenants who haven't contacted the Council in 2 years.

'Love where you live' events were held across the Stroud District clearing rubbish.

HC.049 Performance Monitoring

Councillor Davies commented on the performance monitoring report confirming that the performance monitors were happier with this report however it still didn't measure critical areas.

Councillor Miles asked whether it would be possible to have benchmarking on tenant satisfaction percentages. The Strategic Head of Housing explained that these were new performance indicators and therefore they needed to first build the data before any comparisons could be made.

Councillor Green requested for the performance monitoring report to be in format that was easy for anyone to understand.

Councillor Bennett commented on delivery of affordable homes as it was above target and asked whether it could be maintained. The Strategic Head of Housing explained that it wasn't just the Council but other external developers and registered providers who the team will continue to work with to maintain the high numbers.

Councillor Jockel echoed councillor Miles and Greens comments above.

Councillor Ross asked whether councillors would be updated on where the Council was following the new housing regulations coming in April 2024. The Strategic Head of Housing confirmed that councillors would be informed and should have an awareness of what the regulatory changes were. In response to Councillor Ross' question the Strategic Head of Housing stated there was a dedicated team that focus on gas and electricity and another team that focus on compliance areas. The Strategic Head of Housing added that housing was ensuring they were fully resourced and as close to 100% on all indicators.

HC.050 Work Programme

Councillor Davies requested a review on damp and mould to be added to the work programme.

Councillor Green requested that voids data should be added.

Councillor Schoemaker requested timeline on sustainable budgets.

RESOLVED To note the above updates to the Work Programme.

The meeting closed at 9:38 pm

Chair

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