

LANDLORD SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

26 January 2023

NOTES

Present:

Cllr Paul Rivers (Chair)

Cllr Stephen Mulliner

Chris Austin, Lucas Field Residents Group

Robert Stratford, Waverley Tenants Panel

Danielle Sleightholme, Waverley Tenants

Panel (Co-Optee)

Annie Righton

Andrew Smith

Annalisa Howson

Jeanette Englefield

Apologies:

Terry Daubney

In attendance:

Councillor Paul Follows

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Andrew Smith, Executive Head of Housing Services and Terry Daubney, Vice Chair.

2 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

3 Notes of the previous meeting

Cllr Mulliner recommended the minutes of the previous meeting were amended as there was a spelling error. The Board members agreed.

4 Review updated Terms of Reference

The Chair provided an update on the Terms of Reference as discussed at the December LSAB review meeting. The members of the Board agreed the changes.

5 Introduction to Smith and Byford Ltd

Melanie Herridge, Business Director at Smith and Byford provided the Board with a presentation on the background of company and an overview of the services they provided. This included domestic gas servicing, repairs, and installations, supporting over 70,000 properties, electrical testing, repairs & installation, commercial gas plant repairs, servicing and maintenance and building automation and environmental controls. It was noted that Smith and Byford worked with other Social Landlords in the Southeast and the company was technologically advanced in dealing with clients. It was also noted that the company boasts fast repair services through IT innovations.

Chris Austin from the Tenants Panel queried how Smith and Byford intended to work with individual tenants. It was advised that the relationship with tenants had been discussed and there were several options for interacting with tenants and how

tenants could get in contact with Smith and Byford. It was also advised that employees must comply with the Customer Service Promise to ensure client satisfaction. Annalisa Howson advised the Board that tenants would receive correspondence that week to introduce the company on how to contact the service.

It was noted that all current issues/jobs would be passed on to Smith and Byford within the next few weeks and tenants could contact Smith and Byford directly. Councillor Mulliner sought assurance that back up would be provided if the correspondence was not received by all tenants. He also queried the number of tenants visited per annum. Annalisa Howson assured Cllr Mulliner that contact details would be published in the tenant newsletter, correspondence letters, online and the Customer Service Centre would also signpost tenants. Melanie Herridge confirmed that over 75,000 visits were carried out per year.

Councillor Robini sought clarification on how Smith and Byford intended to reach tenants living in rural locations and how quickly they responded to tenants out of hours. Melanie Herridge confirmed that there was an out of hours service and a call out rota was always active. She noted that operatives would work based on priority and there was a 1-hour attendance for emergency cases.

Danielle Sleightholme queried the process of procurement. Heather Rigg advised the Board that it was an interim contract currently due to short term emergency of CHS terminating, she advised that the council conducted emergency procurement using the appropriate policies and framework.

6 Senior Living Welfare Check in procedure

The Board received a presentation from Amy Walton on the Senior Living Welfare check in procedure. She advised the Board that there were 8 schemes across the borough and approx. 245 tenants within age range. She recommended the Board review the proposed check in contact procedure. She noted that the procedure had been in place since October 2022 and the procedure note confirmed current practice. Amy Walton advised the Board that 47% of tenants were very satisfied with service and 42% satisfied. The 5% of dissatisfied customers gave feedback that they did not receive calls, and this was due to officers seeing them previously in the day. It was noted that the team would clarify that contact could be in person, phone, or careline.

Amy Walton advised the Board that Officers endeavoured to see tenants once a week or would text and call if they were unable to visit in person. Councillor Mulliner queried if there was record of how often tenants were contacted. Annalisa Howson agreed to provide data. She advised that Senior Living welfare was a tenant opt-in scheme, everyone was risk assessed beforehand and was based on individual circumstances.

Councillor Keen noted her concern for vulnerable people in council homes within her ward. It was noted that the scheme was directed to the 245 individuals identified. Members queried if the scheme could be applied further into the community. Annalisa Howson advised that the Careline system was available for other tenants who were not identified by the scheme. She noted that the scheme was a signposting scheme to ensure tenants were getting support from appropriate services. Councillor Maxine Gale queried the careline costs.

Danielle Sleightholme felt that there should be a formal call out schedule for those who were not opted in. Annalisa Howson advised that the officers aimed to have contact with all tenants at least once a week, even where they had opted out of the welfare check in service. She advised that the team knew their tenants and risk assessed actions based on individual circumstances. She also stated that each case was determined on a case-by-case basis and those that opted in, should be contacted weekly and followed up. It was noted that tenants could request additional check in calls.

Annalisa Howson advised that Housing Officers working with general needs tenants also signposted to GP and Adult Social Services. She noted that approx. 10 tenants are signposted per month and Officers were aware of signs and red flags to look out for.

7 2023/24 HRA Draft Budget

The Board were asked to make comments on the recommendations in the report going to the Executive. Annalisa Howson addressed the Board and gave a presentation on the HRA draft budget. She advised that the Strategic Review recommended that the council keep a £2 million reserve. She noted that the report made recommendations for the yearly budget.

Annalisa Howson advised the Board that the report recommended an up to 4% rent increase. The Government cap on rent increases, would allow up to 7%; therefore would 5% be a more realistic proposal? She noted that the impact on tenants and on the business Plan should be considered and balanced. She noted that 40% of tenants pay full rent, 26% of tenants were on Universal Credit and 17% received full housing benefit and a further 17% partial housing benefit. She advised the Board that the service had a strong track record of rent collection and the 1% target of rent arrears had not been exceeded. It was noted that a 7% increase would allow £100,000 additional revenue on the 30-year business plan.

Annalisa Howson advised the Board that the second recommendation related to Senior living service charge increase of 4% to £20.90pw. She noted that the draft capital programme included all improvement plans. She advised that it included a £14 million budget for next year and that the council would need to seek additional borrowing over 12 years to fund new initiatives for stock improvements and new homes.

Robert Stratford from the Tenants panel noted that inflation should be into consideration, along with council tax increases and inflation costs on food. He felt that rents should be kept at 4%. The rent increase was going to hit vulnerable tenants. Annalisa Howson acknowledged the concern and recognised the need for a “goldilocks” increase. She also explained that state pensions and benefits were to increase by 10% and average wages were also increasing.

Councillor Mulliner sought further information (in chart form) on the how the debt would be smoothed out as rent reductions reduced cash flow for the council significantly. It was noted that O&S Resources committee recommended this rent increase be revised. Councillor Mulliner also felt that all tenants should be treated fairly, and the pension increase should be considered, and that inflation suggested 5% was reasonable based on a cap of 7%.

Councillor Follows advised the Board that the Executive have had the same debate. It was advised that rent increases were formulated by CPI inflation plus 1%, which would put social housing rents into a much higher bracket (11%) which is why a cap was set by government. It was noted that the council was looking at grades within that cap and with the comments made in the O&S Recourses committee attempting to balance rent prices with costs of new builds; must be realistic. It was felt that Executive should re-discuss as recommended by the Overview and Scrutiny Resources Committee. Comments made by the LSAB would also be considered by Executive.

Chris Austin from the Tenants panel noted the challenges and agreed a 5% increase.

Danielle Sleightholme queried if this would mean the council would see an increase in vulnerable people and would the Hardship fund continue to support these tenants, she also noted that the very limited take up on the Hardship Fund suggested that information about the fund were not accessible. Danielle also queried the community room charges in Annex 4.

Responding to the queries Annalisa Howson advised the Board that the Hardship fund was still active and used as a last resort where other options had been exhausted. She noted that some tenants may be holding back from applying and tenants should be encouraged to access the fund.

Candice Keet advised that a 4% increase would look at £26 million of additional borrowing while 5% would lead to £21 million of borrowing. Annalisa Howson advised that there was no way to avoid capital projects and additional borrowing. She added that to ensure maintenance of resources for tenants the revenue would be needed, as the cost of building new homes were very high. It was also stated that council rent increases would also warrant housing benefit increases. Additionally, Community room charges in Annex 4 applied to renting/using the room for events or functions, not casual use.

Danielle Sleightholme queried if there were any capital works that could be put off reducing borrowing. Responding to the query, Candice Keet advised that Capital works could not be put off as it was likely to increase costs in future. She added that Capital funding for major repairs were largely funded by a depreciation charge, so putting off capital works would not help as the charge would need to be made anyway.

Recommendation: To revisit the discussion on a 4-5% rent increase by Executive. The Chair asks members of the Board to comment on the benefits of 4% or 5% increase. Cllr Follows recommended that officers minute the comments made in the debate and pass on to Executive. It was agreed that the Executive should look at the minutes of the meeting and take into consideration the comments made when formulating the decision.

8 Heating Position paper for warmth, safety and efficiency

Hugh Wagstaff addressed the Board and outlined the Heating Position Paper for warmth, safety and efficiency (Part One – Domestic Gas Boiler Programme) and plan to award a six-year boiler (domestic and commercial) replacement and servicing contract. He informed the Board that £14 million of the contract will include

servicing schemes. Robert Stratford queried if all the new builds would contain air source heat pump.

Hugh Wagstaff advised the Board that new builds would contain renewable sources of energy, mostly air sourced. He also noted that Ockford Ridge would have air sourced heat pumps. Councillor Mulliner felt that the 2030 target for net zero was unrealistic. He also noted that the type of heating with air source pumps was very different to gas boilers, as the air pump was more energy efficient but may not save costs as usage may increase during a cold spell. Overall, he agreed to the recommendations in the paper. Councillor Mulliner queried the installation cost dated 2002 and if it was an error. Hugh Wagstaff confirmed it was meant to be 2022 and 3730 boilers were to be replaced between 2022-2030.

The co-opted members noted that the recommendation was to endorse the exempt Annex 1. Annex 1 was exempt and had not been seen by the co-opted members. The Board were asked to agree the principle, as the costing details could be identified by officers. Annalisa Howson added to this by stating that it was a position statement, no tendering had been completed yet. The Board's advice and comments were positive, and they endorsed the programme.

It was noted that the Chair would make his decision at the Housing Portfolio Holders Decision meeting.

9 Asbestos Survey and Works Contracts

Hugh Wagstaff outlined the report and presented the contract that would be awarded, he noted that the Chair would make an official decision on the contracts. He noted that a procurement exercise had been carried out and due diligence had been maintained in the tendering of the contract. Danielle Sleightholme asked if the council were going to continue reservicing homes. Responding to the query, Heather Rigg advised the Board that there was a reoccurring general survey in place and a more in-depth survey would be carried out if intrusive works were required.

It was noted that the Chair would make his decision at the Housing Portfolio Holders Decision meeting.

10 Work programme

Annalisa Howson outlined the upcoming items on the work programme:

- Quarter 3 information
- Service plans
- Report on damp and mould
- Senior living consultation findings

Annalisa Howson informed the Board that there would be a webinar with regulator of social housing on 15th Feb at 6pm. Board members should join if possible.

11 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Thursday 23 February 2023.

