

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
HOUSING MANAGEMENT ADVISORY BOARD
MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 16 January 2020

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: **Resident Members:** Len Saunders (Tenant) (Chair) and Jon Thurlow (Leaseholder)

Councillors: John Lloyd (Vice- Chair), Liz Harrington, Lizzy Kelly, John Lloyd, Lin Martin-Haugh, Margaret Notley and Jon Thurlow

Staff Members: David Brown (Interim Assistant Director – Stevenage Direct Services) and Jaine Cresser (Assistant Director – Housing and Investment)

In Attendance: Stephen Archer (Project Manager), Lydia Butcher (Energy & Sustainability Co-ordinator), Elizabeth Ddamulira (Tenancy and Income Manager), Di Dharmasuriya (Service Delivery Manager – Property Repairs), John Farquharson (Damp and Condensation Manager), Chris Philippou (Investment Programme Manager), Andrew Sowden (Investment Programme Manager) and Councillor Jeannette Thomas (Portfolio Holder – Housing, Health and Older People)

Start / End Time:	Start Time:	6.00pm
	End Time:	7.55pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Introductions were made around the table.

Apologies for absence were received from Fiona Plumridge.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 21 NOVEMBER 2019

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB) meeting held on 21 November 2019 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MAJOR REFURBISHMENT CONTRACT UPDATE

The Investment Programme Manager provided an update on the Major Refurbishment Contract. The HMAB were informed that lessons learned from Phase 1 works had now been incorporated into the scope of Phase 2 works and

some processes had been altered accordingly. A number of resident consultation events were rescheduled due to the December 2019 Parliamentary elections. The standard of work being completed to date was considered by SBC to be high. Preliminary analysis of resident feedback forms indicated that the majority of residents were satisfied with the work carried out so far. Some internal works were affected by delays associated with UK Power Network work schedules. A series of standard items had been identified for delivery across the programme.

It was acknowledged that there were numerous reports of problems with concrete (Finlock) gutters. This issue was being resolved by replacing concrete with plastic guttering systems. Costs of the refurbishment programme were in line with expectations. However, costs could be ascertained after inspection of the properties. The Investment Programme Manager also highlighted delays relating to signage. The HMAB noted the lack of uniformity of the signage around the Borough. It was pointed out that one could use the type of signage to speculate property tenure type. This was likely to promote the stigma of social housing. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the new signage had a modern feel and was designed to last long. The Council had long-term plans to replace signage throughout the Borough and ensure uniformity.

It was **RESOLVED** that the update be noted.

4 **REVISED HOUSING INCOME POLICY AND RENT NOTIFICATION LETTERS**

The Income Services Manager presented the Housing Income Policy for annual review by the HMAB. The Executive Portfolio Holder (Housing, Health and Older People) indicated that she would submit amendments to correct typographical errors in the draft Policy.

The Income Services Manager also presented the Draft Rent Adjustment Notification Letter, Explanation of rent and water charges from 06 April 2020 for houses and Explanation of rent and water charges from 06 April 2020 for flats. Members pointed to errors on the letter and explanatory notes. The HMAB stressed the importance of adhering to the Crystal Mark standard on internal documents and documents that were sent to customers. It was indicated that the documents had to be clear and concise in view of the fact that this would be the first rent increases in four years. It was noted that rent increases were often sensitive and complicated.

The Income Services Manager informed the HMAB that a debt advice support worker was available to assist Universal Credit applicants. It was confirmed that some tenants paid for a portion of housing costs that was not covered by Universal Credit.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the Income Services Manager updates the Housing Income Policy before submitting the document for approval by the Executive
2. That the Income Services Manager amends the Rent Adjustment Notification Letter, Explanation of rent and water charges for houses and Explanation of

rent and water charges for flats before sending them to customers

5 AIDS AND ADAPTATIONS POLICY

The Investment Programme Manager informed the HMAB that the current Aids and Adaptations policy did not fulfil the requirements to provide a fair and affordable service for Stevenage Borough Council and its tenants. The proposed policy took into consideration the Borough's aging demographic and how to futureproof homes for tenants requiring adaptation assistance. The policy aimed to support more people to stay independent longer in suitable housing.

The Aids and Adaptations Manager reported that an independent review of the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) had recommended that whichever funding source was used to access assistance with home adaptations, it should be tenure neutral with all applicants given equal access to funding. The proposed policy would allow SBC to meet the current and future demand and deliver assistance to more households in need within budget.

In response to a question, officers advised that the demand for suitably adapted properties could be addressed by providing cheaper temporary adaptations that did not require structural modifications. It was noted that some of the technical options had an adverse impact on the budget for aids and adaptations. It was confirmed that SBC was still a member of the Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency (the HHIA). HHIA was a shared service that provided home and housing adaptations to Hertfordshire residents with Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) allocations. The HMAB expressed concerns regarding the lack of clarity on the responsibilities of SBC and HCC in relation to aids and adaptations. Members welcomed plans to provide a dedicated role within SBC housing structure for a specialist officer to provide comprehensive housing options advice and support for tenants requiring adaptation assistance.

The HMAB recommended that the following policy recommendations be rephrased:

9. Where the adaptation is considered unreasonable and unsuitable for the tenants needs, for example installing a level access shower to a flat above 1st floor that doesn't have a lift
12. Where the proposed adaptation might put others at risk, for example communal area stair lifts
16. Introduce a financial means test in line with current DFG statutory legislation...Benefits are considered as income and working tax credit and child tax credit are 'passport' where income is below £15,050 per annum

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the Draft Aids and Adaptations be noted
2. That contact details and interim assessment procedures for aids and adaptations be provided on the SBC website and the Council's magazine for residents (Chronicle) pending approval of the Aids and Adaptations Policy

6 DAMP AND CONDENSATION POLICY

The Investment Programme Manager informed the HMAB that the Council did not currently have a policy relating to damp and condensation. The damp and condensation service was moved from the Council's Voids and Repair service to Housing and Investment in 2016. A Damp and Condensation Strategy was developed in 2016 and an update on the recommendations and Action Plan was presented to Executive in October 2018. The new policy was aimed at delivering a cost-effective service, identifying the Council's responsibilities and clarifying responsibilities of the tenant and leaseholder.

The HMAB welcomed the recruitment of specialist resources for damp and condensation. It was reported that damp and condensation cases were on the list of top five complaints received by the Council. The backlog of live cases peaked at 450 in March 2018. Members recommended that more clarity be provided on the responsibilities of tenants. The HMAB also recommended that general advice and examples of cases be included in the policy. The Damp and Condensation Manager informed the HMAB that it was cheap to run residential extractor fans. It was therefore reasonable to expect residents to keep rooms ventilated and to report faulty extractor fans. It was reported that the estimated running cost for the common extractor fan (Vent-Axia) was £0.01 per day (£0.16 per month or (£1.81 per year). This estimate was based on an electricity cost of 14 pence per hour per kilowatt, an average of 21 hours per day to run fan on trickle mode (Trickle Time) and an average of 3 hours per day to run fan in boost mode (Boost Time). The Assistant Director informed the Board that the Council carried out detailed analyses of void properties with the aim of identifying and resolving damp and condensation cases at void stage. It was noted that the effective management of damp and condensation in void properties would minimise the loss of income. The Council was seeking legal advice and guidance regarding the conversion of out-houses.

In response to questions, officers pointed out that:

- The Council used a combination of visits and data loggers to analyse temperature, humidity and power use for heating and air conditioning in properties that had persistent damp and condensation problems
- Mould washes were carried out in extreme cases of damp and condensation
- The Council recommended the use of safe off-the-shelf fungicidal washes (mould eradication products)
- Due to cost considerations and not safety concerns, the recommendation to provide mould eradication starter kits would not be included in the Damp and Condensation Policy
- Staff training would be extended to operatives involved in carrying out MOT-style gas servicing inspection if the Council resolved to adopt this inspection regime

Officers welcomed the suggestion that void properties be thoroughly inspected for damp and condensation and appropriate action taken prior to re-letting. It was pointed out that measures should be put in place to ensure that the corrective action did not have adverse impact on voids income. The Assistant Director informed the

HMAB that the issue of over-occupiers in properties affected by damp and condensation would be considered in the upcoming Housing Allocations Policy Review.

It was **RESOLVED** that issues raised by the HMAB be considered for inclusion in the Damp and Condensation Policy.

7 **UPDATE FROM EXECUTIVE MEETINGS**

It was **RESOLVED** that the item be deferred to the next meeting.

8 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Assistant Director circulated the new structure chart for Housing and Investment.

9 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Thursday 20 February 2020, 6.00pm, Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete

CHAIR