

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Monday, 8 March 2021 at 4.30 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery
Scott Payter-Harris

8. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

9. Declarations of interests

Councillor Sanders declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as his mother lives in one of the blocks included in agenda item no.7 HRA Fire Safety Improvement Programme. Councillor Corkery declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as he is a council tenant.

10. Improved Energy Efficiency Standards for New Build Council Homes

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director of Buildings, presented the report, together with Andrew Waggott, Energy Services Team Manager, and Susan Whitehouse, Head of Design Service.

In response to a question from Maria Cole, officers explained that Passive House in its strictest sense is an exacting design requirement that aims to reduce the heating used in a property to 15 kilowatt hours of heating per m² per year. It means the property is extremely well-insulated and air tight with the air changes within it handled by mechanical ventilation. For example, an entire house might be heated by a heated towel rail in the bathroom. The property is usually triple-glazed and it is as if it is wrapped in an energy efficient blanket. The air quality is very good so it is a healthy environment for residents and also tackles fuel poverty.

In response to questions from Councillor Corkery, officers said that feedback and learning from the Design, Operational and Construction milestone phases of the Wecock Farm and Strouden Court schemes will inform future developments. If decisions need to be made on future developments they can be brought forward through the learning and evaluation of these two schemes. Officers plan the next 12 months on a rolling basis so have already factored in the Design phase in case there is another development before the Design phase of these two developments is reached. They are now moving into the next round of feasibility work and the initial work of the Design phase will inform next stages. Officers will engage with all stakeholders as the developments proceed.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris, officers explained the Additional Design Requirements are set out in Appendix B and include renewable energy on-site generation and low carbon heating systems. It would be interesting to see the difference in efficiencies gained from air source heat pumps and ground source systems and if they work better in different locations.

Officers agreed it is important to work from other local authorities who are using the Passive House standard as they can learn from each other. A working group, which includes Southampton and Hampshire, has been established to share best practice.

The more there are of this type of build, the more cost effective the design. Local authorities with more experience of Passive House, such as Exeter, say there is almost no difference in costs. Some savings can be generated by building homes with fewer working parts such as pumps but also by having a select list of contractors and who can deliver on a cost-effective basis, especially as they become more familiar with this type of build. Efficiencies can be shared by learning from the expertise of neighbouring local authorities. Councillor Payter-Harris thought it was not so much a question of a lack of skills to build these types of homes but more a matter of procurement.

With regard to a comparison between the initial financial appraisal and the final cost, feedback on costs will be part of the regular evaluation updates.

Members welcomed the report, noting that it was some of the council's most important, exciting and ground breaking work, particularly in view of the climate crisis. As it is a learning experience for all ongoing feedback is needed.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders noted that the Passive House technology may not work in all locations. However, he does not want to jeopardise social housing so there may have to be some compromises between design, green energy and affordable rents. He urged officers to work with residents so that they know how to use the technology in their energy efficient homes. He thanked officers for the report.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness

- 1. Noted the draft Low Energy and Social Housing Design Requirements.**
- 2. Approves the pilot to apply and test the attainment of the Passive House standard and the use of the Low Energy and Social Housing Design Requirement to two HRA council housing developments; Wecock Farm and Strouden Court.**
- 3. Requested a study evaluating the pilot to be brought back for decision to determine the application to further council housing developments.**

11. Wecock Farm Development

Jo Bennett, Head of Business Relationships, Growth & Support, presented the report, together with Wayne Layton, Finance Manager.

Members welcomed the report, noting it was good to see council homes built on council land. Infill building in gaps in estates can be a complex issue but Wecock Farm is an example of a development that will make a positive contribution to the local community.

In response to questions from members, officers explained that the site had not been included in the Local Plan due to the timeline. As officers work with Havant Borough Council on this type of development they will identify sites that may not previously have been considered for development. The main consideration is to balance additional development with a sense of community.

Discussions with Havant over the number of homes nominated to them will consider the site as a whole and what they need. It is more powerful to ask what Havant needs rather than allocating them a set number of homes.

The Design phase will show the benefit of using in-house expertise; the development is a learning experience for all involved.

£8.1m is the maximum figure for the cost of the development. Officers will have to check the development is still viable if the affordable homes grant funding from Homes England is not received. If the development was costed at social rent level it would not be viable. The cost was pitched as it was as officers are trying to ensure the most capacity to achieve Passive House standards. When officers have more information at the completion of the Design phase there can be more detailed discussions about cost and viability. Current costs are based on industry estimates rather than fully worked up designs.

Maria Cole said it was good to see new homes being built and the council working with Havant, rather than competing with them. Officers said they would look at the needs of people on the waiting list and it was highly likely the development would include adapted properties.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders requested that the development should be as green as possible and rents as low as possible though this may entail compromises and uncomfortable decisions. He noted that all costs are ceilings, not floors, as he does not want to request more money. He thanked officers for the report.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness

- 1. Approved Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Expenditure of £8.1m, to deliver 28 new council housing dwellings.**

2. **Noted that the Capital Expenditure of £8.1m requested for this scheme is based on estimated costs from industry cost analysis of a Passive house model.**
3. **Noted that this development will be a pilot scheme designed and built adopting the principles of the Improved Energy Efficiency Standards For New Build Council Homes this will include bringing a report to this meeting at the completion of the following phases to report on progress and learning; design phase, construction phase and operational phase.**
4. **Delegated authority to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources to amend the composition, design standard and spending profile of the proposed scheme in order to meet planning and design requirements whilst ensuring that the scheme remains financially viable following any necessary changes.**
5. **Delegated the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources to apply for any grant funding to support the scheme and also to agree the use of either Grant funding or 141 receipts to support the scheme.**

12. Strouden Court Development

Jo Bennett, Head of Business Relationships, Growth & Support, presented the report, together with Wayne Layton, Finance Manager.

In response to questions from members, officers explained the red line around the site was slightly larger than in previous discussions with Havant so the development could accommodate an extra eight units without overcrowding. Ground floor adapted properties are definitely being considered and there will be some larger houses to reflect demand on the waiting list.

With regard to removing some of the retail units, which could provide employment and community space, it is unsure yet if it is the right thing to do. It is a matter of what is best for the public realm. One of the units has been empty for some time and parking could be brought closer to the centre of the development making it more convenient. It is essential to understand what local people want. If there was a viable business the unit would not be removed. Portsmouth would need to give good evidence to Havant for removing units and would refer the matter to members. Other factors such as crime statistics and environmental impact would also be considered. A couple of expressions of interest in the unit had not resulted in any takers.

The council will apply for affordable homes grant funding from Homes England and could receive from £30,000 to £35,000 per unit which makes up the shortfall to ensure viability of any schemes. Homes England have recently launched a new round of funding, which provides a good possibility to move forward as the council has been successful in previous bids. The funding is for social housing regardless of tenure so is not a barrier to charging cheaper rents.

Trees and plants will be considered in greater detail as part of the whole landscape. Some are poorer quality and it would be more beneficial to replace them with better quality ones. Attractive trees would not be removed. The landscape architects work closely with the architects and arboricultural advice will be taken. Havant will be consulted as they too will be concerned that the development is attractive. The Design Team have already worked with Havant on other schemes so a good working relationship is in place.

Councillor Sanders thanked officers for the report.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness

- 1. Approved Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Expenditure of £18.7m, to deliver 63 new council housing dwellings.**
 - 2. Noted that the Capital Expenditure of £18.7m requested for this scheme is based on estimated costs from industry cost analysis of a Passive house model.**
 - 3. Noted that this development will be a pilot scheme designed and built adopting the principles of the Improved Energy Efficiency Standards For New Build Council Homes this will include bringing a report to this meeting at the completion of the following phases to report on progress and learning; design phase, construction phase and operational phase.**
 - 4. Delegated authority to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources to amend the composition, design standard and spending profile of the proposed scheme in order to meet planning and design requirements whilst ensuring that the scheme remains financially viable following any necessary changes.**
 - 5. Delegated the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources to apply for any grant funding to support the scheme and also to agree the Resources to apply for the use of either Grant funding or 141 receipts to support the scheme.**
- 13. Council Housing Maintenance and Improvements and Housing IT Business Software 2021/2022**

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director of Buildings, introduced the report. Graham Fairbrother, IT Business Partner, introduced Appendix C, IT Capital Schemes.

Councillor Corkery said residents generally felt the council was responsive towards repairs; however, some repairs are considered as part of the planned maintenance programme so are not done for some years. He understands the council needs to prioritise work.

In response to questions from members Mr Layton explained the capital budget is based on the depreciation charge; it is not linked to rents but is appropriated to the Major Repairs Reserve each year, is a ring-fenced budget and is used for capital work and repaying debt. However, if there were bigger

reserves a surplus could be moved to the Major Repairs Reserve. Councillor Sanders requested an in-depth examination of the depreciation charge to try and reduce it. He noted the effect of the government's reduction of rent levels by 1% for three years which has significantly reduced rental income.

Mr Fairbrother said some IT equipment that is no longer needed is disposed of responsibly by a company on the council's behalf as part of a corporate contract. Other equipment, such as desktop PCs which are no longer needed now more staff have laptops, will be re-used to replace public access computers in Housing offices and HRA funded community centres. The replacement PCs are more fit for purpose as they run Windows 10.

Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, confirmed that sprinklers are fitted in blocks in the following priority order: the tallest blocks first; those with only a single staircase as an escape route; the residents, for example, those in sheltered or supported housing; the presence of mains gas.

Councillor Sanders thanked officers for the report.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Preventing Homelessness

- 1. Agreed that the area programmes and allocation of finance for the funding of the Revenue Budgets for repairs and maintenance of dwellings be noted.**
- 2. Agreed that the capital budgets listed in Appendix B and Appendix C commencing in 2021/2022 be approved and the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services be authorised under Financial Rules, Section B14 to proceed with schemes within the sums approved.**
- 3. Agreed that the Director of Finance & Resources and Section 151 Officer financial appraisal be approved for the capital programme - global provision.**

14. HRA Fire Safety Improvement Programme

Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, introduced the report.

In response to questions from members he explained it is not always practicable to fit fire doors and sprinklers at the same time. Fitting sprinklers requires access to communal areas and routes into individual properties. When fitting fire doors contractors have to take into account redirecting telecommunication cables, particularly where they go through door openings. Work can proceed on fitting fire doors where it is confirmed there are no other issues. Different specialist contractors are used for specific work and it would not be practical to have different contractors in blocks at the same time. It is unlikely there are contractors who could undertake all the different types of work at once.

Surveys undertaken are intrusive when a risk is identified and further information is required to determine if a building element is safe or not while carrying out a non-intrusive survey.

Members welcomed the report and thought the programme of works would reassure residents.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders said one of the first priorities for a landlord was to keep residents safe. He thanked officers for their work and members and Maria Cole for their comments and support. He noted how the developments in housing over the last two years had improved residents' lives.

The Cabinet Member noted the report. The report is for information only and is not subject to call-in.

The meeting concluded at 6.25 pm.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair