

**CABINET (HOUSING) COMMITTEE****26 November 2014****Attendance:**

Councillors:

Tait (Chairman) (P)

Godfrey (P)

Miller (P)

**Other invited Councillors:**

J Berry (P)

McLean (P)

Dibden (P)

Scott (P)

Izard (P)

**TACT representatives:**

Mrs J Steventon Baker (P)

Mr D Chafe (P)

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**1. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**

Councillor Godfrey declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in respect of agenda items due to his role as a County Council employee. However, as there was no material conflict of interest, he remained in the room, spoke and voted under the dispensation granted on behalf of the Standards Committee to participate and vote in all matters which might have a County Council involvement.

Councillors J Berry and Scott declared disclosable pecuniary interests in respect of agenda items due to their both being Council tenants. However, as there was no material conflict of interest, they remained in the room, spoke and voted under the dispensation granted on behalf of the Standards Committee to participate and vote in all matters which might have a Council house rent setting involvement.

**2. MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 1 October 2014 be approved and adopted.

**3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no questions asked/statements made.

4. **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENT SETTING 2015/16 AND BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN OPTIONS**  
(Report CAB2631(HSG) refers)

The Head of Housing Finance gave a detailed explanation of the contents of the Report and he, the Assistant Director (Chief Housing Officer) and Head of New Homes Delivery answered questions from Members as summarised below.

The Head of Housing Finance noted a correction to Paragraph 6.1 c) as the New Queens Head development was due to be completed in 2016.

In response to questions regarding the possible conversion of some sheltered schemes communal areas to provide additional residential accommodation, the Assistant Director (Chief Housing Officer) confirmed that full consultations would take place. He emphasised that the proposals related to a small number of declassified schemes where the communal areas were rarely, if ever, used and in general had resulted from residents' requests. Communal areas would be retained in full sheltered housing schemes.

The Head of Housing Finance advised that the rent proposed did not take account of the findings of the Housing Rent Setting Informal Policy Group as this had not yet finished meeting or produced a final report. He confirmed that the £50 million reduction in the HRA surplus at the end of the 30 year Business Plan was primarily because of the extra spending proposed on major works to the housing stock. The debt profile over the next 30 years was represented in Appendix 6 of the Report.

The Assistant Director advised that funding for Supporting Families had been included in the base budget as it was uncertain how long the national programme of funding would continue. However, it was recognised that there would be on-going demands in addition to the benefits of continuing the closer working links that were being developed between the Council and other organisations involved.

The Assistant Director explained that the RPI was a key assumption in the Business Plan for calculating costs etc so it was considered to be the most appropriate index for increasing garage rents. He highlighted that the vacancy rate for Council owned garages was reasonably low and that the rent charged was below the average charged with other local authorities.

With regard to the proposed Extra Care Scheme in Chesil Street, the Head of New Homes Delivery clarified that although the original scheme did include six shared ownership units, this was no longer essential. The scheme could still be viable if only rental accommodation was included.

The Assistant Director confirmed that consultation would be carried out with tenants affected regarding the proposed changes to the caretaking/estate services as set out in Paragraph 7.2 (f) of the Report.

The Assistant Director advised that he had anecdotal evidence that private market rents were increasing at a rate above inflation. Council social rents averaged at just below 50% of market rents, where new builds would be at 50-80%, depending on costs.

Mrs Steventon Baker emphasised the TACT comment in Paragraph 14.2 that there were no proposals to move away from an affordable rent policy for new Council homes of "up to 80% rents."

Members welcomed the proposed budget to enable the provision of 26 new Council dwellings and noted that any conversions of communal areas would be in addition to this number. Members also welcomed the Report generally and commented that it was a reflection of the good service provided by the Housing Department.

The Committee agreed to the following for the reasons set out above and outlined in the Report.

**RECOMMENDED:**

- 1. THAT SOCIAL AND HOSTEL RENTS FOR 2015/16 BE INCREASED BY SEPTEMBER CPI + 1% FROM 6 APRIL 2015, GIVING AN OVERALL INCREASE OF 2.2%.**
- 2. THAT THOSE AFFORDABLE RENTS FOR 2015/16 BE INCREASED BY CPI + 1% FROM 6 APRIL 2015, GIVING AN OVERALL INCREASE OF 2.2%.**
- 3. THAT GARAGE RENTS FOR 2015/16 BE INCREASED BY RPI FROM 6 APRIL 2015, GIVING AN INCREASE OF 2.3%.**
- 4. THAT THE UPDATED HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) CAPITAL PROGRAMME AT APPENDIX 4 OF THE REPORT, WHICH INCLUDES THE UPDATED NEW BUILD PROGRAMME, BE APPROVED.**

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the revised budget for 2014/15 be approved as set out in Appendix 1.
2. That the options for service changes and additional expenditure be approved as detailed in Paragraph 7 of the Report and approve the preparation of a detailed HRA Budget and Business Plan based on these proposals.
3. That the service charges be raised to cover the cost of specific accommodation based services at communal housing schemes based on recovering the full cost of services.

4. That the Assistant Director (Chief Housing Officer) be granted delegated authority, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, to determine:

- a) the tenure mix for the proposed Extra Care Housing scheme as set out in Paragraph 6 of the Report; and
- b) the level of service charges at communal housing schemes.

5. That it be noted that more details of the major works spending in 2015/16 and future years will be presented to the February 2015 meeting of the Committee.

5. **RENT FREE WEEKS**  
(Report CAB2632(HSG) refers)

The Head of Housing Finance emphasised that despite the title of the Report, these were not “free” weeks, but “rent clear” weeks as in affect, tenants were paying in advance. The majority of tenants now paid monthly and this was likely to increase further with the roll-out of universal credit. Another reason for the proposed change was that as part of Home Choice, the Council’s rent was shown divided by 48 weeks, whereas other Councils and Registered Social Providers (RSPs) rent was divided over 52 weeks.

Members requested that Officers work closely with tenants who currently paid weekly to help explain and assist with the introduction of this change.

Mrs Steventon Baker noted that when the proposal was introduced at the TACT meeting, Officers made assurances that they would assist tenants who wished to continue to pay weekly in advance.

The Assistant Director acknowledged these comments and confirmed that assistance would be provided for tenants.

The Committee agreed to the following for the reasons set out above and outlined in the Report.

RESOLVED:

That from 1 April 2015, rents be calculated and recovered over 52 weeks and that Rent Free Weeks will no longer be in place.

6. **2014/15 PERFORMANCE MONITORING HALF YEAR UPDATE – HOUSING SERVICES**  
(Report CAB2637(HSG) refers)

The Assistant Director introduced the standard half yearly performance report and answered detailed questions from Members, as summarised below.

The Committee congratulated Officers on achieving a re-let time of below 14 days. The Assistant Director explained that the main reason for this success

had been the introduction of pre-termination inspections and early advertising of properties which would be coming available.

Mrs Steventon Baker welcomed the Report and commented on the good service and support received from the Council as landlords.

The Assistant Director advised that "Repair jobs completed within 1 visit" was a relatively new indicator and, although performance was above target, work was continuing to improve this further as it was acknowledged as being of importance.

With regard to estate improvements, it was noted that sometimes work was delayed due to reasons outside the Council's control (for example, in Stanmore due to issues with cabling). The additional staff would help in improving performance.

The Assistant Director advised that the Council had not served any Notices Seeking Possession (NSPs) as a direct result of Welfare Reforms. All tenants were made aware of the Council's Money and Benefits Adviser who was available to assist. However, Discretionary Housing Payments were nearly fully committed for the current year.

The Chairman drew the Committee's attention to a question at the Council meeting on 6 November 2014 regarding the performance of Liberty Gas and highlighted the assurances given in the Report regarding dealing with recent issues.

The Committee agreed to the following for the reasons set out above and outlined in the Report.

RESOLVED:

1. That the performance information be noted.
2. That the proposal included in Paragraph 3.2 of the Report not to invite further proposals for the Estate Improvement programme and for the 2015/16 programme to concentrate on the schemes already under construction, be noted.

7. EXEMPT BUSINESS

RESOLVED:

1. That in all the circumstances, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.
2. That the public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following items of business because it is likely that, if members of the public were present, there would be disclosure to them of 'exempt information' as defined by Section 100I and Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

<u>Minute Number</u>	<u>Item</u>	<u>Description of Exempt Information</u>
##	Exempt minute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>) Information relating to any</li> <li>) individual. (Para 1 Schedule</li> <li>) 12A refers)</li> <li>)</li> <li>) Information which is likely to</li> <li>) reveal the identity of an</li> <li>) individual. (Para 2 Schedule</li> <li>) 12A refers)</li> <li>)</li> <li>) Information relating to any</li> <li>) consultations or negotiations, or</li> <li>) contemplated consultations or</li> <li>) negotiations, in connection with</li> <li>) any labour relations matter</li> <li>) arising between the authority or</li> <li>) a Minister of the Crown and</li> <li>) employees of, or office holders</li> <li>) under, the authority. (Para 4</li> <li>) Schedule 12A refers)</li> </ul>

8. **EXEMPT MINUTE**

RESOLVED:

That the exempt minute of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 1 October 2014 be approved and adopted

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 11.30am

Chairman