

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET 8 FEBRUARY 2023 FROM THE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY PANEL MEETING ON 2 FEBRUARY 2023**

### **EC59: LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND**

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Officers presented the report which provided information on the grant funding offered to the Borough Council in December 2022 through the Local Authority Housing Fund programme which had been established by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to support Local Authorities to acquire homes to accommodate households with housing needs who have arrived in the UK via Ukrainian and Afghan resettlement and relocation schemes.

The Chair thanked the officer for their report and invited questions and comments from the Panel, as summarised below.

Councillor de Whalley welcomed the scheme and commented that he had investigated community sponsorship schemes which identified vulnerable people for resettlement and matched them with sponsors. He commented that those entering the scheme needed protecting and he referred to existing charities that could also provide support. He commented that the houses should not go into the wider stock and instead the Council should set up, or support an existing charity to act as a community sponsor so that the support was ongoing and could deal with any future emergencies.

The Housing Strategy Manager explained that the grant funding offered by Government for this scheme was for Capital purposes and revenue would be required for ongoing support elements. She highlighted the criteria of the funding in that it could only be used for those who had already arrived through schemes as set out in the report. The scheme granted flexibility so that the provision could be used in the wider housing stock if required.

Councillor de Whalley commented that he would like plans for the future to be looked at so that the Council was prepared to ensure that refugees had safety and security.

Councillor Hudson referred to the match funding element of the scheme and that any overspend would be the Councils responsibility. She felt that the grant funding awarded would not cover the costs of acquiring the properties. She referred to the existing housing stock available via Housing Associations and that some were in desperate need of refurbishment and felt that this funding should be used to make improvements to the existing housing stock.

The Housing Strategy Manager explained that the grant funding could not be used for refurbishment and explained that West Norfolk Housing Company would take on the delivery of the units through this scheme and the budget for this had been accounted for in the Company's Business Plan. Modelling would be carried out to identify the mix of housing to be delivered through the scheme and it was likely that houses that were already under construction would be used for the scheme so that the tight timescales could be achieved.

Councillor Hudson commented that there were so many people on the housing register that could be frustrated by this scheme and felt that funding should be directed towards this instead.

Councillor Moriarty asked for clarification on the recommendation within the report relating to delegated authority for the final terms on the Memorandum of Understanding. The Housing Strategy Manager explained that the delegation would involve accepting the principles set

out by Government in terms of accepting the funding allocation, the number of homes to be delivered and timescales. It would not involve increasing the match funding.

In response to a further question from Councillor Moriarty, the Assistant Director explained that the prospectus set out the terms of the scheme and then further detail would be required to establish the Council's Policy for delivery of the scheme including details of tenures, eligibility and assessment of need.

In response to a question from Councillor Moriarty regarding the tight timescales involved, the Housing Strategy Manager explained that the purchase of homes already under development would be investigated. There was some flexibility afforded if the homes were not completed within the timeframe as long as the necessary contracts were in place.

Councillor Moriarty asked for details of tenures and how long people would be permitted to stay in the homes so that stock would be available for those who needed them. The Assistant Director explained that tenancies would be included in the Policy document.

In response to a question from Councillor Moriarty, it was clarified that the Government had made an allocation of fourteen homes for those who had arrived from Ukraine and two homes for Afghan refugees. And this was based on a Government formula. The requirement was for sixteen properties to be delivered and it was confirmed that these could be a mix of sizes to respond to the need of eligible people.

Councillor Ware commented that the fund would be better used to refurbish existing Housing Association properties. She also asked how rents would be paid and it was explained that affordable rents would be paid and it may be that some of the tenants would be eligible for certain benefits to assist with payments. The Assistant Director explained that West Norfolk Housing Company were a social housing provider and they would be taking the scheme forward.

Councillor Bubb asked if the properties would be pepper potted, if locations near to facilities and towns would be considered and if the properties would be furnished. The Housing Strategy Manager explained that the availability of stock would be investigated, but it was likely that homes would be made available close to towns. It was also confirmed that this scheme did not include furnishings, but there were other schemes available that people could be signposted to if required.

Councillor Bullen commented that consideration needed to be given to the location of the properties in relation to families who were already here and had support networks in place.

Councillor Ryves addressed the Panel under Standing Order 34. He felt that there would be resentment from local people who had been waiting on the housing register for a long time. He commented that there was also lots of sub-standard social housing and that the Council should work with Freebridge Community Housing and commit to refurbishment. The Assistant Director explained that this was something that could be investigated separate from this scheme and he was aware that Freebridge Community Housing were currently assessing their stock and looking at options.

Councillor Moriarty commented that he agreed with the suggestion put forward by Councillor Ryves, that the Council work with Freebridge Community Housing to look at ways that improvements could be made to the social housing stock in the Borough.

The Chief Executive explained that there could be further opportunities through Government funding schemes to address other needs such as refurbishment in the future.

**RESOLVED:** That the Environment and Community Panel support the recommendations to Cabinet, as set out below and asked Cabinet to note the comments made about looking at opportunities to work with Freebridge Community Housing in the future.

It is recommended that:-

1. The Council will enter a Memorandum of Understanding with DLUHC based on the attached prospectus for the Local Authority Housing Fund (see appendix 2). Authority is delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing People and Communities to agree the final terms of the Memorandum of Understanding with DLUHC.
2. The Council will accept the total sum of £1,719,141 offered to the Council by DLUHC under the Local Authority Housing Fund to deliver the programme understanding the match funding requirements as set out in the report and attached prospectus.
3. Cabinet agrees that, subject to agreement from West Norfolk Housing Company, the properties will be acquired by West Norfolk Housing Company, funded by the grant, debt financing and other available funding
4. The Council requests that West Norfolk Housing Company works with the Council to deliver the properties through the fund.
5. Cabinet agrees to the principle of allocating properties acquired through the fund to eligible Ukrainian and Afghan households. A further report setting out a policy approach will follow separately.
6. Authority is delegated to the Assistant Director Programme & Project Delivery to
  - a. alter the proposed NORA 4 tenure mix, originally agreed by Cabinet on the 4th February 2020 (CAB 106), where necessary, to facilitate the disposal of properties previously identified as Private Rent and/or Open Market Sale, to West Norfolk Housing Company (WNHC) as affordable housing
  - b. negotiate the terms of any disposal with West Norfolk Housing Company.