



CABINET REPORT

Report Title	OPTIONS APPRAISAL FOR SINGLE PERSON'S ACCOMMODATION
---------------------	--

AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC

Cabinet Meeting Date:	23/9/09
Key Decision:	NO
Listed on Forward Plan:	YES
Within Policy:	YES
Policy Document:	YES
Directorate:	HOUSING
Accountable Cabinet Member:	CLLR S BEARDSWORTH
Ward(s)	LUMBERTUBS

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report proposes a way forward for Single persons accommodation (SPA)
- 1.2 This accommodation is predominantly made up of bedsit rooms, which are unpopular and hard to let. There are a number of possible options and it is proposed to pilot these at Robinson House, which is now empty and therefore most urgently in need of an alternative proposal.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet agree to a "Design and Finance" competition to address the future use of Robinson House, with the competition brief informed and agreed by local residents and stakeholders.
- 2.2 That a further report be brought to Cabinet advising of the outcome of the competition and requesting Cabinet's agreement to the proposed way forward.

- 2.3 That the brief aims to ensure that whatever scheme is proposed, future housing provision would be 100% affordable.
- 2.4 That the future of other SPAs be informed by the work carried out within this proposal for Robinson House.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 The council has 6 blocks of flats/bedsit rooms currently designated as single person's accommodation. None of them have any communal facilities beyond a small washing area. A decision was made some time ago to remove the caretaking and cleaning staff based in these blocks as a cost cutting exercise. Since then some of the blocks have become unpopular with applicants registered on the waiting list and become hard to let. Increased reports of anti social behaviour have been received relating to these blocks and without major investment they will fail to meet the Decent Homes standard.
- 3.1.2 Cabinet decided on 26th September 2008 to close Robinson House and it is now empty and is the first priority for identifying an alternative use of the building and site. There are a number of possible alternative uses, including refurbishment to increase the size of the units from 1 bedroom to 2 or 3 bedrooms, designating the building as specialist supported housing or clearing the site and realising the land value for redevelopment.
- 3.1.3 It is proposed to generate interest in the site from RSLs and developers by advertising a "Design and Finance" competition performed at their own risk and therefore at no cost to the council. The competition brief will be agreed with input from local residents, some of whom have already submitted a report to the council via the local MP, outlining their views and proposals on future development. Appx 1
- 3.1.4 The learning gained from this project will then be applied to other SPA blocks where similar issues need to be addressed. Currently, the most urgent of these are Paget House and Overslade House both of which are largely bedsit accommodation and have a significant turnover of voids. A full list of SPA blocks and property types is shown at Appendix 2.

3.2 Issues

- 3.2.1 A previous proposal to use Robinson House as the location for the "Places of Change" project met with significant local opposition, based partly on the reputation the building and its residents had developed in recent years. Details of any proposals around tenure mix, access to social housing grant and affordability, would be a significant factor when selecting the successful application.

- 3.2.2 In the current economic climate there may be limited viable options available to develop the site. For this reason the competition brief must be as flexible as possible. A Design and Finance competition would entail working up a competition brief that would spell out the terms under which the council would dispose of the land. Developers and or Registered Social Landlords would be required to submit scheme proposals drawn up to comply with the brief and make a financial offer for the site. The brief would detail the criteria that the council would use to decide which was the best scheme and these are likely to include elements like deliverability, sustainability, design quality and the financial offer.
- 3.2.3 We will involve local residents in the process of preparing the brief by consulting them on those criteria and the implications of them.
- 3.2.4 The brief would also show the land area to be disposed. The current Robinson House site is adjacent to other land which is either in the council's ownership or would appear suitable for further development and it would explain how land not in the ownership of the council was to be acquired.
- 3.2.5 The council will advertise the competition in appropriate journals and, due to the current depressed development market, interest from Registered Social Landlords would be expected but not from private developers. Further to the disposal the resultant purchaser would submit a planning application for their intended scheme that would be subjected to the scrutiny of the Local Planning Authority and put before Planning Committee.

3.3 Choices (Options)

3.3.1 The council could try and let the empty units to applicants on the housing register but all the available evidence suggests that this would not be successful as previous efforts have failed.

3.3.2 The site could be put up for disposal on the open market, but this again is not seen as a viable option in current market conditions. With the aid of external advisors a variety of options was considered, but that study was inconclusive except with respect to the poor market conditions which were confirmed.

4. Implications (including financial implications)

4.1 Policy

These options are in line with the Housing Asset Management Strategy which was agreed at Cabinet in July.

4.2 Resources and Risk

There are a number of financial risks relating to these blocks including rent loss through high void numbers and turnover, high repair costs due to vandalism and

overcrowding issues and poor energy efficiency and design standards leading to a failure to meet the Decent Homes standard.

The council does not have sufficient funds to refurbish all of these blocks without entering into a partnership arrangement with an RSL or developer. The risk to the council will be minimised through such an approach.

A full feasibility study and risk analysis would be developed before any final decision on the future of Robinson House and potential options for other SPA accommodation.

4.3 Legal

Section 32 of the Housing Act 1985 gives Local Authorities general powers to dispose of housing land and property, whether by sale of the freehold or on leasehold terms.

Specific consent to dispose of the Robinson House site will need to be obtained from the Secretary of State as the disposal is not covered under the Section 32 General Housing Consents order for the disposal of houses and land.

4.4 Equality

The aim of this report is to put in place a strategy, which will improve the availability of high quality, affordable social housing for those in most need.

4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

- 4.5.1 Residents in the immediate area around Robinson House
- 4.5.2 Voluntary agencies providing accommodation and advice to single people
- 4.5.3 Councillors in Lumbertubs ward
- 4.5.4 M.P for Northampton North

4.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes

Priority 2 – Housing Health and Wellbeing

Priority 4 – Partnership and Community Engagement

4.7 Other Implications

None

5. Background Papers

5.1 Community views on the future of Robinson House

5.2 E.C Harris report –Single persons accommodation stock

Fran Rodgers, Head of Housing Needs and Support, 7595