

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 30 JANUARY 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, EPPING
AT 5.00 - 6.50 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby, K Angold-Stephens, R Chidley, P Gode, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs J Lea, L Martin, Mrs S Perry, T Richardson and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other members present: M Heavens

Apologies for Absence: (none)

Officers Present A Hall (Head of Housing Services), S Devine (Environmental Health Officer), Mrs S Lindsay (Housing Resources Manager), S Stranders (Environmental Services), R Pavey (Assistant Head of Finance), Mrs M Pearce (Housing Needs Manager) and Z Folley (Democratic Services Assistant)

36. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members appointed for the meeting.

37. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillors Mrs A Grigg and Mrs J H Whitehouse declared a personal interest in agenda item 7 (Homelessness Strategy). They declared that their interests were not prejudicial and that they would remain in the meeting for the duration of the consideration and voting on the item.

38. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING - 7 DECEMBER 2005

Noted.

39. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

Noted.

40. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

S Devine presented the report and circulated the findings of a MORI survey on empty properties in the Eastern Region. Noted that the Panel had given initial consideration to the development of a strategy at its meeting in September 2005. The report had undertaken further work on the preferences identified by that meeting and incorporated the findings of various surveys.

S Devine reported that 2.9% of properties in the District were vacant. The highest percentage of empty properties occurred in North Weald. This was partly due to the relatively high turnover rates for property selling in the area. The reasons behind the statistics for Ongar and the North had not been identified.

The Panel considered each set of options in turn. In relation to informal measures, noted the disadvantages of providing a list of all empty properties on the website. Noted that the facility could be used to raise awareness and ascertain details on empty dwellings. In relation to policy led initiatives, considered the options in relation to letting agents, empty property grants, the private sector leasing scheme, the LCB Sub Regional Bid, the finders and the deposit grant scheme.

R Pavey advised that at present properties left vacant for six months or less received a 100% discount. Properties vacant for more than 6 months received a 50% reduction. The Panel could not alter the discount for the first six month period, but there was scope to make recommendations on the level of discount that should be set for the period thereafter. Noted that increasing the percentage of discount might encourage people to declare properties vacant.

Agreed that the discount given to properties vacant for more than six months be 50%. Agreed that the discount be removed for properties vacant for more than a year.

Noted that one options was to provide Grant Aid to help cover the costs of bringing unfit dwellings back in use. Conditions could be attached to the financial support, to state amongst other things, that the expenditure be paid back should the agreed conditions be breached. It was suggested that loans could be made available for empty properties. Noted that the consultants appointed to undertake work on the strategy would explore these options. Noted the enforcement powers that were available and the circumstances in which they could be used.

Agreed that a decision on whether financial assistance be allocated to bring empty properties back into use be deferred until the findings of the private sector renewal project survey had been identified.

Agreed that in the event that the bid to the ODPM for funding was not successful, the Fresh START scheme be increased.

Agreed that the Finders Scheme be introduced on empty properties as per the option set out in Annex A of the report.

Agreed that no changes be made to the Rent Deposit Scheme

Agreed in principle that the Empty Property Strategy should include the use of all statutory powers including Empty Dwelling Management Orders and compulsory purchase. (EDMOs and compulsory purchase only to be used in exceptional circumstances and action in any individual cases only initiated with prior approval of the Portfolio Holder for Housing);

Agreed that the BV64 (number of properties brought back into use or demolished as a result of local government intervention) should be deleted. Agreed that the issues in the District did not warrant a significant KPI. Also agreed that the target did not reflect the current situation. Agreed that this be put to the next OSC on 2 February 2006 to propose that it be referred the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Standing Panel.

Councillor R Chidley voted against the recommendations.

41. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

M Pierce presented this report. Noted that following the discussions at this meeting, the Consultation Draft of the Strategy would be sent out to all organisations with an interest in homelessness to seek their views. Noted that at the end of the consultation exercise, the Homelessness Strategy would be revised to take account of comments received and then submitted to the Housing Portfolio Holder for final approval.

Noted that a report would be submitted to the Cabinet seeking approval for the resource implications of the plan.

Member considered each part of the strategy and endorsed the content.

42. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGIES - HOUSE SALES AND LEASEHOLD SERVICES, RENT ADMINISTRATION AND COLLECTION

S Lindsey presented a summary report and the strategies for the Housing Service Strategies on House Sales and Leasehold Services, rent administration and collection

The Panel considered and approved the updated strategies.

43. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were no reports to be made to the OSC, other than the Chairman of the Panels oral report on the work of the meeting.

44. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next meeting would take place on 3 March 2006 at 2.00 p.m in Committee Room 1.