

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 30 JANUARY 2007
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 6.55 PM**

Members Present:	S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, Mrs D Borton, Mrs H Harding, G Mohindra, Mrs J H Whitehouse, J Wyatt and Mrs P K Rush
Other members present:	D Stallan
Apologies for Absence:	D Bateman, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs J Lea and Mrs P Richardson
Officers Present	A Hall (Head of Housing Services), R Wilson (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)), P Pledger (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property and Resources)), Mrs S Lindsay (Housing Resources Manager), S Stranders (Environmental Services), L Swan (Environmental Services) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

30. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that Councillor Mrs K Rush would be substituting for Councillor Mrs P Brooks.

31. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Panel noted that there were no declarations of interest.

32. TO NOTE THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 31 OCTOBER 2006

The minutes from the last meeting were noted and agreed.

33. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted.

34. VERBAL UPDATE ON CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Panel was given a verbal update on the recent developments on the Choice Based Letting Scheme by the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations). He reported at the last meeting of the Panel that Uttlesford DC had withdrawn from the consortium, which came as a surprise to consortium members. Uttlesford subsequently received a visit from the DCLG's Special Advisor and an officer from the Government Office to encourage them to rejoin the consortium. As a result, on 18 January 2007 Uttlesford agreed to rejoin. In the meantime a lot of work had been carried out on the tendering process, but based on five authorities and not the original six. Because they had moved back to a six-authority scheme the tendering work had to be restarted, which would cause delays. They are now on course to

finish the tendering by May 2007 and hope to go live by October 2007. One of the advantages with this timescale is that it will give extra time for more consultation.

A consultation exercise was carried out in December 2006, through Housing News, which yielded about 400 respondents, the results are yet to be analysed. There are proposals to consult the residents at Norway House in February of this year. A consultation event for outside agencies was held in December, 65 invitations were sent out but only 8 people attended.

The Local Council's Liaisons Committee will be informed of the scheme at their proposed June meeting.

The DCLG are being kept updated of our progress and their special advisor attended the last consortium group meeting.

The Chairman asked if there were any cost implications due to Uttlesford rejoining the group and what kind of detail would members get from the recent consultations. The Assistant Head of Housing answered that some additional consulting days had been incurred, because of Uttlesford's actions. They have said they would cover some of the consultation costs and this is currently being negotiated. The results of the survey would be submitted to the next Housing Scrutiny meeting.

35. HOUSEMARK BENCHMARKING REPORT ON EFDC HOUSING SERVICE - 2005/06

The Head of Housing Services introduced the report on Housemark Benchmarking, a fuller report of which was circulated separately. It comprises a 'club' of organisations that can compare performance and costs with each other; this enables EFDC to compare with other like housing organisations in the country. Having uploaded EFDC's information on to the Housemark Benchmarking website, a report on the benchmarking results had been produced by the Head of Housing Services. This had been circulated separately to members of the Panel. This set out the benchmarking results with all the 51 housing organisations in Eastern and London Regions who had provided Housemark data returns for 2005/06. This report includes comparisons with both local authorities and housing associations. Within the report the activities are ranked by quartiles. The quartiles are broken down into:

Top Quartile – within the top 25% of housing organisations for that activity;

2nd Quartile – within the top 25% and the top 50% of housing organisations for that activity;

3rd Quartile – within the bottom 50% and bottom 25% of housing organisations for that activity; and

Bottom Quartile – within the bottom 25% of housing organisations for that activity.

It was reasonable to assume that an 'average council' would be ranked across the 2nd and 3rd quartiles for all indicators. In comparison, it was noted that the Council had almost 50% of its indicators in the top quartile alone.

Councillor Wyatt asked, of the 51 organisations that participated, how many housing associations who had property in EFDC were not included, and how could you persuade them to participate in the future. The Head of Housing Services answered that any good organisation should be doing this anyway.

Asked to define the target time for an urgent repair was; the Head of Housing Services said that organisations used different target times so it is not possible to accurately compare like for like. EFDC's average time is just under six days, with

94% completed on target within the first two quarters this year, which would put us in the 3rd quartile. It was noted that EFDC had been experiencing problems with recruitment and retention of tradesmen in the Works Unit. This has improved through undertaking job evaluations for craftworkers, which has resulted in higher pay levels and therefore improved our recruitment and retention. Also, for a number of reasons housing associations appear to be quicker at doing urgent repair work. However, if we had compared ourselves only with other local authorities it is likely that a comparable performance would have been better. Also housing associations are currently developing all the new housing, so they have newer stock, compared with our older stock, which needs more repair work.

The Head of Housing Services was asked about tenancy turnover and responded that having a high turnover meant that you were judged to be a poor performer. However, he did not think that was poor performance, as moving people on in a continuous track means that you are meeting more people's needs.

RESOLVED:

That the Housemark Benchmarking Report on EFDC Housing Services 2005/06 be noted.

36. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2006/07 (KEY ACTION PLAN) - PROGRESS REPORT

The Head of Housing Services introduced a six-month progress report on the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2006/07 (key action plan). The Panel noted the progress report (as at 1 January 2007) that set out the proposed action the Council had taken and would take over the following 1-3 years.

The HRA Business Plan would be revised and updated in April 2007 to cover 2007/08.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel noted the progress report on the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2006/07.

37. REPORT ON THE TRI-ANNUAL TENANT SATISFACTION SURVEY 2006

The Head of Housing Services introduced a report on the results of the Council's tri-annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey. The Panel noted that every three years, the Council is required to undertake a detailed Tenant Satisfaction Survey. A standard satisfaction form is used nationally (called the STATUS Survey) in order to compare results amongst landlords. The previous satisfaction survey was carried out in 2003; as then, the Council's latest survey was undertaken by an independent organisation called the National Housing Federation (NHF).

The results of the Satisfaction Survey have now been received and a copy of the NHF's detailed report on the results had previously been circulated separately to all members of the Scrutiny Panel to study.

Around 1,400 tenants (22% of all the Council's tenants) were randomly selected by the NHF to be surveyed. An exceptionally high response for a postal survey of 72% was received, giving a 3% margin of error at the 95% confidence level.

Based on their findings, the NHF concluded that:

“The Council’s tenants have shown they believe the Council is continuing to provide an excellent housing service. They are much more likely to be satisfied with most of the landlord services they receive than the tenants of most other social landlords. In particular, they are exceptionally pleased with the Council’s repairs and maintenance services and also with the contact they have with the Council’s staff. They usually find that staff are helpful and good at dealing with their problems. The survey identified no weak service areas.”

In summary, overall satisfaction with the housing service remains consistently high, increasing slightly from 84% in 2003 to 85% being satisfied (compared to the national average of 77%). 85% of tenants were satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service (compared to the national average of 73%). The Council ranked a strong first in its Peer Group for all 6 aspects of the repairs and maintenance service measured.

RESOLVED:

The Panel noted the National Housing Federation’s report on the results of the Council’s tri-annual Tenants Satisfaction Survey.

38. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING STRATEGY - HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY 2006

The Principal Team Leader from Environmental Services introduced the report on the Housing Assistance Policy, which regulates the manner in which financial assistance is given to private sector households.

The Panel noted that:

i) The Housing Assistance Policy forms part of the Private Sector Housing Strategy. It is intended that the Policy would commence on 1 April 2007. The Policy sets out the basis on which Epping Forest District Council will offer financial assistance for works of repair, renewal or adaptation in the private housing sector.

ii) The Policy could only be submitted once approval had been received with regard to the proposed changes and initiatives as set out the Strategy.

iii) Housing Assistance may be offered in accordance with the Policy towards the cost of:

- (i) The improvement, repair or adaptation of existing living accommodation including mobile homes and houseboats;
- (ii) The creation of new living accommodation by the conversion of existing buildings (including existing dwellings and commercial premises);
- (iii) Any other initiatives that are consistent with the aims and objectives of the Council’s Private Sector Housing Strategy.

vi) The Policy specifies the conditions for eligibility and the amounts for the following types of discretionary grants:

- Small Works Assistance;
- Decent Homes Assistance;

- Thermal Comfort Grants;
- Empty Homes Grants;
- Conversion Grants; and
- Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants/Relocation Grants.

v) For Small Works Assistance and Decent Homes Assistance was a proposal to extend the eligibility criteria to include other vulnerable households such as the chronically sick and disabled and families with dependent children as well as just those over 60 years old. Applicants could be on low income (there will be test of resources) as well as just those in receipt of benefit.

vi) With regard to Decent Homes Assistance, the time period for a Certificate of Owner Occupation is 20 years. This means that any disposal of the dwelling within that time will trigger repayment of the grant. In practice, this is likely to mean that a significant proportion of grants made will be 'recycled' back into the capital fund.

vii) Empty Property Grants are being introduced as part of the overall Empty Property Strategy and Conversion Grants are being introduced to encourage the owners of properties with redundant space (for example over shop premises) to convert the space to housing accommodation. Landlords will have to give a Certificate of Availability for Letting for 5 years. The Council could apply nomination rights if appropriate.

viii) The Policy will be subject to annual review to take into account changing policies at national and regional level and all available information on the condition of private sector housing in the District.

Asked if the policy included Travellers, the Principal Team Leader said that only residents of mobile homes on protected sites would be eligible and then only in certain circumstances.

Officers were asked what the criteria were for landlords who wanted to apply for grants and how it would work. The answer was that in order for landlords to get Empty Property or Conversion Grants the property would have to be brought up to the Decent Homes Standard.

Asked if a property was no longer habitable would the landlord apply for one of these grants. She responded that if a tenant complained about the condition of a property, it could be inspected and the landlord required to bring it up to standard. It may be the case they would be eligible for a Thermal Comfort Grant, but otherwise they will have to pay for it themselves.

Asked about whether an applicants War Disablement Pension (WDP) was taken into account when calculating an applicants contribution to the grant. The member was informed that the means test being used was the Disabled Facilities Grant means test, which does count part of the WDP as income. The Officer agreed to provide the Member with the exact details following the meeting.

The Panel considered how long the period should be before the policy is reviewed. It would need some time to settle down and it was therefore considered that 12 months should be allowed to elapse before it was reviewed. It was noted that an extra recommendation should be put into the Cabinet report to cover this period before a review was held.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Panel recommends to Cabinet that the Housing Assistance Policy be adopted as part of the Private Sector Housing Strategy.
- 2) That the Housing Assistance Policy be reviewed 12 months from its start date.

39. RECOVERY OF ARREARS FROM LEASEHOLDERS

This report was asked for by the Chairman of the Panel which considered the position in respect of leaseholder charges.

The Panel noted that all secure Council tenants have the right to buy their properties under the Right To Buy Scheme. Where these are flatted premises, the Council sells a lease, but maintains the freehold interest. The lease sets out the terms and conditions upon which the Council may pass on the cost of repairs, improvements and other management charges to the leaseholders. The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 sets out, amongst other things, the legislative framework by which leaseholders are to be consulted and controls on administrative and service charges. Currently there are 912 leasehold properties where the Council owns the freehold.

In March each year, all leaseholders are advised of their estimated charges for the forthcoming year. Under the terms of the lease they are required to pay the estimated charges in advance on a monthly basis in instalments. Where planned major works on individual flat blocks are known by the Council, the costs are included in the estimated charges. However, whilst the programmes of works are known in March each year, the actual properties that are to be included in those programmes are not always known, therefore separate notices are issued to leaseholders in line with the legislation as and when the details are established.

Once the actual account is issued, leaseholders are currently required to pay any outstanding balance in full within 28 days of the date of the invoice.

Whilst the terms of the lease are quite clear, leaseholders do not have the ability to plan for when major planned repairs or improvements are carried out, as this responsibility rests with the Council. This means that, from time to time, leaseholders are faced with a large bill, and then have to pay these charges from their savings, take out a loan or remortgage.

It was noted that there are options open to the Council for leaseholders with severe hardship. The Council could provide a loan and could give the leaseholder up to two and a half years to pay it back.

RESOLVED:

The position in relation to leaseholder charges for 2004/05 and 2005/06, and the proposed introduction of a Corporate Sundry Income and Debt Policy was noted.

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

The Chairman agreed that all items reported tonight should be reported to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

41. FUTURE MEETINGS

The last scheduled meeting for the Panel, on 30 April 2007 was agreed.