

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 30 APRIL 2007
IN MEMBERS ROOM, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 6.10 - 7.45 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), , K Angold-Stephens, Mrs J H Whitehouse and Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants and Leasholders Federation)

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: D Bateman, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs D Borton, Mrs H Harding, Mrs J Lea, G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson and J Wyatt

Officers Present A Hall (Head of Housing Services), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), P Pledger (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property and Resources)) and R Wilson (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations))

42. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

43. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Panel noted that there were no declarations of interest.

44. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes from the last meeting were noted and agreed.

45. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and progress with the Work Programme were noted.

The Head of Housing Services informed the Panel of the background to anew approach for the Housing Strategy (this was listed as no longer required on the work programme). The Government had decided that local authorities no longer needed to produce a local strategy. They were now encouraging local authorities to work towards meeting the objectives of sub-regional housing strategies, produced by sub-regional groups. Epping Forest is within the London Commuter Belt Sub-Region. In response the Sub-Region was proposing the formulation of 'position statements' and 'action plans' by individual local authorities to support the sub-regional strategies. Housing Services will therefore be producing a Housing Strategy Statement and Action Plan for the authority, and would be bringing this to the Standing Panel later on in the year for their consideration.

46. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2007/08

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan for 2007/08

The Head of Housing Services took the Panel through the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan for 2007/08, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business

Plan. Apart from providing the usual updating statistical and other information, the main changes to note from last year's Business Plan were:

- (a) Reference to the development of telecare services by the Council's Careline Service to use technology to monitor the well-being of older people;
- (b) A new chapter on the Provision of Quality Housing Services, including an updated section on tenant satisfaction (Chapter 5). This also included references to a new group being set up to look at how Housing Services interfaces with their customers. It will be made up of officers, not necessarily at management level, but who are judged to be the best people to add something to the review;
- (c) A new chapter on Value for Money (Chapter 6);
- (d) A new chapter on Diversity and Equality in the Provision of Housing Services (Chapter 7);
- (e) An updated chapter on Risk Management (Chapter 10);
- (f) A revised Financial Plan (Chapter 11), which considers projected income and expenditure over 30 years. It was noted that, financially, the picture has improved over last year;
- (g) A new Action Plan (Chapter 13); and
- (h) An updated Repairs & Maintenance Business Plan.

It was noted that the Business Plan would be reported to the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation on 10 May 2007.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse said that some tenants at Robert Daniels Court were not happy with their Housing Association's response to emergency call outs, especially over the Christmas period. They much preferred the Council's response. She asked if there was any likelihood that the Government would change the rules to enable local authorities to develop without the need to work with housing associations. The Head of Housing Services replied that a national organisation called ARCH, had been set up for all local authorities that had retained their housing stock. The previous Housing Portfolio Holder had considered joining this organisation and consulted all members via the Members Bulletin. Following this he took the formal decision not to join, but to keep a watching brief on this organisation. The Government is presently considering the provision of more funding for local authorities. Our current tenants satisfaction survey indicated that 85% are happy with their current service.

Councillor Angold-Stephens noted that there were big changes in the amounts for 2006/07 and 2007/08 for the Supporting People Grant and the Sheltered Changes (page 67 of the agenda). He was informed that the Supporting People Grant was made up of a combination of grants that helped pay for some officers, including the welfare officers and the disabled adaptation officer and also pays 5% of all our housing management officer's salaries. Recently, the rules have been changed so that there is only one provider of these services for our sub region. Most of the staff and the money have gone over to this new provider. This is the reason for the reduction in the budget.

As for the reduction in the Sheltered Charges, the Head of Housing Services was not sure and said that he would look into it and let the Panel members know in due course.

The Housing Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan

The Housing Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan was considered next. The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property and Resources) introduced this to the Panel. He also tabled revised versions of Appendices A and B.

Given that repairs and maintenance is the biggest single area of expenditure, and in line with a previous District Audit recommendation, this separate Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan was produced to detail the Council's strategic approach to this work.

The Council already has set standards for most of its service provision, which can be found in various documents such as the Tenant's Handbook, Housing Strategy and Contract Conditions etc. However, it was felt that these documents should be brought together into a single Business Plan, which would assist the Council in planning and monitoring the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service. This Plan was therefore comprehensive in its coverage.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked why had only 79 rooms for the elderly, been decorated, should it not be more? She was told that the policy had changed a few years ago and was now only for one bedroom flats. Housing Services had spent less than half its budget last year as there was less demand as there were less people who met the criteria. The new criteria had been publicised.

Councillor Stallan asked how often do we review the scheme to publicise the option for tenants to downsize their accommodation. He was told that incentives were offered to people to move from larger to smaller premises – but there was no set review timetable. Councillor Stallan asked if the Panel would like a report brought to it, looking at the scheme to encourage people to downsize. The Chairman agreed and said it would be nice to compare what we do with what other authorities are doing.

ACTION: It was agreed that a report looking at the scheme to encourage people to downsize their accommodation should be brought to the Panel in around six months time.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse said she would also like members to have an updated list of officers to contact when they have to deal with their housing cases.

Councillor Angold-Stephens corrected an out of date abbreviation on page 107 of the agenda where it referred to the IEE, it should now be referred to as the IET. He also questioned the budget for off street parking of £80,000; he thought it was more than that. The Assistant Head of Housing (Property and Resources) said that it was a combination of funding from HRA and the General Fund. Housing had recently taken over the off street parking role from Highways and are currently looking at this. They will prioritise identified schemes and eventually provide a report to the Cabinet. The Chairman commented that as this would be an ongoing job, should part of the officer's time be funded from the General Fund. It was agreed that this should be covered in the forthcoming Cabinet report.

The Panel noted an amendment made to page 114 of the agenda, under 6.2 (d) it should have read 63:37 and not 70:30.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the HRA Business Plan 2007/08, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan 2007/08 be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.
- 2) That a report looking at the scheme to encourage under occupying tenants to move to smaller accommodation should be brought to the Panel in around six months time.
- 3) That members be provided with an updated list of officer contacts to help them deal with their housing cases.

47. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS - UPDATE

The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) introduced the updating report on Choice Based Lettings.

The Panel noted that Uttlesford District Council had now re-joined the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium. As a result, the procurement process had to be re-started, which would delay implementation by three months, leaving a new starting date of around October 2007 (Broxbourne and Chelmsford would be unable to meet this starting date for their own reasons, but this would not affect the overall scheme). The additional days due to Uttlesford's temporary withdrawal cost the consortium a total of £1,950, which Uttlesford agreed to reimburse.

Four companies have been short listed in answer to the advert seeking expressions of interest from companies experienced in managing Choice Based Lettings (CBL). There will be separate contracts between each of the six authorities and the CBL agency, so it would not affect the other authorities if one of them pulled out in the future.

The six authorities will have a Memorandum of Understanding between them, which sets out the terms and conditions to which each authority would comply. On advice taken, the Portfolio Holder will not need to sign the final version of the Memorandum, so paragraph 6 of the report would not apply.

The Choice Based Letting Agency will send out an information pack to all prospective tenants nearer the start date.

An information evening will also be held to inform members of the scheme.

RESOLVED:

That the progress with the Choice Based Letting Scheme was noted.

48. ETHNIC MONITORING

The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) introduced the report on Ethnic Monitoring. This report is produced each year for information. This year the Panel noted that the figures for sheltered accommodation was separated out in the report.

RESOLVED:

The Panel noted the Ethnic Monitoring Report and agreed that no recommendations be made concerning amendments to the Council's Allocations Scheme due to ethnicity as current figures do not show a significant disparity between the ethnicity of the applicants in housing need in the District and those allocated both general needs and sheltered accommodation through the Housing Register.

49. REVIEW OF THE INTRODUCTORY TENANCY SCHEME

The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) introduced the report on the Review of the Introductory Tenancy Scheme.

The Panel noted this was an update report on the first 12 months of the scheme. Under the Housing Act 1996, local authorities are given discretionary power to operate a scheme of "Introductory Tenancies" whereby all new tenants would not be secure until after a twelve month "trial" period. During the twelve-month period, Introductory Tenants do not have the same statutory rights as secure tenants. Therefore, if the Council wishes to seek possession of the property for any breach of a tenancy condition, (e.g. rent arrears or anti-social behaviour) provided certain procedures are followed, the Introductory Tenancy could be terminated. This is simply by the issuing of a Notice of Proceedings without grounds having to be stated which the courts having no alternative but to grant possession, provided the Council had followed the correct procedures. An Introductory Tenancy, by its very nature, sends out a message to all new tenants as to what is expected of them, particularly in the early months of their tenancy.

In the first 12 months, 311 Introductory Tenancies were granted, with 16 Notices of Possession Proceedings being served, all on grounds of rent arrears. In one case after a review of the decision, the officer panel agreed to extend the period of the Introductory Tenancy by 6 months.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel noted the progress made with the Introductory Tenancy Scheme in the first year of its operation.

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

The Chairman agreed to report briefly to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee all the reports considered at this meeting.

51. FUTURE MEETINGS

The scheduled future meetings for the new year were noted.

The Head of Housing Services reported that there may not be a need to hold the 5 July 2007 meeting depending on what may emerge between now and then.

The Chairman took this opportunity to thank officers and members for their help and contributions during the year. In turn the Chairman was thanked for his Chairmanship of the Panel during the last year.