

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 3 JULY 2008
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 7.50 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, D Dodeja, Mrs J Lea, Mrs L Wagland, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J Wyatt

Other members present: R Frankel, P Gode, Mrs C Pond, B Rolfe, D Stallan and Mrs J Sutcliffe

Apologies for Absence: J Collier

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), R Wilson (Assistant Director Operations), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

Also in attendance: Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants & Leaseholders Federation)

1. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members.

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Stephen Murray declared a personal interest in item 10 Review of Epping Forest Careline by virtue of his mother using a dispersed alarm. Residential alarms were discussed in the meeting.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference for the Panel were noted. It was noted that the Working Group on Member Training has requested that a Housing Information Evening be provided on the same evening as the 9 October 2008 meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, which would particularly assist new members of the Panel.

4. HOUSING BVPI AND LPI PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - OUT-TURN 2007/08

Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, presented a report to the Panel regarding the out-turn of the Housing BVPI and LPI Performance Indicators for 2007/08.

Up to March 2008, all councils had been required to record, monitor and publish Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for a range of council services which included Housing Services. In addition, local authorities often recorded, monitored and published Local Performance Indicators (LPIs) for services which the local authority considered important. From the range of BVPIs and LPIs the District Council had selected Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which it considered important indicators to monitor. From April 2008 the lengthy number of BVPIs had been replaced by a smaller number of National Indicators. The District Council had re-designated some of the former BVPIs as LPIs so that they are still monitored. Performance against all the Council's BVPIs and LPIs was monitored on a quarterly basis by the Finance and

Performance Management Scrutiny Panel. The Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel had asked that performance on the Housing BVPIs and LPIs be reported to the Housing Scrutiny Panel for its consideration.

The following conclusions could be drawn:

- The Council's housing performance improved in 2007/08 in respect of 14 indicators (58%)
- There was no change in housing performance for 4 indicators (17%)
- The Council's housing performance worsened in 2007/08 in respect of 6 indicators (25%)
- Housing performance met or exceeded the target in respect of 16 indicators (67%)
- Housing performance failed to meet the target in respect of 8 indicators (33%)
- Housing performance was in the top quartile for all district councils in respect of BVPIs (25%) and was not in the top quartile in respect of 9 BVPIs (75%)

Councillor Mrs L Wagland began the discussion by saying she was surprised at the first indicator, regarding percentage of tenants evicted as a result of rent arrears, as being an "inappropriate indicator." Mr A Hall said that this indicator did not necessarily reflect the Council's performance on collecting rent and minimising rent arrears. Evictions were only done as a last resort and as a responsible landlord the District Council only evicted if it was necessary. He said that it would be wrong to judge the District Council by its number of evictions. The Chairman commented that the District Council, whilst supporting tenants, still expected them to pay rent. Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing Services, advised the Panel that it could take some time before legal action could be concluded. The Housing Act required a court order before a tenant was evicted. Members were concerned about tenant arrears and the periodic write-off of these arrears. The Director of Housing said that efforts were made to follow up tenants whereabouts. Mr A Hall added that the write-off of arrears was not an indicator. Mr R Wilson commented that if tenants re-appeared for re-housing, their arrears record may go against them. The Chairman said he was happy to re-examine this issue on an annual basis.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Council's housing performance in relation to Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) and Local Performance Indicators (LPIs) in 2007/08 be noted; and
- (2) That a report be provided to this Scrutiny Panel at their July meeting on an annual basis in the future.

5. DE-DESIGNATION OF PROPERTIES FROM OLDER PEOPLE'S OCCUPATION

The Assistant Director of Housing, Mr R Wilson, presented a report regarding de-designation of properties from older people's occupancy. Following some concerns raised by Members about the number of properties formerly designated specifically for occupation by older people on housing estates being let to younger people, the Housing Portfolio Holder had asked for this particular report to be submitted to the Panel for consideration.

During the mid-1980s, the Council had designated around 1,300 properties as specifically suitable for older people due to their size, type and location. These

properties were exempt from the right to buy. The properties did not include sheltered housing for older people, which was not de-designated from older persons' use.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s 176 properties had been removed from the list as they had proved unpopular with older people. There was also a growing need for small flats to be let to young, married couples. More recently, when vacancies occurred, designated properties for older people had proved even more difficult to let to older applicants. Under the old system of allocations, up to 10 offers were made and refused by this client group, resulting in void times increasing.

Following the introduction of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme in November 2007, designated properties for older people were advertised. In some cases no expressions of interests had been received, not even from older applicants in the lowest band. Many applicants who had expressed an interest often refused the offer of accommodation thus extending the void periods.

If any properties on the de-designated list proved difficult to let to older applicants, then applicants in the lowest bands (5 and 6) were advised of the opportunity of being possibly successful, should they express an interest. If no interest had been expressed then the age limit was reduced by 5 years from 60 to 55, and so on until it was eventually let. Currently 9.7% of applicants on the Housing Register were over 60, with 40% of applicants wanting one-bedroom accommodation. These statistics supported the Council's decision to de-designate appropriate flats originally set aside for older persons' use. Mr R Wilson commented that the Council often faced criticism when properties were left empty or let to younger people.

The Panel members had concern about the age mix of tenants on estates, there could be potential behavioural problems having younger tenants living next to older people. Mr R Wilson replied that the District Council could not leave properties empty simply because older people were not taking them up. The Council did what it could to let properties to older people but often there was no choice about letting to younger people. In response to a question regarding the designation of individual flats. Mr R Wilson said that the blocks of flats were designated block by block. Mr A Hall clarified to the Panel that officers were not proposing changes to the existing policy, just analysing the policy.

There was concern about transportation from the flats for older people, Mr R Wilson said that the District Council tried to designate properties near shops and bus stops. These properties had alarms and visiting scheme managers. If an older person's property is left void and is subsequently rented to a younger tenant, the alarm systems can be de-activated until such times as an older tenant rents the property again. Members felt equally that dwellings may need modernising for young people. The Panel was advised that due to social and demographic change, more people were growing older and in many cases were not ready to move to smaller houses. People were making adaptations to their houses rather than moving to residential accommodation. Councillor Mrs L Wagland commented on demographics supporting current trends in housing occupancy. She felt that people were generally in good health and were living longer as well. It would be the baby boomers that would change forthcoming statistics. One member suggested that housing at Centre Green, Epping, needed an alarm system to be installed. Mr R Wilson said he would look into it.

Mr A Hall informed the Standing Panel of the Housing Needs Survey. The last survey regarded information about people's future needs; 20% of people in the District took part in the survey. Information needed to be relevant to age groups. Councillor Mrs L

Wagland commented that people's intentions indicated in the survey may change over time. Mr R Wilson said that actions were part of housing need for young people interested in properties.

Councillor D Dodeja asked if Housing would screen potential tenants. Mr R Wilson replied that there were different types of tenants some had certain social needs, others did not. He added that younger tenants with certain problems would only be housed with older tenants as a last resort. Councillor Mrs J Lea that some people were willing to exchange a 3-4 bedroom property for a 2 bedroom one. This would release some properties for other, married tenants.

The Chairman asked if it was possible to de-designate flats individually. Mr R Wilson replied that only one flat in Torrington Drive had been de-designated out of an entire block, to a younger tenant. The Chairman was concerned about the bad behaviour of some younger tenants living amongst older tenants. Mr Wilson said that Managers needed to know about anti-social behaviour, it was felt that Area Housing Managers needed to be pro-active. Mr R Wilson replied that he was aware of these problems, Housing Services did take them seriously. He chaired the review hearings which examined bad behaviour amongst new tenants. Tenants can appeal against their decisions, sometimes the District Council will evict.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel noted and commented on the current policy of de-designating properties on housing estates from older person's occupation (which had proved difficult to let to this client group) and allocating to younger applicants

6. ETHNIC MONITORING

The Assistant Director of Housing, Mr R Wilson, presented a report regarding ethnic monitoring of the Council's Allocations Scheme. The Panel were advised that a large number of housing applicants did not disclose their ethnicity. However it was evident from the analyses shown in the officer's report that the ethnic make up of the Housing Register mirrored the allocation of vacancies sufficiently for the Council to be confident that its Allocations Scheme did not racially discriminate.

RESOLVED:

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 applicants on the Housing register, and those allocated both general needs and sheltered accommodation through the Housing Register.

7. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING STRATEGY

The Director of Housing Services, Mr A Hall, advised that the Private Sector Housing Strategy report would be available for scrutiny in a few month's time.

8. UNAUTHORISED PARKING ON HOUSING ESTATES – MEMBERS CONSULTATION

The Assistant Director of Housing, Mr R Wilson, presented a report to the Panel regarding Unauthorized Parking on Housing Estates. He said that parking was an on-going problem in the District and that he often received mixed messages from members of the District Council about parking concerns. Some members had contacted him requesting greater parking enforcement whilst other members were concerned with increased traffic overflow resulting from enforcement action.

The Panel were reminded that at its meeting in March 2008, they had agreed that the rule restricting the length of vehicular crossovers 6 metres rule should be extended to 12 metres, enabling more residents to be able to park one or more vehicles off road. Consultation had taken place with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation as well: they had agreed with extending the 6 metre rule, but felt that residents should be required to use surfacing such as "grass crete" to maintain a green environment. They thought, as well, that enforcement action should be taken with immediate effect to remove vehicles from grass verges.

Councillor J Wyatt commented on weight limits to parking, there should be a 3.5 ton limit to parking. Mr R Wilson said that the Council already had this policy. He said that they will enforce parking restrictions. However they had limitations on their power, for example parking enforcement does not cover owner-occupiers; County Council Highways had greater enforcement powers; the District Council cannot enforce parking on highways. Members were advised that if there were any problems then they should report them to Housing who will action them. Councillor Mrs L Wagland commented that many complainants were concerned about neighbours' parking and not about parking in general. There was not a clear set of enforcement rules, thereby consistency was a problem. She was concerned about the cost implications of enforcement, there may be fewer cars around in the future.

The Chairman commented that the approach needed to be flexible, some grass verges were not worth protecting whilst other verges were an amenity. There may, in some cases, be no alternative to removing a grass verge. Mr A Hall said he had come to the same conclusion and that Housing Officers needed to make judgements based on an agreed policy. A suggestion could be not to let people park on verges unless there was usually nowhere else to park within a reasonable distance. Councillor R Frankel agreed with Councillor Mrs L Wagland that the rules were inconsistent. He thought that areas should be designated as no parking with adequate signage. Some verges could be protected with grasscrete. He also added that it was unlikely that substantial numbers of cars would disappear from the roads. Councillor P Gode stated that a blanket policy was impossible; people aged mid-50 upwards, had fewer cars; there was often no public transport, leaving people reliant on cars. In flats most people had a car and flats had a smaller frontage than houses. The District Council needed to stop people parking on the whole pavement. It was suggested that bollards had stopped parking in some places but had led to more people parking on verges. Councillor D Dodeja was concerned about lorries parking on pavements which were causing more damage to footways than cars. Councillor Mrs J Lea was worried about Walton Gardens on the Harold Estate that had inadequate parking to such an extent that emergency vehicles could not go down the road. Sometimes cars occupied whole pavements.

Councillor J Wyatt commented on damaged verges having wood and other materials being used as in-fill. He thought that only earth should be used. Mr R Wilson was concerned that in winter the ground would be churned up; a proper surface installation would stop this happening. Mr A Hall said that under the off-street parking programme grassed areas could be converted to off-street parking areas. The Chairman requested a report for the next meeting on a general policy that could be

adopted giving housing officers guidance on when unauthorised parking should be enforced.

Councillor Mrs J Sutcliffe was concerned about District Council action on unauthorised parking; a lot of money had been spent on enforcement when in many cases it had only been 1 or 2 persistent offenders who were causing the problems. Mr A Hall advised the Panel that funds were being prioritised in certain areas, Mr A Hall reminded the Panel that non-authorised parking included commuters; with regards to enforcement, a relaxed regime could be adopted towards tenants. Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse commented on Centre Green, Epping, where residents had been having problems with cars parking on the grass verges; Essex County Council Highways were not assisting. Mr R Wilson said that it was not aware of the position regarding the provision regarding the provision of off street parking.

With regard to budgets for off street parking the Chairman advised that the £300,000 per annum discussed at the last meeting for allocating to off street parking had to be match funded by the General Fund. Councillor D Stallan spoke about match funding and advised that, at the Cabinet meeting on July 14, provision would be made in the Capital Programme for £288,000 from the General Fund. He added that this would be funded from anticipated underspends on private sector housing. Coming back to parking he commented that it came back over and over again as an issue. It was possible only to alleviate some of the problems; the main factor in parking was commuters. He thought that the 6 metre rule could be raised to 12 metres but no further, however parking spaces on the road would be lost by putting them in. At Bell Common, cross overs had been stopped. He said that grass verges contributed to the area. Councillor J Wyatt said that a double cross over would take two vehicles off the road.

Councillor Mrs C Pond had found Councillor K Angold-Stephens comments, attached to the agenda on unauthorised parking on housing estates helpful. Government would be introducing a requirement for planning permission for tarmacing on gardens; the 6 metre rule should be doubled. Councillor R Frankel thought it good to increase the 6 m rule to 12 m. Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse spoke about communal access to estates; Highways were concerned about safety. Councillor D Stallan supported the report by Councillor K Angold-Stephens; this was to be confirmed by the Cabinet. He supported the 6 m rule being extended to 12 m, but that would have to be the limit. There was a report going to the Cabinet in September 2008. Councillor Mrs C Pond asked about an existing pathway, Mr R Wilson said than an existing pathway cannot be removed because of pedestrian needs, the approach on which had been the subject of a recent Portfolio Holder Decision.

RESOLVED:

The Panel made the following recommendations to the Housing Portfolio Holder, that:

- (a) the additional £300,000 available in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme from 2009/2010, be made available to fund further off-street parking schemes matched from the General Fund;
- (b) the maximum permitted amount of grass verge to be removed in order to construct a vehicular crossover be extended beyond the current policy of 6 metres to 12 metres; and

- (c) officers prepare a report for the next meeting on the criteria to be used to judge where unauthorised parking should not be enforced.

9. REVIEW OF EPPING FOREST CARELINE

The Assistant Director of Housing, Mr R Wilson, presented a report regarding a Review of Epping Forest Careline. Following the completion of the Best Value Service Review of Housing Services in February 2004, the review panel which was set up to oversee the review, agreed that the Careline Service provided a good service and it should be retained and reviewed again in 2007. The Review had been delayed while consideration was given to the possible introduction of a Customer Contact centre. The Careline Service offered a 24 hour, 365 days per year, emergency alarm system to older and disabled people living within the District, the service is also offered to other vulnerable groups including victims of domestic violence and young people with disabilities. Users of the service were connected via the telephone network. The Council's own sheltered housing schemes and other designated dwellings for older people on housing estates had a hard wired system installed in their properties with a speech module mounted on the wall and pull cord in each of the rooms. A total of 2,500 properties, representing approximately 3,000 people, were linked to the service. Around 1,250 of the connections are private sector dwellings which were connected via a dispersal alarm. The user pays an annual rent to the Council for the service with the Council receiving a total income of around £136,000 per annum. The Council works in partnership with Essex County Council who provided the equipment free of charge to the Council and funded the first 12 weeks rental for the user.

The Council had introduced many further initiatives such as:

- (a) a disaster recovery plan which is an essential back up system
- (b) an on-going test programme ensuring all systems are working
- (c) maximum discounts to providers,
- (d) installation of a dispersed alarm system for new private clients within 2 working days of receiving the application,
- (e) monitoring of fire alarms within the sheltered housing schemes when the scheme manager is off duty,
- (f) any residents nominated as "high risk" are called and accounted for every day,
- (g) installation of alarms at Council offices enhancing staff safety at homeless persons hostels; and
- (h) introduction of a pilot scheme where Careline users were visited when the number of calls received had increased to identify if they benefitted from any core or support services.

Mr R Wilson described the three options available to the Panel:

Option One – The Council to continue to provide the existing Local Service.

The advantages of this option was the District Council having greater control over the management of the service, including procedures for issues like keeping relatives up to date with incidents. A tenant satisfaction survey found that over half of the Council's tenants were over 60 years of age and 1 in 3 were over 75. It was therefore an advantage to have a local service meeting future needs for an ageing population. Users become familiar with staff as the same individuals who visit them will also speak to them regularly on the system. It is easier for outside agencies to liaise with a local service when dealing with victims of domestic violent etc. Scheme managers had a local service which supported them in their work and the service can initiate the call out of rest centre staff in the event of a civil emergency. The financial cost to the District Council was nil.

Option Two – Monitoring the service through another provider

Following a survey of members of the Essex Communications User Group, it was discovered that of fifteen local authority and housing associations, eleven had their own control centre of which one switched the service to another provider overnight. The remaining three linked into neighbouring authorities' centres. For example Basildon District Council's Careline Centre offered a monitoring service to other authorities. For a basic monitoring service of the Council's 2,500 properties currently linked into Careline, 24 hours per day, Basildon District Council had indicated they would charge approximately £65,000 per annum. Another established external provider "Invicta" stated they would charge around £37,000 for the same service. This would be subject to a tendering exercise if the service was externalised.

Although these charges were less than the Council's current costs, there was no guarantee that these would remain at this level in future years. This option posed a danger to the Council in that closure of the Careline Centre would leave the Council vulnerable to having no alternative but to accept unreasonable increases in monitoring charges at a later date.

The full net cost of the Careline Service (excluding income from clients) is funded through the Supporting People Grant received by the Council from Essex County Council's Supporting People Commissioning Body. Any saving made from externalising the service would be a saving to the County Council. Essex County Council had advised that it was intending to undertake a value for money exercise commencing in September 2008, exploring themselves if savings could be made with emergency alarm services across the County.

In comparison with Option One, where the Council continued to manage the service, there was a potential saving of around £99,700 per annum to Essex County Council, although this figure could vary according to the outcome of any tendering exercise. If this option were agreed, the Council would still need to employ staff to carry out various functions. Should redundancy arise, then around £25,000 redundancy costs would be added in the first year's monitoring charge. When taking into account the average cost of redundancy, based on a three year pay back period, the saving to Essex County Council between Options One and Two, reduced from around £99,700 to £91,400 per annum for the first three years.

If Careline was to be externalised then it would free up one 3 bedroom house originally built to accommodate the Scheme manager, which could be converted into 2 one bedroom flats at a cost of around £100,000 and would be incorporated into the Parsonage Court sheltered housing scheme in Loughton. Based upon 2007/08 rent levels the 2 new flats would produce rental income of around £6,400 per annum. However, under the Government's subsidy rules, the Council will not receive any

additional rental income for any additional properties created; therefore the Council's income for this will be £3,200 per annum.

Option Three – The Council continues to provide an expanded service.

This option retained the existing service, but expanded it to provide additional facilities and services at no extra cost. There was potential to monitor alarms for other authorities and housing associations, although the additional increased workload required additional full-time Careline operators to be employed. Essex County Council was undertaking a value for money exercise in the future that may result in a reduction of the number of control centres in Essex. There would be a potential for the Council's Careline Centre to monitor alarms for other authorities, which would produce further income reducing the funding gap. Currently, tenants can only report routine repairs up to 5p.m.; if the Careline Service was retained then there was potential to extend the Council's Repairs Reporting service, which could be managed by Careline up to 8p.m. on each working day, without additional costs being incurred. Careline could periodically monitor estates through website access within the centre, improving the Council's response to incidents of anti-social behaviour.

If the service was retained in accordance with this option, the enhancements could be achieved with all of the advantages of continuing to provide a local service at the same costs set out in Option One. The loss of any potential savings to Essex County Council would be justified due to the planned service enhancements which would not be achievable under Option Two.

Expansion of the Careline Service would require additional office space. It would be necessary to extend the current accommodation into the adjacent house, originally built to accommodate the scheme manager. It was proposed to extend the Careline Centre into the ground floor of the adjacent house using the first floor for an additional older person's flat which would be incorporated into the sheltered housing scheme. The cost of the Careline extension was around £55,000 with the flat conversion being around £55,000. The new flat on the first floor of the adjacent house would bring additional income of £3,200 per annum to the HRA.

Essex County Council agreed with the recommendations. The Supporting People Team, undertaking their own review of community alarm providers in Essex, would prefer that the Council's Careline service was received at the same time as their own review. If the Council decided to externalise the Careline Service, the Supporting People contract will only allow the Council to enter into a short term contract with any external provider pending the outcome of their review. They would not encourage this as it would leave the Council's service vulnerable and subject to changing again in the future. Essex County Council were happy to continue with the same level of funding which they believed was more justified if the service was expanded.

Mr Wilson confirmed with Councillor J Wyatt that the Telecare Service to Careline meant that a wide range of sensors were available for Council accommodation, which could amongst other things detect carbon monoxide. Councillor Mrs L Wagland asked about the pensions scheme for Careline staff; Mr R Wilson confirmed that their pensions were managed by Essex County Council.

RESOLVED:

1. That in accordance with Option Three in the report, the view of the Scrutiny Panel is that the Careline Service continues to be provided locally by the Council but be expanded to include the following:

- (a) Exploring the potential to monitor alarms for other authorities and housing associations;
- (b) Extending the routine repairs reporting service for tenants from 5p.m. to 8p.m. on each working day
- (c) Periodically monitoring existing Council-owned CCTV systems through website access; and
- (d) Monitoring the whereabouts of the Council's lone workers on a 24 hour basis; and

2. That the Careline premises be extended into the ground floor of the vacant adjacent former Scheme manager's accommodation converting the first floor into a one-bedroom flat which will be incorporated into the Council's sheltered housing scheme Parsonage Court, Loughton

10. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS - 6 MONTH REVIEW

The Assistant Director of Housing, Mr R Wilson, presented a report regarding the 6 month review of Choice Based Lettings. On 19 November 2007, Housing had introduced its new Choice Based Lettings Scheme, which was necessary for meeting Government requirements that such a scheme be in place by 2010 at the latest. The scheme's implementation proved very successful, with the Council being in a position to go live in the first phase.

Under the Scheme, all vacant social rented properties were advertised to applicants on the Housing Register in a two weekly publication, via website and other media, giving details of location, type, rent, service charge, council tax band and landlord of the available accommodation. Applicants applied for a property by "expressing an interest" in up to a maximum of three properties for which they have an assessed need, either in person, by post, telephone, text, email or Internet. At the end of a two weekly cycle, the Council analysed the "expressions of interest" received and allocated each property following a prioritisation and selection process in accordance with its own Allocations Scheme. In general terms, the property is offered to the applicant in the highest band, who has been registered the longest. The results of the "expressions of interest" on each property advertised is then published in the next periodic publication, setting out the number received on each property, as well as the Band and registration date of the successful applicant. This helps applicants see how long the successful applicant has been waiting and gives greater transparency in the allocation of accommodation, as each applicant would be able to clearly understand how the scheme worked. There were 252 properties allocated during the period November 2007 to May 2008. Some properties were advertised on more than one occasion as they were difficult to let which had resulted in 469 advertisements being placed in the free sheets. There were 15,433 expressions of interest made, an average of around 33 expressions of interest each time a property was advertised. Most properties attracted in excess of 100 expressions of interest. Almost 86% of applicants expressing an interest over the internet; around 36% of applicants participated in the scheme during the first 6 months.

At its meeting on 22 January 2008, the Panel agreed that a survey be undertaken of all applicants on the Housing Register on their views on the new scheme. Two surveys were undertaken, one a questionnaire to all those who had participated in the Home Option Scheme and another survey to those that had yet to express an

interest in any property. Around 2,660 survey questionnaires were sent to those who had not participated in the scheme, with responses being received from 726 applicants (27%). It was of some concern that 220 applicants had stated that they were not aware of the Home Option Scheme. This inferred that there was potentially around 800 applicants (20% of all applicants on the Housing Register) not being aware of the Scheme. The survey also showed that a large number of applicants had not kept their Scheme User Guide, they did not know their housing application registration number, had not seen the free sheets and had not looked at the website.

The separate survey explored if there were any vulnerable people who may be having difficulty using the scheme. All applicants who stated their housing reference number on the survey form will be contacted and given every assistance in participating in the scheme. Furthermore a letter will be sent to all those who had not participated to date offering assistance and explaining again about the scheme. A summary leaflet of the Scheme User Guide will be produced with a poster which will be placed in public areas around the District, and an item placed in the tenants magazine Housing News, which is sent to all tenants and applicants setting out the results of the survey, giving details of how they can get assistance in participating in the scheme.

A great deal of effort had been made in making provisions for vulnerable people who may have difficulty in using the scheme. The officers felt that the scheme had received some negative feedback from people on the lowest bands of the housing register who were awaiting allocated accommodation. Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse appreciated the amount of work involved in building the scheme and the questionnaire as well. She felt that residents should be asked about cases of harassment to provide witnesses of anti-social behaviour.

Councillor Mrs J Lea asked about downsizing of accommodation. Mr R Wilson explained that incentives were available to people who agreed to move in to smaller properties; £500.00 was paid for every bedroom given up.

Councillor Mrs L Wagland was concerned about some people on the waiting list not using computers to locate the properties they wanted, the Chairman requested that all types of access should be retained to facilitate greater opportunities, he suggested using coupons. Mr R Wilson said that many younger people had not participated in the scheme, they had put their names on the Housing Register from the age of 18 and then waited for the time when they may need a place. The Chairman thanked Mr R Wilson for encouraging faith groups to use the internet for taking part in the survey.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel noted the progress made on the Choice Based Lettings Scheme since its implementation on 19 November 2007.

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

A verbal report was to be made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

12. FUTURE MEETINGS

1. The next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel was on 9 October 2008. There was a gypsy traveller report scheduled to be discussed at the meeting.

However it was felt that this report might overload the meeting so it would go to the 8 January 2009 meeting instead.

2. That a Housing Information Evening for members be tagged on the end of the October 2008 meeting.