

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 23 MARCH 2009
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 7.05 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, K Chana, D Dodeja, Mrs J Lea, Mrs P Richardson and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: D Bateman, Mrs L Wagland and J Wyatt

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), P Pledger (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property and Resources)), R Wilson (Assistant Director Operations (Housing)), P Maddock (Assistant Director Accountancy) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

31. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members present.

32. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 8 January 2009, be agreed, subject to Councillor S Murray, Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel, being recorded in minute item 28, Draft Housing Strategy, as intending to attend the Housing Strategy Conference. He was not in actual fact intending to attend the conference due to work commitments.

33. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor S Murray declared a personal interest in item 11 of the agenda, Housing Service Strategies on Under-Occupation, Older People's Services and Housing Management, because his mother used the Careline Service.

34. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted by the Panel. The Work Programme included items which were going forward for the 2009/10 programme.

35. HOUSING STRATEGY CONFERENCE 2009 - FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY PANEL REPRESENTATIVES

Councillor Mrs R Brookes had attended the one-day Housing Strategy Conference held on 18 March 2009, and provided feedback to the Panel on the discussions there. The conference displayed a bigger picture of the area's housing needs. She had attended a workshop concerning housing issues facing the under 35 year olds. Although a further 3,000 houses were being built in the area by 2012, the cost of housing had risen by 133% since 2000.

A Hall said he would provide copies of presentation slides from the meeting to the panel members along with a conference report.

36. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2008-09 (KEY ACTION PLAN) - PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received a report from A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2008/09 (Key Action Plan) – Progress Report.

In March 2008, the Council's latest Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan (2008/09) was produced, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan. The document set out the Council's objectives, strategies and plans as landlord, in relation to the management and maintenance of its own housing stock. An important section of the HRA Business Plan was the Key Action Plan, which set out the proposed actions the Council was taking, primarily over the next year.

P Pledger, Assistant Director of Housing (Property) informed the Panel about the installation of solar panels on one property in the district. The installation had been completed free of charge, normally it would have cost in the region of £7,000. The service was relying on the tenants of the house to feed back over a 12 month period which would cover all four seasons.

The Panel was advised that Housing was seeking to reduce the target response times for routine non-urgent repairs from 8 weeks to 6 weeks. Currently the service achieved a target response of 8 weeks, 85% of the time.

37. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2009/10

The Panel received a report from A Hall, regarding the HRA Business Plan 2009/10.

The Government's Communities and Local Government (DCLG) required all local authorities to produce annual Business Plans for their Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs), ensuring that local authority housing was used and maintained to maximum effect. HRA Business Plans dealt with council plans and performance for the delivery and quality of its housing services to tenants. The Council's Audit and Governance Committee required that all of the Council's Business Plans were completed and published by 31 March each year.

An important part of the HRA Business Plan related to the Council's objectives, strategies and plans for repair and maintenance of the Council's housing stock over the next 30 years. This included the Council's progress in meeting the Government's decent homes standard. The government had given local authorities a target ensuring that all their homes were decent by 2010.

Another important part of the HRA Business Plan was the Financial Plan which considered projected income and expenditure for the HRA over a 30 year period. The Financial Plan showed that there was sufficient income to meet the necessary level of expenditure on management, repairs and maintenance for the foreseeable future.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2009/10, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan 2009/10, be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption.

38. CHANGES TO THE REVENUE AND CAPITAL RULES FOR NEW COUNCIL HOUSING

The Panel received a report regarding a consultation document entitled Changes to the Revenue and Capital Rules for New Council Housing.

The Council had received the consultation document from the Government's Communities and Local Government. The Housing Portfolio Holder had prepared a draft response to the consultation paper. However, before finalising his response, he was first consulting the members of the Housing Scrutiny Panel and members of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

The Government's Proposals

The Consultation Paper proposed the removal of the current disincentives for local authorities to build new social housing themselves.

For the last 20 years successive governments had discouraged local authorities from building new council housing and had encouraged them to be "enablers" or "facilitators" of new social housing provided by housing associations. To discourage local authorities there had been two main financial disincentives:

(a) Local authorities had not been able to keep all of the rental income received for its housing stock.

(b) When properties were sold under the right to buy scheme, the Council paid 75% of the net capital receipt to the Government only 25% was retained by the Council.

The Consultation Document set out proposals removing these two major disincentives by changing the revenue and capital rules and allowing local authorities to retain all of their rental income received from new properties and retain all of the capital receipts from the sale of properties that were built after the introduction of the changes.

The Government was proposing a scheme whereby specific new properties were excluded from both the HRA subsidy system and the capital rules. This would have been undertaken through specific agreements between individual local authorities and the Secretary of State. The types of properties that would qualify for exclusions under the proposed scheme were new-build properties, properties purchased or otherwise acquired and derelict or uninhabitable properties brought back into use as a result of significant council investment.

It was proposed that local authorities applied for an exclusion for new development (or acquisitions) to the new Homes and Communities Agency (which had taken over the former Housing Corporation's funding role), who would advise the Secretary of State on whether the exclusion was allowed. Applications should have included details about the proposed development, including design and development standards, rents and allocation policies. If agreed, the Secretary of State would issue a short letter of agreement in a standard form.

The Consultation Document emphasised that, although decisions on how local authorities chose to invest its own resources were essentially a local matter, in granting an exclusion, the Secretary of State expected to see evidence that "appropriate local decision making processes had been applied, including a robust

options appraisal, and that the chosen option offered value for money.” The Consultation Document also stated that the Government only expected to exclude properties that conformed to all Government policies regarding Council housing.

Key issues for the future were:

- Whether or not the Council had the capacity and skills to undertake new house building itself;
- Whether the council should obtain better value for money through building properties itself, or by continuing to work in partnership with housing associations, that construct new housing in large volumes; and
- Whether or not the Council had the financial capacity and the will to fund new house building, through the use of capital receipts (that currently provided significant investment income for the General Fund) and/or prudential borrowing.

The consultation period ran for 12 weeks, to the 17 April 2009.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the draft response from the Housing Portfolio Holder to the Government’s Consultation paper “Changes to the Revenue and Capital Rules for new Council Housing,” be agreed.

39. HOUSEMARK BENCHMARKING REPORT ON EFDC HOUSING SERVICES 2007-08

The Director of Housing, A Hall, presented a report to the Panel, regarding the Housemark Benchmarking Report on EFDC Housing Services 2007/08.

The Council’s Housing Directorate was a member of Housemark, a national housing benchmarking organisation. Housemark enabled housing organisations to submit detailed information on their costs, electronically, and then compared these with other housing organisations nationally.

Housemark enabled member organisations to compare themselves with user-defined data sets. For example, the Council could make comparisons between themselves and all housing organisations, nationally and at local authority level. It could also define the locations (by regions) of those organisations included within the comparison and restrict the comparison to housing organisations of more or less than a defined number of properties. During the Autumn of 2008 all the required cost data for the Housing Directorate 2007/08 was uploaded to the Housemark website. This data was then verified by Housemark.

The Director of Housing had produced and circulated a report on the benchmarking exercise. The report set out the benchmarking results with all the 40 housing organisations (councils, housing associations and ALMOs) in the Eastern, South Eastern and London Regions who had provided Housemark data returns for 2007/08.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housemark Benchmarking Report on EFDC Housing Services 2007/08, be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder and Director of Housing.

40. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGIES ON UNDER-OCCUPATION, OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES AND HOUSING MANAGEMENT

The Assistant Director of Housing (Operations), R Wilson, presented the Housing Service Strategies to the Panel.

The Housing Service Strategies were originally produced around 10 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework, and had since been updated. The Housing Service Strategies gave more detail than the Council's main housing strategy on the various housing services provided a total of 16 Housing Service Strategies had been produced to date.

The strategies assisted Housing in achieving the Charter Mark award for customer service excellence, Quality Accreditation, and had been important in meeting the minimum requirement for supporting people funding under the conditions of the contract.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and endorsed three updated Housing Service Strategies on Housing Management Services, Older People's Services and Under-Occupation. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had been consulted on the strategies at their meeting on 24 March 2009.

The Panel asked officers about In Touch Support R Wilson advised that the District Council used to receive an annual grant of £13,000, which was passed on to voluntary action who in turn made provision for a part time worker. This money was now provided to In Touch Support which helped tenants move to smaller accommodation. Although their service provision was generally adequate, officers did have concerns about the service. The Housing posts of Housing Welfare Officer and part time Welfare Officer were now replaced by the current system provided by In Touch through Essex County Council. Officers wanted to ensure that they provided as good a service as before. The members requested that In Touch was invited to a future meeting of the Panel to answer questions about their service provision.

AGREED:

That In Touch Support be invited to the next meeting of the Panel to answer questions on their service provision.

The Panel discussed the Housing Service Strategy on Older People's Housing Services. The Council currently employed 10 full time Scheme Managers at sheltered and grouped schemes for older people and 3 Scheme Managers, who visited older tenants living in designated dwellings. In March 2004 the Cabinet agreed that newly appointed Scheme Managers should be non-resident. Additionally, all existing staff had been given the opportunity to move off site into secure Council accommodation. Consequently, the Council had only 4 resident Scheme Managers. The members were concerned that the Scheme Managers were office orientated. R Wilson shared these concerns, it was felt that visiting tenants was an important role.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housing Service Strategies on Housing Management Services, Older People's Services and Under-Occupation, be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

41. PARKING ENFORCEMENT ON HOUSING ESTATES

The Panel received a report from R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing (Operations), regarding Parking Enforcement on Housing Estates. At the Panel's meeting on 3 July 2008 the members had considered a report on options to resolve the increasing problems with parking and congestion on housing estates.

To ease the parking problems the Housing Portfolio Holder and the Panel had agreed that the following recommendations were made to the Cabinet:

- That the maximum amount of grassed verge removed in order to construct a vehicular crossover allowing residents to park their vehicle (s), in their front garden, should be increased from 6 metres to 12 metres in length; and
- That the additional £300,00 budget available in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme from 2009/10, should be made available for funding further off-street parking schemes and match fund from the General Fund.

At its meeting on 1 September 2008 the Cabinet agreed both of the above recommendations. However, on the recommendation of the Housing Portfolio Holder, it was further agreed that, for any proposed crossover in excess of 6 metres, a consultation exercise involving local residents and ward members was undertaken prior to approval and construction.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel had asked officers to draft a policy on the approach to be taken on unauthorised parking. The draft policy was considered by the Panel at its meeting on 9 October 2008, and its comments were incorporated. Both the Panel and the Housing Portfolio Holder suggested that the policy was reviewed by the Panel one year after its implementation. Subsequently the Corporate Executive Forum had concerns that the proposed policy may have been difficult to enforce, but as the report was considered by the Housing Scrutiny Panel and Housing Portfolio Holder it was agreed that it was submitted to the Cabinet on 15 December 2008 for consideration. However, prior to the Cabinet meeting, the Housing Portfolio Holder decided that the report be deferred and officers asked to consult with other enforcement officers within the Council seeking their views on the policy.

The consultation had been undertaken. Unfortunately it had not been very helpful as they also saw the difficulties with enforcing any policy. Indeed, the two Area Housing Managers responsible for housing management in the north and the south of the District had been consulted on the draft enforcement policy and asked that the Panel consider their concerns which were as follows:

- Any enforcement policy would be difficult to apply, as it was always going to be unclear and difficult to interpret.
- An enforcement policy should be subjective in its application and difficult decisions would need to be made by officers which, as with the current arrangements some would be in favour and others against.
- When a decision was made, the Council may have difficulty explaining to residents why it was allowed in one area and not another.
- The Council should not allow cars to cause an obstruction, damage grass verges, or cross pavements where kerbs had not been dropped.

The Tenants and Leaseholder's Federation was consulted on the policy at its meeting on 23 September 2008, by a majority of 5 in favour and 2 against, they concluded that unauthorised parking on housing-owned grass verges should not generally be permitted across the district.

There were four options available:

Option One – Unauthorised Parking was Fully Enforced.

Although this would solve the problems of damage being caused to the grassed areas, due to the large number of vehicles being parked on grass verges, this would cause further congestion in side streets.

Option Two – Postponement of Parking Enforcement in Identified Priority Areas

Any parking enforcement was postponed in identified priority areas, where off-street parking schemes had been agreed, until the schemes had been constructed, or residents have had the opportunity to construct a new vehicular crossover (particularly under the new 12 metre rule). However, members needed to consider the action taken in areas which were of a less priority.

Option Three – Continue with the Parking Enforcement Policy

The Housing Scrutiny Panel should consider recommending to the Housing Portfolio Holder that, following consultation with the Council's enforcement officers, the policy previously proposed by the Scrutiny Panel had been submitted to the Cabinet for consideration.

Option Four – Carry Out Enforcement Measures on ad hoc basis

Carrying out enforcement measures on an ad hoc basis was the current practice of housing management. Jockey rails or shrubs were installed at sites where the problem was particularly bad and the most complaints were received following a local consultation exercise. If this option was continued, it was suggested that all ward members were also consulted in the future, prior to any enforcement measures being undertaken.

It was suggested that Option Four was the most appropriate course of action. Although this was the current policy, it was recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder that in the future, in addition to local residents, would members be consulted on any proposed enforcement action. Additionally it was suggested that the Housing Scrutiny Panel agreed a date to review the position.

RECOMMENDATION:

- (a) That enforcement measures are undertaken on an ad hoc basis where problems are particularly bad, following consultation with local residents and ward members; and
- (b) That the position is reviewed at a future date.

42. TENANT PARTICIPATION PROGRESS 2008

The Panel received a report on the Tenant Participation Progress 2008.

At the Tenant Participation Progress Meeting held on 23 October 2007 and following discussion with the Director of Housing, it was agreed to provide a yearly tenant participation update to the Housing Standing Scrutiny Panel.

The Housing Services Strategy on Tenant Participation, updated in 2007, set out the Council's approach to tenant participation and how the service was delivered. Consultation of 1,563 general needs tenants through the 2008 Tenant Satisfaction Survey showed that 62% of respondents were satisfied that their views were being taken into account by their landlord (EFDC) and only 7% were dissatisfied.

There were currently 6 established residents associations and two resident's panels in the District. In addition to the existing groups, there were three associations representing specific groups of residents:

- Epping Forest Leaseholders Association.
- Epping Forest Sheltered Forum.
- Epping Forest Rural Tenants Forum.

There was also an "Umbrella" group, the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, that included representatives of all the residents groups and meets with senior officers of the Housing Directorate and the Housing Portfolio Holder bi-monthly.

Each of the residents associations had signed a Local Tenant Participation Agreement with the Council, which set out the approach each group and the Council would adopt in relation to tenant participation. These agreements were renewed on a yearly basis.

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, Leaseholders Association and Sheltered Forum had each signed its own participation agreement. These agreements were renewed on a three yearly basis.

Each of the residents associations was invited to apply for a support grant of up to £250 per annum and a minor estate enhancement grant of up to £500 per annum.

New Initiatives

It was planned to introduce Local Area Agreements, particularly in areas where no current residents group existed. This offered the opportunity for residents in these areas to become involved in the management of their neighbourhood and would also lead to the setting up of resident's groups.

The Tenant Participation Officer was working with the East of England Resident Involvement Group, which met quarterly to share good working practice and compare methods for involvement. Through this involvement a "Mystery Shopping" exercise was planned for 2009. This was where tenants would "test" the services being provided by the housing organisation, by "pretending" to be a customer in need of a service, and reporting on how well the organisation dealt with the enquiry.

In October 2008, all tenants and leaseholders were invited to complete a Tenant Talkback form, detailing areas of interest for future consultation on a variety of subjects, including Repairs and Maintenance, Estate Inspections, Equality and

Diversity, and Frauds Maintenance. 98 respondents returned their form and a database of interested tenants had been set up for use in future consultation and the setting up of focus groups to discuss specific subjects.

Diversity

In its Key Lives of Enquiry (KLOE's) the Government had identified a number of "Hard to Reach" groups; rural communities, younger people, minority groups, and families, that landlords were expected to include in the tenant participation process. The Tenant Participation Officer had been working with a number of these groups in a variety of ways.

From information received through Tenant Talkback, 16 tenants had been invited to join the Council's Disability Equality Scheme Consultative Group.

In addition, 10 tenants had expressed an interest in forming a district-wide Multi-Faith group or joining the existing Multi-Faith Forum.

The Epping Forest Sheltered Forum represented EFDC tenants living in sheltered or Group – dwelling schemes and properties covered by a Scheme Manager. The Forum meets bi-monthly and continued to attract new members.

The Epping Forest Rural Tenants Forum was set up in November 2006 and continued to expand. Twelve rural areas of the district were represented on the Forum.

The Tenant Participation Officer held monthly progress meetings with the Housing Resources Manager and Principal Housing Officer (Information and Strategy) and quarterly progress meetings with the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations).

The Tenant Participation Officer maintained an Action Plan which monitored progress of all aspects of tenant participation. Progress of the Action Plan was discussed at both the monthly and quarterly meetings.

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

Changes to the Revenue and Capital Rules for New Council Housing – CLG Consultation Document: Council's Response, was being put before the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation on 24 March 2009 before a verbal report could be made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in April 2009.

44. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor D Stallan, thanked the Chairman and members of the Panel for their work and input over the last year.

The next meeting of the Panel was scheduled for 30 July 2009.