

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel **Date:** Thursday, 30 July 2009

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 5.00 - 8.25 pm

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, Mrs M Carter, K Chana, D Dodeja, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs J Lea, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J Wyatt

Other Councillors: B Rolfe and D Stallan

Apologies: - Mrs R Gadsby

Officers Present: R Wilson (Assistant Director (Operations)), R Wallace (Housing Options Manager), L Swan (Assistant Director (Private Sector & Resources)) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance: G Osbourne and J Grainger

1. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members reported.

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse declared a general personal interest in so far as she was scrutinising the same subjects as a County Councillor.

3. NOTES OF LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the meeting held on 23 March 2009 be agreed, subject to clarification being sought on minute item 38 that stated that "...the Government only expected to exclude properties that conformed to all Government policies regarding council housing." This did not seem to make sense.

In item 41, the second bulletin point should include the word "not" after the word "should".

4. IN TOUCH SUPPORT

The Chairman introduced Gloria Osbourne from the 'In Touch Support' organisation and Jo Grainger from Essex County's 'Supporting People' team.

'Supporting People' was a major Government initiative on policy and funding for housing related support services which started in April 2003. These services included housing related support delivered to vulnerable tenants and applicants living in the community or in temporary accommodation.

In April 2007 'In Touch Support' was appointed by the Supporting People Team as the service provider for the London Commuter Belt which includes Epping, Brentwood, Uttlesford, Chelmsford and Harlow.

Ms Osbourne told the Panel that 'In Touch' was a registered charity and was part of the Hyde Group (a major Registered Social Landlord). 'In Touch' currently provided support services across the Southern Home Counties, London and the East of England. They are entirely funded by the Essex Supporting People Team but have occasional access to grants from other charities.

They provide a short term service for vulnerable people at risk of homelessness and offer an individual service to people in their homes which would "float" off when the support was no longer required. Hence, they are also known as a floating support service.

They offered advice and support on housing related issues and provided links to other statutory and voluntary care and support services. They assisted clients to build up skills to manage their finances, help develop social skills and provide access to health and other professional services. They also:

- Provide support for up to twelve single homeless vulnerable people housed in Council accommodation who are provided with a 'floating' support worker until they have sufficient skills to live more independently;
- Provide support to vulnerable tenants throughout the District referred by Housing Management;
- Provide support to single vulnerable homeless applicants placed in bed and breakfast accommodation;
- Provide specialist support to residents in sheltered accommodation when the Scheme Manager requires additional assistance;
- Provide specialist support to residents in the Council's homeless person's hostel, Norway House, North Weald when managers need additional assistance; and
- Provide assistance to tenants who are moving to smaller accommodation, thereby assisting the Council's aim to reduce under occupation.

Prior to receiving this service all tenants and applicants are referred through the 'In Touch Support' assessment "Gateway" to ensure that those in most need are supported and that the service is appropriate for the user. 'Gateway' staff determine eligibility, assess priority, hold, manage and prioritise the waiting list and monitor performance of partners and other providers.

'In Touch' provides support to all types of client groups. Their eligibility criteria is from the age of 16 onwards. Their oldest client was 92 years old. They also work with ex-offenders, people with substance misuse, people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, young people at risk, people with HIV Aids or long term medical conditions such as MS and people with sensory and or physical disabilities.

People can access their services by self referrals, referrals from professionals, friend or family, from other agencies, telephone or email referrals. However, they are not funded to work in residential homes.

Their contact details are:

In Touch
2nd Floor, Rosebery House,
41 Springfield Road,
Chelmsford
Essex CM2 6JE

Tele. 01245 607154

Councillor Mrs Richardson asked if 'In Touch' helped people not in council accommodation. Ms Osbourne said they were not just Council accommodation based; they also worked with owner occupiers etc. Councillor Mrs Richardson was concerned about the state of some people's houses. Ms Osbourne said that they are not responsible for the condition of properties but did provide advice on health and safety issues and also worked with local church groups who helped clear houses and take the rubbish to the dump.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked how many people worked for their organisation. Ms Osbourne confirmed that they employ 31 staff to cover the whole of their areas. They worked around their current clients and their waiting list. They would call the people on the waiting list every two weeks and ask if there were any changes in their circumstances.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked what they did about assisting people move to smaller accommodation. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that discussions have taken place with 'In Touch' support about providing this service which was previously delivered by VAEF. Now the funding has been passed to 'In Touch' they will accept referrals.

Councillor Mrs Brookes asked how long they worked with a client who had a crisis in their home. Ms Osbourne said they would normally work for about six weeks, but longer if they thought it necessary. They would work with them and if necessary refer them to other agencies.

Councillor Mrs Brookes then asked how they dealt with tenants with a bad history, such as with previous notices of eviction due to anti-social behaviour. Ms Osbourne said they would visit up to two or three times a week. The clients would also be able to contact them at any time as they would have their mobile phone numbers. It would also depend on the individual.

Councillor Mrs Grigg asked for an example of the specialist support given to Scheme Managers. Ms Osbourne said it was difficult for Scheme Managers on site if say, one of their tenants had high debts – they would go in and do structured work with the tenant and then hand back to the Scheme Managers. Also, if there was a lot of clutter, and a tenant was hoarding items they would work with them to sort it out and help them to dispose of their unnecessary belongings. They found that older people did not like to confide in their Scheme Manager who they saw every day and would prefer to speak to an outsider on personal matters.

Councillor Wyatt asked if they got involved with the other teams that were awarded floating support contracts in Essex. He was told that they worked in partnership with them but did not get involved with their casework.

Councillor Murray asked, as the finance was contract based, was there enough flexibility? Jo Grainger from Supporting People replied that the team had set it up so it was flexible for each persons needs, and according to the hours they needed.

Councillor Murray then asked about the 'Gateway' procedures, who would get the lowest priority. Ms Osbourne said that would be where their housing was not at risk, (but may become at risk) but were just about managing. They would contact those on the waiting list every two weeks. Only with the agreement of the client would they close a case down. The trouble was that some people wanted their help but were reluctant to engage with them.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked about the Gateway panel, how often did they meet and who was involved. Ms Osbourne explained that 5 case workers, with their four senior workers and the administrator and the Area Manager met to discuss the case referrals. Last week they had 20 referrals to consider. Cases get screened when they arrive and the background is checked, also an 'at risk' assessment is carried out. If eligible they look to see if they are in crisis, if so it would go to the IRTT or the holistic service. They (the holistic service) would go out and do their own assessment. Once assessed they would be prioritised and they would have a priority meeting every month.

Councillor Murray asked if the members had any comments to pass on to the Portfolio Holder. Councillor Mrs Whitehouse said the information was very generalised so it was hard to make specific comments. As the officers had worked closely with the service what did they feel about it. Roger Wilson said they did have their concerns in the early days about communication between officers and 'In Touch' but they had some meetings and had resolved these problems. The officer's feedback has to be that they are very good. Russell Wallace the Housing Options Manager added that the Council was satisfied with the support provided by 'In Touch'.

Councillor Murray thanked Ms Osbourne for her informative and interesting presentation.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Standing Panel received a presentation from the 'In Touch Support' and commented, as above, on the services provided to the Portfolio Holder.

5. OLDER PEOPLE'S STRATEGIC REVIEW - RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

The Panel noted that Jo Granger from the Counties 'Supporting People' Team was attending the meeting to answer any questions on the Older People's Strategic Review.

The Assistant Director of Housing (Operations), R Wilson explained that housing related support was funded through 'Supporting People'. That team had just undertaken a consultation exercise in which the following changes to the way the Scheme Manager Service was provided was recommended:

- That the Scheme Manager Service be provided by the 'Hub and Spoke' model, with the sheltered scheme being the hub and the support reaching out to older people in the community, like the spokes of a wheel;
- That the service be provided on a tenure neutral basis;
- That all service users will be assessed through the existing floating support gateway.

The Older People Strategic Review report outlined 10 key principles in section 3.1. The aim was to help ensure consistent service delivery. 9 of these 10 principles were already met by this Council; the one exception being point 6 that "Services should be available across the county and to everyone regardless of who owns the accommodation i.e. tenure neutral". Section 3.2.2 of the report outlined why Hub and Spoke was the preferred delivery model and attached to the report was the officer response to the report. Since writing that response Mr Wilson had met with Ms Grainger and they had dealt with some of the issues raised in his response. It was noted that Scheme Managers and residents had been consulted and they agreed in general terms that the Hub and Spoke system was the best option. Scheme

Managers were concerned about the impact the changes would have on their jobs they also felt the Supporting People Team should be more specific about the type of support they would be expected to deliver. Residents, via the 'Sheltered Forum' had some concerns about changes to services and the possible loss of sheltered accommodation. They were in favour of the ten key principles and believed that EFDC already operated the 'Hub and Spoke Model'. Officers had concluded that this Council had been providing services in an effective and efficient manner and that they had already been working in the spirit of the 'Hub and Spoke system'. The implementation date was flexible but the earliest would be April 2010. Residents who just received the basic Scheme Manager Service would not be referred through the gateway.

Ms Grainger added that the Older People Strategic Review had been continuing for about two and a half years across the county. The 'Hub and Spoke' was the preferred model. They will hold meetings with all councils before they implement any changes. It would not be a 'big bang' start, but would be a phased approach over time. The 'Hub and Spoke' system was spread out across England and not just Essex.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked how the preferred model would work in practice. Mr Wilson this was a service the Council had been operating for some years. Over 20 years ago it was recognised that Scheme Managers has some spare capacity and were therefore asked to visit outside properties.

Councillor Murray was happy with the officer response to the consultation exercise. Councillor Mrs Grigg was also happy with the letter and thought it was very useful to have the glossary of terms included.

Councillor Mrs Brookes queried the procedure for users in need of support in an emergency situation. She was told that they always had the use of the Careline Service. Ms Grainger added they were making sure that procedures were in place for emergency situations.

RESOLVED:

Subject to the comments made, the Panel endorsed the officer's response on the Older People's Strategic Review.

6. BREAK IN MEETING

The meeting then took a 20 minute break and reconvened in Committee Room 1.

7. DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

Mr Wilson introduced the strategy saying the Council were required to review and publish their Homelessness Strategy on at least a five year basis; however Members had wanted it reviewed every three years to keep it up to date. The draft Homelessness Strategy had been sent out to all Town and Parish Councils and all organisations with an interest in homelessness seeking their comments. The results of this consultation were tabled at the meeting. Any comments made by the Panel would also be added to these results.

The Panel noted that:

- Some minor typo's were highlighted;

- On page 5, paragraph 5.6, Ongar Town Council would like an explanatory note on what “tenure neutral” means;
- Page 7, paragraph 10.3, the last sentence to be deleted;
- This strategy was to be approved by the Portfolio Holder and not the Cabinet;
- Page 9, paragraph 2.2 should read 5000 homes and not 5700. Also it should not be “affordable” but just read as ‘5000 homes’;
- Pages 10& 11, paragraph 1.5, the last line should read “estimated” additional 34 pitches.

Councillor Mrs Richardson commented on owner occupiers who had problems with their repayments. It was explained that the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) would advise on these difficulties. But she believed that the CAB was having problems with the volume of people asking for advice. Mr Wilson said that she was right; the CAB was having difficulties with the volume of people asking for advice in the current financial climate. This Council had a very effective homelessness prevention team, who worked in partnership with the CAB. They also offered advice through the homelessness prevention team. It would depend on the circumstances on how each case was dealt with. In the final analysis, the CAB’s problems were outside the council’s control. Mr Wallace, the Housing Options Manager, advised that the CAB were having problems nationwide, being inundated for advice. The Council had provided the local CAB with extra funds to increase their capacity.

Councillor Stallan said that in our literature and on the website people are advised to call on the council if they had problems. Mr Wallace said officers would look to see if this message was being put forward clearly enough.

Councillor Mrs Lea had the impression that homeowners should go to the CAB for help. It was pointed out that anyone threatened with homelessness could also approach the council for advice.

Councillor Wyatt asked if the council distinguished between intentionally and unintentionally homelessness with regards to family exclusions. Mr Wallace said that they did. The Council has a Mediator who assists with cases and had an 80% success rate in preventing this type of homelessness.

Councillor Wyatt queried a Housing Association (NACRO) who purchased houses and put in difficult tenants. Could the council assign areas where these houses were put? Mr Wallace said that they only owned one property outright in our district, and they did have 39 bed spaces in other areas.

In preventing homelessness, Councillor Mrs Richardson asked if the council would act as guarantor to a mortgage company. Mr Wilson said they would not, but would help in other ways. They would assess their needs and look to keep them in their home. They could also give a small, interest free loan, to help pay the mortgage.

Councillor Murray asked if officers would report back on the action plans on a six monthly basis. It was agreed that a report would be submitted to the Panel after the first six months and then yearly afterwards.

AGREED: that a report be submitted on progress with the action plan in six months and thereafter on a yearly basis.

That once agreed an item be placed in the Members Bulletin explaining that the Strategy was available on the website.

RESOLVED:

That subject to any comments made, the Panel endorsed the Draft Homelessness Strategy.

8. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

1. The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted by the Panel.
2. The item on the shortage of affordable housing within the District proposed by Councillor Mrs Brookes was considered by the Panel. They considered the option of adding it to their work programme or have a small sub-group look at this.

It was agreed that a sub-group be set up to consider the matter. Mr Wilson said that the Director of Housing was the expert on affordable housing and would be happy to attend the sub-group. This was last considered in 2006 when a report was produced by the Director Housing who looked at all the options for providing more affordable housing. This report could be updated and submitted to the sub-group. The Panel were reminded about the call for sites which is currently going on.

RESOLVED:

1. That a sub-group be established to consider the Shortage of Affordable Housing within the District.
2. That the Sub-group consist of the following members: Councillors Mrs R Brookes, K Chana, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs J Lea and S Murray.

9. HOUSING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - OUTTURN 2008/09

The Assistant Director of Housing (Operations), R Wilson, introduced the Housing Key Performance Indicators report. The targets for the KPIs were based on upon the most recently available national performance information. Annual Improvement plans were produced for each KPI to reflect year on year initiatives which are in place to achieve targets.

An item was tabled setting out the latest outcomes of LPI 07, 08, 09 and 10; all of which were being currently being met or exceeded. It was anticipated that these would continue to be met based on the changes that have been introduced as part of the on-going review of the DLO.

RESOLVED:

That the performance of the Housing Directorate in relation to its Key Performance Indicators for 2008/09 be noted.

10. ETHNIC MONITORING

Mr Roger Wilson introduced the annual report on Ethnic Monitoring. There was a requirement for an annual review of the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing register, compared with the ethnicity of those allocated accommodation. The review was to identify whether or not there were any indications to suggest the Council may be discriminating against any one ethnic group.

The statistics confirmed that the ethnicity of the applicant's allocated accommodation is similar to those of different ethnic groups on the housing register. Also, when compared, there appeared to be no significant disparity between the ethnicity of

applicants in need of sheltered accommodation in the District and those allocated sheltered accommodation.

It was evident from the analyses shown in the report that the ethnic make up of the Housing Register mirrored the allocation of the vacancies sufficiently for the Council to be confident that its Allocations Scheme does not racially discriminate, either directly or indirectly. Therefore no adjustments to the Allocations Scheme were recommended.

RESOLVED:

That no recommendations be made concerning amendments to the Council's Allocations Scheme due to ethnicity as current figures did 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.

11. C.A.R.E. HANDYPERSON SCHEME

The Assistant Director of Housing (Private Sector and Resources), Lyndsay Swan, introduced the report on the CARE (Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest) Handyman Scheme. The scheme was funded jointly between Essex County Council's Adult Social Care and Community Wellbeing (ASC&CW) who contribute £11,417 and Epping Forest District Council who pay for the work. The Council's current budget for the Handyman Service work was £12,250. Currently the service is free of charge and clients can have work undertaken up to a maximum of £150, provided they are on means tested benefit. Those not receiving benefit pay in full for the work. They can only use the service once in any one calendar year. The work is carried out by local private contractors from CARE's preferred contractors list.

The qualifying criteria had not been reviewed for some years and they had found that £150 did not cover the cost of work being carried out (this has not increased since 2003). Officers have analysed the service provided in the past few years and using this data have drawn up new draft recommendations to update the criteria. The draft recommendations had been put to the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation who raised no objections and also went to the CARE Advisory Panel who also raised no objections.

RESOLVED:

That the following revised criteria for the CARE Handyman Scheme be agreed and recommended to the Portfolio Holder:

(i) That the number of jobs that can be carried out be increased to a maximum of 3 times a year with applications being at least 3 months apart;

(ii) That the cost limit is increased to a maximum of £250 in any application but no more than £400 be allowed in any one year;

(iii) That the remit of qualifying works be extended to:

- Plumbing (e.g. tap washers, toilet cisterns, ball valves, overflow, provision of lever taps);
- Remedial carpentry;

- Minor electrical works (Renewing light bulbs, fitting battery operated smoke detectors);
- Glazing;
- Security works (window/door locks);
- Curtain rails;
- Minor tiling;
- Falls Prevention and safety works (fixing carpets, lowering cupboards, putting up shelves);
- Small roof and guttering jobs that can be carried out within the cost limits, bearing in mind Health and Safety considerations;
- Small works to assist in the early release from hospital (although within the scope of the Service it may not be possible to carry out emergency works).

(iv) That following works be excluded from the Scheme:

- Decorations;
- Work to gas installations;
- Fencing;
- Electrical appliances (e.g. kettles, cookers);
- Gardening (except clearing paths for access where safety is a consideration);
- Window cleaning;
- Roofs and guttering works involving scaffolding or extensive Health and Safety measures;
- Small works to common parts (except in exceptional circumstances where permission is given by the freeholder)

12. REVIEW OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL STRATEGY 2007-2009

The Assistant Director of Housing (Private Sector and Resources), Lyndsay Swan, introduced the review of the private sector housing renewal strategy 2007-09. The current strategy expires in 2009; it was implemented in April 2007. Local authorities have a legal duty to consider the condition of their private sector housing stock in terms of statutory responsibilities and the provision of assistance with housing renewal.

The strategy included an action plan which the Panel considered and agreed. It also contained a detailed review of the Private Sector Assistance Policy, a summary of the Empty Property Strategy including a review of its success and a review of the houses in multiple occupation, which the Panel noted.

It was noted that the new strategy could not be developed until officers had carried out a new housing condition survey, this should take about a year and they hoped to start in early 2010.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel noted the outcome of the review of the current Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy.

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

The Panel considered that the following items should be reported verbally to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting:

- a) In touch support;
- b) Older people's strategic review – response to consultation;
- c) Draft homelessness strategy;
- d) Setting up of a sub-group to look into affordable housing in the district;
- e) The renewal of the private sector housing renewal strategy.

14. FUTURE MEETINGS

1. The dates of the Panel's future meeting were noted.
2. Due to unavoidable clashes with other duties the Chairman asked that two of the future meeting start at a later time. The Panel agreed that the following meetings now start at **7pm**. They are the 21 January 2010 meeting and the 25 March 2010 meeting.