

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 29 JULY 2010
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 8.15 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), R Barrett, W Breare-Hall, Mrs A Grigg (Chairman of Council), Ms J Hart, Ms J Hedges, Mrs J Lea, L Leonard, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J M Whitehouse

Other members present: K Angold-Stephens, P Gode, Mrs M Sartin, D Stallan and Ms R Brookes

Apologies for Absence: D Dodeja and Mrs S Jones

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Operations)), R Wallace (Housing Options Manager) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

Also in attendance:

1. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that Councillors J Whitehouse and W Breare-Hall were substituting for Councillors D Dodeja and Mrs S Jones respectively.

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

3. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 25 March 2010 be agreed.

4. PRESENTATION THE ROLE OF THE HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION SERVICE

The Panel received a presentation from Mr R Wallace, Housing Options Manager regarding the District Council's Homelessness Prevention Service. The service became fully operational in 2006 and formed an integral part of Housing Options within the Housing Directorate. The service receives funding from both the Government and the District Council's General Fun.

The Homelessness Prevention Service:

- Reduced demand on costly temporary accommodation
- Reduced unnecessary homeless applications
- Provided effective Housing Options for households with housing difficulties

The “Relate” Family Mediation Service:

- Committed to reducing homeless acceptances on parental exclusions
- The service had an 80% success rate on referral cases

The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme set up in 1995 gave:

- Good partnership working between Housing Options and Private Sector Housing
- Provided a Bond to assist referred clients to identify accommodation across the District
- Currently 84 guarantees in place
- In the past year, the scheme assisted 61 adults and 40 dependents to access the scheme.

The Epping Forest District Sanctuary Scheme assisted high risk cases of Domestic Violence or HATE crime. The Sanctuary provided:

- Successful partnership working
- Safer Communities
- Tenure neutral
- Housing repairs
- Liaison with Essex Police and Fire and Rescue
- Reduced cost of temporary accommodation
- The scheme had seen a drop in reported domestic violence incidents
- All cases were risk assessed

Single Accommodation for Epping Forest (SAFE) Project:

- Effective tool in preventing homelessness for young single people
- Provided 39 bed places across the district
- Accommodation with Housing Management support

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

- Became operational from January 2009

Success had been achieved through:

- Good partnership working
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Moat Housing
- Negative equity 20% and property price cap £200,000
- 6 completions so far

The Rental Loan Scheme

- Set up with good performance grant of £10,000 from CLG in 2008/09
- Scheme received additional £20,000 in 2005 from the Cabinet
- Granted interest free loan up to £1,000 to be re-paid over 24 month period
- Had assisted 65 households since 2008

Homeless Prevention Fund

- Grant of £47,500 from CLG in June 2009
- Assisted households sustaining existing accommodation
- Interest free loan up to maximum of £5,000 re-paid over maximum 5 year period
- Accepted 11 households

Conclusions

- Reduction in homeless acceptances from 2007 for period 2005/06 to 48 for period 2009/10
- For period 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2010 prevented homelessness on 2,563 cases

With the conclusion of the presentation, Mr R Wallace answered questions from the members present.

- Did the District Council house victims of domestic violence outside the District?

Although the District Council housed victims of domestic violence outside the district, they were guided by the clients involved. It was confirmed that there was secure accommodation in the Ongar area now available.

- What other funding streams were available?

There was a Homelessness Prevention Fund supported by the District Council, along with Supporting People funding. However the Government funding for the staffing was expected to end in March 2011. A report would be submitted to the Cabinet in October 2010 with the funding options.

- Had there been an increase in Call-Outs

There had been a significant increase in call-outs recently. 80% of incidents known, occurred in the Loughton and Chigwell areas.

The Chairman thanked Mr R Wallace for his presentation.

RESOLVED:

That the Presentation on The Role of the Homelessness Prevention Service be noted.

5. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel's Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted. In relation to Item 8 of the Terms of Reference regarding Traveller issues, it was confirmed that this was not a "new" item as indicated on the agenda but an original one.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the Panel's Terms of Reference and Work Programme be noted; and

- (2) That M Jenkins delete "New" from Item 8 of the Terms of Reference.

6. TENANT SATISFACTION - COMPARISONS WITH OTHER STOCK RETAINING COUNCILS

The Panel received a report regarding Tenant Satisfaction – Comparisons with other Stock-Retaining Councils, from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

Until a recent change by the new Coalition Government, all councils and housing associations have undertaken Tenant Satisfaction Surveys, using common questions every two years. The last survey was undertaken in 2008, however Tenant Satisfaction Surveys were no longer required by the Government, and consideration was being currently given to whether or not the Council should continue to carry out such surveys voluntarily.

Communities and Local Government (CLG) had recently published a national comparison of all the tenant satisfaction results for 2008. It provided details of the satisfaction levels in relation to the 9 main subject areas surveyed, for all 182 stock retaining councils in England. It had been found that the cumulative satisfaction put the District Council within the top 10% nationally.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Tenant Satisfaction – Comparison with other Stock Retaining Councils report be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

7. REVIEW OF THE HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME

The Panel received a report regarding the Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme presented by Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing.

At its meeting on 25 March 2010, the Panel agreed the deferment of the Review of the Allocations Scheme, normally reviewed annually, until the current meeting. The delay was due to the Government's new statutory guidance on Social Housing Allocations for Local Authorities in England not being received until late January 2010. The report before the Panel concerned proposed changes to the Allocations Scheme, taking effect from 1 October 2010.

Members suggested that the narrative style of the scheme could be changed allowing easier reading for the public, although it was noted that a leaflet summarising the scheme in plain English was also produced. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation also made recommendations to the Panel regarding Paragraph 6.7 of the scheme, "the homeseeker will be contacted by telephone" and "under normal circumstances within 1 working day." It was also agreed, based on a recommendation from the Federation that a new paragraph, numbered 9, should state that homeseekers should be penalised if they refused two offers of accommodation within any three month period rather than three offers as proposed by officers.

RECOMMENDED:

That the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme with the amendments to Paragraph 6.7 and the new Paragraph 9 of the Scheme, as

suggested by the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, be consulted upon with the proposed changes recommended to the Cabinet.

8. HOUSING SERVICE STANDARDS 2010, HOUSING CHARTER AND LOCAL OFFER TO TENANTS

The Panel received a report regarding Housing Service Standards 2010 Housing Charter and Local Offer to Tenants from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

In April 2010 the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) introduced its new Housing Regulatory Framework. The Regulatory Framework:

- required registered Providers of Housing to consult with tenants and publish, by April 2011, a “Local Offer” setting out the service tenants could expect.
- The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation considered setting up a small Local Offer Sub-Group to work with senior housing officers and draft a Local Offer to the Federation and Housing Portfolio Holder. However at the July 2010 meeting of the Federation decided not to set up a Sub-Group.
- Once the draft Local Offer had been agreed by the Federation and Housing Portfolio Holder, all the Council’s tenants would be consulted on the Local Offer through the “Housing News.” The Federation and Housing Portfolio Holder would then consider the views received from tenants before agreeing the final Local Offer before 1 April 2011.

RECOMMENDED:

(1) That the draft Housing Portfolio Holder report be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder; and

(2) That the Housing Service Standards 2010 and Housing Charter be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

9. HOUSING STRATEGY 2009-2012

The Panel received a report regarding the Housing Strategy 2009-2012 which included a 12 Month Progress Report on the Key Action Plan 2009/10 and the proposed Key Action Plan 2010/11 from Mr A Hall, Housing Director.

At its meeting in September 2009 the Council’s Cabinet adopted the Housing Strategy 2009-2012. This followed the Housing Scrutiny Panel considering in detail and approving for consultation an earlier “Consultation Draft” Housing Strategy and a major Consultation exercise undertaken with the Council’s partners, key stakeholders and public over three months.

The Housing Strategy assessed the District’s current and future housing needs having particular regard to the Strategic Housing Market Assessment produced by six local authorities. The strategy included a Key Action Plan setting out the proposed actions that would be taken by the Council to contribute towards the achievement of the housing objectives over the 3 years of the Housing Strategy.

RECOMMENDED:

(1) That the 12 Month Progress Report on the Key Action Plan 2009/10, contained within the Housing Strategy 2009-2012 be recommended to the Portfolio Holder;

(2) That appropriate uncompleted actions be carried forward to the Key Action Plan 2010/11; and

(3) That the proposed Key Action Plan 2010/11 be recommended to the Cabinet for adoption.

10. ETHNIC MONITORING

The Panel received a report regarding Ethnic Monitoring from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing.

The Council had a Policy Statement for Equal Opportunities in the Provision of Housing Services. The Policy Statement included a requirement for an annual review of the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing Register, compared with the ethnicity of those allocated accommodation. In addition, during 2006, the Council undertook Race and Diversity Impact Assessments across all services which were reviewed this year. The review identified whether or not there were any indications suggesting that the Council was discriminating against any one ethnic group. Although a large number of housing applicants did not disclose their ethnicity, it was evident from the analyses 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.

RECOMMENDATION:

That no recommendations be made concerning amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme.

11. TENANT PARTICIPATION IMPACT STATEMENT

The Panel received a report regarding Tenant Participation Impact Statement by Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing. At its meeting on 21 January 2010 the Panel received a detailed presentation on the Tenant Services Authority (TSAs) proposed Regulatory Framework and Short Notice Inspections. The Housing Directorate had a range of initiatives in place and was reasonably prepared for any inspection. Although the Housing Directorate met many of the Framework's requirements, it was recognised that a number of actions were required to fully comply and be prepared for any inspection. At its next meeting on 25 March 2010, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and agreed the draft Regulatory Framework Action Plan. The plan identified a number of actions required over the coming months to fully meet with the requirements of the TSA's new regulatory framework. One of the items on the Action Plan was the completion of a Tenant Participation Impact Statement which included publishing arrangements for involving and empowering tenants and how support would be provided to achieve this aim.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Tenant Participation Impact Statement is recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

12. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGY ON THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Panel received a report regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on the Private Rented Sector, from Ms L Swan, the Housing Directorate's Service Strategies were originally produced about 13 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework, and had since been updated. The strategies gave more detail than the Council's main Housing Strategy on the various housing services provided. In total, 17 Housing Service Strategies had been produced. They had assisted Housing Services in achieving the Charter Mark award for customer service excellence, and had been important in meeting the minimum requirement for Supporting People funding under the conditions of the contract.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on the Private Rented Sector be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

13. HOUSING CUSTOMER PERSPECTIVE PROGRAMME - FINAL ACTION PLAN AND PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received a report regarding the Housing Customer Perspective Programme – Final Action Plan and Progress Report by Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

It was noted that the provision of a high quality housing service to customers meeting their needs, properly informing them of the services being received and providing them with sufficient information to make appropriate choices was essential. The Housing Directorate's "customers" were predominantly tenants, leaseholders, housing applicants and landlords.

In March 2007, the Director of Housing introduced the Housing Customer Perspective Programme which had been a major undertaking, but was now completed. The basis of the programme had been to consider all aspects of "interfaces" that individual sections of the Housing Directorate had with its customers.

Over the past three years, in a programmed way, existing housing policies, practices, information, documentation and standard letters, relating to the Housing Directorate, had been discussed and challenged by a group, chaired by the Director of Housing, comprising Housing staff and the Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. The following written material was circulated to members of the Group:

- All information leaflets provided to customers
- All forms completed by customers, including accompanying notes
- All standard letters sent to customers
- Hard copies of any pages on the Council's website dedicate to the function being challenged.

The meetings were attended by the Housing Manager from the section whose function (s) were being challenged, who explained all the various customer interfaces in relation to the section's work.

As a result of this process, the Group had formulated a Customer Perspective Action Plan, listing around 120 improvements to the way the Housing Directorate interfaces with its customers.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Action Plan formulated through the Housing Customer Perspective Programme and associated current progress report be noted.

14. REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE - KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2009/10

The Panel received a report regarding Housing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – 2009/10 Out-Turn Report, from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

The Council had adopted a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), comprising all National Indicators (NIs) and Local Performance Indicators (LPIs), which included 4 KPIs and 6 LPIs relating to the Housing Service.

Performance against all the Council's KPIs were monitored on a quarterly basis by the Finance and Performance Management (FPM) Scrutiny Panel. However, in past years, the Housing Scrutiny Panel had asked that performance on the Housing KPIs be reported to and considered by the Scrutiny Panel, which had now been included within its Annual Work Programme.

All four of the targets for the NIs and three out of the six LPI targets for 2009/10 were achieved.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Council's performance in 2009/10 in relation to the Housing Key Performance Indicators, comprising National Indicators and Local Performance Indicators be noted.

15. REVIEW OF PROPOSED LICENCE CONDITIONS FOR PARK HOMES

The Panel received an update from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing regarding the Review of Proposed Licence Conditions for Park Homes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a call-in on 12 July 2010, of the Cabinet's proposed licence conditions for park homes sites. The Committee decided to refer the issue back to the Cabinet for further consideration and then the Housing Scrutiny Panel should undertake a review of the proposals and objections received. Therefore arrangements had been made for a special meeting of the Panel to take place on Wednesday 8 September 2010 at 7.30p.m. in the Council Chamber.

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

It was noted that there were no Panel reports going before the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

17. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next programmed meeting of the Panel was on Thursday 28 October 2010 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1. Officers had requested that the date of the Panel meeting in April 2011 be brought forward to March. The Panel would need to consider the HRA Business Plan before it could be signed at the end of March 2011. Members agreed to hold the meeting on Thursday 24 March 2011 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1.