

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 28 OCTOBER 2010
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.35 - 7.43 PM**

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

Other members present: Ms R Brookes and D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: Mrs S Jones and Mrs J Lea

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

24. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that Councillor W Breare-Hall was substituting for Councillor S Jones.

25. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

26. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

(a) Minutes:

The notes of the meeting held on 8 September 2010 were agreed as a correct record.

(b) Matters arising:

Renewal of Proposed New Licence Conditions for Permanent Residential Park Home Sites

The Panel noted that heights of fences and hedges would be established before licences were issued and that this would be noted as part of the consultation to be carried out. A copy of the consultation document would be circulated to all members for their comments.

The Panel wanted to record their thanks to all officers who helped out at the September meeting.

Minutes of 29 July 2010

Noted that the minutes of 29 July 2010 should be added to the next agenda.

27. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel's Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted.

The Panel noted that a review on unauthorised parking on housing estates was to be added to the work programme.

28. HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

The Director of Housing Services, Alan Hall, introduced the report on the Homelessness Prevention Service. This enabled the Scrutiny Panel to pre-scrutinise a report that would be going to the Cabinet in December 2010 requesting a CSB growth bid of up to a maximum of £60,000 to make up a projected shortfall from the government to cover a shortfall in the Homelessness Prevention Service.

The Homelessness Prevention Service was introduced in January 2003 and had proved to be a great success in reducing the level of homelessness acceptances and has led to a higher number of people being able to remain in their own homes. It also ensured that any unnecessary homelessness applications no longer occurred. At present there were only 5 homeless applicants but in 2002 there were 35.

The Council's Chief Internal Auditor had undertaken a Value for Money audit on this service. He concluded that the Homelessness Prevention Service was providing excellent value for money and that the service had developed a pro-active approach to homelessness prevention, which, together with the good working relationships it had with partner agencies, had resulted in a substantial reduction in homeless acceptance in the District.

Since writing the report, the Comprehensive Spending Review had taken place and this had provided good news for the homeless grant. Ministers had decided to protect this grant, holding it at this year's level and to maintain it over the next four years. This grant would be paid directly to local councils. However, the allocations would not be made until December, so the Council would not know until then how much it would get. Therefore, officers were recommending that this report still went to the Cabinet, updated with this new information, so that the money would still be available if the government allocation fell short.

The Panel members agreed that this was a good service that was provided by the Council, was very successful in reducing the number of homelessness applicants and it was a very good example of a "spend to save" approach.

They questioned whether the staff should be given a three year contract rather than a permanent one and were informed that as they had previously been under a temporary contract they were entitled, because of length of service, to permanent conditions of service, so that it made no difference.

Members asked that the tables on pages 15 and 16 of the agenda be extended to bring the figures as near as possible into the current year.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel considered and approved the report on the future funding of the Homelessness Prevention Service as it provided Value for Money, was a valuable service to the Council and would save the Council money.

29. REVIEW OF THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

Alan Hall introduced the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan for its six monthly review. This strategy would be reviewed every three years by the Council and this Housing Standing Panel requested that it review the Strategy Action Plan on a six-monthly basis.

The Panel went through the Action Plan and made the following comments:

- They noted that the tendering exercise for Leader Lodge had stalled, officers had looked at shared ownership but none of the tenders came up to scratch except for one and they had withdrawn. Officers were now looking at other options.
- Noted that officers were seeking a viament of £10,000 from the Preventing Repossession Fund to give to the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme. That would still leave about £16,000 in the Preventing Repossession Fund, and this viament would make better use of that money with the EFHAS.
- Noted that the Government had set a limit of £200,000 on the Mortgage Rescue Scheme, not enough for most properties in Essex, but nevertheless this Council had completed six mortgage rescues, being more than any other authority in Essex.
- Noted that the likelihood of achieving the improvement of homeless decisions within 33 days to 75% was remote. Officers tended to take their time and investigate cases thoroughly which took longer than 33 days. Meeting this target time limit was not as important as getting this right and officers thought it should be deleted.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel noted Homelessness Strategy Action Plan.

30. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2010/11 SIX MONTH PROGRESS REPORT ON KEY ACTION PLAN

The Panel considered the six month progress on the Key Action Plan contained within the HRA Business Plan 2010/11.

The Panel noted:

- **(Item 2)** Congratulations were offered to all Housing Officers concerned in achieving the Government's new Customer Excellence Award for the whole of the Housing Directorate;
- **(Item 3)** That the Government would now require that local authorities take on specific amounts of debt from April 2012 to replace the current housing subsidy system. Until there was a detailed response from the Housing Minister it would not be known if this would effect the Council's General Fund;
- This debt would be paid back from the HRA, although some of it may have to be funded by the General Fund;

- **(Item 8)** That tenants were advised of the Home Ownership Grants Scheme by the Council writing to each tenant (as it only applies to council tenants). There were 26 applicants this year, with 7 shortlisted;
- **(Item 11)** The Council was still in protracted negotiations with the freeholder (a charity) of the land and properties at Marden Close as they were concerned as this was green belt land. The charity would now appoint a Planning Agent to advise them about the potential development of this land;
- **(Item 15)** That the Tenant Talkback Panels were set up to cover specific issues which proved very successful. Officers in conjunction the Tenants Federation are now considering having a single Panel to discuss a range of issues;
- **(Item 21)** The Strategic Review of the Council's Older People's Accommodation had been put in doubt as the Department of Health had suspended its PFI programme. ECC has stated that it would only jointly fund the Strategic Review if the DoH proceeded with the PFI Scheme; and
- **(Item 42)** In order to improve Council's Housing Repair Service, Council Staff would be working under an External Repairs Management Contractor. This had been discussed with the Council staff. A repairs advisory group had been set to oversee the appointment of the contractor. When up and running a progress report would be presented to this Panel.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel considered and commented upon the six-monthly progress report for the Key Action Plan contained within the HRA Business Plan 2010/11.

31. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK ACTION PLAN 6 MONTHLY PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel noted that the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) is now to be disbanded; they had introduced a new regulatory framework in April 2010 and officers have now prepared an action plan for this. Two representatives from the TSA had visited the Council in August 2010 and were impressed with the progress made.

A copy of the Council's Annual Report to tenants would be sent out to Panel members in due course.

They also noted that under (Item 4), the performance indicators that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation (TLF) wished monitored were monitored on a quarterly basis by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel. This Panel would get an annual report, in July, on the 21 indicators that the TLF had picked to monitor.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and commented on the progress made on the Regulatory Framework Action Plan.

32. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGIES ON ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR & HOUSING

The Service Strategies had first been produced 13 years ago and have since been updated. The strategies give more detail than the Council's main Housing Strategy

on the various housing services. In total, 17 Housing Service Strategies have been produced.

Anti-Social Behaviour –

The Panel noted that:

- There had not been any demoted tenancy orders issued over the last year;
- The Council does not move problem families around the District but tries and deal with the problem in situ;
- Under the scheme harassed or stressed tenants could ask for a move under the allocation scheme, but they would be given a low priority. Only under exceptional circumstances could they be moved and these moves must have a police recommendation;
- The Mediation Service had been used over the years, but both parties had to agree to this, but when used it had been successful, with less of a cost to the Council.

Housing Service Strategy on Information –

The Panel noted that:

- 'Housing News' was published three times a year, unfortunately the section that produced the publication were have staffing issues at present, but officers did understand how important this publication was to residents;
- The Housing Section was looking at having PCs in the Civic Offices. They were running a pilot in the Broadway reception area and were looking to put one in Limes Farm. They were also pushing to have one in the reception area of the Civic Offices, perhaps using specialised terminals.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel considered and endorsed the Housing Directorate's Service Strategies on Anti-Social Behaviour and Housing Information.

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

To report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a general update on the reports considered at this meeting.

34. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Panel confirmed that the meeting that was to be held on 28 April 2011 had been rescheduled to 24 March 2011, starting at 5.30pm.