

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 19 MARCH 2013
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 7.28 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), A Mitchell MBE (Vice-Chairman), K Chana, Ms J Hart, Ms H Kane, L Leonard, Ms G Shiell, Mrs J H Whitehouse and W Marshall (Tenants and Leaseholders Federation)

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: Mrs S Jones

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), P Pledger (Assistant Director (Property and Resources)), L Swan (Assistant Director (Private Sector & Resources)) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

60. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members present at the meeting.

61. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

62. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 28 January 2013 be agreed.

63. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

(a) Terms of Reference

The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.

(b) Work Programme

It was agreed that the following Housing Service Strategies should be deferred to next year's Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel:

- (i) Item 29 Housing Service Strategy on Energy Efficiency
- (ii) Item 30 Housing Service Strategy on Allocations
- (iii) Item 31 Housing Service Strategy on Tenant Participation
- (iv) Item 32 Housing Service Strategy on Harassment

64. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2012/13 - PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2012/13) – 12 Month Progress Report.

In March 2012, the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for 2012/13 was produced, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan. This 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 would be taking over the following year. It was good practice that the progress made with the stated actions was monitored. A 6 month progress report was reported to the Panel in October 2012. The panel considered the latest report.

RECOMMENDED:

That the 12 Month Progress Report for the Key Action Plan contained within the HRA Business Plan 2012/13 be noted.

65. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2013/14

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2013-14.

The Government's Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) required all local authorities to produce an annual Business Plan for their Housing Revenue Accounts. The CLG's intention was to ensure that local authority housing was used and maintained to maximum effect. The Business Plans dealt with council's 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.

HRA Financial Plan

In accordance with the Cabinet's instructions, the previous Financial Plan had been formally reviewed by officers on a quarterly basis over the past year. The Cabinet had also asked the Panel to formally review the Financial Plan bi-annually. The Panel had undertaken its first bi-annual review in October 2012, and its second review would be undertaken at this meeting.

Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan 2013/14

An important part of the HRA Business Plan related to the Council's objectives, strategies and plans relating to the repair and maintenance of the Council's housing stock over the next 30 years. This included the Council's plans to ensure that the Council continued to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard in the short term, and maintain the housing stock to a full modern standard, in the longer term. It was advised that it would be a number of years before all of the Council's properties would meet the new standard, due to the amount of catch-up needed.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2013/14 be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption.

66. FORMATION OF TENANTS SCRUTINY PANEL

The Panel received a progress report regarding the Tenant Scrutiny Panel from the Assistant Director of Housing (Private Sector and Resources).

As a front line service, the provision of a high quality housing service was essential. The Housing Directorate's customers were tenants, leaseholders, housing applicants and landlords. In order to meet the standards expected, it was important that its clients played a key role in scrutinising the Council's performance and were involved in setting targets for further improvement.

Under the theme of Community Engagement, one of the Council's Key Objectives for next year was the engagement with communities to put them at the centre of the Council's policy development and service design.

At its meeting in September 2010, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation agreed to the setting up of a Tenant Scrutiny Panel to undertake the majority of the scrutiny and monitoring functions currently carried out by the Federation.

Following a recruitment process for tenants to be selected for the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, Terms of Reference had been formulated for the Tenant Scrutiny Panel which had been agreed by the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation in July 2012. The Panel now had eight members and had met formally on 21 February 2013 to elect a Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary. The Panel would meet again on 19 March, its first service review would be on how the Housing Directorate deals with complaints.

RESOLVED:

That the establishment of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and the progress to date be noted.

67. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY ON EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

The Panel received a report regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Equality and Diversity from the Assistant Director of Housing (Private Sector and Resources).

The Housing Directorate's Service Strategies were originally produced around 15 years ago, giving more detail than the Council's main Housing Strategy on the housing services provided. The strategies were produced to a common format setting out how individual housing services would be delivered. The Panel considered and endorsed the updated strategy on Equality and Diversity which would be considered by the Tenants and Leaseholders federation before being forwarded to the Housing Portfolio Holder for approval.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Equality and Diversity be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption.

68. WELFARE REFORM MITIGATION ACTION PLAN QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Welfare reform Mitigation Action Plan Quarterly Progress Report.

On 8 March 2012, the Welfare reform Act 2012 received Royal Assent, legislating for the biggest change to the welfare system for over 60 years. To understand and prepare for the changes, the Council had commissioned the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) to undertake a major study into the impact and implications of the welfare reforms on the Council and its residents. The CIH estimated that the total loss in housing benefit and other welfare benefits to both Council and private tenants in Epping Forest, as a result of the welfare reforms, would be around £1.1 million per annum. In addition, the direct financial impact on the Council itself was estimated at between around £240,000 and £460,000 per annum. The CIH had identified that as a result of these changes, there was likely to be a significant increase in the amount of homelessness for the Council to cope with.

Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team and Mitigation Action Plan

In view of the significant effects of the welfare reforms the Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team was formed in September 2012, chaired by the Director of Housing. The Team had formulated an Action Plan which was adopted by the Cabinet in October 2012. The Cabinet had asked this Panel to monitor progress with the delivery of the Action Plan.

Progress to date

The first Quarterly Progress Report on the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan was presented to the Panel at its January 2013 meeting. The latest report was attached to the agenda for this meeting. Good progress continued to be made to date in delivering the 59 actions of the Action Plan.

The key points noted within the latest Progress Report on the current position and progress were as follows:

- (a) There were 391 under-occupying Council tenants affected by the "Bedroom Tax";
- (b) In December 2012, the Government announced that the Benefit Cap would be introduced in only four London Boroughs from April 2013, and then rolled out in all other local authorities before September 2013;
- (c) The Department for Work and Pensions and the Council's Benefits Division had established that 78 households in the District would be affected by the proposed Benefits Cap. The highest loss by a household would be around £210.00 per week. All District Council tenants affected had been written to, offering for their Housing Management Officer to visit them and advise on how to mitigate the effects;
- (d) An updated Housing Service Strategy on Under-Occupation had been agreed;
- (e) As at 15 February 2013, 183 out of a possible 389 visits (47%) had been undertaken to EFDC tenants affected by the "Bedroom Tax." However 21% of tenants had expressed an interest in downsizing;

(f) It was expected that the earliest the direct payments of Universal Credit would be made to claimants in Essex would now be March 2014;

(g) The Cabinet had agreed to provide the requested funding of £67,000 to the Citizen Advice Bureau to appoint two full time Debt Advisors for 18 months;

(h) The Cabinet had agreed that part of the CLG's funding for homelessness prevention for 2013-15 should be used to appoint an additional Homelessness Prevention Officer;

(i) The Benefits Division had formulated a Draft Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) Policy; and

(j) The Panel had recommended to the Cabinet that some of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2013/14 be used to meet all the HRA costs to deliver the Mitigation Action Plan.

RECOMMENDED:

That the latest Quarterly Progress report on the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, as at 1 March 2013, be noted.

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

The Chairman advised that he would update the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as to the Panel's progress.

70. FUTURE MEETINGS

(a) The next meeting of the Panel was scheduled for Tuesday 23 July 2013 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1. It was advised that an extra-ordinary meeting of the Panel was required for June 2013 to discuss the New Tenancy Agreement for flexible tenants. The Chairman advised that he would not be able to attend a meeting during the last week in June 2013.

(b) The Housing Portfolio Holder extended his thanks to the Panel Chairman, members and officers for their work over the past year.