

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 31 MAY 2012
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.30 - 8.30 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), A Mitchell MBE (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, A Boyce, Ms J Hart, Ms H Kane, Mrs J Lea, B Rolfe, Ms G Shiell and H Ulkun

Other members present: J Knapman, Mrs C Pond, D Stallan, Ms S Stavrou and C Whitbread

Apologies for Absence: K Chana, Mrs A Grigg and Mrs S Jones

Officers Present P Pledger (Assistant Director (Property and Resources)), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

67. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that Councillor D Stallan was attending the meeting as Housing Portfolio Holder and not as a Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel member, therefore he had no vote at the meeting.

68. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The following substitutions were noted:

- (a) Councillor K Angold-Stephens substituted for the former Panel member and Councillor Ms R Brookes;
- (b) Councillor A Boyce substituted for Councillor Mrs S Jones;
- (c) Councillor Ms H Kane substituted for former Panel member D Stallan, present at the meeting as Housing Portfolio Holder;
- (d) Councillor Mrs J Lea substituted for Councillor Mrs A Grigg;
- (e) Councillor B Rolfe substituted for Councillor K Chana; and
- (f) Councillor Ms G Shiell substituted for former Panel member and Councillor B Pryor.

69. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council' Code of Member Conduct, Councillor J Knapman declared a personal interest in the following item of the agenda by virtue of having been a member of the Cabinet when the decision on fire safety in Council blocks was made. The Councillor had determined that his interest was not prejudicial and would remain in the meeting for the duration of the discussion and voting thereon:

- Item 6 Call-In Cabinet Decision on Fire Safety in Flat Blocks

70. NOTES OF THE LAST TWO PANEL MEETINGS

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the last two Panel meetings held on 5 and 13 March 2012 be agreed.

71. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.

72. CALL-IN CABINET DECISION ON FIRE SAFETY IN FLAT BLOCKS

The Panel considered the call-in of a decision by the Cabinet of a Housing Portfolio Holder report (C/067/2011/12) regarding Fire Safety in Flat Blocks made on 12 March 2012. The following reasons for the call-in were given:

- (a) No distinction had been made between 2 storey flat blocks and flat blocks of 3 or more storeys;
- (b) The conditions set in paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Cabinet Decision were too onerous to comply with;
- (c) That in relation to paragraphs 2 and 3 above, the 4 month permitted period should be extended to 2 years, due to the time taken for mains alarms, approved fire doors and other measures taken into place;
- (d) That the Council should remove, free of charge, any non-complying carpets; and
- (e) That residents of 2 storey flat blocks install carpets conforming to BS5287, once all conditions were met.

The Chairman requested that the lead member of the call-in Councillor Mrs J Hart, open the discussion. She began by stating that residents should be safe in their homes, the call-in was not opposed to fire safety measures being undertaken. It was felt that there was no distinction made between 2 and 3 storey flat blocks in the decision, with the four month compliance period being too prohibitive. The Councillor suggested that flats in the district had easy escape routes and advised that fire safety experts had stated that no one could be held responsible for deaths and injuries caused in fires so long as a fire risk assessment had been carried out. In conclusion she thought that the décor of flat communal parts gave home pride to tenants and avoided a drab environment.

The Chairman requested that two other call-in signatories present, Councillors K Angold-Stephens and Mrs C Pond added their comments. Councillor K Angold-Stephens said that in the event of a fire it was extremely unlikely that the Housing Portfolio Holder would be held responsible. The Local Government Association Fire Safety Advice for Flat Blocks stated that there was no evidence for tenants being in danger, deaths from flat fires were less likely to occur than in houses and bungalows. He added that flats were encased in a fire resistant area, it was very rare for anyone outside the flat to die. It was also rare for a fire to originate in the common area. Whilst accepting that the Fire and rescue Service attempted to eliminate all risk, the

best housekeeping could only be maintained with the co-operation of residents. Concrete steps were far more dangerous than the hazard posed by carpets in common areas. He concluded by saying that the cost of removing carpets should be borne by the Council. Councillor Mrs C Pond spoke last, she supported the comments made, she said that there should be a more flexible approach regarding safety in maisonettes.

The Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor D Stallan made his opening statement. He reminded the Panel that he had not been a Cabinet member when this decision was made. He advised that there currently was no financial provision within the budget for compensating tenants who require new carpets and mats. On the point of differentiating between 2 and 3 storey blocks, it was best that safety was enforced irrespective of height.

Following these opening comments, the Chairman requested that the Panel members participate. Members were concerned about the lack of resources in the budget for compensation. However members were satisfied that this issue had been debated thoroughly and that the decisions involved along the way had improved.

The lead member for the call-in and the Portfolio Holder were asked to make their concluding statements.

Councillor Mrs J Hart said that the Portfolio Holder was taking a zero tolerance approach to this. Two storey flat blocks were similar to small houses, there was no difficulty in evacuating them in emergencies. Fires could not start on British Standard carpets. There were no incidents of fires starting in the common parts of blocks. These blocks were little havens, homely and inviting. The Council's approach was too heavy handed.

The Housing Portfolio Holder re-affirmed that currently there was no money in the budget for replacing the carpets, officers were aiming to complete this work within 4 months. He advised that almost all local authorities had adopted a zero tolerance policy on fire safety in flat blocks, unlike the District Council which was a managed policy.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet Decision on Fire Safety in Flat Blocks C/067/2011-12 be upheld.

73. FUTURE MEETINGS

The following scheduled meetings were noted as follows:

- (a) Thursday 28 June 2012 at 5.30p.m. (Extra-Ordinary Meeting regarding Licences for Park Homes);
- (b) Tuesday 24 July;
- (c) Tuesday 23 October;
- (d) Tuesday 29 January 2013; and
- (e) Tuesday 19 March