

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel **Date:** Wednesday, 22 January 2014

Place: Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 5.30 - 8.25 pm

Members Present: Ms G Shiell (Vice-Chairman), G Chambers, K Chana, Ms J Hart, Mrs S Jones, Mrs J Lea, L Leonard, B Rolfe and W Marshall

Other Councillors: Ms H Kane, D Stallan, G Waller and D Wixley

Apologies: S Murray, Mrs R Gadsby and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Officers Present: A Hall (Director of Housing), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Operations)), C Sobey (Principal Housing Officer (Information)) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

Also in attendance: J Foile (Chief Officer – VAEF)

27. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chairman of the Panel, Councillor S Murray, had tendered his apologies for this meeting as he had to attend an event, following him being short listed for a teaching award.

28. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that Councillor G Chambers was substituting for Councillor Mrs R Gadsby.

29. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest made.

30. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the Panel meeting held on 22 October 2013 be agreed.

31. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman undertook this role. She proposed that Councillor Mrs J Lea fulfil the role of Vice-Chairman.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Mrs J Lea act as Vice-Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

32. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME**(a) Terms of Reference**

The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.

(b) Work Programme

The Panel's Work Programme was noted.

33. REVIEW OF THE GARDEN MAINTENANCE SCHEME FOR OLDER AND DISABLED TENANTS

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) regarding the Review of the Garden Maintenance Scheme for Older and Disabled Tenants.

The Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) Gardening Scheme for older and vulnerable tenants had been in operation since 2003. During 2012/13 and 2013/14, £20,000 per annum plus an additional £20,000 per annum (making a total of £40,000 per annum in these 2 years) funded from the Housing Improvement and Enhancement Fund from the HRA to provide the scheme. VAEF oversaw voluntary garden maintenance work for older and disabled Council tenant's properties and undertook some work for private sector residents, funded separately.

Tenants were only included if there was no one physically able to carry out the work under the age of 70 living at the property. Tenants in rent arrears were ineligible to receive the service. Disabled tenants, regardless of their age, were included on the scheme. All those applying were assessed by VAEF and were only included on the scheme if they could not cope with their gardens.

The amount of work undertaken had substantially increased as a result of the additional funding provided in 2012/13 and 2013/14. VAEF had confirmed that they could continue with the scheme for a further two years. The Panel supported HRA funding of £20,000 per annum plus an additional £20,000 per annum from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for two years from 2014/15 to VAEF's Gardening Scheme for Older and Disabled Council Tenants.

RECOMMENDED:

- (1) That the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel recommends to the Cabinet that Housing Revenue Account funding of £20,000 per annum continue to be utilised to fund the Voluntary Action Epping Forest gardening scheme for older and disabled Council tenants for a further two years from 2014/15; and
- (2) That the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel further recommend to the Cabinet that additional Housing Revenue Account funding of £20,000 per annum for two years from 2014/15, be provided to Voluntary Action Epping Forest's Gardening Scheme for Older and Disabled Council Tenants funded from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund.

34. BRIEFING ON THE PROPOSED COUNCIL RENT INCREASE FOR 2014/15

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the proposed Council Rent Increase 2014/15.

It had become customary for the Housing Portfolio Holder and Director of Housing to brief the Panel at its January meeting on the proposed rent increase for the following year. A major implication for the Council rent increase this year, and the longer term viability of the Council's HRA Financial Plan was the Government's proposals for the future of social rents. It was estimated that there would be an average rent increase of 4.941% (£4.49) for 2014/15.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Portfolio Holder's recommendation to the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee on the proposed Council rent increase for 2014/15 be noted.

35. PROPOSED HOUSING SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS AND SERVICE ENHANCEMENTS - 2014/15

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2014/15.

The Cabinet had asked the Panel to consider and recommend to them a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements each year, utilising the additional funding made available as a result of HRA self-financing. Over the previous two years the Panel had formulated lists of housing improvements and service enhancements accordingly, the majority of which had later been approved by the Cabinet.

The Panel had also been requested to make similar recommendations for 2014/15. It was anticipated that £430,000 would be available for new projects next year, after an allocation of £220,000 to the Major Capital Projects Reserve in 2014/15. It was advised that the amount of resources available to spend on new improvements and enhancements in 2014/15 and subsequent years was much less than previously anticipated, mainly due to the proposed cessation of the Government's Rent Convergence Policy from April 2015.

The Panel was advised that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had considered and had endorsed the proposals put forward by officers.

RECOMMENDED:

- (1) That, the following recommendations be made to the Cabinet:
 - (a) That the latest out-turn forecasts for each of the projects funded by the Housing Improvement and Service Enhancement Fund in 2013/14, provided at Appendix 1 of the report to the Scrutiny Panel be noted;
 - (b) That the associated expenditure for any slippages on individual projects in 2013/14 be carried forward to complete the projects in 2014/15;
 - (c) That, subject to the average Council rent increase and the proposed rent levels for re-let properties being agreed by full Council for 2014/15;

(i) The proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements for 2014/15, and the associated recommendations for each project, set-out in Appendix 2 of the report to the Panel, be approved; and

(ii) That the amount allocated from the Fund to the Major Capital Projects Reserve in 2014/15 be reduced from £850,000 to £220,000, due to:

- The required second year's funding for Marden Close and Faversham Hall (£508,000);
- The proposals being put forward at Appendix 2 for the allocation of resources from the Fund next year (see below); and
- The anticipated cessation of the Government's Rent Convergence Policy from April 2015;

(d) That the proposed £220,000 within the Major Capital Projects Reserve for 2014/15 be utilised to either help fund a capital project next year (subject to the subsequent approval of the Cabinet or Housing Portfolio Holder as appropriate), or be added to the funding made available for the Major Projects Capital Reserve in the following year (2015/16), for a larger capital project at that time; and

(e) That, at its meeting in January 2015, the Housing Scrutiny Panel be asked to consider and recommend to the Cabinet the proposed use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2015/16;

(2) That the Scrutiny Panel's report to the Cabinet be based on the content of this report to the Scrutiny Panel;

(3) That the Cabinet be asked to record in the subsequent Cabinet Minutes all the Cabinet's decisions on the recommendations set out in bold at Appendix 2; and

(4) That, in view of the absence of the Chairman at the Scrutiny Panel meeting, the Vice-Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel presents the Scrutiny Panel's report to the Cabinet on the 3rd March 2014.

36. REVIEW OF PARKING ENFORCEMENT MEASURES ON HOUSING ESTATES

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) regarding the Review of Parking Enforcement Measures on Housing Estates.

At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in June 2013, members agreed that this Panel review the approach to parking enforcement to prevent unauthorised parking on Housing owned grass verges. The Public Interest Justification originally raised by the three members, one proposing and two supporting, was as follows:

“Considerable damage to grass and the “green” concept on which many residential areas were designed is gradually disappearing. The damage caused could pose safety hazards for users of the highway.”

In September 2008, the Cabinet had agreed in order to allow more residents to park vehicles off road, that the maximum amount of grassed verge to be removed to construct a vehicular crossover for residents to park their vehicle/s be increased from 6 to 12 metres in length. It was further agreed that any proposed crossover exceeding 6 metres would generate a consultation exercise involving local residents and ward members.

This Panel had considered options for parking enforcement at its meetings in March and July 2008, and in March 2009. The reports stemmed from increases in complaints from the public. The complaints were mainly about two issues. Firstly, residents were unhappy that vehicles were parking on grass verges causing damage. When enforcement action was taken, residents complained that there was nowhere to park.

After discussion, the Panel supported the Council's status quo policy, to carry out enforcement measures on an ad hoc basis. Jockey rails or shrubs were installed at sites where there were particularly bad problems, following local consultation. This had been the policy since March 2009, the Panel noted that very few enquiries had been received from members from this date and no formal complaints regarding parking issues had been made. Following consultation exercises, enforcement measures had been undertaken in 6 locations within the district with no further complaints or issues being raised since they were installed.

The Panel preferred to amend the title of this policy from "ad hoc" to "managed." They also asked officers to place an item in the Council Bulletin with information about the policy and actions that could be taken in response to unauthorised parking. Members also asked that outcomes of consultation exercises were considered carefully and weight given to those residents who may have special circumstances.

RECOMMENDED:

That the "ad hoc" or "managed" policy on enforcement measures be recommended for approval to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for onward reference to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

37. SHELTERED HOUSING AND OLDER PEOPLE'S HANDYPERSON SCHEMES - 1 YEAR REVIEW

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Housing (Property) regarding the Review of the Handyman Scheme – A Year On.

Up until April 2012, the Council only operated a Handyperson Scheme for non-Council tenants over 60 years of age and in receipt of benefits. The Council also funded Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) to provide preventative advice and undertake minor works in the homes of older and disabled non-Council tenants.

The Cabinet had subsequently agreed to provide a free of charge Handyperson Scheme to older and other vulnerable tenants irrespective of means who were living in sheltered accommodation and those living in any other Council dwelling.

During the last 12 months it was estimated that this service had undertaken more than 1,000 jobs across eight sheltered schemes and over 280 jobs in other Council accommodation. The overall cost of the scheme was around £77,500 per annum. The scheme had a very high satisfaction rate (100%) and was popular.

RESOLVED:

That the Review of the Handyman Scheme be noted.

38. SIX-MONTHLY PROGRESS REPORT ON HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2013/14

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Strategy – 6 Month Progress report on Key Action Plan 2013/14.

The Council's Housing Strategy assessed the District's current and future housing needs and set out the Council's approach to meeting those needs. The Strategy also included a Key Action Plan, which was updated annually, setting out the proposed actions that would be taken by the Council to contribute towards the achievement of the housing objectives over the following year. The Cabinet had agreed that progress with the Key Action Plans should be monitored on a 6 monthly basis by the Panel.

RECOMMENDED:

That the 6 Month Progress Report on the Housing Strategy Key Action Plan 2013/14 be noted.

39. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGY ON TENANT PARTICIPATION

The panel received a report from the Principal Housing Officer (Information) regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Tenant Participation.

The Directorate Service Strategies totalled 17, being produced to a common format setting out how individual housing services would be delivered.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Tenant Participation be endorsed to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

40. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGY ON INFORMATION

The panel received a report from the Principal Housing Officer regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Information. The Directorate Service Strategies totalled 17 being produced to a common format setting out how individual housing services would be delivered.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Information be endorsed to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

41. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE WELFARE REFORM MITIGATION ACTION PLAN

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

A Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team was formed in 2012 to consider and implement ways that the effects of the Government's Welfare Reforms could be minimised, or reduced. The Project Team had formulated an Action Plan subsequently adopted by the Cabinet which identified around 60 separate actions with target dates. After a period of intense activity by the Project Team, there had been very little further progress with the Action Plan over the last six months, because most of the remaining actions related to issues depending on Government decisions.

Therefore, it was noted that there was little to report to the members. However, since the last Panel report, a further 3 tasks had been achieved which amounted to 70% of all the tasks being completed.

RECOMMENDED:

- (1) That the position with the latest Quarterly Progress Report on the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan be noted; and
- (2) That no further progress reports be made to this Panel until preparations are needed for the Government's introduction of Universal Credit and Direct Payments.

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

The Chairman of the Panel advised that she would provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the Panel's recent work.

43. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Panel was scheduled for 25 March 2014 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1.

CHAIRMAN