

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL  
HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 23 APRIL 2014  
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING  
AT 5.00 - 7.32 PM**

**Members Present:** S Murray (Chairman), Ms G Shiell (Vice-Chairman), K Chana, Mrs S Jones, Mrs J Lea, L Leonard, B Rolfe and Mrs J H Whitehouse

**Other members present:**

**Apologies for Absence:** Ms J Hart

**Officers Present** A Hall (Director of Communities), P Pledger (Assistant Director (Housing Property)), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Housing Operations)), L Swan (Assistant Director (Private Sector Housing & Communities Support)), D Barrett (Area Housing Manager (South)), Manning (Area Housing Manager) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

**44. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)**

There were no substitutions made for the meeting.

**45. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor S Murray declared a non pecuniary interest in the following item of the agenda by virtue his mother being a Careline user. The Councillor indicated that he would remain in the meeting for the duration of the meeting and voting thereon:

- Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2013/14) – 12 Month Progress Report

**46. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

**RESOLVED:**

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel, held on 22 January 2014, be agreed.

**47. 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 were noted.

**48. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN KEY ACTION PLAN (2013/14) - 12 MONTH PROGRESS REPORT**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Communities regarding the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2013/14) – 12 Month Progress.

In March 2013, the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for 2013/14 was produced, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan. This set out the authority's objectives, strategies and plans as landlord regarding the management and maintenance of its housing stock. The Key Action Plan formed an important part of the Business Plan, outlining the proposed actions the authority would be taking over the following year.

The Panel had reviewed the Plan in October 2013, it was noted that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation were consulted on 24 April.

**RECOMMENDED:**

That the Panel endorse and recommend the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2013/14) – 12 Month Progress Report to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

**49. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUSINESS PLAN 2014/15**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Communities regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2014-15.

The Government's Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) expected all local authorities to produce annual Business Plans for their Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs). The CLG intended to ensure that local authority housing was used and maintained to maximum effect.

**HRA Business Plan 2014/15**

It was noted that the plan related, to a large extent, to 2012/13 which was the last year that full year statistics were available.

**RECOMMENDED:**

- (1) That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2014/15, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan and HRA Financial Plan 2014/15 be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption; and
- (2) That the final version of the Business Plan be circulated to members via the Council Bulletin.

**50. REVIEW OF HOUSING MANAGEMENT STAFFING LEVELS - WELFARE REFORMS**

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Communities (Housing Operations) regarding the Review of Housing Management Staffing Levels – Welfare Reforms.

At its meeting in October 2012, the Cabinet considered a report on Welfare Mitigation which due to the Welfare Reform Act 2013 would have a significant impact on

Council tenants. Subsequently officers produced a Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan adopted by the Cabinet. As part of it was agreed that two additional Housing Management Officers be appointed in order to help minimise the effect of the welfare reforms on Council tenants. Officers reported that one officer was based at Area Housing Office (North) in the Civic Offices, Epping and one based at the Area Housing Office (South) at the Broadway, Loughton. Both officers commenced work in January and March 2013 respectively.

### **Rent Arrears Performance**

Under Key Performance Indicator 40 – “What percentage of the rent due from our Council home tenants was paid?” the target had been met in the last two quarters of 2013/14 and during the previous two years. This was considered a particular achievement due to additional staffing and new methods of managing rent arrears.

#### **RECOMMENDED:**

- (1) That the Review of Housing Management Staffing Levels regarding Welfare Reforms be noted;
- (2) That the existing Housing Management staffing levels be endorsed as sufficient to meet current service needs; and
- (3) That Housing Management staffing levels be further reviewed following the introduction of Universal Credit and direct payments of Housing Benefits to tenants.

### **51. TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS HANDLING IN THE HOUSING SERVICE**

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Communities (Private Housing and Communities Support) regarding the Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report on Complaints Handling in the Housing Service.

In February 2013 the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation set up a Tenant Scrutiny Panel to take an independent view of the Housing Service's performance and undertake scrutiny activities on the Federation's behalf. The Panel would carry out an assessment of one housing service per annum, their first subject agreed was the way complaints were processed, monitored and analysed. They subsequently made a draft report in early 2014 making 14 separate recommendations. As a result of their work, in part, a new post of Customer Relationship Officer would be established, to investigate complaints and provide a customer orientated response.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report on Complaints Handling in the Housing Service be noted.

### **52. SOCIAL HOUSING FRAUD PROGRESS REPORT**

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Communities (Housing Operations) regarding the Social Housing Fraud Progress Report.

In February 2010 the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed that a new post of Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) be appointed on a temporary part time basis for a Social Housing Fraud Pilot Scheme for a 12 month period. In March 2012 the Cabinet agreed that the temporary part time post should be made permanent and full time. The following month, the Cabinet approved a second permanent post of Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud).

Between January 2012 and March 2013 60 cases were referred to the Social Housing Fraud Team, 14 properties were recovered due to non-occupation, unlawful sub-letting or unlawful succession.

The Panel evaluated progress made on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

**RESOLVED:**

That the progress made on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014 be noted.

**53. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

**RESOLVED:**

(1) That, in accordance with Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the item of business set out below as it would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12(A) of the Act indicated and the exemption is considered to outweigh the potential public interest in disclosing the information:

<u>Agenda Item No</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Exempt Information Paragraph Number</u>
12	Housing Service Strategy on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud	7

**54. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY ON THE PREVENTION OF SOCIAL HOUSING FRAUD**

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director of Communities (Housing Operations) on the Housing Service Strategy on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud.

This was the 16<sup>th</sup> Housing Service Strategy and would be reviewed on a three yearly basis.

**RECOMMENDED:**

That the Housing Service Strategy on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud be endorsed and recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

**55. INCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

**RESOLVED:**

That the public and press be invited back into the meeting for the remaining items of business.

**56. EFFECT OF WELFARE REFORMS ON THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING SERVICE IN THE FIRST YEAR**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Communities regarding the Effect of Welfare Reforms on the Council's Housing Service.

The Cabinet had previously asked the Panel to monitor progress made with the Council's Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, but this had been delayed until the introduction of the Universal Credit proposals. This year saw the main Welfare Reforms introduced, the Panel Chairman had agreed for this additional report to be considered, as information had only just been collated. The main effects of the Welfare Reforms:

- (a) Removal of the "spare room subsidy;"
- (b) Introduction of the Benefit Cap; and
- (c) Introduction of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme;

There were originally around 390 working age Council tenants who had their housing benefit reduced as a result of the "spare room subsidy." By March 2014 this had reduced by 24% to 295.

**Rent Arrears**

It was reported that rent arrears in the District had reduced over the past 12 months by 27% (£175,000), the rent collection rate had increased from 97.16% to 97.60%.

**The Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan**

The Action Plan had 59 separate actions of which 70% had been completed by March 2014. The remaining actions were dependant on Government decisions.

**RESOLVED:**

That the effect of the Government's Welfare Reforms on the Council's Housing Service in the first year be noted.

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

The Chairman advised that he would give oral reports to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the following:

- (a) Item 6 Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2013/14) – 12 Month Progress Report;
- (b) Item 7 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2014/15;
- (c) Item 8 Review of Housing Management Staffing Levels – Welfare Reforms;

- (d) Item 9 Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report on Complaints Handling in the Housing Service;
- (e) Item 10 Social Housing Fraud Progress Report; and
- (f) Item 12 Housing Service Strategy on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud.

**58. FUTURE MEETINGS**

It was noted that this was the last Panel meeting for the current Council year. The Chairman extended his thanks to the Panel members and officers for their work supporting the Panel over the last year.

The next meeting of the panel would be held on Tuesday 22 July 2014 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1.