

STANDING PANELS

1. HOUSING STANDING PANEL

Introduction by the Chairman:

"To be Inserted" . PHOTO

Councillor Stephen Murray
April 2009

The Housing Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor S Murray (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs R Gadsby (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D Bateman, Mrs R Brookes, J Collier, K Chana, D Dodeja, Mrs J Lea,
Mrs P Richardson, Mrs L Wagland, Mrs J Whitehouse and J Wyatt.

The Lead Officer was Alan Hall, Director of Housing Services. The Panel also appreciated the Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor D Stallan, attending the meetings to help them with their deliberations.

Mrs Molly Carter, the Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation, who attends the meetings as a non-voting co-opted member to provide the views of residents and stakeholders, assisted the Panel.

Terms of Reference

The Housing Standing Panel is tasked to undertake reviews of a number of the Council's public and private sector housing policies and to make recommendations arising from such reviews to the Housing Portfolio Holder or cabinet as appropriate. They also undertake specific projects related to public and private sector housing issues, as directed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Panel scrutinised a number of important issues over the last year, which included:

i) The Choice Based Letting Scheme –(LOGO)

The Panel were kept abreast of the latest developments in the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. Under the Scheme, all vacant social rented properties are advertised to applicants on the Housing Register in a two weekly publication, via website and other media giving details of the property. Applicants apply for a property by expressing an interest in up to a maximum of three properties for which they have an assessed need. At the end of a two weekly cycle, the Council would analyse the expressions of interest and offer each property following a prioritisation and selection process in accordance with its own Allocations Scheme. In general terms, the property would be offered to the applicant in the highest band who had been registered the longest. The process was transparent, with the results being published so other applicants could see how long the successful applicant had been waiting.

As agreed when the Scheme was first introduced, the Panel undertook a review after six months operation. The review found that the scheme had generally been very successful. A survey of both housing applicants that had used the service to express an interest, and those that had not, had been undertaken. One of the outcomes of the survey was that even more publicity needed to be given to the Scheme.

ii) Housing Best Value Performance Indicators and Local Performance Indicators - The Panel reviewed the 2007/08 Housing BVPIs and LPIs out-turn at the end of the 2007/08 financial year. Up to March 2008, all councils had been required to record, monitor and publish Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for a range of council services which included Housing Services. In addition, local authorities often recorded, monitored and published Local Performance Indicators (LPIs) for services, which the local authority considered important. This was a summary of the various indicators performance during 2007/08.

iii) De-designation of properties from Older People's Occupation – This report resulted from some concerns raised by Members about the number of properties formerly designated specifically for occupation by older people on housing estates being let to younger people, the Housing Portfolio Holder had asked for this particular report to be submitted to the Panel for consideration. The Panel reviewed the policy and how they were allocated to younger people. It concluded that the current policy of de-designation should continue.

iv) Ethnic Monitoring – The Panel received a report regarding ethnic monitoring of the Council's Allocations Scheme, and considered the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing Register, compared to the ethnicity of applicants offered Council accommodation. The Panel were advised that a large number of housing applicants did not disclose their ethnicity. However it was evident from the analyses that the ethnic make up of the Housing Register mirrored the allocation of vacancies sufficiently for the Council to be confident that its Allocations Scheme did not racially discriminate.

v) Unauthorised Parking on Housing Estates - The Panel considered a report on unauthorised parking on Housing Estates. Problems had been identified with parking and increased congestion on Housing Estates. Many of the Housing Estates were built during the 1940s and 1950s. With the subsequent growth in car ownership, residents are experiencing severe parking problems on estates where parking both on and off road is at a premium. In addition, due to the introduction of permit parking, many side roads are becoming further congested (possibly by commuters) particularly in the Debden and Epping areas with vehicles being forced onto grassed verges. The Panel considered if the council should take enforcement action and force people to park elsewhere (and therefore increase congestion); they also considered whether the Council should spend more on off street parking schemes and if the current policy of permitting a maximum of 6 metres to be covered over to construct a vehicular cross-over over a grass verge to their front gardens should be raised to 12 metres.

The Panel made a couple of recommendations to the Housing Portfolio Holder, that:
a) additional money be made available in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme from 2009/2010, to fund further off-street parking schemes matched from the General Fund; and

(b) the maximum permitted amount of grass verge to be removed in order to construct a vehicular crossover is extended beyond the current policy of 6 metres to 12 metres.

Following initial proposals relating to the enforcement of unauthorised parking on housing estates, the Panel will be reconsidering this issue.

vi) Review of Epping Forest Careline - The Careline Service offered a 24-hour, 365 days per year, emergency alarm system to older and disabled people living within the District, the service is also offered to other vulnerable groups including victims of domestic violence and young people with disabilities. Users of the service were connected via the telephone network. The Council's own sheltered housing schemes and other designated dwellings for older people on housing estates had a hard wired system installed in their properties with a speech module mounted on the wall and pull cord in each of the rooms. A total of 2,500 properties, representing approximately 3,000 people, were linked to the service. Around 1,250 of the connections are private sector dwellings, which were connected via a dispersal alarm. The user pays an annual rent to the Council for the service. The Council works in partnership with Essex County Council who provided the equipment free of charge to the Council. The Panel endorsed the current system and asked that officers investigate the possibility of this system being extended to cover other things such as monitoring the alarms of other authorities and extending the opening hours of the repairs reporting service.

vii) Parking Enforcement on Housing Estates – There had been an increase in complaints from the public about unauthorised parking. The complaints were from residents unhappy that more vehicles were being parked on grass verges causing damage to the open green spaces. In response, when the Council took enforcement action, other residents had complained about having nowhere to park with cars being displaced into already heavily congested side streets. There had been mixed responses from elected members, some had asked that action be taken to prevent vehicles from parking on the grassed verges, while other members had asked officers not to take action as it displaced vehicles and caused problems inside streets.

A policy had been drafted on the recommendation of officers, on the approach to be taken on unauthorised parking and the Panel reviewed this policy at their October 2008 meeting.

viii) Allocation Scheme Report 2008 - The Review of the Allocations Scheme was legally required of the Council. It set out the procedures for allocating its housing accommodation and making nominations to Registered Social Landlords. Each year the Cabinet considered the Council's Allocations Scheme and reviewed changes following detailed consideration by this Panel.

ix) Tenant's Satisfaction Survey - The District Council are required to carry out a detailed Tenant Satisfaction Survey every two years. The last two surveys had been carried out by Feedback Services Ltd, a company part-owned by the National Housing Federation (NHF), that specialised in conducting surveys and related activities for social landlords. New guidance was incorporated into the Tenant Satisfaction Survey 2008 and, subsequently, a number of the standard questions were re-written. On reviewing the survey the members commented on the dissemination of information to tenants. They suggested that the normal channels of informing tenants should be widened. It was felt that each edition of Housing News

should be posted to tenants in an envelope with a covering letter instead of being simply posted, although this would lead to an additional cost.

x) Housing Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection -
The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and endorsed two updated Housing Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection and Administration.

xi) Draft Housing Strategy – The Panel received the Consultation Draft Housing Strategy 2009-2012. The Council's Housing Strategy was last produced in May 2003 and was assessed at the time as being fully "fit for purpose," by the Government Office for the East of England. The Housing Strategy set out a district's housing plans for the medium term (3-5 years). However, these plans could be formulated with regard to the housing objectives for the long term, which could span 30 years.

The Panel agreed that the Draft Housing Strategy should be subject to a three month consultation period with other organisations interested in housing, during which a one-day Housing Strategy Conference would be held. The Panel nominated three of its members to attend the Conference on the Panel's behalf.

It was agreed that the final version of the Housing Strategy be adopted for a period of three years, with Key Action Plans produced and updated on an annual basis for approval by the Cabinet.