

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 8 JANUARY 2009
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 7.50 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, D Dodeja, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse, J Wyatt and Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants and Leasholders Federation)

Other members present:

Apologies for Absence: D Stallan (Housing Portfolio Holder)

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), C Sobey (Principal Housing Officer (Information)), L Swan (Assistant Director Private Sector & Resources) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

22. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members.

23. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The notes of the last meeting of the Panel, held on 9 October 2009, were agreed.

24. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct.

25. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

(a) The Terms of Reference of the Panel were noted.

(b) Work Programme – The next meeting of the Panel, on 26 March 2009, would include a Housing Information Evening. The Panel members requested that the first part of the meeting should start at 5.30p.m., a sandwich break would follow, and then from 7.30p.m. the Information Evening would start.

26. TENANT'S SATISFACTION SURVEY

Ms C Sobey, the Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Information), presented a report to the Panel regarding the Tenant Satisfaction Survey for 2008. The District Council had previously been required to carry out a detailed Tenant Satisfaction Survey every three years, however, the Government's requirement currently was to undertake a 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. Significantly, local authorities were required to exclude tenants living in sheltered housing accommodation from the survey. As a result, only the Council's general needs tenants were surveyed, whilst the 2006 survey had included all tenants, including those in supported accommodation. It was felt that this would have the effect of lowering the levels of tenant satisfaction. A peer group of nine landlords had been selected by the consultants undertaking the survey, all closely resembling the District Council in terms of area of operation and the number and type of properties managed. Comparison with previous results, and with other landlords, had only been possible where questions were similar to previous surveys.

Approximately 1,500 of all the Council's tenants, 25%, were randomly selected by the National Housing Federation's Feedback Service to be surveyed. The response was 53%, a good response for a postal survey. There was a 95% certainty that the results for all the questions would have been somewhere between 3% less and 3% more than the results from the sample survey, if all tenants were surveyed.

Despite the exclusion of sheltered tenants from the survey, the National Housing Federation had concluded that overall tenant satisfaction with the landlord service the Council provided remained high, and above that reported by most other landlords. The survey had particularly identified satisfaction with the repairs and maintenance service and customer service. Overall satisfaction with the landlord service remained consistently high, at 84% compared to 85% in 2006. 86% of tenants were satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service, which was 12% above the peer group average of 74%. In terms of quality on contact with the Council, as many as 12% more Epping Forest District Council tenants said it was easy to get hold of the right person than the peer landlords. 75% of tenants being satisfied with the final outcome of their contacts. 62% of tenants were satisfied that their views were being taken into account by the landlord. This was an improvement of 14% to the 2006 survey. One area where the statistics had come down, was that 79% of respondents, (down 5% compared to 2006), said that Epping Forest District Council was good at keeping them informed about things that affected them as tenants. Tenants felt that parking was a particular problem. Low numbers of tenants had reported anti-social behaviour.

The members commented on the dissemination of information to tenants. They suggested that the normal channels of informing tenants could 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.

AGREED:

That, the results of the National Housing Federation's (NHF's) report, be reported in the District Council's Members' Bulletin, Housing News, The Forester and a Press Release issued to the media.

RECOMMENDATION:

That, the National Housing Federation's (NHF's) report on the results of the Council's biennial Tenant Satisfaction Survey be passed to the Housing Portfolio Holder and Director of Housing Services without material comment.

27. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGIES ON HOME OWNERSHIP AND RENT COLLECTION

The Housing Resources Manager, Mrs S Lindsay, presented the Housing Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection and Administration to the Panel. The Housing Service Strategies gave more detail than the Council's main Housing Strategy on the various housing services provided. There were 16 Housing Service Strategies, which set out how individual housing services were delivered. The Housing Scrutiny Panel was asked to consider and endorse two updated Housing Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection and Administration.

The Panel asked about the procedures for purchasing a Council property. The officers explained to the Panel that tenants who wished to buy had the process explained to them at the start. There was a Government handbook available to tenants on the Right to Buy which examined some of the potential drawbacks. The Chairman felt that some Council property buyers did not fully understand their responsibilities and the implications following purchase. The officers told the Panel that 24 properties were sold by the District Council last year, in the two previous years it had been 50 and 100 each. The Panel was told that a tenant had to rent for 5 years before being eligible to buy.

The Panel was advised that the District Council's IT system had been taken over by Northgate from Anite, which had recently announced that it would not be providing support beyond 2013. A new system was therefore needed to replace it before this date. Reference was also made to the current transition period of Finance staff implementing a new housing benefit system. The Panel was assured that there were no dangers of evictions taking place because the IT system had not processed new housing benefit payments.

The Panel asked the Director of Housing about the use of bailiffs for the recovery of rent from District Council properties. The Panel were advised that this was a rare occurrence; however, the District Council on occasions did serve distress warrants, with powers to seize goods, although this was usually only used for small debt up to a value of £100.00. This was invariably sufficient to achieve a result from tenants in arrears. Officers went to great lengths to avoid evictions; it was better discussing rent problems with tenants.

RECOMMENDATION:

That, the Housing Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection and Administration, be passed to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption without any material comments.

28. DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY

The Director of Housing, Mr A Hall, presented the Consultation Draft Housing Strategy 2009-2012 to the Panel. 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. There was no current requirement for local authorities to produce their own Housing Strategies. However, in July 2008, the Government had made reference to the future of housing strategies.

A 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 London Commuter Belt (LCB) Housing Sub Region, within which the District sits, was one of the largest sub regions in the country, comprising 15 local authorities in Essex and Hertfordshire. The local authorities and Registered Social Landlords within the Sub Region had previously worked in partnership producing a sub-regional Housing Strategy, which formed part of the Regional Housing Strategy.

It was proposed 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.

In view of the strategic importance of the Housing Strategy, the document had been produced as a Consultation Draft. It was proposed that a major consultation exercise be undertaken with the Council's partners, key stakeholders and the public over a three-month period in early 2009. All responses received from the consultation exercise would then be considered, and changes felt appropriate by the Housing Portfolio Holder would then be made for the final version. This would be submitted to the Cabinet for recommendation to, and adoption by, the full Council, in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

Having regard to best practice set out in the Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) for the inspection of local housing strategies, it was proposed that, during the consultation period, a one-day conference be held on the proposals within the Consultation Draft, to which all the consultees would be invited. Presentations would be given on the key issues and proposals, in order to fully brief consultees and inform their responses. Details of the Consultation Draft would also be publicised in the local press, with an invitation for interested members of the public to obtain a copy of the Consultation Draft and provide their comments. A copy of the document was being published on the Council's website.

AGREED:

That, the Housing Portfolio Holder, Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel, and Councillors Mrs R Gadsby, Mrs R Brookes and Mrs J Whitehouse, to attend the Housing Strategy Conference.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (a) That, the Panel considers the Housing Strategy 2009-2012 (Consultation Draft) and endorses it for consultation with key partners, stakeholders and the public;
- (b) That, a Consultation Exercise be undertaken on the Consultation Draft, including a one-day Housing Strategy Conference;
- (c) That, appropriate comments received through the Consultation Exercise, be incorporated within the final version of the Housing Strategy;
- (d) That, the final version of the Housing Strategy be submitted to the Cabinet, with a recommendation to the full Council, that it be formally adopted;
- (e) That, subsequent annual Key Action Plans be submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet;

(f) That, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considers progress with the Key Action Plan, in accordance with its Terms of Reference, six months following its adoption.

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

It was reported that there were no reports going to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

30. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Panel was noted as 26 March 2009.