

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel **Date:** Tuesday, 15 December 2009

Place: Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 5.30 - 7.55 pm

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, D Dodeja, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs P Richardson and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other Councillors: Mrs C Pond and D Stallan

Apologies: K Chana, Mrs J Lea and J Wyatt

Officers Present: A Hall (Director of Housing), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Operations)), P Pledger (Assistant Director (Property and Resources)), P Maddock (Assistant Director (Accountancy)) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

Also in attendance: Mrs J Figgins and Ms N Price (Petitioners invited to the meeting regarding Fire Safety Policy in Council blocks)

15. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members at the meeting.

16. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor Mrs P Richardson, declared a personal interest in Item 6 of the agenda – Fire Safety Risk Assessment in Blocks of Flats, because she had previous knowledge of the residents' petition, put before the panel. The Councillor indicated that her interest was not prejudicial and she would stay in the meeting for the discussion.

17. NOTES FROM THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the meeting held on 30 July 2009 be agreed.

18. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

1. The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.
2. Work Programme (The following was noted)
 - **Item 17 Council response to the TSA's Consultation Paper on its new Regulatory Framework**

Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, suggested this item should be considered by the Panel in January 2010 and would be accompanied by a short presentation as well, explaining short notice inspections.

- **Item 18 Annual Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme**

This item would have to be deferred until March 2010, as the guidance had not yet been received.

19. FIRE SAFETY RISK ASSESSMENT IN BLOCKS OF FLATS

The Panel received a report from Mr P Pledger, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding Fire Safety in Common Parts of Blocks of Flats. The District Council's Housing Directorate had received a petition from 84 residents of Torrington Drive, Loughton, regarding the Council's Fire Safety Policy in Blocks of Flats.

The members were informed about the current legislative situation concerning fire safety. The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 was introduced in October 2006 by the Government, putting the onus on residents with some level of control in premises, to take reasonable steps reducing the risk from fire and making sure people could safely escape in case of fire. It did not apply to private homes, including individual flats in a block or house.

In complying with the order, the Council were required to:

- Carry out a fire risk assessment of each block of flats identifying possible danger and risks;
- Consider at-risk groups;
- Reduce of fire risk, as far as possible and make provision for general fire precautions;
- Take other measures, ensuring there was protection for flammable or explosive materials were used;
- Create a plan dealing with any emergency; and
- Review findings when necessary.

A specialist company was appointed by the Council to undertake fire risk assessments of the complete blocks (annually). Fire risk assessments existed for all Council buildings which fell into the legislation, and were next due for review in April 2010. The assessments ensured that everyone on the premises could escape safely if there was a fire. Building Regulations stated that common stairs needed a "satisfactory standard of fire protection" and protected stairways needed to be relatively free of potential sources of fire.

In conjunction with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, the Council had issued an information leaflet for tenants on fire safety, which was delivered to every Council property. Letters were also sent to residents living in blocks of flats explaining that the Council would be carrying out additional inspections of all blocks, ensuring that personal belongings such as door mats, carpets, postal plants, bikes, scooters, chairs and tables, pushchairs, gates etc were not obstructing the communal areas or causing a potential hazard.

It was this action which led to the Council receiving a petition signed by 84 residents of Torrington Drive, Loughton, objecting "to the extreme measures that Epping Forest District Council intend to implement relating to alleged fire safety concerning personal belongings in communal areas." In response the District Council had consulted the Workplace Fire Safety Officer at Essex Fire and Rescue on the dangers and risks in flat blocks. He confirmed that all common parts of flat blocks which formed a means of escape, should be "sterile." The officer had suggested that the following be allowed:

- (a) Where pictures were hung on the wall, they did not contain glass in the frame;
- (b) Where mats were placed outside front doors, these were rubber backed (non-slip) and had a chamfered edge all around;
- (c) Curtains at windows should be flame retardant; and
- (d) Any plant pots should be stored in recesses away from any means of escape routes and not on window sills.

The lead petitioner, Mrs J Figgins, and another petitioner, Ms Nicola Price, had been invited to the Panel to give feedback on their feelings about the situation. Mrs J Figgins said that she felt the District Council's fire safety letter had been stern and dictatorial. Although it was appreciated that rugs, bikes and pushchairs could be a nuisance, there was a particular problem with bare floor surfaces in the flats which could get wet and were a hazard. She felt carpets provided by residents were, in this case, a safer option. It was also felt important for the flats to look homely with pictures etc hanging from the walls.

It was suggested that smoke alarms should be fitted to all Council blocks, although it was noted that under the tenancy agreement, smoke alarms were the responsibility of the tenants. The existing fire regulations were about communal areas and not private dwellings.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the Council note the petition received from 84 residents of Torrington Drive;
2. That the Housing Portfolio Holder be recommended to continue to enforce the removal of personal belongings and any other items stored in common parts of flats, with the exception of the following concessions as put forward by the workplace Fire Safety Officer of the Essex Fire and Rescue Services;
 - (a) Pictures hung on the wall, provided that they do not contain glass in the frame;
 - (b) Mats placed outside front doors, provided that these are rubber backed (non slip) and have a chamfered edge all around;
 - (c) Curtains at windows that are flame retardant;
 - (d) Non-flammable items which are aesthetically pleasing (eg plant pots) stored in recesses away from any means of escape routes, and not on window sills;

3. That letters be sent to all tenants and leaseholders in the blocks advising them of these concessions after the Portfolio Holder has made his decision; and
4. That the Housing Portfolio Holder be asked to consider allowing tenants to provide fire retardant fitted carpets in flat blocks if such material exists.

20. INCREASING AFFORDABLE HOUSING - REPORT OF THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING SUB GROUP

The Panel received a report from Councillor Mrs R Brookes regarding the Affordable Housing Sub-Groups' proposals on Ways to Increase the Amount of Affordable Housing within the District and the Possibility of the Council Re-Commencing a Social House-Building Programme.

At its meeting in July 2009 the Panel had agreed to set up an Affordable Housing Sub-Group to consider ways of increasing the amount of affordable housing provided in the District. The Sub-Group met on the 26 November 2009 and considered ways in which the Council could increase the amount of affordable housing within the District and the possibility of the Council re-commencing a social-house building programme.

The Panel considered a report and recommendations of the Sub-Group. It was suggested that the report was submitted to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 1 February 2010.

The report identified a problem relating to the Council's Capital Financing Requirement that made a programme of new Council house-building financially unviable at present, due to the detrimental effect it would have on the Council's General Fund.

The report recommended that the Council writes to the Minister of State for Housing and the Chief Executive of the Local Government Association asking them to assist the Council to overcome the identified problem. It was suggested that the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Assistant Director of Finance and ICT, draft a letter to the Minister and LGA for approval by the Cabinet at the same meeting.

The following recommendations were made to the Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) That the report and recommendations of the Affordable Housing Sub-Group, on ways to increase the amount of affordable housing within the District and the possibility of the Council re-commencing a social house-building programme, be supported and endorsed in full;
- (2) That the report be presented by the Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel to the Cabinet at its meeting on 1 February 2010;
- (3) That the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Assistant Director of Finance and ICT (Accountancy), submit to the Cabinet for approval, a draft letter to the Minister of State for Housing and the Chief Executive of the Local Government Association (LGA) asking them if they could assist the Council to overcome the identified problem relating to the Council's Capital Financing Requirement, that currently makes a programme

of new Council house-building financially unviable, due to the detrimental effect it would have on the Council's General Fund; and

(4) That the notes from the Sub-Group meeting of 26 November 2009 be agreed by those members of the group.

21. HOUSING SERVICE STANDARDS

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding Housing Service Standards 2009 and Housing Charter.

In 2007 the Housing Portfolio Holder had agreed a range of Housing Service Standards covering all of the Housing Directorate's main areas of activity. An updated Housing Charter was also agreed, which set out the Council's approach and ethos to the delivery of its housing service to customers.

The Director of Housing, informed the Panel about the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). This was a new organisation that took over the regulatory housing functions of the former Housing Corporation. From April 2010, local authorities would be regulated by the TSA.

There were two changes proposed for the Housing Charter, the first was an additional commitment, to comply with the accreditation requirements of the Telecare Services Association, the second was a revised wording of the commitment relating to equalities, reflecting the requirements and coverage of the Equalities Bill currently being passed through Parliament.

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had been consulted regarding the performance against the standards and the proposed changes and additions. They had suggested that Service Standard HM8's definition should be re-worded, making it clear that officers would make every effort to meet with tenants.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the draft Decision by Portfolio Holder for the Housing Service Standards 2009 and Housing Charter be supported for recommendation.

22. HOUSING DIRECTORATE STRATEGIES

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding three Housing Directorate Strategies.

The Housing Directorate Strategies were produced 10 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework, and had since been updated. There were 17 strategies which assisted in achieving the Charter Mark award for customer service excellence.

The Panel considered three updated Housing Directorate Strategies on Equality and Diversity, Allocations and Housing Advice. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had been consulted and supported the strategies.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housing Directorate Strategies on Equality and Diversity, Allocations and Housing Advice be endorsed to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

23. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2009/10 - 6 MONTH PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2009/10 (Key Action Plan) – Progress Report.

In March 2009, the Council's latest Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan; (2009/10) was produced, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan. It set out the Council's objectives, strategies and plans as landlord, in relation to the management and maintenance of its own housing stock.

An important section of the HRA Business Plan was the Key Action Plan, the Plan was monitored via a six month progress report. It was noted that a number of responsive repair tasks within the Key Action Plan, were not yet completed, since they were dependant on the outcome of the Repair Refresh Programme.

The Panel was advised that the HRA Business Plan for 2010/11 would be considered at the Panel's meeting in March 2010.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Six Month Progress Report for the Key Action Plan, contained within the HRA Business Plan 2009/10, be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

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

The Chairman of the Panel, Councillor S Murray, would make a verbal report to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

25. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Panel would be held on Thursday 21 January 2010 at 7.00p.m. and then on Thursday 25 March 2010 at 7.00p.m.

CHAIRMAN