

STANDING PANELS

1. HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL

The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

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

The Lead Officer was Alan Hall, Director of Housing. 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, took part in Panel discussions.

Terms of Reference

The Housing Scrutiny 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, Overview and Scrutiny Committee 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) In Touch Support - 'Supporting People' was a major Government initiative on policy and funding for housing related support services which started in April 2003. These services included housing related support delivered to vulnerable tenants and applicants living in the community or in temporary accommodation. Gloria Osbourne from the 'In Touch Support' organisation and Jo Grainger from Essex County's 'Supporting People' team came to the July meeting to inform and update Panel on what 'in touch support' did.

Ms Osbourne told the Panel that 'In Touch' was a registered charity and was part of the Hyde Group (a major Registered Social Landlord). 'In Touch' currently provided support services across the Southern Home Counties, London and the East of England. They are entirely funded by the Essex Supporting People Team but have occasional access to grants from other charities.

(ii) Older People's Strategic Review - Housing related support was funded through 'Supporting People'. That team had just undertaken a consultation exercise in which the following changes to the way the Scheme Manager Service was provided was recommended:

- That the Scheme Manager Service be provided by the 'Hub and Spoke' model, with the sheltered scheme being the hub and the support reaching out to older people in the community, like the spokes of a wheel;
- That the service be provided on a tenure neutral basis;

- That all service users will be assessed through the existing floating support gateway.

The 'Hub and Spoke' was the preferred model, although this was a service the Council had been operating for some years. Over 20 years ago it was recognised that Scheme Managers has some spare capacity and were therefore asked to visit outside properties.

(iii) Draft Homelessness Strategy - The Council were required to review and publish their Homelessness Strategy on at least a five year basis; however Members had wanted it reviewed every three years to keep it up to date. The draft Homelessness Strategy had been sent out to all Town and Parish Councils and all organisations with an interest in homelessness seeking their comments. The Scrutiny Panel recommended the draft Homelessness Strategy to the Housing Portfolio Holder for approval. Six months later, the Scrutiny Panel formally considered a progress report on each of the identified actions within the Homelessness Strategy's Key Action Plan.

(iv) Ethnic Monitoring - There was a requirement for an annual review of the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing register, compared with the ethnicity of those allocated accommodation. The review was to identify whether or not there were any indications to suggest the Council may be discriminating against any one ethnic group.

The statistics confirmed that the ethnicity of the applicant's allocated accommodation is similar to those of different ethnic groups on the housing register. Also, when compared, there appeared to be no significant disparity between the ethnicity of applicants in need of sheltered accommodation in the District and those allocated sheltered accommodation.

It was evident from the analyses shown in the report that the ethnic make up of the Housing Register mirrored the allocation of the vacancies sufficiently for the Council to be confident that its Allocations Scheme does not racially discriminate, either directly or indirectly.

(v) Fire Safety Risk Assessments in 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 Panel was 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.

A specialist company was appointed by the Council to undertake fire risk assessments of large establishments (e.g. sheltered housing schemes), and housing technical officers has undertaken assessment of smaller blocks on estates. 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.

Regarding the petition, the lead petitioners were invited to the Scrutiny Panel meeting to present their views, which the Panel took account of when making its

recommendations to the Housing Portfolio Holder (which recommended a change in approach).

(vi) Review of the Scope of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel (HARP) – a report was received about whether the Scrutiny Panel would like to be consulted on a report that the Director of Housing would be submitting to the Constitution and Member Services Scrutiny Panel about the scope of the housing appeals and reviews undertaken by the HARP, in accordance with its Terms of Reference, and whether or not the scope is too wide. Concern had been expressed by some members of the HARP about the cost and the member and officer time involved about relatively minor matters.

The Scrutiny Panel concluded that it would like to be consulted on the report, prior to consideration by the Constitution and Member Services Scrutiny Panel.

Case Study: Affordable Housing Sub-group

During the July 2009 meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel, members had requested that an Affordable Housing Sub-Group should be established investigating the shortage of affordable housing within the District. The Sub-Group was also tasked with considering the possibilities of the District Council re-commencing a social house-building programme.

The Sub-Group met in November 2009, it comprised five Panel members. The Group noted that average property prices in the District were around 11 times the average earnings for the District; they also noted the high number of expressions of interest made by housing applicant for vacancies properties through Home Options Choice Based Lettings. It was felt that at a time of low interest rates, more affordable housing in the form of social rented housing and intermediate housing should be provided by the Council.

The Sub-Group identified that increasing the amount of affordable housing in the District was constrained by the provision of available land, the provision of grant and member's priorities. The Sub-Group completed a report for the Panel which:

- (a) suggested some initiatives that the Council could undertake to increase the amount of affordable housing provided within the District;
- (b) following a detailed analysis of the issues, recommended that, in principle, the Council should re-commence a programme of council house building; however
- (c) identified a problem relating to the Council's Capital Financing requirement which 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.

In relation to (b) and (c), the report recommended that the Council writes to the Minister of State for Housing and the Chief Executive of the Local Government Association (LGA) asking for assistance in overcoming this particular problem.

The Scrutiny Panel endorsed all of the Sub Group's proposals, which were then presented to the Cabinet, which were also agreed by the Cabinet