

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 25 MARCH 2010
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.05 - 9.40 PM**

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

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: Mrs J Lea and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Officers Present A Hall (Director of Housing), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Operations)) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

37. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that there were no substitute members present.

38. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

39. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes from the last meeting of the panel be agreed.

40. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel's Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted.

41. DEFERMENT OF THE REVIEW OF THE ALLOCATIONS SCHEME

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, requesting deferment of the annual report regarding the Review of the Allocations Scheme.

At its meeting on 21 January 2010 members were advised that a delay was required in considering the Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme for 2010. The Government's new statutory guidance on Social Housing Allocations for Local Authorities in England was not received until late January 2010. In order to comply with the requirements of the guidance a number of actions needed consideration which would need some months to complete. Therefore the Panel was asked to defer the review until its meeting on 29 July 2010. It was noted that the Council was not required to review the scheme on an annual basis.

RESOLVED:

That the reasons for the deferment of the Annual Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme to July 2010 be noted.

42. HOMELESSNESS PRESENTATION

Following a suggestion from the Housing Portfolio Holder and Councillor Mrs L Wagland, the Panel was asked if it would find it useful to receive a presentation on the approach the Housing Directorate took in respect of dealing with cases involving domestic violence. It was suggested that this could be expanded to include the Directorate's overall approach to homelessness prevention, including the approach taken on domestic violence. Mr R Wallace, Housing Options Manager, would make the presentation.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel receives a presentation from the Housing Options Manager at its meeting on 29 July 2010 regarding "The Council's Approach to Homelessness Prevention" including initiatives on dealing with domestic violence; and

(2) That an invite be extended to all District Council members to attend the presentation.

43. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2009 - 10 SIX 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. The Business Plan 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. It was noted that a number of tasks included within the Key Action Plan relating to responsive repairs had not yet been completed since they were included as part of the "Repairs Refresh Programme," involving the appointment of a private repairs management company to manage the response repairs service which had been agreed by the Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

That the second Six Month Progress Report for the Key Action Plan, contained within the HRA Business Plan 2009/10, be noted.

44. HOUSEMARK BENCHMARKING REPORT ON VALUE FOR MONEY

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the HouseMark Benchmarking Report on Value for Money of Housing Services (2008/09).

It was noted that the Housing Directorate placed great importance on benchmarking its housing performance and costs against other housing providers. It benchmarked in two ways.

Annual Value for Money Review

Each year, the Council compared its performance and costs for all of its main service areas with other groups of local authorities, using the Audit Commission's VFM Profile Tool. The Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel received a Review Report which set out:

- The Council's ranking, for each performance or cost indicator, compared to the other councils
- Details of the best performing authority
- A commentary on each performance and cost indicator including proposed actions improving performance or reducing costs.

Housemark

The Housing Directorate had been a member of "Housemark" for a number of years. Housemark was a:

- National housing benchmarking organisation
- It enabled housing to submit detailed information on their performance and costs and compared these to other housing organisations nationally.
- HouseMark enabled member organisations to compare themselves with user-defined data sets.
- Housemark had produced a detailed Benchmarking Report on the Council's costs and performance for 2008/09 compared to other stock – retaining local authorities. It also produced a VFM Summary, which had been provided to the Panel. This had established that, generally, the District Council performed extremely well compared with other housing organisations.

RESOLVED:

That the HouseMark Benchmarking Report on Value for Money of Housing Services 2008/09 be noted.

45. HRA BUSINESS PLAN 2010-11 REPORT

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2010 – 2011. The Government required all local authorities to produce annual Business Plans for their Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs). The intention was to ensure that local authority housing was used and maintained to maximum effect. The HRA Business Plan dealt with the council's plans and performance for the delivery and quality of its housing services to tenants.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2010/11, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan 2010/11, be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption.

46. HOME OPTION CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME - PROGRESS REPORT

The Panel received the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Progress Report.

At its meeting on 21 January 2010, the Panel considered the updated Housing Service Strategy on Allocations. The Panel had requested a progress report on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme, including all of the provisions being made to support vulnerable applicants.

The Choice Based Lettings Scheme was introduced in November 2007 which met the requirements of Government that such a scheme should be in place by 2010. The scheme was administered by the external Choice Based Lettings agency Locata Housing Services (LHS).

The Panel were advised that in the period 16 January 2009 to 22 January 2010:

- 477 properties had been allocated
- 607 advertisements were placed in the Free Sheets
- 42,374 expressions of interest were made.
- On average there were around 70 expressions of interest each time a property was advertised.
- Almost 90% of applicants expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet.

The Council was a member of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium (HEHOC) which jointly operated the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. A number of improvements had been identified and were being considered, including:

- Adding a consultation module to the Home Option Website to seek the views of users on the scheme.
- Producing a single housing application form for all HEHOC member authorities to streamline the application process.
- Offering the service to private sector landlords which would bring additional income and increase the number of housing options.
- On-line housing application registration.
- The charging of partner Registered Social Landlords for including their properties on the scheme.

RESOLVED:

That the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme and the Housing Activity Report for the period January 2009 to January 2010 be noted.

47. OPTIONS FOR CROSS BOUNDARY ALLOCATIONS

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding Options for Cross-Boundary Allocations.

The Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium (HEHOC) were set up in 2005, to develop a joint Choice Based Lettings Scheme (CBL). There were six local authority partners within the Consortium. One of the objectives of the Regional Housing Strategy for the East of England was to provide mixed communities and widen choice.

The agency, Locata Housing Services (LHS), was the largest Choice Based Lettings agency in the UK and administered the HEHOC HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme. LHS advised that a number of the Consortia they administered operated some form of cross-boundary working. The allocations policies used were based around one of the following five models:

Model One – Retention of own Allocations Scheme

This was the model currently used by HEHOC, with each authority retaining their own Allocations Schemes with no cross-boundary working. However, as applicants only had priority in terms of local connection in their own area, they had much lower priority for properties advertised by their neighbouring authorities.

Model Two – Retention of Own Allocations Scheme with an Over-Arching Sub-Regional Policy

Under this model, although each authority would retain its own Allocations Scheme locally, around 5 – 10% of vacant properties selected randomly would be extracted by LHS from each HEHOC member authority for cross-boundary “bidding.” These vacancies, during each two-weekly cycle, would be allocated under a separate, over-arching, Sub Regional Allocations Policy. Banding priority would be predominantly based upon need, with those applicants who did not have local connection having less priority within each band.

Model Three – Retention of own Allocations Scheme allowing Cross-Border allocations for mobility reasons

This model was a variation of Model Two, but without the need for an over-arching policy. A random 5 – 10% of all vacancies would be made available to applicants in other local authority areas within the Consortium’s area, based on mobility need.

Model Four – Voluntary Sub-regional Policy for Difficult to Let Properties

With this model, all HEHOC members would pool all difficult-to-let properties and advertise them as being available to all applicants across the partner authorities, possibly subject to applicants being registered with the authority where the vacancy existed. Although this would demonstrate partnership working, it would not increase the housing chances of an applicant outside of an authority’s area, as they would already be placed in a lower band due to not having a local connection.

Model Five – Common Assessment Policy

Under a Common Assessment Policy, all HEHOC members would allocate accommodation across all areas under one Allocations Scheme. To make this work, all partners would need to work to either a banding or points based system. If a banding system was agreed, then local connection would give greater priority within each band rather than applicants being placed in the lowest band.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the options for cross-boundary allocations within the areas of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium, in accordance with the expectations of the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) be noted; and

(2) That the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium be advised that, although the Council would wish to retain its own Housing Allocations Scheme (Model One), it would be prepared to discuss further the possibility of the Council allowing a small number of cross-border allocations for mobility reasons (Model Three) and would be happy to make cross-border allocations of difficult-to-let properties.

48. CONSULTATION ON THE REVIEW OF THE SCOPE OF THE HOUSING APPEALS AND REVIEW PANEL

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding consultation with the Scrutiny Panel on the Review of the Scope of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel.

At its last meeting, on the invitation of the Chairman of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel, the Panel considered whether or not it wished to be consulted on the report and recommendations of the Director of Housing to the Constitution and Member Services Scrutiny Panel, reviewing the scope of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel. The Housing Scrutiny Panel had agreed that it would like to be consulted.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the Scrutiny Panel generally supports the recommendations within the report on Consultation on the Review of the Scope of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel; and

(2) That the Director of Housing be asked to provide to the Constitution and Member Services Standing Scrutiny Panel further details of the five appeals relating to vehicular crossovers, and the three appeals relating to allocation bandings, considered by the Housing Appeals and Review Panel over the previous two years.

49. HOUSING STRATEGY 2009-2012: 6 MONTH PROGRESS REPORT ON KEY ACTION PLAN

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding Housing Strategy 2009-2010: 6 Month Progress Report on Key Action Plan.

At its meeting in September 2009, the Council's Cabinet adopted the Housing Strategy 2009-2012. This followed the Housing Scrutiny Panel considering in detail and approving for consultation an earlier "Consultation Draft" Housing Strategy, and a major consultation exercise being undertaken with the Council's partners, key stakeholders and the public over a three month period. The consultation exercise included a one-day Housing Strategy Conference, to which all the consultees were invited.

The Cabinet agreed that progress with the Key Action Plan should be monitored on a 6-monthly basis by the Housing Scrutiny Panel. When adopting the Housing Strategy, the Cabinet also agreed that Key Action Plans should be produced and updated on an annual basis for approval by the Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

That the 6-Month Progress Report on the Key Action Plan 2009/10, contained within the Housing Strategy 2009-2012, be noted.

50. DRAFT REGULATORY FRAMEWORK ACTION PLAN

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding the Draft Regulatory Framework Action Plan.

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) came into effect in December 2008 and replaced the regulatory functions for housing associations, formerly undertaken by the Housing Corporation. From April 2010, the TSA would also regulate local authority housing and would be seeking to generally raise the standard of services to tenants. At its meeting on 21 January 2010, the Panel had received a detailed presentation on the TSA's proposed Regulatory Framework and Short Notice Inspections. The Panel was advised that the Housing Directorate already had a range of initiatives in place and was reasonably preparing itself for any inspection.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the draft Regulatory Framework Action Plan be agreed; and
- (2) That the draft Regulatory Framework Action Plan be monitored by the Housing Scrutiny Panel on a six-monthly basis and be added to the Panel's Work Programme.

51. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGY ON HARASSMENT

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Harassment.

The Housing Directorate's Service Strategies were originally produced around 12 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework, and had since been updated. In total, 17 Housing Service Strategies had been produced and updated to date.

The strategies were produced to a common format that set out how individual housing services would be delivered. They had assisted Housing Services in achieving the Charter Mark Award for Customer Service Excellence and had been important to meeting the minimum requirement for Supporting People funding under the condition of the contract.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategy on Harassment be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

52. TENANT PARTICIPATION PROGRESS 2009

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding Tenant Participation Progress 2009.

At the Tenant Participation Progress (Officer) Meeting held on 23 October 2007 and discussions with the Director of Housing, it was agreed to provide an annual tenant participation update to the Housing Scrutiny Panel. The Housing Services Strategy

on Tenant Participation set out the Council's approach to tenant participation and how the service would be delivered.

Consultation of 1,563 general needs tenants through the 2008 Tenant Satisfaction Survey showed that 62% of respondents were satisfied that their views were being taken into account by their landlord (EFDC) and only 7% were dissatisfied.

Each of the resident's associations had signed a Local Tenant Participation Agreement with the Council which set out the approach each group and the Council would adopt in relation to tenant participation.

Special Events

- During 2009 a Community Consultation Day was held in Loughton (Debden). It was planned to hold similar events in other parts of the District during 2010.
- A Mystery Shopping Exercise took place during November/December 2009, it was planned to set up a Mystery Shopping Group from EFDC's tenants and leaseholders in 2010.

New Initiatives

- It was planned to introduce Local Area Agreements, particularly in areas where current resident's groups existed.
- The Tenant Participation Officer was working with the East of England Resident Involvement Group, sharing good practice and comparing methods for involvement.
- A Repairs and Maintenance Customer Focus Group was being set up to look at ways of improving the current repairs service provided to tenants and leaseholders.
- A Tenant Reading Group was being set up to "Tenant Approve" new literature created by the Housing Directorate.
- A focus group was being set up looking at the Housing Allocations Scheme.
- A Tenant Participation Impact Assessment was being written to record and measure the impact of tenant participation in the District.
- Officers were working with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation in agreeing a number of service standards required by the Tenant Services Authority's New Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England.

Diversity

- The Government had identified a number of "Hard to Reach" groups, e.g. rural communities, younger people, minority groups and families, as part of its key lines of enquiry.
- The Epping Forest Sheltered Forum represented EFDC tenants living in sheltered or group dwelling schemes and properties covered by a scheme manager.
- The Epping Forest Rural Tenants Forum was set up in November 2006 and continued to expand.

Administration and Management of Tenant Participation

- The Tenant Participation Officer held monthly progress meetings with the Housing Resources Manager and Principal Housing Officer and quarterly progress meetings with the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations).
- The Tenant Participation Officer maintained an Action Plan which monitored progress of all aspects of tenant participation.

RESOLVED:

That the progress made on the development of tenant participation during the period 1 January 2009 – 31 December 2009 be noted.

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

The Chairman indicated that verbal reports would be given at the forthcoming meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

54. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next programmed meeting of the Panel was taking place on Thursday 29 July 2010 at 5.30p.m.

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