

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel **Date:** Tuesday, 19 July 2011

Place: Combined Committee Rooms 1 & 2 **Time:** 5.30 - 8.30 pm
- Civic Offices

Members Present: Councillors S Murray (Chairman), Ms R Brookes, K Chana, Mrs A Grigg, Ms J Hart, D Stallan and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other Councillors: Councillors Mrs M McEwen and D Wixley

Apologies: Mrs S Jones and Mrs M Carter

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

Also in attendance: M Gammack (Mears)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

In addition to the apologies noted above, Councillor R Barrett had indicated his intention of attending this meeting, but had given his apologies shortly before the meeting. Although Councillor R Barrett was not a member of this Panel his apologies were noted.

2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitute members at the meeting.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

4. NOTES OF THE LAST PANEL MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 24 March 2011 be agreed.

5. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

- (1) The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.
- (2) The following was noted:
 - (a) Item 9 Feed-In Tariff Scheme for Council Housing Stock

A report would not be submitted in July 2011 but in October 2011.

- (b) Item 11 Annual Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme

It was advised that the Decentralisation and Localism Bill would bring in major legislative changes to housing allocations policy.

RESOLVED:

That no review or changes to the Housing allocations Scheme be undertaken in 2011/12, and that a major review of the Housing Allocations Scheme be next undertaken around October 2012, to take account of legislative changes after the enactment of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill.

- (c) Item 16 Approach to Future Council House – Building Programme

It was advised that the Cabinet had agreed in principle to the introduction of a modest Council House Building Programme.

There would be an additional item for the Panel's Work Programme regarding smoke detectors in communal parts of flat blocks and within Council properties.

6. PRESENTATION BY MEARS ON PROPOSED APPROACH TO REPAIRS MANAGEMENT CONTRACT

The Panel received a presentation from Mr P Pledger, Assistant Director of Housing, and Mr M Gammack from Mears regarding the Proposed Approach to the Repairs Management Contract.

Mr P Pledger began by reminding members of the situation in March 2011 when the District Council had agreed to enter into a contract with Mears. He spoke of the consultation and contract procedures followed. Mr M Gammack took over the presentation, his main points were as follows:

- (1) Offered one to one discussions with all Housing Repairs staff
- (2) Building trust with staff and the Council;
- (3) Re-assured staff about no proposed staff cuts;
- (4) Currently the service had too much paper systems and only limited IT systems;
- (5) Impressed by staff;
- (6) The Council did not have purchasing power;
- (7) 7 pieces of paper to deliver a single repair;
- (8) Proposed new IT system and hand held devices which enter repair appointment, proposal to send text message to tenants and link to store replenishment system; and
- (9) Need to improve performance on achieving target times for Repairs staff

Following the presentation, members asked Mr M Gammack questions.

- (a) What was the fee impact from Mears on the District Council?

Response: The budget for the contract was already allocated. Much of the ongoing contract cost would be met from the staff saving in not-re-appointing a new Housing repairs Manager, following the retirement of the previous post-holder.

- (b) The Council already had been a Handy Person Scheme, was this affected?

Response: No. This work was provided by a small contractor for non-Council tenants. Tenants were encouraged to carry out their own repairs.

It was estimated that this new contract could make up to 30% savings on materials in some cases.

The members thanked Mr M Gammack for his attendance and presentation.

RESOLVED:

That the Presentation by Mr M Gammack of Mears regarding the Proposed Approach to the Repairs Management Contract be noted.

7. HOUSING PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - 2010/11 OUT-TURN (TENANT - SELECTED & KPIS)

The Panel received a report regarding Housing Performance Indicators (Tenant-Selected and KPIs) Out-Turn 2010/11 from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

The Council had adopted a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which included 9 KPIs relating to the Housing Service. In addition, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had selected 21 "Tenants-Selected Indicators," as being areas of performance considered particularly important to tenants.

The Out-Turn Report for these Housing Performance Indicators in 2010/11 showed that 18 (82%) of the 22 Housing Performance Indicators with targets had been achieved.

Three of the four indicators that were not achieved related to the percentage of repairs completed within target times. It was anticipated that this performance would improve significantly in 2011/12, now that Mears had been appointed as the Council's new Repairs Management Contractor. Through the contract, Mears had been set the following targets which were far more challenging than both the Council's current targets and the Council's current performance – whilst maintaining the current high levels (98%) of tenant satisfaction:

- (1) Emergency Repairs: 99% within 4 hours (compared to 99% within 24 hours)
- (2) Urgent Repairs: 98% within 3 working days (compared to 95% within 5 working days)
- (3) Routine Repairs: 98% within 2 weeks (compared to 95% within 6 weeks)

The fourth performance indicator that did not achieve the target, was in respect of the average overall void period. The following was noted:

- (a) The target was only missed by 1 day;

(b) The target time was reduced from 40 days to 30 days at the beginning of year; and

(c) The performance of 31 days was still an improvement on the previous year's performance of 33 days.

RESOLVED:

That the District Council's performance in 2010/11 in relation to the Housing Performance Indicators, comprising the Tenant-Selected and Key performance Indicators be noted.

8. PERFORMANCE AGAINST HOUSING SERVICE STANDARDS IN 2010/11 AND REVIEW

The Panel received a report regarding Performance Against Housing Service Standards in 2010/11 and Review from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing.

Since 2007, following consultation with the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, a range of Housing Service Standards covering all of the Directorate's main areas of activity were formulated. 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. It was also agreed that the Directorate's performance against the Housing Service Standards, would be considered annually.

Since that time, performance against the Housing Service Standards had been reported to this Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation annually.

The Housing Service Standards and Housing Charter formed two of the three components of the Council's "Local Offer" to tenants, as required by the Tenant Services Authority's Regulatory Framework for Housing. The other component was an Annual Tenant – Agreed Action Plan.

Performance against the Housing Service Standards in 2010/11

It was emphasised that it was not possible to measure performance against every Service Standard. In a number of cases, there was nothing that could be measured, since the Standard was a "statement of intent." In other cases, whilst performance could potentially be measured, it was considered that the time and resources that would be required to properly record and monitor performance was not warranted.

Proposed Changes and New Service Standards

The Director of Housing had reviewed the Housing Service Standards and Housing Charter, having regard to performance in 2010/11, and changes in legislation and Council policy. As a result of this review, no changes were proposed this year. This was the first year that no changes had been recommended.

RESOLVED:

(1) That performance against the previously-agreed Housing Service Standards in 2010/11 be noted; and

(2) That no changes to either the Housing Service Standards or the Housing Charter be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder this year.

9. HOUSEMARK BENCHMARKING REPORT OF HOUSING SERVICES

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the HouseMark Benchmarking Report on Value for Money of Housing Service (2009/10).

It was noted that the Housing Directorate placed great importance on benchmarking its housing performance and costs against other housing providers. It was also a requirement of the Tenant Services Authority's (TSA's) Housing Regulatory Framework.

The Housing Directorate had been a member of "Housemark" for a number of years. Housemark was a national housing benchmarking organisation, which enabled housing organisations to submit detailed information on their performance and costs, and to compare these with other housing organisations nationally.

Housemark produced a detailed Benchmarking Report for the Council annually, comparing the Council's performance with 47 other local authorities across the country. Additionally Housemark also provided a helpful Value for Money (VFM) Summary. This was organised in a way to illustrate how the Council's housing performance compared with other local authorities, in respect of the four specific service areas of the TSA's National Standards covering:

- (1) Tenant Involvement and Empowerment
- (2) Home
- (3) Tenancy
- (4) Neighbourhood and Community

Future Housemark Benchmarking

Although Housemark provided an excellent and consistent benchmarking facility, the process was expensive and time consuming. The annual subscription to Housemark was around £7,000. In view of the Council's current financial position and the amount of staff time involved, it had been decided to only subscribe to Housemark, and undertake the benchmarking every two years.

RECOMMENDED:

- (1) That the HouseMark Benchmarking Report on Value for Money of Housing Services (2009/10) be noted; and
- (2) That the decision to undertake benchmarking through HouseMark bi-annually, unless HouseMark can provide a quality-only benchmarking service, be endorsed.

10. ANNUAL REPORT ON THE HOME OPTION CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Progress Report.

As part of its Work Programme, the Panel considered an annual report on the "HomeOption" Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The scheme was introduced in November 2007, it was administered by the external agency, Locata Housing Services (LHS).

Under the scheme, all vacant social rented properties were advertised to applicants on the website, a two-weekly publication and other media giving details of location, type, rent, service charge, council tax band and landlord of the available accommodation. Applicants applied for a property by “expressing an interest” in up to a maximum of 3 properties each fortnight for which they had an assessed need.

At the end of the two-weekly cycle, the Council analysed the “expressions of interest” received and allocated each property following a prioritisation process. The property was offered to the applicant in the highest band, who had been registered the longest. The results were then published on the website and the next periodic publication, setting out the number received on each property, the band and registration date of the successful applicant. This helped applicants see how long the successful applicant had been waiting and gave greater transparency to the process.

HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Information Bulletin

As the LHS computer system only stored information for a six-month period, it was only possible to report statistics for a six-month period. The period covered in the report was from November 2010 to May 2011.

A total of 214 properties were allocated during this period. With 21,038 expressions of interest being made, this was an average of around 75 expressions of interest each time a property was advertised. Almost 93% of applicants expressed an interest in properties over the Internet. Around 70% of applicants registered on the Housing Register had participated in the scheme.

Applicants who had participated were asked how satisfied they were with the service, 408 responded to this question. The level of satisfaction was as follows:

- (1) Very Satisfied – 152 (37%)
- (2) Quite Satisfied – 152 (37%)
- (3) Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied - 64 (16%)
- (4) Quite Unsatisfied – 19 (5%)
- (5) Very Unsatisfied – 21 (5%)

Applicants who stated they were either quite or very unsatisfied, and could be identified, would be contacted and offered further assistance if felt appropriate. A total of 5,438 forms were sent out to all Housing Register applicants – 781 were returned representing a response rate of 14.4%.

RECOMMENDED:

That the progress made on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme and the Housing Register Activity report for the period December 2010 to May 2011 be noted.

11. ANNUAL ETHNIC MONITORING REVIEW OF HOUSING APPLICANTS

The Panel received a report from Mr R Wilson, Assistant Director of Housing, regarding Ethnic Monitoring.

The Council had a Policy Statement for Equal Opportunities in the Provision of Housing Services. The Policy Statement included 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.

Although a large number of housing applicants did not disclose their ethnicity, it was evident from the analyses shown 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 either directly or indirectly.

RECOMMENDED:

That no recommendations be made concerning amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme due to ethnicity.

12. 12-MONTH PROGRESS REPORT ON HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2010/11 AND HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2011/12

The Panel received a report from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing, regarding the Housing Strategy 2009 – 2012: (a) 12-Month Progress Report on Key Action Plan 2010/11; and (b) New Key Action Plan 2011/12.

At its meeting in September 2009, the Council's Cabinet adopted the Housing Strategy 2009 – 2012. This followed the Housing Scrutiny Panel 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 Housing Strategy assessed the District's current and future housing needs, and set out the Council's approach to meeting those needs. It also linked with other Council and non-Council strategies that both influenced and were influenced by, the Housing Strategy.

The Strategy also included a Key Action Plan, which set out the proposed actions that would be taken by the Council to contribute towards the achievement of the housing objectives over the 3 years of the Housing Strategy. The Cabinet agreed that progress with the Key Action Plans should be monitored on a 6-monthly basis by the Panel. Last year, the Cabinet adopted the second Key Action Plan for the Housing Strategy, on the recommendation of the Panel. It was now necessary for the Cabinet to adopt a Key Action Plan for the forthcoming year, which was the last year before the Housing Strategy was fully updated in 2012.

RECOMMENDED:

(1) That the 12-Month Progress Report on the Housing Strategy's Key Action Plan 2010/11 be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder and Director of Housing; and

(2) That the proposed new Key Action Plan 2011/12 be recommended to the Cabinet for adoption.

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

The Panel agreed to add an extra item to its Work Programme regarding a progress report on the Implementation of the New Licence Conditions for Park Homes. It was likely that it would be submitted to the Panel around January 2011.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to agree that an extra item be added to the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel Work Programme regarding Progress with the Implementation of New Licence Conditions for Park Homes.

14. FUTURE MEETINGS

(1) The next programmed meeting of the Panel was scheduled for 25 October 2011 at 5.30p.m. It was noted that an incorrect date for a future Panel meeting was entered on the agenda as 31 March 2012, it should state 13 March 2012.

(2) Members discussed the start time of the Panel meetings. It was felt by some Panel members that 5.30p.m. was too early a time for members to meet, and it was suggested that a later time should be arranged. However, it was agreed that the Panel start time should remain the same as 5.30p.m.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel start time remain as 5.30p.m.

CHAIRMAN