

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON FRIDAY, 3 MARCH 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, EPPING
AT 2.00 - 5.05 PM**

Members Present:	S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, P Gode, Mrs A Grigg, L Martin, Mrs S Perry, T Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse, Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants and Leasholders Federation) and D Stallan
Other members present:	M Heavens, Mrs C Pond, K Wright and R Glozier
Apologies for Absence:	Mrs J Lea
Officers Present	A Hall (Head of Housing Services), Mrs M Pearce (Housing Needs Manager), J Preston (Head of Planning and Economic Development), R Wilson (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)), A Wintle (Planning Officer) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)
Also in attendance:	(none)

45. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The panel noted that Councillor D Stallan was substituting for Councillor Mrs J Lea.

46. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council Code for Members Conduct, Councillors K Angold Stephens and Mrs C Pond declared a personal interest in agenda item 8 (Increasing the amount of Affordable Housing in the District) by virtue of being members of Loughton Town Council. They declared that their interests were not prejudicial and that they would remain in the meeting for the duration of the consideration and voting on the item.

47. NOTES OF LAST MEETING - 30 JANUARY 2006

Noted.

48. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

Noted that paragraph 3(v) is to be deleted, and item 14 should be raised to a higher priority level.

49. CHANGE IN ORDER OF AGENDA

With the meetings agreement agenda item 8 (Increasing the amount of affordable Housing in the District) was taken next.

50. INCREASING THE AMOUNT OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN THE DISTRICT.

Alan Hall took the meeting through the report, which was written as a result of a request by the panel for a report that looked at ways of increasing the amount of affordable housing in the district.

It was estimated that approximately 1000 affordable houses a year was needed which, as a council, we were never going to satisfy. It particularly affected the younger set of the local community who having grown up here could not find affordable housing in the area – this was a matter of local public concern.

It was noted that a definition of affordable housing is hard to come by. One definition could be, “subsidised housing for rent” and another could be defined as “intermediate housing with shared ownership, shared equity and/or shared renting”.

The panel also considered the possibility of allowing some residential housing on Metropolitan Green Belt land, subject to it providing significant levels of affordable housing on the basis that it would constitute very special circumstances and an exceptional reason for not applying the Council’s normally strict policy of restraint, in view of the high affordable housing need. It was noted that the green belt was first established in the 1930’s, but having a greater impact after the war to fix the urban area boundary of London.

The council already gives careful consideration to any development schemes that involved the creation of affordable housing within so-called ‘brownfield sites’ but does not actively seek out these types of development. A member asked if any residential (affordable) housing could be put on old/redundant farm buildings. It was pointed out that farms tended to be in out of the way places and not ideally suited for housing development. The government now suggests that land banks should be provided by local councils that are located at sustainable locations (where there is access to public transport etc.).

The Housing Portfolio Holder made a plea that any new housing should be built in the existing towns and villages, derelict farms etc should be given back to the countryside and not used to create new settlements.

Agreed that Green Belt land should not be developed on at this time.

The Panel then considered whether or not there was any merit in exploring the possibility of part of one or more urban open spaces in Loughton accommodating development to provide significant levels of affordable housing as well as enhancing the open spaces. Six sites were considered in detail. The panel were not comfortable with giving up public parcels of land where the amenities could not be recovered once lost.

Agreed that amenity spaces located in Loughton should not be considered for development.

The Panel then considered if there should be a recommended minimum limit that the council should set for affordable housing that could be negotiated by officers on Section 106 sites. Currently the council seeks 30% (which may rise to 40% in certain cases) of affordable housing on Section 106 sites. The panel members did not want to hinder officers in their negotiations by drawing a line in the sand and if the choice was between a maximum of 30% and a minimum of 20 %, which would a developer choose?

Agreed that no minimum limit on the provision of affordable housing in Section 106 sites should be recommended.

The Panel then considered the provision of additional social housing grant by the council.

Agreed that more funding should be made available within the Council's Capital Programme for 2006/07 and that this position be considered every year by this panel.

The feasibility studies on the development potential of the Council's car parks was then considered by the panel.

Agreed that it should be required of potential developers that they maximise the amount of affordable housing provided on these types of sites.

The panel next considered a proposal to the cabinet that land associated with any General Fund assets that become surplus to requirements and where residential housing would be acceptable in planning terms, should be used to provide affordable housing, instead of providing a Capital Receipt for the Council.

Agreed that advantage should be taken to provide affordable housing on any sites that become available.

The panel **agreed**:

- with recommendation 12 of the report that unless
 - a) any of the London Housing Sub-Regions offer at least 50% nomination rights to the Council, as host authority, to allow the use of funding allocated by the London Region of the Housing Corporation to develop sites within the District for affordable housing; or
 - b) such funding is able to be used to purchase existing housing in the District to let as affordable housing,

the panel does enter into any 'Out of London Agreements' with London Sub-Regions; and

- with recommendation 13 that cabinet should be asked to re-affirm its commitment to the Strategic Housing Partnership and the Scheme of RSL Partnering and Joint Commissioning.

The panel then considered whether or not the cabinet should be recommended to seek the Right to Buy (RTB) Hot Spot Status for the district from the ODPM. On consideration the panel agreed that the council should seek the RTB status, which if obtained would reduce the maximum available to tenants under the RTB from £34,000 to £16,000, in order to slow the reduction in the Council's contribution to the affordable housing stock in the District.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO THE CABINET:

- (1) That additional one-off budget provision of £1m be made within the Council's Capital Programme for 2006/7, funded as follows;
 - a) £500,000 - by reducing the budget(s) of one or more existing projects within the Capital Programme by an equivalent amount (either in 2006/7 or later years); and

- b) £500,000 – as additional expenditure to the existing Capital Programme;
- (2) That the Cabinet undertakes a formal review each year, prior to the annual review of the Capital Programme, on whether or not further budget provision should be included within the Capital Programme to fund social housing grant(s), and if so, how much should be included and when;
- (3) *That the proposed feasibility studies on the development potential of the Council's car parks require potential developers to maximise the amount of affordable housing provided on the sites within any proposals that come forward;*
- (4) *That the land associated with any General Fund assets that becomes surplus to requirements in the future, where residential housing would be acceptable in planning terms, be provided to a registered social landlord free of charge to provide affordable housing, instead of providing a capital receipt for the Council; and*
- (5) That the Council seeks Right to Buy (RTB) "Hot Spot Status" for the District from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) which, if obtained, would reduce the maximum discount available to tenants under the RTB from £34,000 to £16,000, in order to slow the reduction in the Council's contribution to the affordable housing stock in the District.

51. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGIES - HOUSING ALLOCATIONS AND HOUSING ADVICE

Marion Pearce introduced her report on Housing Service Strategies – Housing Allocations and Housing Advice. The Chairman took the opportunity to announce Marions' imminent retirement, he thanked Marion for all her hard work, excellent advice and level of replies given to the panel, and the other members echoed this.

The report informed the panel on the recent updates made to the strategies.

Noted that:

- paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3 of the strategy on Housing Advice was to be deleted;
- the figure in paragraph 1.4 should read £102,500 and not as printed £120,500;
- the word 'formal' in the first line of paragraph 1.5 be deleted; and
- the figures for the 2005/06 column in the table in paragraph 12.5 be reassessed.

52. EPPING FOREST LOCAL SUPPORTING PEOPLE STRATEGY - 2006-2010

Roger Wilson introduced the Local People Strategy to the panel.

Noted that on page 77 it should refer to Children's Centres and not Youth Centres.

Report noted by the panel.

53. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The panel received a progress report on choice based lettings. It was noted that:

- A consultancy Brief had been set up;
- The selection process was to begin in May; and
- An extra item to be added into the timescale list in section 6 that implementation was wanted by April 2007.

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

None discussed.

55. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel is to be held on 27 April 2006 starting at 5pm.

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