

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL  
HELD ON TUESDAY, 23 OCTOBER 2012  
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING  
AT 5.30 - 7.22 PM**

**Members Present:** S Murray (Chairman), A Mitchell MBE (Vice-Chairman), K Chana, Ms J Hart, Mrs S Jones, Ms H Kane, L Leonard, Ms G Shiell, Mrs J H Whitehouse and Marshall

**Other members present:** D Stallan (Housing Portfolio Holder)

**Apologies for Absence:**

**Officers Present** G Chipp (Chief Executive), A Hall (Director of Housing), L Swan (Assistant Director (Private Sector & Resources)), D Clifton (Principal Housing Officer [IT]), S Devine (Private Sector Housing Manager) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

**30. NOTES OF THE LAST TWO MEETINGS OF THE PANEL**

**RESOLVED:**

That the notes of the last two meetings of the Panel held on 24 July and 7 August 2012 be agreed.

**31. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)**

There were no declarations of interest made.

**32. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

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

**33. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME**

**(a) Terms of Reference**

The Panel's Terms of Reference were noted.

**(b) Work Programme**

It was noted that:

Item 9 (Annual Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme) and Item 23 (Adoption of EFDC's Tenancy Policy) would be discussed at an extra-ordinary Panel meeting on 17 December 2012 at 5.30p.m. The Chairman requested the reports for this meeting to be circulated to members, as far as possible, before the normal agenda deadline.

Item 34 (Progress Reports on the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan). It was advised that the Cabinet had referred this item to the Panel. It was proposed that the

first progress report be scheduled for the meeting in January 2013. The Housing Portfolio Holder requested that the meeting should be held in the Council Chamber. In response to a suggestion from the Panel the Director of Housing advised that priority for this item would be changed from “low” to “medium.”

#### **34. HRA BUSINESS PLAN KEY ACTION PLAN 2012/13 - PROGRESS REPORT**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Key Action Plan (2011/12) – 6 Month Progress Report.

In March 2012, the Council’s latest Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2012/13 was produced, incorporating the Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan. This document 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, which set out the proposed actions the Council would be taking over the next year. It was good practice that the progress made with the stated actions was monitored.

Members raised the following issues around the action points:

- (1) Action 9 – Introduce a facility for tenants to apply for housing on-line.

It was noted that this action referred to applicants rather than tenants which would be corrected. Officers advised members that between 90 – 95% of housing applicants “bid” for vacant properties on-line. Members were concerned about applicants not being IT literate and being discriminated against.

- (2) Action 13 – Select the Council-owned (mainly difficult to let garage) sites suitable for development and formulate the Council Housebuilding Programme accordingly.

Officers advised that on average, between 40-50% of these garages were difficult to let. There would be a detailed feasibility study on the development potential for each site before any garages were required to be vacated, many garage sites would, in all likelihood, not be developed, and in cases where development was undertaken, other garages would be offered to vacating tenants.

- (3) Action 24 – Introduce a programme of providing scooter stores at sheltered housing schemes.

Officers said that the Housing Directorate was trying to identify suitable places for scooter stores, although this had been difficult.

- (4) Action 25 – (Subject to Cabinet approval) Introduce a free Handyperson Scheme operated by:

- (a) the Council’s Housing Repairs Service for all older tenants in sheltered housing schemes; and

- (b) Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) for all older tenants in non-sheltered housing, funded by a grant from the Council.

The Director of Housing advised that a letter was being dispatched to all sheltered housing tenants informing them of this, combined with an official launch.

**RECOMMENDED:**

That the Six Month Progress Report on the Key Action Plan contained within the HRA Business Plan 2012/13 be noted.

**35. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT FINANCIAL PLAN - 6 MONTH PROGRESS REPORT**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the HRA Financial Plan – Half Yearly Update.

At the Panel meeting in March 2012, members considered the draft HRA Business Plan for 2012/13 and recommended its adoption to the Housing Portfolio Holder, which was subsequently approved. An important part of the HRA Business Plan was the HRA Financial Plan, which set out the anticipated HRA income and expenditure over the next 30 years.

The Financial Plan had a much higher profile than previously, following the introduction of HRA self financing from March 2012, whereby the Council made a £185 million payment to the CLG, funded with loans from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB), as a replacement regime to the former (discredited) Housing Subsidy System.

The HRA Financial Plan within the HRA Business Plan was approved by the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 March 2012. The Cabinet asked this Panel to review updates to the HRA Financial Plan twice each year, at its scheduled meetings in October and March.

CIH Consulting had acted as the Council's HRA Business Planning Consultants for the last few years, and the Cabinet had agreed that the Council should contract with CIH Consulting to act as the Council's HRA Business Planning Consultants for a further three years until 2015.

CIH Consulting had met with officers from the Housing and Finance/ICT Directorates and had updated the Council's HRA Financial Plan to take account of the Council's current financial position and national and local policies.

**RECOMMENDED:**

That the updated HRA Financial Plan and report from CIH Consulting, the Council's HRA Business Planning Consultants, be noted.

**36. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE TECHNICAL OFFICER DEALING WITH EMPTY PROPERTIES AND PARK HOME SITES**

The Panel received a report from the Private Housing Manager – Technical, regarding progress on the work by the Technical Officer dealing with Empty Properties and Park Home Sites within the Private Sector Housing (Technical) Team.

In November 2009, the Cabinet agreed to the addition of a part time, temporary post in the Private Sector Housing (Technical) Team assisting with bringing empty properties back in to use and helping with the licensing of the District's park home

sites. In September 2011, the Cabinet agreed to the existing post being made full time and permanent. The former post holder had resigned in August 2011 and the new full time permanent post was filled during February 2012.

### **Empty Properties**

A systematic procedure had been established for dealing with empty properties in the private sector, beginning with tracing and communicating with property owners or other interested parties establishing why a property was empty. Following this the Technical Officer's role was to determine how best the owner could be assisted in bringing the property back into use. The Council could offer financial incentives for bringing properties up to the Decent Homes Standard and providing affordable accommodation for tenants or owner occupiers. The PLACE (Private Lease Agreements Converting Empties) Scheme was one form of financial assistance; the scheme ran at no cost to the Council other than the administration process by the Technical Officer. It currently offered high level grants of up to £50,000 to an owner in return for leasing the property for 3 years to the Consortium's preferred partner, Genesis, during which time the owner received no rental income.

In June 2011 the previous Portfolio Holder for Housing agreed to the PLACE Scheme being extended to offer smaller grants and loans to owners of empty properties. The grant allowed an owner to take out a smaller grant for renovating their home and lease for an agreed period, dependent on the grant size, but to also receive some rent themselves. The PLACE Small Grant was available to owners; the first three applications were being considered. In the near future, interest free loans would be available; once approved they would be up to a maximum of £25,000 per unit on either a "loan-to-sell" or "loan-to-let" agreement. The loans would be repayable and recycled back in to the PLACE scheme funds.

The Council attached conditions requiring all grants to be repaid when the recipient sold the property. The Empty Homes Repayable Assistance was effectively an interest free loan up to £10,000, repayable on the sale of the property and available to owners wanting to live in the property themselves. The loan had been available from July 2012 and officers were currently processing one application with several other owners showing interest.

In some cases, where a problematic empty property existed and the owner was either absent or un-cooperative in bringing their property back to use, it was necessary to consider enforcement action. This could be through Enforced Sale, Compulsory Purchase (CPO) or making an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO). Officers followed the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy in such cases, seeking Member approval where appropriate.

The new Technical Officer spent approximately 18 hours a week dealing with empty properties, for which there was a target in the Private Sector Business Plan 2011-13 of bringing 30 empty dwellings per annum back into use. In 2011/12, 60 empty properties were brought back into use.

The New Homes Bonus (NHB), introduced by the Government in April 2011, created an effective financial incentive to encourage local authorities in facilitating housing growth. As well as applying to new homes built, the NHB also applied to long term empty properties brought back into use. The Bonus was calculated by comparing the number of dwellings for which Council Tax was collected in a local authority area from October to October and rewarding any net increase. The number of long term empty properties was deducted from the total number of dwellings on the Council

Tax list. This “netting off” of long term empty properties meant that any reductions in the number had the same effect as building new homes and, any increases in the number of long term empty properties had the same effect as a reduction in new homes.

While the bringing back into use of a total of 28 properties could be directly attributed to the work of the Technical Officer in the first two quarters of 2012/13, a further 178 properties had been taken off the Empty Property List following an initial standard letter, or follow up letter, which also counted towards the NHB.

### **Licensing of Park Home Sites**

Local authorities had a statutory requirement to issue licences on all their park homes sites and decide what conditions to attach. In 2008, the Government produced new standards for permanent residential park homes sites, providing a framework upon which councils could base the conditions they attach when re-licensing sites.

The existing site licence conditions for park home sites in the Epping Forest District had not been reviewed for many years. New proposed standard park home site licence conditions for permanent residential sites were produced to ensure conditions were relevant, consistent and would adequately protect the health and safety of people residing at, or visiting, sites within the District. These were agreed by the Cabinet in April 2011 following a second consultation exercise with residents and site owners.

However, during the course of officer inspections, certain anomalies came to light which, not being specifically covered in the conditions, officers felt that a determination from Members on the interpretation to be adopted was required. It was agreed that site owners and park home residents should be consulted on these further matters and that their views should be considered further by the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel. A meeting also took place in January 2012 between the former Leader, the former Housing Portfolio Holder, and representatives of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECF & RS) at which they expressed their views. The Cabinet agreed on 23 July 2012 that revised Standard Park Home Site Licence Conditions for Permanent Residential Sites be adopted which included clarifications and variations relating to smoke detection in porches; decking and porches being structures; fence height and definition of a hedge.

Following the Cabinet decision, the Technical Officer had written to all site owners and Residents Associations informing them of the outcome. The site owners had been provided with a summary sheet of existing contraventions that would be tolerated by virtue of the fact that they would have existed prior to the issuing of the new site licence. The Technical Officer would use this as a basis for determining compliance with the site licence conditions.

It was anticipated that new site licences, with standard site licence conditions, would be issued to all site owners by November 2012. It would then be necessary to monitor them to ensure compliance with the site licence conditions and deal with any matters from residents or site owners relating to the licence or management of the site. This would continue to require two days a week of an officer's time on an ongoing basis.

**RESOLVED:**

That the report regarding the work carried out by the Technical Officer post in the Private Sector Housing (Technical) Team, dealing with empty properties and park home sites, be noted.

**37. HOUSING DIRECTORATE'S SERVICE STRATEGIES ON HOME OWNERSHIP AND RENT COLLECTION AND ADMINISTRATION**

The Panel received a report from the Housing Resources Manager regarding the Housing Directorate's Service Strategies on "Home Ownership" and "Rent Collection and Administration" Key Action Plan.

The Housing Directorate's Service Strategies were originally produced 15 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework and had since been updated on an ongoing basis. The strategies gave more detail than the Council's main Housing Strategy on the various housing services provided. In total, 17 Housing Service Strategies had been produced to date.

The strategies were produced to a common format that set out how individual housing services would be delivered. They had assisted the Directorate in achieving the Customer Service Excellence award and ISO 9001:2008 Quality Accreditation, and had been important in meeting the minimum requirement for Supporting People funding under the conditions of the contract.

**RECOMMENDED:**

That the Housing Directorate's Service Strategies on Home Ownership and Rent Collection and Administration be recommended to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption.

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

The Chairman advised that he would update the Overview and Scrutiny Committee verbally at its next meeting.

**39. FUTURE MEETINGS**

The next meeting of the Panel would be an extra-ordinary meeting on Monday 17 December 2012 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1, and then on;

- (a) Tuesday 29 January 2013 at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1; and
- (b) Tuesday 19 March at 5.30p.m. in Committee Room 1.