

STANDING PANELS

1. HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL

The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor S Murray (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs A Mitchell MBE (Vice Chairman)
Councillors K Avey, K Chana, Ms J Hart, Mrs S Jones, H Kane, L Leonard, Ms G Shiell, Mrs J Whitehouse and N Wright

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.

Wyn Marshall represented the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation, attending the meetings as a non-voting co-opted member to provide the views of residents and stakeholders.

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) Call-In Cabinet Decision on Fire Safety in Flat Blocks – In May 2012 the Panel considered the call-in of a decision by the Cabinet of a Housing Portfolio Holder report (C/067/2011/12) regarding Fire Safety in Flat Blocks made on 12 March 2012. This had been referred to them from last year as it had come in late in the year.

On consideration of the arguments put forward the Panel decided that the Cabinet Decision on Fire Safety in Flat Blocks be upheld.

(ii) New Site Licence Conditions for Park Homes Sites - On 18 April 2011, the Cabinet agreed to the adoption of the "Standard Park Home Licence Conditions for Permanent Residential Sites in Epping Forest District Council." The agreed conditions included some variations to the Model Standards 2008 and also allowed for certain contraventions to remain provided they were in existence on the date the new site licence was issued. In June 2013 after inspections of the sites and considerable consultation, with officers holding a meeting with Park Home Site Owners and representatives of each of the site residents associations to gauge their views the panel considered the new conditions. They agreed that the agreed interpretations to the Standard Licence Conditions for Permanent Residential Park Home Sites in Epping Forest District be recommended to the Cabinet.

(iii) Review of Homelessness Strategy - Under the Homelessness Act 2002, Local Authorities had a duty to review and publish their Homelessness Strategy on, at least, a 5 yearly basis. As this area of work changed regularly, it was agreed that the Council's Strategy would be reviewed every 3 years and in July 2012, the Panel once again reviewed the strategy and recommended it for approval, noting that the strategy linked with other Council strategies and schemes. It set out achievements since 2009 and incorporated the needs and demands on the service and an Action Plan for the coming three years.

(iv) HomeOption Choice based letting scheme and Ethnic Monitoring progress reports – in July the Panel considered the progress reports on these two items and considered the progress made by the Council during the past year. The Panel noted that, following the 2011 National Census, an updated breakdown of the ethnicity of the population of the District would be available and reported next year.

(v) Council response to CLG consultation paper - "High Income Social Tenants Pay to Stay" - The Panel was invited to consider the proposed Council response and whether any different, or additional comments should be included on the DCLG Consultation Paper "High Income Social Tenants Pay to Stay". They agreed that the proposed Council response to the consultation be forwarded to the Government.

(vi) West Essex Tenancy Strategy – Draft Consultation - Under the Localism Act 2011, all local authorities must produce a Tenancy Strategy which set out the District's expectations of the types of tenancies that all Registered Providers (RPs) of Housing in their district would provide. All RPs must have regard to the District's Tenancy Strategy when setting their own Tenancy Policy. Since the Council had its own housing stock, it must have regard to the Tenancy Strategy itself when formulating the Council's own Tenancy Policy. In January 2012, the former Housing Portfolio Holder agreed that the Council should work with Harlow District Council and Uttlesford District Council to produce a Joint West Essex Tenancy Strategy.

Following the production of a Consultant's Brief by EFDC's Director of Housing, and a subsequent tender exercise, the three local authorities had appointed a small consultancy, Jenkinsduval, to produce a draft West Essex Tenancy Strategy on their behalf.

Following consultation Jenkinsduval produced a Consultation Draft which:

- Was not too prescriptive, providing a broad, overarching approach;
- Enabled local flexibility in the three local areas, and amongst different RPs;
- Enabled social landlords to provide fixed term tenancies or lifetime tenancies, as appropriate;
- Expected minimum 5 year terms, if fixed term tenancies were provided;
- Set out the expectations of the criteria used for reviews and renewals of tenancies; and
- Emphasised the importance of good timely advice at the review period.

This draft was welcomed by the Panel who made no further comments.

(vii) Repairs Management Contract Presentation, One year on – In August 2012 the Panel received a presentation from the Assistant Director of Housing

(Property) and the Housing Repairs Manager, representing Mears regarding the Repairs Management Contract.

In May 2011, following an EU procurement exercise, the Council let an innovative “In-Sourcing” contract with Mears, as the External Repairs Management Company, whereby Mears manage the Council’s own in-house Housing Repairs Service with the intention of delivering a step-change in performance and service for tenants.

The presentation concerned the improvement of management and services being delivered to tenants, delivery of 5 Key Deliverables, improvements in Key Performance Indicators and Value for Money achievements over the first year of operation.

(viii) Housing Service Standards – Performance Report 2011/12 and Review -

In 2007, following consultation with the Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed a range of Housing Service Standards and an updated Housing Charter. Subsequently a leaflet was issued to all the Council’s tenants, setting out the agreed Housing Service Standards. It was also agreed that the Housing Directorate’s performance against the Housing Service Standards should be considered annually.

The Director of Housing had reviewed the Housing Service Standards with regard to performance in 2011/12, a number of changes were proposed including some new Service Standards. A number of the proposed changes resulted from the introduction of the Repairs Management Contract with Mears and the improvements that Mears and officers had already made to the Housing Repairs Service, particularly due to the introduction of Mears’ own Repairs IT System.

The Panel endorsed the proposed changes and additions to the Housing Portfolio Holder. It was also recommended that relevant leaflets should be updated at the appropriate time. It was suggested that performance against the service Standards was reviewed again in July/August 2013.

(ix) Housing Strategy 2009-12 - The Panel noted that around 3-4 years earlier, it had approved for consultation a “Consultation Draft” Housing Strategy and a major Consultation exercise was undertaken with the Council’s partners, key stakeholders and the public over a 3 month period. The exercise included a one day Housing Strategy Conference, to which all the consultees were invited. At its meeting in September 2009, the Council’s Cabinet adopted the Housing Strategy 2009 – 2012.

Although there was no legal or policy requirement, it was originally anticipated that the Housing Strategy would be updated during 2012, covering the following three years. However, following a recommendation from the Panel, in May 2012, the former Housing Portfolio Holder agreed that the production of the next Housing Strategy should be deferred for one year, and produced in 2013/14. This was because it was identified and acknowledged that there were a number of important issues that would be concluded by the Council over the following year, which would have a significant impact on the Housing Strategy. These issues included:

- (a) A refresh of the Council’s Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA);
- (b) The production of the Council’s Strategic Housing Land Assessment (SHLA);
- (c) The production of the Council’s Draft Local Plan, which would set out the Council’s proposed plans on the number and proposed location of new homes in the District; and
- (d) The Council’s decisions on housing issues relating to the Localism Act.

The Panel therefore reviewed the 12 Month Progress Report on the Housing Strategy's Key Action Plan 2011/12, and considered a Draft Housing Strategy Key Action Plan 2012/13 for recommendation to the Cabinet.

(x) Tenant Satisfaction Survey 2012 - Under the Government's previous Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) and National Indicator (NI) regime, it was a requirement for all registered providers of housing to undertake a Tenant Satisfaction Survey every two years and then submit headline data to the Government through the BVPIs and NIs. All registered providers used a standard STATUS Survey Form, ensuring that they all asked the same questions to aid benchmarking.

Although there was no longer a requirement to undertake such surveys, or to be benchmarked with other landlords, members and officers considered it very important to understand the views of the Council's tenants.

Housing had been a member of 'Housemark', a national housing benchmarking club, for many years. Housemark had devised a new standard tenant Satisfaction Survey Form, called 'STAR', for its members to use, in order to continue measuring tenant satisfaction and benchmark with other registered providers if they wished.

The overall response was very high at 49%, with 1,093 questionnaires returned from the 2,215 sent out, representing around 17% of all tenants.

The vast majority of the District Council tenants were satisfied with the services provided by the Council, and the overall rating was amongst the highest in the survey at 88%.

(xi) Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and Repairs/Maintenance Business Plans 2012/13 - 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 noted and commented on the progress report on the plan.

(xii) Progress Report on the work of the Technical Officer dealing with empty properties and Park Home sites – In October the Panel received a report from the Private Housing Manager (Technical), regarding the progress of work of the Technical Officer dealing with Empty Properties and Park Home Sites within the Private Sector Housing (Technical) Team Key Action Plan.

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.

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.

Park Homes - The existing site licence conditions for park home sites in 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.

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.

(xiii) Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2013/14 – In January 2013 the Panel received a report from the Director of Housing regarding the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2013/14.

In December 2011 the Cabinet approved the strategic approach to the new 30 Year HRA Financial Plan in readiness for the introduction of self financing for the HRA from April 2012. The approach agreed was to plan the repayment of the required loans to the Public Works Loan Board to be taken out to fund the CLG's required debt settlement – over a 30 year period. This enabled the Council to maintain the housing stock and implement a new Council Housebuilding Programme, and allow a lower rent increase in April 2012 (6%) than assumed by the Government. It also funded an additional £770,000 per annum of housing improvements and service improvements.

The estimated amount available to the Housing Improvements and Service Improvements Budget each year was, in effect, a balancing figure for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as a whole, over the 30 year period of the HRA Financial Plan.

The Cabinet agreed the Panel's recommendation that 14 housing improvements and service enhancements be undertaken in 2012/13. Since this list was not approved by the Cabinet until after the commencement of the current financial year, very good progress had been made with all of the projects over the remaining period of the year. The following summarised the budget position for the overall 2012/13 programme:

- (a) Original budget 2012/13 - £770,000;
- (b) Latest anticipated expenditure forecast - £674,000; and

- (c) Savings/slippage carried forward to 2013/14 - £96,000

The main slippage carried forward was £85,000 for the acceleration of the mains powered smoke detector installation programme, which was mainly due to the amount of installations required and the late approval of the expenditure for 2012/13 by the Cabinet.

It should be noted that, even utilising all of the resources available to the fund in 2013/14, there would still be a further £64,000 and £77,000 available to spend in 2014/15 respectively, based on current forecasts.

(xiv) ...

Case Study: Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund

On 28 January 2013, the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel considered the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2013/14.

In December 2011, the Cabinet approved the strategic approach to the new 30 Year HRA Financial Plan in readiness for the introduction of self financing for the HRA from April 2012. The approach was to plan the repayment of the required loans from the Public Works Loan Board to be taken out to fund the CLG's required debt settlement over a 30 year period, enabling the housing stock to be maintained to a full modern standard and also implement a new Council House building programme and allow a lower average rent increase in April 2012. It also funded an additional £770,000 per annum of housing improvements and service improvements. The estimated amount available to the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget each year was, in effect, a balancing figure for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as a whole, over the 30 year period of the HRA Financial Plan.

Since housing related income and expenditure were ring fenced to the HRA, any annual HRA surpluses that were not required for any specific purpose needed to be spent, otherwise they resulted in increased HRA balances, which was why the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget had been introduced from 2012/13. However, since the amount available each year would vary, it was suggested that the budget should be operated as a Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund.

The Cabinet agreed the Panel's recommendation that 14 housing improvements and service enhancements be undertaken in 2012/13. The following summarised the budget position for this overall 2012/13 programme:

- (a) Original budget 2012/13 - £770,000;
- (b) Latest anticipated expenditure forecast - £674,000; and
- (c) Savings/slippage carried forward to 2013/14 - £96,000

The main slippage carried forward was £85,000 for the acceleration of the mains powered smoke detector installation programme.

When the HRA Financial Plan was produced in March 2012, it identified that an additional £750,000 per annum should become available for improvements/enhancements from April 2013, on top of the £770,000 per annum from April 2012. However, the latest iteration of the HRA Financial Plan had identified that it was no longer possible to fund an additional £750,000 per annum from April 2013. This was mainly due to:

- (i) Rental income to the HRA were less than previously forecast;
- (ii) The requirement to repay part of the loan portfolio (£31.2m) in 2021/22;
- (iii) A higher capital expenditure requirement; and
- (iv) A higher debt provision being required, due to the effects of the welfare reforms.

Nevertheless, since many of the improvement/enhancement projects agreed for 2012/13 were one off projects, there was still some substantial funding available for new projects from April 2013/14.

Although £580,000 per annum was available for new projects from 2013/14, the Cabinet had already agreed that one off and on going revenue expenditure of £163,000 to deliver the following projects within the Cabinet's Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan should be met from the fund in 2013/14:

- Additional two Housing Management officers – Annual - £56,000
- Increase in budget provision for financial incentives for downsizing – Annual - £22,000
- Grant to CAB to employ two Debt Advisors for 18 months – 2 years - £67,000
- Direct Debit Marketing Campaign – One Off - £10,000
- Census of Tenants – One Off - £5,000
- Purchase of Welfare Reform Personal Calculators – One Off - £3,000

Therefore, this left £407,000 available to spend on further new housing improvements and service enhancements in 2013/14. Following consultation with the Housing Management Team and all the Housing Managers, new projects for 2013/14 were put forward for recommendation to the Cabinet.

They were:

- Appointment of Senior Cleaner
- Renewal of lounge chairs at communal lounges of sheltered housing schemes
- In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund
- Major Capital Housing Project Reserve

It should be noted that, even utilising all of the resources available to the fund in 2013/14, there would still be a further £640,000 and £770,000 available to spend in 2014/15 respectively.

The Panel made recommendations to the Cabinet for its meeting on 11 March.