

STANDING PANELS

1. HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL

The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor S Murray (Chairman)
Councillor G Shiel (Vice Chairman)
Councillors K Avey, K Chana, R Gadsby, Ms J Hart, Mrs S Jones, J Lea, L Leonard, B Rolfe and J H Whitehouse

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) Review of Housing Service Standards – In 2007, following consultation with this Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed a range of Housing Service Standards, covering all of the Housing Directorate's main areas of activity, and that the Service Standards should be reviewed annually.

The Housing Service Standards was therefore reviewed, having regard to performance in 2012/13, and changes in legislation and Council policy. As a result, a number of changes were proposed, including new Service Standards. The recommendations were approved by Portfolio Holder and Panel.

(ii) Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan - The Panel were reminded that in view of the significant effect that the Government's welfare reforms would have on the Council and residents, a Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team was formed in September 2012, comprising officers from across the Housing Directorate and the Benefits Division. The team had considered and implemented ways that the effects of the welfare reforms could be minimised, or at least reduced.

The Action Plan identified around 60 separate actions, with lead officers and target dates provided for each action.

The Panel noted progress made to date, that the third Quarterly Progress Report had shown good progress in delivering the 59 actions of the Action Plan. That the CAB's two new temporary Debt Advisor posts had now been filled and were operational from the three CAB offices and the Limes Centre, Chigwell, funded by a grant of £67,900 from the Council and that the Epping Forest Re-Use Project had been launched.

(See case study for full details)

(iii) Annual Ethnic Monitoring Review - The Panel noted that the Council had a Policy Statement for Equal Opportunities in the Provision of Housing Services. The 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 have been 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.

(iv) Housing Performance Indicators - outturn and targets - The Council had adopted a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which, for 2012/13, included 9 KPIs relating to the Housing Service. Performances against all of the Council's KPIs were monitored on a quarterly basis by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Standing Panel.

(v) Presentation on progress made on the Private Sector Housing Strategy - The Panel received a presentation regarding a Progress report on the Private Sector Housing Strategy. The presentation covered:

- (a) Caring and repairing in Epping Forest;
- (b) Assisting vulnerable people in repairing, adapting or improving their homes;
- (c) The Handyperson Service;
- (d) New Charging from October 2013 – service users in means tested benefits would be charged a maximum fee of £30.00 each time they used the Handyperson Service;
- (e) The Gardening Scheme;
- (f) Safe and Well Project (Home from Hospital) – funded by the NHS, reducing admissions/re-admissions for older and disabled people and providing minor adaptations ensuring homes were safe on return from hospital;
- (g) Housing Assistance – Maximum payments for 2012-15 were £10,000 for Decent Homes, £3,000 for Small Works and £10,000 for Empty Homes;
- (h) Disabled Adaptations - 78 in 2012/13 and 83 in 2013/14;
- (i) Long Term Empty Properties – the Empty Property Officer had influenced the bringing into use of 405 empty properties during 2012/13;
- (j) Introduction of an Essex wide Landlord Accreditation Scheme – the purpose of the scheme was to recognise and promote good management and good quality properties in the private sector, with a view to driving up

standards generally. This scheme was being introduced in the summer of 2014;

(k) Licensing of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Sites – consultation with third parties and the GRT community was required before introduction of new standard site licence conditions;

(l) Licensing of Holiday Sites – new standard site licence conditions were proposed for all holiday sites on the district; and

(m) Mobile Homes act 2013 – Council’s would be able to charge for licensing of residential park home sites from April 2014. Officers were considering the various options for charging and would make recommendations to members in due course.

(vi) Housing Service Strategy on Anti-Social Behaviour - The Panel considered the Housing Directorate’s Service Strategy on Anti-Social Behaviour Policies and Procedures.

The Housing Directorate’s Service Strategies were produced around 15 years ago in accordance with an agreed standard framework and have since been updated. The Panel considered and endorsed the service strategy on Anti-Social Behaviour Policies and Procedures. Members asked about the possibility of withholding repairs from tenants if they had been involved in anti-social behaviour. The Panel agreed to review this in October 2014.

(vii) HRA Financial Plan – Half Yearly Update – the Panel noted that an important part of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan was the HRA Financial Plan setting out the anticipated HRA income and expenditure over the next 30 years. It was estimated that there would be a reduction in income to the Council as the rent for Council and Housing Association properties would be harmonised. On consideration the update of the HRA financial plan was endorsed by the Panel.

(viii) Yearly update on progress on the Housing Business Action Plan – the Key Action Plan set out the proposed actions that would be taken by the Council to contribute towards the achievement of the housing objectives over the first year of the Housing Strategy.

The twelve month progress report on the Housing Business Plan Action Plan was endorsed to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

(ix) Consultation on ‘Providing Social Housing for Local People’ - The Panel received a report asking if they wished to submit a response to the Government’s Consultation Paper – “Providing Social Housing for Local People”.

The consultation considered that local authorities should be “strongly encouraged” to have a period of residency for at least two years before qualifying for social housing. The District Council’s policy was three years. The Panel supported this but felt that the wording “strongly encourage” needed clarification.

The Government also proposed guidance encouraging local authorities to adopt other criteria, alongside a residency test, so applicants demonstrating a strong association to the local area were not disadvantaged. The Panel felt more clarification was required around the consultation’s reference to strong family association and the suggestion of applicants or members of their household being eligible if employed in the district. The Panel thought that this also needed some

clarification. In any event the Panel felt that this should not form part of any local eligibility criteria.

(x) Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2014/15 - The Cabinet had asked the Panel to consider and recommend to them, a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements for each year, utilising the additional funding made available as a result of HRA self-financing. Over the previous two years the Panel had formulated lists of housing improvements and service enhancements accordingly, the majority of which had later been approved by the Cabinet.

The Panel had also been requested to make similar recommendations for 2014/15. It was anticipated that £430,000 would be available for new projects in the new year, after an allocation of £220,000 to the Major Capital Projects Reserve in 2014/15. It was advised that the amount of resources available to spend on new improvements and enhancements in 2014/15 and subsequent years was much less than previously anticipated, mainly due to the proposed cessation of the Government's Rent Convergence Policy from April 2015.

The Panel was advised that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had considered and had endorsed the proposals put forward by officers.

(xi) Review of the Handyman Scheme – A Year On - Up until April 2012, the Council only operated a Handyman Scheme for non-Council tenants over 60 years of age and in receipt of benefits. The Council also funded Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) to provide preventative advice and undertake minor works in the homes of older and disabled non-Council tenants.

The Cabinet had subsequently agreed to provide a free of charge Handyman Scheme to older and other vulnerable tenants irrespective of means who were living in sheltered accommodation and those living in any other Council dwelling.

During the last 12 months it was estimated that this service had undertaken more than 1,000 jobs across eight sheltered schemes and over 280 jobs in other Council accommodation. The overall cost of the scheme was around £77,500 per annum. The scheme had a very high satisfaction rate (100%) and was popular.

Case Study: Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan

In view of the significant effect that the Government's welfare reforms will have on the Council and residents, a Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team was formed in September 2012, chaired by the Director of Housing and comprising officers from across the Housing Directorate and the Benefits Division, to consider and implement ways that the effects of the welfare reforms could be minimised – or at least reduced.

The Project Team formulated a Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, which was adopted by the Cabinet in October 2012. The Action Plan identifies around 60 separate actions, with lead officers and target dates provided for each action, under the following 7 themes and associated key objectives:

Theme	Key Objective
Strategic	To ensure that a strategic and corporate approach is taken to mitigate the effects of welfare reform, including good data management
Information to Residents and Advice Agencies	To ensure that residents are provided with accurate, useful and timely information, advice and support on the welfare reforms; how they may be personally affected; and action they can take to mitigate the effects
Reducing Under-occupation	To minimise the under-occupation of Council properties by working-age Council tenants in receipt of housing benefit, and to endeavour to assist under-occupying Council tenants to move to smaller accommodation if they wish
Reshaping Service Delivery	To change services, or introduce new services, to assist the Council and residents to mitigate the effects of the welfare reforms
Minimising Homelessness	To minimise the numbers of households who become homeless as a result of the welfare reforms and to assist such households to minimise the resultant effects
Council's Financial Management	To identify and minimise the financial cost and effects of the welfare reforms on the Council as an organisation, and to ensure that appropriate budget provision for the additional costs are made within the HRA Financial Plan
Staff Training and Communication	To ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the welfare reforms, the effects on residents, the Council's response to the reforms and ways that residents can mitigate the effects on themselves

Good progress continued to be made to date in delivering the 59 actions of the Action Plan.

The key points to note within the latest Progress Report on the current position, compared with the position reported to the Scrutiny Panel at a previous meeting, were as follows:

- The latest information from the DWP & Benefits Division (April 2013) is that the number of households in the District who will be affected by the Benefits Cap has increased by 11, from 78 to 88 households, with the number of Council tenants increased to 16.
- These Council tenants will lose an average of £52.18 per week (compared to the average of £48.58 per week), with 2 Council tenants losing all their Housing Benefit.

- There were originally around 390 under-occupying Council tenants identified as being affected by the “bedroom tax”. By 31st May 2013, the number affected by the “bedroom tax” had reduced by around 10% to 347 tenants.
- As at 1st April 2013, all Council tenants who were willing to be visited by their Housing Management Officer to discuss the implications of the “bedroom tax” on them, and ways of mitigating the effects, had been visited. A total of 217 visits were undertaken, representing around (56%) of those originally identified.
- Of those visited to discuss the implications of the “bedroom tax”:
 - (a) 23% of tenants had expressed an interest in downsizing;
 - (b) Around half wanting to downsize are seeking 1 bed accommodation, with the remainder seeking 2 bed accommodation;
 - (c) No tenants had expressed an interest in taking in a lodger.
- Between 1st January 2013 and 31st May 2013, 14 Council tenants affected by the “bedroom tax” have been known to downsize to smaller Council accommodation, either through transfers or mutual exchanges.
- In the first two months of the “bedroom tax” coming into operation (1st April 2013 - 31st May 2013), of the 347 tenants affected throughout the period:
 - (a) 53 tenants (15%) who now have to contribute towards their rent (due to under-occupying their Council property) did not pay any rent;
 - (b) 122 tenants (35%) who now have to contribute towards their rent (due to under-occupying their Council property) paid the full amounts required;
 - (c) The total amount of rent arrears that accrued during this 2-month period from tenants who now have to contribute towards their rent (due to their under-occupation) was £6,175. The existing level of rent arrears for these cases at 1st April 2013 was £39,400, which increased to £45,575 by 31st May 2013.
 - (d) The total amount of rent due from all these tenants affected during this 2-month period was around £93,000, plus the existing rent arrears of around £39,000 – totaling around £132,000.
 - (e) Of this £132,000, only around £70,000 was paid - representing a rent collection rate of just 53% (compared to the Council’s overall rent collection rate for all properties in 2012/13 of 97.16% - some 44% lower).
- Following detailed consideration and recommendations by the Housing Scrutiny Panel, and a subsequent consultation exercise, the Cabinet adopted a new Housing Allocations Scheme on 15 April 2013, effective from 1st September 2013, which included the following provisions to help mitigate the effects of the welfare reforms:
 - (a) A change to the size of Council properties offered to housing applicants,

in order to meet the Local Housing Allowance requirements;

- (b) A provision that no penalties will be applied for downsizing tenants who refuse an offer of accommodation for which they have expressed an interest;
 - (c) A reduction in the age limit for bungalows, from 60 to 50 years of age for those downsizing;
 - (d) Under-occupying tenants being kept in the highest priority band; and
 - (e) A provision that homeless families with less than 3 years residence in the District should be placed in suitable private rented accommodation if possible.
- The budget for providing tenants with financial incentives to downsize to smaller accommodation has been doubled for 2013/14.
 - The Epping Forest Re-use Project has been launched, which has leased a warehouse at Bowers Hill, Epping. The Scheme provides used furniture to those in need, with reduced prices for those in receipt of benefits.
 - The CAB's two new temporary Debt Advisor posts have now been filled.
 - An appointment has been made to the additional post of Homelessness Prevention Officer, following the Cabinet's decision to use part of the CLG's funding for homelessness prevention to create the additional post.
 - The Finance and Technology Portfolio Holder has agreed the Council's new Discretionary Housing (DHP) Policy, which includes the use of DHPs for rental loans etc. Since April 2013, 47 applications for DHP's had been considered, of which 26 applications had been accepted and 21 had been refused.
 - The Council's Management Board has identified that the effects of the welfare reforms on the Council and the community represent one of the Council's 8 most significant risks.