

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 27 JULY 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.05 - 8.55 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, Councillor Mrs D Borton, Mrs J Lea, G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse, J Wyatt and Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants and Leasholders Federation)

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: Mrs P Brooks and Mrs H Harding

Officers Present A Hall (Head of Housing Services), J Gilbert (Head of Environmental Services), S Stranders (Environmental Services), L Swan (Environmental Services) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

1. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Panel noted that there were no declarations of interest.

3. NOTES OF LAST MEETING - 27 APRIL 2006

The minutes of the last meeting were noted. The Head of Housing Services reported to the Panel that the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2006 had been signed off by the Housing Portfolio Holder incorporating the Housing Scrutiny Panel's comments.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

Noted that the item on the Housing Service Strategy on the Private Rented Sector (item 4 on the work programme) will now go to the October meeting. The Housing Harassment Strategy is to be added to the work programme, as it was to be covered at this meeting.

Further information on item 12 of the work programme 'Implementation of Choice Based Lettings', relating to the proposed specification of the Choice Based Lettings Service should be ready in early September and a special meeting should be arranged for this item in September.

RESOLVED:

That a Special meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel be arranged for Monday 11 September 2006 starting at 5.30 p.m.

Councillor Stellan reported that in the last municipal year Councillor Mrs Whitehouse had requested a review of the Handypersons scheme, which had been agreed by the previous Portfolio Holder. Councillor Stellan had recently raised this issue with the Task and Finish Panel on Older Services, but that Panel had said that it was unable to undertake a review. However, it was understood that Councillor Mrs Whitehouse had recently indicated that she may not now wish this review to be carried out. The Chairman left it with Councillor Mrs Whitehouse to pursue the matter if she still wanted the review to take place. If so, it was noted that she would have to make a formal request to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to see if this extra piece of work could be taken on by a panel, and if agreed, the Committee would have to decide to which Panel it would go to.

5. HOUSING ETHNIC MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Housing Services introduced a report on the Ethnic Monitoring of the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing Register, compared with the ethnicity of those allocated accommodation. The reason for the review is to identify whether or not there are any indications that suggest the Council may be discriminating against any one ethnic group.

It was noted that although around 15.2% of housing applicants do not disclose their ethnicity, it is evident from the analyses shown in the report that the ethnic make up of the Housing Register mirrors the allocation of vacancies sufficiently for the Council to be confident that its Allocation Scheme does not racially discriminate, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, no adjustments to the Allocation Scheme were recommended.

RESOLVED:

1. That no recommendations be made concerning amendments to the Council's Allocations Scheme as current figures do not show a significant disparity between the ethnicity of applicants in housing need in the District and those allocated accommodation through the Housing Register; and
2. That, in future years, in accordance with the recommendations arising from the Race and Diversity Impact Assessments within Housing Services, the ethnicity of applicants offered sheltered accommodation be monitored and reported separately.

6. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING STRATEGY

The Principal Team Leader from Environmental Services introduced the report on the Private Sector Housing Strategy. The draft Strategy will lead to substantial changes in the enforcement of private sector housing standards and the arrangements for giving financial assistance to promote the repair and improvement of sub-standard private sector housing.

Until the Regulatory Reform Order 2002, the Government set very clear rules, which governed the way that local authorities could give financial help. With effect from July 2003, the Order set aside these rules and gave local authorities much greater freedom to offer financial assistance in ways that reflect local needs, circumstances

and resources. To do this, however, a local authority had to prepare a Private Sector Housing Strategy and Renewal Policy, which looked at evidence of local circumstances and linked local priorities with national, regional and other local strategies.

In 2005, a general House Condition Survey was carried out which provided a substantial amount of information on the condition of local private sector housing stock. In addition, an additional survey of empty homes was carried out. With the benefit of up to date local information, and in the light of the significant changes introduced by the Housing Act 2004, the pressure to tackle decent homes and national trend towards introducing private sector finance, a fundamental review of the Strategy had become necessary.

It was noted that:

- For the medium term move from giving grants to equity release, negotiations will be required with a specialist not for profit financial provider and it is hoped that the system will be organised in conjunction with other local authority partners;
- the Disabled Facilities Grant would be raised from £300k to £500k for 2006/07;
- GO-East has confirmed that a capital grant of £447k targeted at improving non-decent private sector properties will be made available for 2006/07, with a further £223k for 2007/08. Any of these additional funds not spent can be rolled into future years provided there is a plan in place showing how they are to be spent, and a commitment to deliver the plan;
- It is anticipated that the spend over the next two years will total £2,129k;
- Existing staffing resources are not adequate and should be increased by 1.5 FTE and a specialist consultant is needed for which £20k had been initially allocated.

The Panel wanted to know if the £20k set aside was enough to provide the services of a consultant. The Principal Team Leader from Environmental Services said that they were not sure if it was enough but they hoped to form partnerships with another local Council, which would help with the costs. The consultant (in consultation with other Local Authorities) in turn would help the council chose the best Equity Release mechanisms to use in conjunction with the strategy.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse wondered if would be possible to introduce the householders to the current Essex Savers scheme currently operating.

Councillor Borton wondered how EFDC selected the houses that were in need of rejuvenation? It was explained that the new Housing Act required Local authorities to go and find the non-decent properties in their area and assess them. They may find residents who don't want to know, but the Housing Act places a duty on Local Authorities who in turn can take enforcement action if unsafe conditions are found in a property and can serve a hazard awareness notice to the house-holder. Councillor Borton asked how they would assess the need for a grant and was told that several criteria was used including, age, disability, children etc. The Head of Environmental Services added that they were not trying to create a "Housing Police" – the government is just trying to bring unfit and unsound housing back into use. Most referrals would come through from complaints.

Councillor Angold-Stephens said that some people were nervous about equity release schemes. He also asked if there would be powers to go down the enforcement route for owner occupiers, which may not be welcome. He was told that

officers were aware of the problems associated with many equity release schemes and any enforcement with regard to housing standards would be reasonable and in line with the Council's Enforcement Concordat. Councillor Gadsby said that equity release was a complicated procedure, would there be adequate advice given? It was confirmed that the Council's C.A.R.E agency would help people through the process, that and the use of our consultant and working with not for profit organisations would also help ensure that people got the best, impartial advice.

Councillor Stallan noted that recommendation 3 was asking to increase the establishment by 1.5 FTE in order to deliver the strategy, would that be for this year? He was told that the posts were to be phased in, but there was an immediate need of 0.5 of a post to apply for new grants to set up the scheme. But they would be looking to increase it in 2007/08.

The Chairman wanted to know if the £20,000 to be spent on the consultant could also help develop in-house expertise. He was told that it would happen as a by-product as they would learn in-house as the scheme progressed.

The Panel wanted to clarify if the money in recommendation 3 was to be for this year or next year. This would be clarified in conjunction with the Chairman of the panel at a later date. Subject to this clarification, the reports recommendations were agreed.

RESOLVED:

- (1) The Panel recommend to Cabinet that the draft Private Sector Housing Strategy should be adopted as Council policy;
- (2) The Panel agreed to accept a further report setting out a detailed Housing Assistance Policy which will regulate the manner in which financial assistance is given to private sector households;
- (3) The Panel recommend to Cabinet to increase the establishment by 1.5 FTE in order to deliver this Strategy at cost of £61,971;
- (4) The Panel recommend to Cabinet that the capital allocation for DFG's be kept at £500k per annum; and
- (5) The Panel recommend to Cabinet that a DDF allocation of £20,000 be made to engage a specialist consultant to support the delivery of this strategy.

7. EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

The Principal Team Leader from Environmental Services introduced the draft Empty Property Strategy, explaining that they were seeking approval in principle for the draft strategy. She explained that the money secured by the GO-East bid was not required to be paid back, but that the new proposed grant will have to be repaid if the owners of the empty properties sells up within a certain time period. The maximum eligible expense will be £10,000 with landlords only qualifying for a maximum of 50%.

Councillor Wyatt asked if these were rented out to council tenants, would it be a secure tenancy. He was told that only Local Authorities could provide secure tenancies. Councillor Wyatt also asked if any safeguards could be put in place to stop landlords receiving more than one grant per property. The Principal Team Leader said that some sort safeguards could be put into place, requiring the landlord

to put the property back into use and to take council nominated tenants and restrict the payment of £1,000 Finders Fee per property on a once only basis.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse wanted to know what sort of tenancy agreement would they have and would EFDC have an oversight. The Head of Housing Services said that the landlord would provide an Assured Shorthold Tenancy, and they would not be council tenants, but would be taken of the housing applicants list. The Council rent officer would set the rate.

Councillor Stallan welcomed the strategy but asked why the extra (0.5 FTE) was needed. The Head of Environmental Services replied that it was complicated and they may have to produce a fuller report to make a case for the extra staff asked for. The need for extra resources across private sector housing is not only due to the changes in the law but is also a catch up exercise where the Council has not delivered a private sector enforcement service in the past.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked that a follow up report be provided to the Panel six months after the scheme had started. It was agreed that a follow up report would come to the panel in October 2007.

AGREED:

- 1) Officers to add in safeguards into the report that goes to Cabinet to stop landlords receiving more than one grant per property; and
- 2) That the Panel receive a follow up report in October 2007.

RESOLVED:

- (6) The Panel agrees to recommend to Cabinet that the draft Empty Property Strategy (with additional safeguards) should be adopted as Council policy;
- (7) The Panel recommends to Cabinet to increase the establishment by 0.5 FTE in order to deliver this Strategy at a cost of £20,657; and
- (8) The Panel recommends to Cabinet that a CSB growth of £5000 for 2007/8 be made to fund the Finders Fee Scheme for five properties per annum.

8. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY ON HARASSMENT

The Head of Housing Services introduced a report on the Housing Services Strategy on Harassment. The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel was asked to consider the strategy and provide any comments to the Housing Portfolio Holder. It was noted that the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation and the Anti Social Behaviour Violent Crime and Tasking Group are also to be consulted on this strategy.

It was noted that Housing Services condemns all forms of harassment and bullying and recognised that harassment is defined by the impact on the victim of harassment, not by the intentions of the alleged perpetrator.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked what sort of support could the Council provide. She was told that that EFDC could offer a transfer within our district, called a Priority Transfer, but this is only given if endorsed by the police.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel have no comments to make on the draft Housing Service Strategy on Harassment and recommended its adoption by the Housing Portfolio Holder.

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

Housing Scrutiny Ethnic Monitoring Report;
Private Sector Housing Strategy;
Empty Property Strategy; and
Housing Service Strategy on Harassment.

10. FUTURE MEETINGS

It was noted that a special meeting of the Panel would be held on 11 September 2006 starting at 5:30pm to discuss the report on Choice Based Lettings.

It was also agreed that all future meeting of the panel would begin at 5:30pm.

The next meetings of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel are:

11 September 2006,
31 October 2006,
30 January 2007, and
30 April 2007.