

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 7.30 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, D Bateman, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs D Borton, Mrs H Harding, Mrs J Lea, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J Wyatt

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence:

Officers Present A Hall (Head of Housing Services), R Wilson (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)), R Wallace (Housing Needs Manager), T Shelly (Asst. Housing Needs Manager) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

18. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

19. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Panel noted that there were no declarations of interest.

20. TO NOTE THE MINUTES OF LAST MEETING HELD ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2006

The minutes from the last meeting were noted and agreed.

21. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted. The Panel agreed the request of the Chairman that item 15 on the Work Programme (Leaseholder Service Charges for Major Works and Improvement – Payment Arrangements), be added to the Work Programme (classified as ‘medium’ priority) for consideration by the Panel in January 2007.

22. CHANGE IN ORDER OF AGENDA

By the leave of the Chairman the Housing Services Strategy on Empty Council Dwelling was considered next.

23. HOUSING SERVICES STRATEGY - EMPTY COUNCIL DWELLINGS

The Panel considered the strategy relating to vacant Council dwellings. This strategy was updated from the 2003 version and did not include empty properties in the

private sector. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had already considered and supported this strategy, with no proposed amendments.

The Head of Housing Services took the Panel through the document pointing out that Section 5 listed the aims and objectives of the strategy. He was asked if there were so many vacant properties why did so many people have to wait a long time to be housed. He replied that at 0.8% of the total housing stock, the vacant properties were not that numerous, and these vacancies comprised of different size properties (flats and houses with different bedroom combinations). Houses were generally the most sought after, and these were not always available.

Councillor Angold-Stephens asked which were the hardest to let properties. He was told that was mostly the bed-sits in sheltered housing schemes. In response to the question as to why the Council could not house younger people in these bed-sits, he was told it was not advisable to mix the younger, possibly homeless persons in with older people in sheltered housing schemes, also if the Council mixed the ages in sheltered housing schemes they would open them up to 'right to buy' rights.

Councillor Mrs Lea asked if the council could restrict re-housing people who leave their old properties in a bad condition. She was told that the council could not, but could charge the tenant for the damage caused, but it would have to be severe damage if they were to take them off the Housing Register.

It was noted that the table in section 11, Key Targets and Performance Monitoring, the heading 'Performance' should be replaced by the word 'Targets'. It was agreed that the target percentage of rent loss from empty properties be reduced to less than (<) 1%.

Councillor Murray asked if the third point of the action plan, about multiple viewings, was just to be considered or was to be implemented. He was informed that officers were considering this but had not implemented this as yet.

RESOLVED:

That, having considered the Housing Service Strategy on Empty Council Dwellings, the Strategy be supported and the only comment to be provided to the Housing Portfolio Holder is that the target percentage of rent loss (Section 11, table) from empty properties be reduced to less than (<) 1%.

24. EPPING FOREST LOCAL SUPPORTING PEOPLE STRATEGY 2006-2010 - SIX-MONTH PROGRESS REPORT (OCTOBER 2006)

The Head of Housing Services took the Panel through the six-month progress report on the Epping Forest Supporting People Strategy 2006-2010. He told the Panel that this was not a Council document but is produced by the Local Supporting People Core Strategy Group, of which the Council is a member.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse asked what control the Council had over the placing of emergency pull cords in sheltered housing. She was told that it would depend on who owned the premises; if the Council owns the homes then it is responsible. It was noted that the Council did provide the monitoring service for all sheltered accommodation.

Councillor Angold-Stephens asked about Point 24, that the Homelessness Prevention Officer was to be part time but is now full time; will they have enough

work? The Head of Housing Services replied that because it was partly funded by Government, the Council was pleased to get funding for a full time officer. This officer is now heading up a small team who do all they can to prevent homelessness, which in turn has helped to reduce the number of homelessness applications and acceptances.

Councillor Mrs Harding noted that under Point 19 there was still a vacancy at Cripsey Avenue for a person with learning difficulties, why this was the case. It was explained in response that it was because Essex County had informed this Council that there was no-one in this district that was suitable for the amount of care. The Head of Housing Services commented that he had found this hard to believe, so was resisting an allocation being made to someone from outside the District, until a suitable candidate from this district could be found.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel noted the six-month progress report for the Epping Forest Local Supporting Strategy 2006-2010.

25. HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME

The Assistant Head of Housing Services introduced this report on the review of the Council's Housing Allocation Scheme. He also introduced Russell Wallace the Housing Needs Manager and Tracy Selly the Assistant Housing Needs Manager who were there to answer any detailed questions on the Scheme.

It was explained that the proposed changes to the Scheme would be implemented in stages; the first stage will be general changes required as a result of the review, which would take effect from 1 April 2007, and stage two will be changes to the Allocations Scheme to meet with the requirements of Choice Based Lettings. Part of the proposals included a reduction from 7 to 6 bands.

It was noted that:

- The Council could not ask applicants for ID photos with their application forms;
- Clarification was given to acts of anti social behaviour in paragraph 8.6;
- Paragraphs 9.1 and 9.2 is aimed at meeting the governments targets;
- Under paragraph 13.3 a tenant has the chance to appeal against being taken off the Housing Register through their failure to renew their application. The Scrutiny Panel agreed that, a letter informing them to this effect should be sent;
- Ex-army families and servicemen are treated sympathetically if they wish to join the Housing Register, each case is judged on it's own merits;

Appendix 3:

- To move all non-priority homelessness cases to new Band 4;
- Persons of 'no fixed abode' are not necessarily homeless as they could be staying with friends and family; a lot of these people would be picked up by the Single Homelessness Accommodation for Epping Forest (SAFE) Project;

RESOLVED:

That, having considered the review of the Housing Allocations Scheme, the Panel's comments be passed on to the Housing Portfolio Holder for his consideration prior to its submission to the Cabinet.

26. HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY - EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

The meeting considered the Housing Service Strategy on Equality and Diversity, which was introduced by the Assistant Head of Housing. It was noted that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had already considered this Strategy, which had suggested that the Strategy be put on the Council's Website. Also it was thought to be useful for Citizen Advice Bureaux to be given copies of them.

RESOLVED:

That, having considered the Housing Service Strategy on Equality and Diversity, the Strategy be supported.

27. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS UPDATE

An update on this scheme was given by the Assistant Head of Housing. He informed the meeting that consultants had been employed and paid for by the Government funding, an advert had gone into the EU journal asking for expressions of interest to appoint a Choice Based Letting Agency, hopefully by February 2007, and would be in place before the end of 2007.

There is now a memorandum of understanding between all participants, which included agreement that all the local authorities would have individual contracts with the choice based lettings agency. Officers would be consulting with all external agencies on 6 December 2006 and would also be consulting with all the Council's tenants and applicants.

It was noted that Uttlesford DC had now dropped out of the partnership, claiming they were not happy with having a blanket scheme across all the areas.

EFDC staff training would be commencing shortly. A list of potential distribution points for the two-weekly publication was tabled, and it was noted that it would be possible to post the publication out to vulnerable members of the public who were unable to pick up their own copy. The meeting asked if Post Offices could be added to the list as well as Loughton Leisure Centre and Loughton Town Council. Asked if people could subscribe to the publication the Assistant Head of Housing Services replied that they could if they paid. All councillors would also receive a copy of the publication.

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

The Chairman agreed that all items reported tonight should be reported to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

29. FUTURE MEETINGS

The scheduled future meetings of 30 January 2007 and 30 April 2007 were agreed.