

**COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN AT 7.30 PM on 14 SEPTEMBER 2006**

Present:- Councillor D J Morson – Chairman.
Councillors H D Baker, M A Hibbs, R M Lemon, J E Menell,
M J Miller, J P Murphy and G Sell.

Tenant Forum Representative:- Mrs D Cornell.

Officers in attendance:- G Bradley, R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, M Cox,
J Dear, P O'Dell, T Turner and C Wingfield.

C15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C A Bayley, P Boland, M A Gayler, E W Hicks, A Marchant, S V Schneider, F E Silver and Mrs J Bolvig – Hanson (Tenant Forum).

Councillor Sell declared a personal interest as a member of Stansted Parish Council. Councillor Miller declared a personal interest as a member of Dunmow Town Council and Councillor Lemon declared a personal interest as a member of Hatfield Heath Parish Council.

Councillor Murphy declared a personal prejudicial interest in item number 13, Great Dunmow Skateboard Park as a member of Great Dunmow Town Council and would leave the meeting for the consideration of this item.

C16 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2006 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

C17 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute C3 (i) - Great Dunmow Primary School – Eastern Boundary Housing Land

The Committee was advised that a report on this matter had been considered by the East Area Panel and it had been agreed that no further action be taken in respect of the closure of the strip of land in question.

(ii) Minute C3 (iv) – Thaxted Day Centre

Members were informed that a full report on the project would be considered at the next meeting of the East Area Panel.

(iii) **Minute C9 – First Aid**

The Principal Environmental Health Officer said that 5 to 6 members of staff would shortly be trained in the use of the defibrillator equipment at the Council Offices.

C18

DIVERSITY

The Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) presented a report on the progress of the diversity agenda. Since the Diversity Festival in 2005, equalities and diversity were now priorities within the Corporate Plan, diversity forming part of the Community Engagement Project. There were, however, limited district resources for initiatives. Initial attempts to recruit to a part time one year post, to establish diversity network, had not been successful. The nature of the work now required was outside the scope of the original post and officers were looking at how to support the agenda on a practical level. There were two main strands in taking forward the diversity agenda, research and needs analysis and community development work.

It was essential to build a comprehensive picture of minority ethnic communities in the district so that services could be allocated accordingly. A study was being compiled by EXDRA, focussing on the economic impact of migrant workers in the sub region and the Joint Research and Intelligent officer would be undertaking research to map the size and where possible, the needs of the District's minority ethnic community. Because of limited funding, other authorities and voluntary sector organisations had been approached for opportunities of joint research or input into a jointly funded post.

Once the new communications team was fully staffed in November, analysis would be undertaken of related issues such as language translations and appropriate consultation with minority ethnic and other hard to reach groups.

Councillor Sell said that he was disappointed with the limited progress that had been made on this matter since the Diversity Festival last year. He agreed that partnership working was the way forward and acknowledged that it was difficult to obtain information about migrant workers. He said that there were many diverse communities now represented in the District and each had different issues and problems. Members agreed that it was crucial to obtain up to date information and that the voluntary sector including churches and the PCT were important in building links with the communities. Members said that the Council could help practically by facilitating English language courses. Members hoped that this issue would be kept on the Committee's agenda and noted that future funding might need to be considered.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the progress made in developing work programmes to address the diversity agenda.

C19

EMERGENCY PLANNING BEIRUT EVACUATION

The District Emergency Planning Officer outlined the events which had occurred during the Beirut Evacuation in July. On the whole, the emergency

procedures had worked well, but the report set out a number of learning objectives to be incorporated for future emergencies.

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) outlined the Housing Department's role in the emergency. There had been 23 family units, which the Council had a duty to house. Initially, accommodation had been provided in student rooms at Colchester University. To find more permanent accommodation, a few other Councils in the country had taken some of the refugees. For the remaining 16 family units officers had decided to open up some difficult to let accommodation and everyone had now been successfully housed. There were however ongoing needs which Council officers and other agencies were dealing with. A number of officers had been involved and had worked exceptionally hard to help the families. The Executive Manager said he was proud of the way that the department had dealt with the crisis, but said that officers had been very stretched and would not be able to cope if this was to become a frequent occurrence.

In terms of financial implications, it was estimated that the initial weekend of dealing with the arriving refugees had cost in the region of £42,000. The Council had lodged a claim under the Belvin Scheme, but this had been turned down as it applied only to natural emergencies and disasters. The Council was now lobbying other Government departments for funding, and Members' influence might be necessary if this was not forthcoming.

Members commented that if such an emergency was to be an ongoing problem, the Council should plan for this and hoped that Councillors would be asked for help if necessary.

The Committee paid tribute to all the staff that had been involved in the operation.

C20

EMPTY HOMES INITIATIVES

The Principal Environmental Health Officer reported that new powers to deal more effectively with long term empty properties had recently come into force. These powers enabled housing authorities to apply for an Interim Empty Dwelling Management order if a property had been empty for more than six months, subject to a number of exemptions. Officers at Brentwood District Council and Epping Forest District Council had suggested that the three authorities could enter into an agreement to jointly finance an empty homes officer as the local authorities were similar in character, with about 400 – 500 properties and neither of them could justify a full time post of their own. The cost would be in the range of £15,000 - £20,000 per authority.

RESOLVED that officers investigate joint funding, in the region of £15,000 - £20,000, for an Empty Homes Initiative officer for a period of two years.

C21

HOUSING POLICY

The Executive Manager Housing Services presented a report which outlined a number of issues that needed to be addressed by the Council over the next few years. First, there was a need for the Council to review the quality and requirement for sheltered housing provision as part of the future housing strategy statement. Officers had been looking at the sheltered stock to ascertain those sites that needed to be reviewed urgently and Mead Court, Stansted and Reynolds Court, Newport had been identified. The second issue was the provision of short term accommodation. The Homelessness Task Group had considered that there was a need for “manage short stay accommodation” provision within the district. Officers had identified an appropriate site in Manor Road, Stansted and suggested carrying out a feasibility study and report back to a future meeting of the Committee.

The third issue was opportunities for development. These were council owned sites that had been identified for possible housing development. The report set out the sites and the progress regarding the discussion with housing associations.

The Executive Manager concluded that the recommendations were to enable the Council to address a number of new policies to maximise resources and provide new and more appropriate accommodation for specific client groups. All initiatives would be subject to future reports to Committee.

Councillor Murphy said that he did not support the two proposals for housing developments in Great Dunmow. He said that Dunmow needed a comprehensive master plan as to the appropriate use of the land. He asked that alternative uses for the sites be considered in consultation with the residents. Councillor Hibbs replied that the Housing Strategy Working Party had been aware of the sensitive nature of these sites. Each location had been looked at very closely for its appropriateness for housing. There had been a lot of consultation and information had been obtained to produce this list of priorities. He considered that this land should be set aside as housing land as there were a large number of people in the district in need of homes. He confirmed that all schemes would be brought to this Committee for consideration.

Councillor Sell agreed that some improvements were required at Mead Court, Stansted but hoped that thorough consultation would take place with residents. For Manor Road, Stansted, this was a difficult location, but the establishment of a homeless facility was a sensitive issue. The Executive Manager said that this site appeared to have the right facilities, but he would report all views and the results of the feasibility study back to Members.

Mrs Cornell, the Tenant Panel Representative agreed with the report, particularly the changing aspirations of elderly residents and their decreasing desire to move to sheltered accommodation. The Tenant Forum had commented that the greatest need in the district was for short term accommodation especially for young people.

Councillor Murphy requested that a recorded vote be taken.

For the proposal: Councillors H D Baker, M A Hibbs, R M Lemon, J E Menell, M J Miller and G Sell.

Against the proposal: Councillor J P Murphy.

RESOLVED that the Committee

- 1 Notes the report.
- 2 Agrees that the feasibility studies be carried out about future requirements at Mead Court, Stansted and Reynolds Court, Newport as part of a sheltered housing strategy.
- 3 Endorses the action taken regarding the possible use of Holloway Crescent, Leaden Roding for the provision of extra care housing.
- 4 Agrees to carry out a feasibility study about the provision of a managed short stay accommodation unit.
- 5 Agrees with using the 4 sites identified in the report for affordable housing and carry out additional consultation with Great Dunmow Town Council.
- 6 Reviews the need to sell or develop the remaining sites referred to in the report subject to progress on the initiatives.
- 7 Receives more detailed reports on the initiatives at future meetings.

C22

GREAT DUNMOW MUSEUM

The Great Dunmow Museum Society had requested a renewal of its previous grant from the Council for 2006/07 and the next two years, at £2,750 per year. The grant was essential to enable it to meet its share of the running costs of The Maltings, Great Dunmow as required by the lease agreement. A small earmarked reserve had been found which could fund the current year's application, pending consideration during the forthcoming budget process of the longer term request.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The Operations Committee be requested to approve the grant of £2,750 to the Great Dunmow Museum Society for 2006/07, funded from the earmarked reserve for the promotion of Local Centres.
- 2 The Community Committee approve that the funding request for the years 2007/08 and 2008/09 be added to the draft budget, with final decisions to be taken during January/February committee cycle.

C23

MUSEUM AUDIT REPORT

The Committee received a verbal update on the Museum Audit Report. A full report would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

C24 CHOICE BASED LETTING

The Committee recalled that it had previously agreed that the Council should be part of the sub regional bid to try and access funding for the implementation of a Choice Based Letting Scheme. At the last meeting, it had been reported that the bid had been successful and officers had been instructed to work with consultants about the details of introducing a scheme. It had been expected that a report would be presented later in the year, but the timetable had changed due to the need to appoint consultants to oversee implementation. The Committee was now required to make a decision as to whether to proceed with the scheme. The Executive Manager was concerned about a number of significant issues which still needed to be fully thought through nationally and then locally before a scheme was adopted. Until there was clarity on the issues, officers felt it inappropriate for the Council to commit to a fundamental change in its allocation process.

The Committee agreed with the report but hoped that a Choice Based Letting scheme could be established in the future, on a local basis if necessary.

RESOLVED that the Council does not at the time proceed with the implementation of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme but officers be asked to prepare a report for a future meeting on the viability of a stand alone scheme.

C25 EMERGENCY PLANNING COUNCIL OFFICES

The Committee received a report which outlined the events of the flooding of the ground floor of the Council Offices on 15 July 2006.

C26 FUNDING ALLOCATION CRITERIA

At the last meeting of the Committee, there had been a request for funds from a community group and at that time, Members had asked that officers devise criteria by which future applications could be judged. It was noted that the Community Committee did not have any budgetary provision associated with awarding grants and any ad hoc funding would only be considered in cases where there was special circumstances and the request merited such an award. Applications to the Committee should normally be considered during the budget process. However, some issues did arise outside this period and the Committee was asked whether such applications should be considered at all outside of the budget process.

The Leisure and Community Development Manager had devised a scheme for assessing ad hoc grant requests. The report set out the suggested funding criteria and a scoring mechanism to be incorporated into the evaluation sheet. It was suggested that applications achieving a score of fully met should be considered for the award of the full amount requested.

Applications with a part met score would be awarded a percentage. The two schemes to be considered later in the agenda had been evaluated using the new criteria.

Councillor Menell thought it would be more appropriate for the Area Panel to determine all the requests for grant funding in their areas, which would ensure equity across the district. Other Members felt there was still a need for centralised consideration and that the Council should maintain flexibility to deal with unplanned need.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The Committee continue to accept applications for ad hoc funds to community projects outside the Council's normal budget process.
- 2 The Operations Committee be informed that such applications will be considered by this Committee but in the full knowledge that any funding eventually recommended will be subject to either virement possibilities within the Committee's own budget or a justification being made to the Operations Committee and Full Council for additional funding if that is required.
- 3 The suggested criteria outlined in the report be adopted as the basis for any such requests being considered.

C27

GREAT DUNMOW SKATE PARK

Councillor Murphy left the meeting for the consideration of this item.

Members were informed that Great Dunmow Town Council had requested a contribution towards the replacement of the existing skate park equipment at Great Dunmow. The District Council was requested to contribute up to £30,000 to help provide the replacement equipment. The Project Team had been out to tender for the works and these were in the region of £60,000. Great Dunmow Town Council had committed £15,000 and the Essex County Community Initiative had put forward £12,800. A number of other organisations and grant funds were being approached, but a commitment from the District Council would give credibility to the scheme and increase the likelihood of these being obtained. Any grants received from other parties would reduce the District Council's contribution. The request had been considered at the East Area Panel and had been supported by all members.

The request had been assessed by the proposed funding allocation criteria and qualified for a 100% grant.

RESOLVED that the Committee recommends that the Operations Committee support the contribution of up to £30,000 to the Great Dunmow Skate Park and is asked to request the Full Council to make such provision in the Council's Capital Programme.

C28

STANSTED SKATEBOARD PARK

Councillor Sell left the meeting for the consideration of this item.

Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council had requested a contribution towards phase 2 of the development of the skate park. The District Council had contributed £19,000 towards phase 1 of the skate park in 2004 and the Parish Council had raised another £66,000 and now intended to raise another £40,000 to purchase more equipment as part of phase 2 of the project. The Parish Council had awarded a further £5,000, other fundraising had secured £14,543 and an application had also been made to the Essex County Council Youth Service for £2,000. The District Council had been asked to contribute the amount of £20,000 to enable this equipment to be purchased.

The request had been approved by the South West Area Panel and had met the criteria of the new allocation policy.

RESOLVED that the Committee recommends that the Operations Committee supports the contribution of £20,000 to the Stansted Skateboard Park and is asked to request the Full Council to make such provision in the Council's Capital Programme.

C29

REPORT OF HOUSING CONFERENCE

The Committee noted the report of the Housing Conference held in Harrogate in the summer.

C30

BUDGETARY CONTROL REPORT 2006/07

The Committee was provided with details of its spending and income compared to budget for the period 1 April to 31 July 2006. The only significant variation was a projected year end overspend on the management and administration element of the Environment and Cultural Services. This was most likely due to the implementation of the CRM system, but this would be subject to further examination to bring it back in line.

C31

GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2007/08

The Committee received a report which provided the starting point for the preparation of the Committee's 2007/08 General Fund Budget by looking at new spending pressures against the background of the Council's likely overall financial position. It was noted that final decisions on the budget would not be made until January and February 2007 but it seemed likely that significant savings would be required to balance the budget. Officers were asking for an early indication from the Committee about spending pressures which it supported and should be included in the formal consultation with the public. The report also looked at the initial scope to devolve budgets to area panels and sought the Committee's views on this issue.

Members considered the Committee's new spending pressures. Councillor Gayler said that any new spending should only be supported if it was vital or unavoidable. Councillor Hibbs felt it was inappropriate for the Committee to be discussing such small items as these should be absorbed in the process of managing change and balanced by other savings.

With regard to consultation, Councillor Hibbs said it was important to consult the public on all the proposed additional spending, while other Members felt that it would be more appropriate to consult the public only on significant items. It was moved by Councillor Hibbs and duly seconded that only the £40,000 for the purchase of an emergency response vehicle be included in public consultation regarding the Council budget.

Councillor Murphy asked that a recorded vote be taken.

For the proposal: Councillors H D Baker, M A Hibbs, J E Menell, D J Morson, G Sell.

Against the proposal: Councillors R M Lemon, M J Miller, J P Murphy.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The ongoing and one off spending pressures contained in appendix 1 of the report be included in the draft budget and be subject of individual business cases in January 2007.
- 2 The £40,000 for the purchase of an emergency response vehicle be included in public consultation regarding the Council's budget.
- 3 Further research and appropriate consultation be undertaken with regard to the possible devolvement of the four budgets highlighted as having potential as indicated in paragraph 15 of the report.

The meeting ended at 11.00 pm.