

**COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 24 JANUARY 2008**

Present:- Councillor S V Schneider – Chairman.
Councillors E C Abrahams, E L Bellingham-Smith,
R H Chamberlain, E W Hicks, S J Howell, J E Hudson,
J E Menell, M J Miller, D J Morson, J A Redfern, C C Smith and
G Sell.

Also present:- D Cornell (Tenant Forum Representative).

Officers in attendance:- D Bradley, D Burrige, W Cockerell, P Clanchy,
T Cowper, E Evans, R Millership, C Roberts, G Smith, M Stocks
and A Webb.

C38 PRESENTATION

A presentation had been given from 7.00 pm until immediately prior to the meeting about Buffy Bus activities, funding and philosophy. The speakers were the Co-ordinator and the Project Manager of the Buffy Bus Association.

C39 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D J Sadler, C C Smith and A C Yarwood.

C40 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mrs J Menell declared a personal interest in item 4 on the agenda insofar as she was the President of the Buffy Bus Association.
Councillor M J Miller declared a personal interest in item 10 on the agenda insofar as his wife ran a bed and breakfast establishment.

C41 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 November 2007 were agreed, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

C42 LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Director of Operations updated the Committee on matters arising from the Minutes which were not otherwise on the agenda and information items arising since the last meeting of the Committee.

(i) Post Office Closures

The Director of Operations informed Members that a letter had been sent by the Committee objecting to the four closures previously proposed. The final decision was to close the four post offices but because closure of three other post offices had been stopped it was proposed to close a further three including the Henham Stores Sub Post Office.

Councillor D Morson referred to a letter received from the Chairman of the Council relaying objections to the proposed closure of Henham Sub Post Office, particularly because its closure could impact on the viability of the community shop in which it was situated as well as inconveniencing residents.

Councillor Morson asked for the support of the Committee to oppose, formally the proposal to close the Henham Sub Post Office for the reasons that:-

- (a) The process was undemocratic since it should involve an interview with the post person before the decision was taken whether to close it, but in the case of Henham, the decision to close was being taken before that interview.
- (b) The proposal to close the sub post office made no economic sense in as much as it was situated in the community shop and so its overheads were very small.
- (c) The proposed closure ran counter to the Government's policy of community cohesion since it would adversely affect a community shop which was run seven days a week by 40 volunteers. The shop's customers used the finance and other facilities provided by the post office. Other Members felt that the decision to close the Henham Sub Post Office was most disappointing and flew in the face of the rural agenda.

RESOLVED that the Committee's formal opposition to the proposed closure of the Henham Post Office be conveyed to Post Office Ltd further to the comments made at the South West Area Panel.

(ii) Lebanese Report

Members noted the information comparing the costs of the Lebanon Evacuation experienced by different councils who had been involved in accommodating the evacuees. It was noted that the figures for Crawley Borough Council appeared incongruous. Members were also concerned to obtain some financial commitment from the Government since the Council might be presented with the same evacuation situation in the future. The Director of Operations assured the meeting that Jason Dear, the Emergency Planning Officer, was investigating this matter. A report would be brought to the Committee at a future meeting.

(iii) Negative Housing Subsidy

Members were most concerned that Yvette Cooper had refused the Council's request for a meeting to discuss the Negative Housing Subsidy.

RESOLVED in order to progress this matter that

- 1 The assistance and intervention of the local Member of Parliament, Sir Alan Haselhurst, be requested.
- 2 That the report of the Director of Operations be noted.

C43

STRAY DOGS

The Committee considered the report of the Principal Environmental Health Officer informing them that as from April, the police would no longer have responsibility to take in stray dogs and that, local authorities would have to provide a place for accepting stray dogs outside office hours. The report described several possible courses of action which could be taken and the Principal Environmental Health Officer informed Members of the numbers of dogs dealt with in the previous year, the scale of service required and the funding situation.

RESOLVED that

- 1 A kennelling facility be provided at an animal rescue site to be available around the clock for an initial outlay of up to £1,000.
- 2 The Head of Environmental Health be appointed as the officer for the purpose of discharging the function of accepting stray dogs.

C44

REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES – ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Environmental Health which proposed fees increases in the order of 2½% to keep pace with inflation and in step with internal and external influences on the services. In addition, the report suggested introduction of:-

- (i) a new service to deal with nuisance grey squirrels and
- (ii) a nominal charge for rat treatments as recommended in a recent audit report.

Members were of the view that there should be no charge for rat treatments. It was felt, however, that a report should be brought to a future meeting of the Committee on services regarding all pests. It was noted that there was a charge for rat treatments at commercial properties.

In answer to a question, the Head of Environmental Health explained that the proposed charge for dealing with grey squirrels was competitive compared with commercial prices because officers were available locally at any time. It was noted that there was a system for reduced rate charges to pensioners for treatment of pests.

Members considered that the charge for dealing with grey squirrels would provide a service at a competitive price for the public and more income for the Council and that the revisions to charges generally were of a reasonable amount.

RESOLVED

- 1 That the Council does not introduce a charge for the treatment of rats.
- 2 That the Council approve the introduction of a service to deal with nuisance grey squirrels in properties at a charge of £54 per hour.
- 3 That the table of revised charges for Environmental Health Division be approved.
- 4 That a report be brought to a future meeting of the Committee regarding pest control.

C45

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2008/09 – 2010/11

The Committee considered the Draft General Fund Capital Programme set out, with explanatory notes, in the Appendix to the report of the Capital Accountant.

Members asked questions about the changes to the funding timetable for rebuild of the Thaxted Day Centre so Mr M Stocks, the Electrical Surveyor, was invited to present his report on replacement of the existing Thaxted Day Centre. He described the progress to date and the need for an authority under “exemption to standing orders” KK12 in view of the specialised nature of the works, giving a detailed explanation of the actions taken in seeking out tenders and negotiating in order to achieve a suitable replacement day centre within budget.

Councillor Chamberlain commented that he thought the budget had been very carefully produced and was a credit to officers and Members thanked the Electrical Surveyor for his clear explanation of the funding aspect relating to the Thaxted Day Centre.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The Committee recommends to the Finance and Administration Committee the proposed revised Capital Budget for 2007/08 together with the proposed Capital Budgets for each of 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.
- 2 As regards the Thaxted Day Centre replacement, that the actions taken so far towards the procurement of a replacement day centre within budget be noted.

- 3 That in the light of the advice from the Electrical Surveyor and to enable officers to negotiate with two of the most favoured specialist contractors for a final scheme, firm price and early start and completion date, approval be recommended for the project to proceed under “exemption to standing orders” KK12 - specialised nature of the works.

C46 **HRA CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2008/09 – 2010/11**

Members considered the report of the Capital Accountant on the annotated Draft Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme. Members commented that the figures within the revised budget had increased, but that a detailed explanation had been given at the Housing Initiative Task Group by Mr Clanchy, and the difference would be covered by grant.

RESOLVED that the proposed revised Capital Budget for 2007/08 together with proposed Capital Budgets for each of 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 be recommended to the Finance and Administration Committee for approval.

C47 **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES AND RENT LEVELS 2008/09**

The Committee considered the report of the Acting Chief Financial Officer and the Director of Operations setting out the 2008/09 draft estimates for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

It was noted that the rent levels incorporated into the estimates were based on a formula set by Central Government and were for confirmation by the Council.

The Acting Chief Financial Officer explained that the report had been considered at length by the Tenant Forum and the Housing Initiatives Task Group. Members took into consideration the explanations which had been given by Mr Clanchy, at the meeting of the Housing Initiatives Task Group and the sheet of further financial information distributed at the Community Committee meeting.

The Tenants Forum had reluctantly accepted the proposals for increased rents which should permit repair to the housing stock. Mrs D Cornell, on behalf of the Forum, stressed, however, that the Forum would wish to see any increase in support services capped to a figure no greater than the increase in the retirement pension.

The Forum was not happy with an increase in rents of 6.6%, but was presented with a fait accompli by the Government whereby sums of 50% of the rent payments would be redirected to benefit other parts of the country. The Forum believed this to be extremely unfair, but was unable to alter the situation.

A cap of 5% on the formula rent had been expected, but the Forum was persuaded that the larger amount of 6.6% would slow the depletion of the

working balances in the Housing Revenue Account and therefore allow the Housing Department to keep the housing stock in good repair for present and future tenants. On this basis, reluctantly, the Forum agreed the recommendation.

The Chairman of the Committee expressed appreciation for the valuable feedback from the Tenants Forum and Mrs Cornell reciprocated.

Following a request from Councillor Chamberlain, it was agreed that a presentation on the Lifeline service be made to the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED that the Committee accept the Draft Estimates as presented for 2008/09 and recommend that:-

- 1 Weekly dwelling rents be increased by an average of 6.6% in line with the Government's proposals for rent restructuring.
- 2 Garage rents be increased from £7.40 to £7.60 per week (2.7%) and heating and sewage charges be increased in line with actual costs, capped at 5%.
- 3 Charges for warden services be set from April 2008 in accordance with the contracts with the commissioning body and that protection be continued for tenants at 31 March 2003 who are ineligible for Supporting People grant assistance. Charges for Lifeline services be similarly set from April 2008 in line with the contract with the commissioning body.
- 4 That a presentation about the Lifeline service be given to the next meeting of the Committee.

C48

GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2008/09

The Acting Chief Financial Officer explained that the Draft Budget contained details of all changes up to but not including the current round of redundancy figures. He asked Members to include in point 9 of the report the headings 2007/08, 2007/08 and 2008/09 above the columns headed respectively "Original", "Revised" and "Original".

In answer to a question from Councillor G Sell, the Acting Chief Financial Officer described the financial impact of transfer of the Tourism Information Centre to the Town Council. Members were concerned about the proposed TIC cuts and a number of different Members expressed their appreciation for the work of the TIC and their concern at the impact of transfer to the Town Council. It was nevertheless noted that there was in fact no proposal to close the Tourist Information Centre and discussions for its continuation were ongoing.

RESOLVED the Committee approves and submits to the Finance and Administration Committee:-

- (i) the revised General Fund Revenue Budget for Community Committee for 2007/08 as set out in Appendix 1 to the report of the Acting Chief Financial Officer;
- (ii) the Draft General Fund Revenue Budget for Community Committee for 2008/09 (Appendix 1); and
- (iii) that it be noted that the Committee recognises the valuable work of the Tourist Information Centre in promoting the Uttlesford District.

C49

LAND AT GREAT DUNMOW

The Committee considered a report and presentation from Mrs E Evans, the Right to Buy and Leasehold Officer, about a request to the Committee for sale of an area of the Council owned land at either Rosemary Crescent or Waldgrooms in Great Dunmow to provide an access road to a new development at Buildings Farmhouse, Great Dunmow.

In answer to a question from Councillor R Chamberlain, she explained that the decision whether to sell would come back to be considered by the Committee.

Members were made aware that consultation with tenants would be a part of the process and there was a possibility that additional parking for the Council's residents might be obtained with a contribution to the maintenance of the road. Rosemary Crescent was the preferred option of both the owner and the Great Dunmow Town Council. The District Valuer would probably recommend a high price for this land and require a contribution to the road maintenance and provision of parking for existing residents.

RESOLVED that the officers inform the owners of Buildings Farmhouse that the Council is prepared to enter into negotiations regarding the sale of the area of land at Rosemary Crescent in Great Dunmow to provide an access road to a new development at Buildings Farmhouse.

C50

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP

The Committee received a report from the Head of Housing Management informing them of recommendations from the Housing Initiative Task Group held on 10 December 2007. In answer to questions she explained the priorities of the various projects in contemplation.

RESOLVED that the Committee approves the recommendations set out in the Minutes of the Housing Initiative Task Group (Appendix 1) as follows:-

- 1 That a stock options appraisal be funded from the Housing Revenue Account during 2008/09.

- 2 That the following two options for Holloway Crescent are investigated further:-
 - (a) Utilise the sheltered block and the garage area to create a mixed site for general needs use and elderly accommodation – the preferred option.
 - (b) Dispose of the site to raise a capital receipt to include the garage area but not the green (to be retained as an open space), and obtain a valuation from the District Valuer's office to give some indication of the implications of pursuing the different options being examined.
- 3 That investigations should also conclude the principle of redeveloping Mead Court at Stansted with the first preference being the redevelopment of the sheltered block and garage area at Holloway Crescent for general needs housing in conjunction with the Housing Association and/or a private developer.
- 4 That the residents at Holloway Crescent be given the opportunity to comment upon the options under consideration.

C51

URGENT OTHER BUSINESS – COMMUNITY ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

The Committee was reminded of the Community Achievement Awards evening to be held on 21 February at 5.45 pm.

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm.