

**COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 PM on 13 MARCH 2008**

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

Officers in attendance:-

G Bradley (Leisure and Community Development Manager), D
Burrige (Director of Operations), S Clarke (Housing Strategy
and Planning Policy Manager), R Millership (Head of Division,
Housing Services), E Petrie (Housing Management Manager), R
Procter (Committee Officer), J Snares (Senior Housing Officer -
Homelessness), S Walker (Housing Enabling and Development
Officer) and C Wingfield (Museum Curator).

C52 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E C Abrahams, D J
Morson and M J Miller, and from Mrs D Cornell, and Mr S Sproul, Tenant
Forum co-opted representatives, and from Mr D Parrish as Mrs Cornell's
substitute.

C53 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

C54 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2008 were agreed, confirmed
and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

C55 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute C42 – Lebanese Report

Councillor Chamberlain asked officers to provide an update, in particular with
regard to the possibility of financial support from the Government if a similar
situation were to arise in the future. He requested comparative information in
respect of other authorities encountering such a situation. The Director of
Operations replied that a report was to be prepared for the meeting in June by
the new Emergency Planning Officer.

(ii) Minute C47 – Presentation on Lifeline service

In reply to a question from Councillor Chamberlain, the Director of Operations
said that the presentation would be given immediately prior to the meeting in
June.

C56 ITEMS REFERRED FROM OTHER COMMITTEES

The Committee was invited to consider Minute SC30 from the Scrutiny Committee meeting of 20 February 2008, and Minute SC24 from the Scrutiny Committee meeting of 28 November 2007, and it was

RESOLVED that the Community Committee encourage the Council to support the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Harlow, in its ambition to become an NHS Foundation Trust in 2008.

C57

STATEMENT BY MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC

The Chairman was made aware that Mr Dwyer, a member of the public who had duly given notice of his intention to make a statement, but who had not appeared at the start of the meeting, was now in attendance. No objection being made to the Chairman's suggestion that he should be allowed to speak at this point, Mr Dwyer addressed the Committee. He said that as a resident at Greenways, he opposed the reintroduction of the play area. He said that when the area had previously been used as a play area, residents had experienced significant problems with nuisance behaviour, including vandalism, graffiti and intimidation. He said that in his capacity as a member of Neighbourhood Watch, he was aware of no problems since the old equipment had been removed. He was extremely concerned that such problems would recur if play equipment was reinstated. He questioned whether there were any other play areas in residential locations in the District. He referred to the play area at Ross Close, a few streets away from Greenways, which he considered met the need for a local play amenity. He concluded by asking for consideration to be given to views of the majority of residents.

The Chairman thanked Mr Dwyer.

C58

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Committee considered the report presented by the Director of Operations. Regarding the re-building of Thaxted Day Centre, she said that work was due to start shortly, and that plans were available for Members to view at the end of the meeting. Regarding Empty Homes, she referred to the leaflets for the "PLACE" scheme (Private Lease Agreements for Converting Empties), whereby local authorities collaborated with the owners of properties to enable letting out of their properties. Councillor Howell noted that there was a discrepancy where the figures for empty homes were stated in the Lead Officer's report and the Empty Homes Strategy document. The Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager replied that the information in that document reflected the position as at 1 April 2007, and that the Lead Officer's Report was drawn from the council tax records at the end of January. Further information would be provided when the Empty Homes Strategy document was finalised. Councillor R Chamberlain said that PLACE was an excellent scheme. He commented that it would be interesting to find out how many properties fell within this category, as the figure of 312 should be seen in the context of the approximately 30,000 households in the District.

In reply to a question from Councillor J Hudson, who said that in Stansted Mountfitchet there were empty properties which had fallen into disrepair, officers explained that under the proposed Strategy the Council would

encourage owners to become landlords, using financial incentives. Councillor G Sell said that deteriorating properties had a damaging effect on neighbouring property prices. With reference to the appointment of a new Emergency Planning Officer, he asked whether the individual concerned had received appropriate training, and whether Parish Councils had been informed of the change. The Director of Operations replied that the new Emergency Planning Officer had been participating in the Emergency Plan for Essex for approximately two years. She said that the Parishes would be informed of the appointment.

RESOLVED that

the report of the Director of Operations be noted.

C59

MUSEUM SERVICE CHARGES

The Committee received details of the Curator's report. Regarding proposed increases in charges, the Curator said that the retirement of the current Education Officer and the recruitment process for her successor would mean that a significant increase in revenue during 2008/09 was unlikely. A further factor was the £1,500 cost of re-printing promotional literature. Councillor J Menell said that Jenny Gibsone had been an outstanding Education Officer and asked that Members' appreciation be recorded.

RESOLVED that

- 1 education charges be increased for schools booking taught sessions and adult groups booking talks on or off site, to £2.50 per pupil/person, with the minimum group rate to rise to £40, with discretion to waive the minimum charge for small special needs groups and charge them at "per pupil" rate.
- 2 admission charges be retained at the current level for 2008-09, subject to longer-term review in the context of the Museum Service's Forward Plan (Stage II).
- 3 A recommendation be made to Finance and Administration Committee that admission charges be retained at the current level.

C60

GREENWAYS PLAY AREA

Councillor A J Ketteridge declared a personal interest in this item as a member of Saffron Walden Town Council.

Members considered the report of the Leisure and Community Development Manager, and the statement made at C57 by Mr Dwyer. Councillor S Howell wished to propose an amendment to the resolution, as whilst he was sympathetic to the residents of Greenways, it was his experience that surveys of those living near play areas tended to show a negative response, whilst those further away would value such an amenity. He considered that the Town Council would be better able to manage the play area than the District Council. He took the view that the Big Lottery funding for the play area would

resolve many of the reported problems. He expressed surprise that the Town Council had suggested that the responsibility for conducting a survey should rest with the District Council, in view of the agreement for transfer of ownership to the Town Council.

The Leisure and Community Development Manager said that the land had not yet been formally transferred, and that the Town Clerk had asked that the transfer be deferred until a survey had been carried out. Councillor E W Hicks said that the transfer had been resolved in principle, and that it seemed to be a decision for the Town Council as to whether a survey was necessary.

Councillor Smith agreed, and said that a survey should take into account the children who would use the play area. Councillor A Yarwood said that there was a similar situation in Newport, and that any meaningful survey should include all users of the space. It was his recollection that transfer of the Greenways play area had been agreed in principle, with no indication that Members consider whether or not it was to remain a play area.

Councillor D Sadler declared a personal interest as a member of Saffron Walden Town Council.

Councillor D Sadler said that he chaired the Committee of the Town Council dealing with this matter. He had been informed the main reason for deferring transfer was that the District Council had lost the funding. In clarification, the Leisure and Community Development Manager said that at the previous meeting of the Community Committee, Members had agreed to transfer the land to the Town Council together with the £20K which would have derived from the section 106 agreement, but that subsequently an equivalent sum had been awarded by the Big Lottery Fund instead, and that therefore money was available. The process had been halted at the request of the Town Clerk when the opposition of some residents had been made known, as he took the view that there was little point in transferring the land if it was not to be a play area.

Councillor G Sell said he thought the intention of the Committee was to agree the transfer on the basis that the upkeep of the play area would be much improved under the Town Council. He referred to similar problems in Stansted, and said that co-operation with agencies, including the police, was needed.

Councillor R Chamberlain said that it was important to note what residents had said about unacceptable behaviour and abuse of the play area. He questioned how the Town Council could effect improved management, and what the involvement of the police had been.

Councillor A J Ketteridge recalled that designation of the land as a play area was a condition of planning permission, and the purpose of the section 106 money was to maintain it as such in perpetuity.

Councillor Redfern wished to highlight the fact that the situation being considered was in fact a general problem across the District. She considered the Council should try to address the lack of activities for this age group.

Members agreed that it was necessary to ask officers to rectify the apparent miscommunication between the Town Council and the District Council regarding the status of the grant for £20,000 obtained from the Big Lottery Grant, and that officers should discuss with police the concerns expressed by Mr Dwyer regarding nuisance behaviour. Councillor S Howell proposed wording for an amended resolution, which was duly seconded, and it was

RESOLVED

To note updates on recent developments regarding Greenways Play Area and to refer the matter back to officers to conduct further discussions with the Town Council and the police, and to report back to the Committee.

C61

HOUSING INITIATIVES TASK GROUP

The Committee received recommendations from the Housing Initiatives Task Group meeting held on 10 March 2008. Members agreed to defer to the end of the meeting the consideration of the report containing exempt information within the meaning of s.100I and paragraph 1 part 1 Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Members considered the reports of the Senior Housing Officer on Private Sector Settled Homes and Homeless Temporary Accommodation. Councillor Chamberlain, Chairman of the Task Group, said that these items had been discussed in detail at the Group's meeting. The Chairman said that the Committee appreciated the work of the Task Group, and the recommendations were duly proposed and seconded. It was

RESOLVED

to approve the recommendations of the Housing Initiative Task Group as follows:

- 1 That the Council work with King Street Housing Society to set up a private sector Settled Homes Scheme as part of the Council's homelessness prevention work using funds provided for this purpose by the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- 2 That managers in the Housing Division be given discretion to convert a limited number of hard to let bungalows currently used as temporary accommodation into permanent tenancies within the Council's own stock.
- 3 That the policy for welfare gardening and decorating work revert to the policy previously applied so that welfare work be

applicable only for those elderly and disabled tenants on housing benefit, or on disability living allowance.

C62 RURAL EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

Members considered the final report setting out the recommendations of the Programme's mentors, which the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager said had also been presented at the meeting of the Environment Committee on 11 March, to permit full discussion of the proposals. The Chairman said that this was a very useful report, and apologised for not having been able to attend the Rural Excellence event earlier that day. Councillor R Chamberlain said that this event had been excellent, and that there had been very useful discussion of matters affecting the whole area. Councillor A J Ketteridge said that comments made by the Rural Housing Trust about the co-operation of officers of this Council were worthy of note, and that Uttlesford was well regarded in terms of the schemes it had established.

Councillor Yarwood agreed with Councillor Ketteridge's remarks. Regarding paragraph 10d, he suggested changing the wording to "Parish opinion", as not every Parish had a Parish Plan. Councillor Menell said that the Parish Plans were community led plans, and did not solely represent Parish opinion. Councillor G Sell said that Stansted was currently working on its Parish Plan, with the support of officers. He said it was an opportunity to identify areas to be developed for affordable housing, and that it required reasonably dynamic Parish Councils to take the lead.

RESOLVED

That the recommendations of the Rural Excellence Final Report be noted and that officers research and provide proposals from recommendations b, d and f, and report to the next meeting.

C63 TENANT FORUM MINUTES

Members noted the Minutes of the Tenant Forum's meeting of 4 February 2008. Councillor A J Ketteridge commented on the informal style of the Minutes. Councillor R Chamberlain said that these were not strictly Committee Minutes, but that it had been agreed some years ago to submit them to this Committee as a useful reporting document.

C64 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

The Committee received details of the Empty Homes Strategy. Councillor R Chamberlain said that this was a very useful document, setting out key objectives within the Housing Strategy. Councillor S Howell said that whilst he would generally take the view that people should be allowed to keep their houses empty if they wished, he accepted that there were situations where the Council should try to work with owners to encourage occupation. He referred to an example in his ward where a property had remained empty for six years after suffering minimal fire damage. He therefore supported this strategy.

Councillor G Sell said that whilst the number of properties involved was not particularly significant, this was a step forward. He referred to two long-term vacant properties in Stansted which blighted their street, and had been the source of much frustration for neighbours, Councillors and officers. He enquired about powers under the Empty Dwellings Order. The Housing Enabling and Development Officer said that there was likely to be a financial constraint on taking such measures at present.

RESOLVED that

the Committee note the Draft Empty Homes Strategy.

C65 **EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

RESOLVED that under Section 100I of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

C66 **REDEVELOPMENT OF HOLLOWAY CRESCENT**

Councillor R Chamberlain said that this item had been the main subject of discussion at the meeting of the Housing Initiative Task Group on 10 March. He strongly recommended that Members support the proposals. He viewed this as an opportunity to resolve the longstanding problem of Holloway Crescent.

In reply to questions, the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager said that there was a high housing need at Leaden Roding, amongst not only the elderly, but for general needs, for a mix of one, two and three-bedroomed properties. A rural scheme was currently being developed for those with a local connection. There was an option of releasing some land for private housing and thereby obtaining a capital receipt. She confirmed that informal discussion had taken place with the residents of the sheltered housing scheme, and that the wishes of residents of all the properties in question would take priority. Councillor R Chamberlain said that communication with the wider community as well as residents was important.

RESOLVED that the recommendations of the Housing Initiative Task Group be agreed and that officers progress this work.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm.