

**COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 19 JUNE 2008**

Present:- Councillor S V Schneider – Chairman.
Councillors E L Bellingham-Smith, R Chamberlain, S J Howell,
J E Hudson, J E Menell, D J Morson, G Sell and C C Smith.

Tenant Forum Representatives:- Mrs D Cornell, Mr D Parish.

Officers in attendance:- D Bradley (Interim Head of Finance), G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager), D Burrige (Director of Operations), S Clarke (Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager), L Lipscombe (Emergency Planning Officer), R Millership (Head of Division, Housing Services), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer), J Snares (Housing Options/ Homelessness Manager), Martin Stocks (Electrical Surveyor).

C1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E C Abrahams, E W Hicks, J A Redfern, D J Sadler and A C Yarwood.

Councillors G Sell and J E Hudson declared prejudicial interests in Minute C13 as members of Stansted Parish Council.

C2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2008 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the following amendment to Minute C62 – Rural Excellence Programme: to insert “Council” after the word “Parish” where referred to.

C3 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute C64 – Empty Homes Strategy

Councillor Sell wished to record his frustration at lack of progress in resolving the longstanding problem of a private property in his ward which had remained empty for about four years. Councillor Schneider said that she understood officers were continuing working towards resolving the matter with the owners, but that financial resources had a bearing on such issues.

Councillor Howell agreed, and said that the problem of empty homes was a significant issue for certain residents. Where owners of empty properties were in arrears with Council tax, this could be used as leverage.

C4 LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

Members received a report on two matters that had arisen since the meeting.

It included a report on a consultation on BT telephones. The Director of Operations said that this information had been circulated to Members, Parish Councils and Area Forums. She encouraged Members to pass on their views to her before the deadline of 2 July.

The Committee discussed the collation of responses to the consultation. Councillor Sell referred to concerns expressed by Stansted Parish Council regarding community safety if telephones on busy roads were to be removed. Councillor Menell said the telephone in her village provided a night light and was vital in emergencies. She recommended a vociferous response. Councillor Howell expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of information about financial loss in relation to each site. The survey was therefore a fait accompli. Councillor Chamberlain challenged the assumption behind the proposals that mobiles were universally used, and said that in rural areas the lack of access to a telephone was more disadvantageous. The Director of Operations said that if public telephones were removed from deprived areas where "pay as you go" mobile telephones were used in place of landlines those without credit or a charged up phone would be bereft of telephone access.

The Committee noted that responses would be collated and considered by the Director of Operations and the Chairman to ensure all salient points from Parish Councils were taken into account.

The report also advised Members that Iain Wright MP, Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, had agreed to the request to meet a delegation from this Council to discuss the issue of Negative Housing Subsidy.

Councillor Schneider reported on a recent presentation by Three Valleys Water which she had attended, on plans to install meters in all new properties, and eventually to install meters in existing properties on a street by street basis. If Members wished to have copies of the booklets she had obtained they should contact the Lead Officer.

Councillor Schneider reminded the Committee of the forthcoming IDe&A training for Members which had been arranged by the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager for 5 July 2008 at the Saffron Hotel.

C5

COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Director of Operations presented a report setting out known issues that would be submitted for decision by the Committee. She advised that there would be likely to be additional matters as they arose.

RESOLVED that the Committee approve the Committee Work Programme 2008/2009.

C6

AREA FORUM REPORT

The Committee received a report for information from the Community Partnerships Manager. There were no specific matters referred to this Committee from the first meetings of the new Area Forums. Public reaction had been positive. The main agencies involved were keen to participate in community engagement in order to meet the requirements of relevant national legislation and local policy requirements.

The Committee asked about the timing and format of the meetings. Councillor Sell questioned the suitability of Great Dunmow as a fixed venue for the South Area Forum in view of the large settlement of Stansted and the surrounding wards.

Councillor Menell said more time should be allowed for sending out agendas for the next round of Area Forum meetings. The Community Partnerships Manager advised that timing for the first meetings had been constrained for constitutional reasons, but that this should not pose a problem in future. In reply to a question from Councillor Morson, she said that forms would be made available to members of the public for suggested agenda items.

Mrs Cornell said that the format of the meeting she had attended was good, but she thought the agenda should be more widely publicised.

C7

BUDGETARY CONTROL

The Committee received a report on budget monitoring for information. The Acting Head of Finance reminded the Committee that this report was part of the Council's improvement plan. Whilst the figures in the report currently showed an underspend, it was early in the year, and figures would become more significant as the year progressed. Any questions should be forwarded to the Chairman of the Committee for passing to the relevant Heads of Division.

The budgetary report was noted.

C8

NEW THAXTED DAY CENTRE

The Committee considered the report presented by the Electrical Surveyor, detailing unforeseen additional costs during preparatory works for the renewal of Thaxted day centre. These included a charge of £4,000 for the re-positioning of a telegraph pole, and additional foundation costs relating to the discovery of poor ground conditions and an underground chamber. Costs were therefore £11,500 over budget, with no provision for a contingency fund. The Electrical Surveyor emphasised that proceeding with a project of this scale without a contingency fund was inadvisable. Additional funding of up to £32,000 was therefore sought to meet the above costs and to allow for contingencies. He said there was a Catch-22 situation in that abortive costs were likely to be £90,000.

There followed discussion of the proposed recommendation. Councillor Sell said the new day centre was an important facility for Thaxted, and would help provide a better service. Councillor Howell said whilst he did not wish to belittle the sum, it would be a pity if for want of a nail the project could not progress. It was preferable to factor in the additional funds at the start, and try to recover them later. Accordingly he supported the proposal.

The recommendation was accordingly proposed and seconded by Councillors Sell and Howell.

RESOLVED to recommend to the Finance and Administration Committee that an additional sum of £32,000 be allocated to the capital programme for the Thaxted Day Centre project in 2008/09.

C9 **DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY**

The Committee considered the draft homelessness strategy, action plan and report of the Housing Options/Homelessness Manager.

Councillor Chamberlain said this document provided a huge amount of helpful information to members. He noted that in order to comply with law, it was necessary for the Council to adopt the strategy before the end of July 2008. The Housing Initiatives Task Group had not been able to address all points of detail in this document during its recent meetings, due to other pressing business. He therefore proposed that the Task Group would examine the draft strategy more closely at its next meeting and would return any issues requiring further consideration to the Committee.

Members asked questions regarding projected figures, and what work had been done with vulnerable age groups. Officers had liaised with the St Matthew's service, which was now in a position to offer increased provision for 16 and 17 year olds. If the facility in Stansted could be secured, further support would be possible.

Members expressed gratitude to the Housing Options/Homelessness Manager for her extensive and valuable work in preparing the draft strategy, which was an interesting and helpful document.

RESOLVED

- 1 to approve the Draft Homelessness Strategy.
- 2 that it be noted that at the next meeting of the Housing Initiatives Task Group the detail of the document would be further considered.

C10 **HOUSING INITIATIVES TASK GROUP**

The Minutes of two meetings of this Task Group held on 8 May and 9 June 2008 were considered. Councillor Chamberlain drew the attention of the Committee to Minute HTG43. The Housing Initiatives Task Group had

concluded that there was a case for a housing committee. Any views from Members of this Committee on this matter would now be put forward to the Constitution Task Group in considering whether such a committee should be formed. Housing was one of the greatest areas of expenditure in the Council. The Task Group would recommend to the Constitution Task Group that a separate housing committee should go forward for approval.

Mrs Cornell said that Tenants had been asked for their views. They considered the Task Group to be very good, but felt a separate housing committee would ensure housing matters were not rushed through this Committee. Tenants were quite happy to keep the Council as their landlord.

Councillor Sell said he thought this was the way to go forward, and that if there were to be a housing committee, it would be a lost opportunity if it did not include strategy.

NOTED that the above comments expressed by Members of this Committee would be put forward to the Constitution Task Group.

C11 LAND ADJACENT TO HAMEL WAY, WIDDINGTON

The Head of Division of Housing Services presented the report of the Right to Buy and Leasehold Officer. The land owned by the District at Hamel Way was currently used as a play area. A request had been received for a formal lease to Widdington Parish Council. Officers gave brief details of the approach taken in similar circumstances at Ashdon, where the term of the lease granted was 12 years. Councillor Chamberlain recommended a consistent approach.

RESOLVED that the area of land adjacent to Hamel Way, Widdington owned by the District Council and currently used as a play area, be leased to Widdington Parish Council at a nominal rent of £50 per year for a period of 12 years, such lease to include a break clause and any necessary terms and conditions specified by the Chief Executive.

C12 GREENWAYS PLAY AREA

The Committee recalled extensive deliberation of this matter at the last meeting, culminating in a request for further discussions to take place between officers and the Town Council. The Community Partnerships Manager gave a report on the outcome.

Saffron Walden Town Council would not take on full responsibility for the play area until they were satisfied that nearby residents wanted it to be reinstated. It was their view that a survey to establish residents' views should be carried out. Information from the Police indicated that during the period May 2006 to February 2008 there were 10 incidents in the Cromwell and Saxon Road areas, and one in Greenways, all of which were noise-related complaints, and not specifically arising from use of the recreation ground.

Options before the Committee were to engage in further consultation with local residents with a view to Saffron Walden Town Council accepting responsibility for the facility if a positive majority response were received; to decide against reinstating the play equipment with the funding being transferred to another Play Strategy portfolio project; or to proceed with reinstatement without further consultation, in which case the District Council would be obliged to allocate funds for future maintenance. In the latter instance, the offer of the Town Council to monitor and carry out cleaning would be accepted.

Councillor Howell said this matter was like a bad penny. There was a history of opposition amongst residents to the reinstatement of play equipment, and accordingly the Town Council had in the past resisted transfer of ownership. Residents would be aware of the existence of the play area before moving to the area, and could not claim that a play area was being imposed on them. The original proposal would have been the best option, as the Town Council would be the ideal landlord. It was not right that only the residents nearest to the site should be consulted, as the amenity served a wider group. There was an available budget, and it was preferable that the Town Council should monitor the area.

A question was raised about the status of the section 106 agreement. The Community Partnerships Manager confirmed that there was such an agreement in force, but that as the land was in any case designated for recreational use, this did not raise any major issues.

Councillor Morson said this site was an anomaly. When the matter was first considered by Members it was understood it would be administered by Saffron Walden Town Council. He asked about funding and maintenance costs. The Community Partnerships Manager said whilst there was £20K from the Big Lottery for installing play equipment, a decision should have regard to annual maintenance and inspections costs.

Councillor Sell agreed that there should be wider consultation, and said those living nearest should not have a veto.

There was further discussion of the appropriate extent of consultation. In reply to a question from Councillor Schneider, officers advised that the costs of a survey would be met in-house, and would not be taken from the play equipment budget. Councillor Howell said the amenity served approximately 500 to 600 households, that there were many parents who took their children to the play area, and that it would be great shame just to canvass only three or four roads. He proposed that option (a) be amended, which was seconded by Councillor Menell, and it was

RESOLVED that

- 1 a consultation exercise be undertaken with those living within a radius of the play area of a quarter of a mile to determine whether or not the play area should be reinstated and to act in accordance with the majority verdict.

- 2 if the outcome of the consultation favoured reinstatement, that officers should resume discussions with Saffron Walden Town Council on that basis.

C13 **MULTI-USE GAMES AREA, THE GREEN, STONEYFIELD DRIVE, STANSTED MOUNTFITCHET**

Councillors Hudson and Sell declared a prejudicial interest in this item as members of Stansted Parish Council, at 8.40pm, and stated their intention to withdraw after responding to Members' questions.

Councillor Chamberlain asked Councillors Sell and Hudson for their views on the proposals, as the Members for Stansted.

Councillor Sell said he supported this proposal, and that the Parish Council had agreed to meet maintenance costs. Councillor Hudson said he also was in favour of the proposal.

Councillor Chamberlain asked if Stansted Parish Council had received any representations about possible noise or other disturbance relating to proposals for The Green. Councillor Sell replied that he had not received any representations of this sort, nor had any been reported to him by the Parish clerk. He was aware that in the past some concern had been voiced, but in view of the survey results it seemed those fears had been allayed.

Councillors Hudson and Sell then withdrew.

Members discussed the survey which had been conducted, and noted that the majority of responses had been in favour. Councillor Morson then proposed the motion, which was seconded by Councillor Bellingham-Smith.

RESOLVED that the installation of a multi-use games area on The Green, Stoneyfield Drive, Stansted Mountfitchet, be progressed.

Councillors Hudson and Sell returned to the meeting.

C14 **OPERATION Highbrow Review**

The Committee considered the report of the Emergency Planning Officer, which reviewed the Council's response to the Lebanese evacuation incident of July 2006. There was a significant probability that a similar incident could occur, and the Committee was therefore invited to authorise preparation of plans for a future response.

Comments from other local authorities receiving evacuees at that time had been obtained in order to compare responses. There were a number of contrasts between this Council and other authorities receiving evacuees. At Manchester and Gatwick they had been kept airside, and had been given financial assistance to travel onwards. Long term housing had not been provided.

The Emergency Planning Officer had discussed plans for a future incident with BAA contingency planning officers, and it was now agreed that any evacuees arriving at Stansted would be kept airside, in a rest centre.

She referred to compensation for costs via the Bellwin Scheme. She said this scheme was intended to provide assistance during natural disasters, and tended not to provide support for other types of incident. Criteria for reimbursement included making allowance in a risk assessment, in view of the fact that there was an airport located in the district. The Council had not maintained a budget for such a risk, and therefore did not meet the criteria.

Councillor Chamberlain reminded the Committee that he had been closely involved in the Council's response to the Lebanese evacuation. This was a helpful report, but he was concerned about a repetition of this kind of incident on several counts. He warned against automatically relying on BAA to provide a rest centre. No such offer had been forthcoming on the last occasion. He questioned the information on evacuee numbers stated to have been provided by Crawley Council and Manchester City Council, and asked officers to seek more details. It was essential to obtain a written response on the number of evacuees arriving in other centres who had presented as homeless, and what action had been taken.

The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said that the Council had acted according to emergency legislation passed at the time of the incident, and she did not understand why other councils had not taken homelessness applications.

Councillor Chamberlain said 64 evacuees had required housing in Uttlesford. The impact in terms of costs and officer time had been huge. The Homelessness Strategy predicted such crises would occur every three to four years, and more financial support from central government was essential. There should be a complete review of the arrangements for authorities dealing with such incidents.

Councillor Schneider said she would be glad to sign a letter to the Minister. Councillor Sell suggested an appropriate avenue for making representations would be the Local Government Association.

Councillor Smith queried the terminology "airside", as this was a technical term, and it was more likely that people would in fact be kept in a public area. The Emergency Planning Officer said that a contained departure lounge had been designated as the rest centre. In reply to questions from Mr Parish, she said this centre was intended to be a short term holding centre, but that in the long term the Council would have to make other provisions.

Councillor Morson questioned whether the council's grant from government recognised the additional risks facing the council from the airport. Allowing for a contingency was impossible as potential demand for assistance was an unknown quantity. The response to the crisis was one of the proudest moments of this Council. He therefore proposed the motion with the amendment that officers should prepare a letter to the Minister, which was seconded by Councillor Bellingham-Smith.

RESOLVED that

- 1 officers be authorised to establish plans to prepare for any future evacuation of a similar nature to the Lebanese crisis;
- 2 officers write to the Minister responsible to seek assurance of future financial support, and to object to the requirement for this Council to maintain a contingency fund for what would be an unknown quantity;
- 3 officers to liaise with the Leader of the Council in making representations to the Minister.

C15

AUDIT COMMISSION COMMUNITY HOUSING INSPECTION

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Housing Management. This had not been an easy inspection, but it had taken place during a very difficult time for the Council. Many elements of the action plan imposed related to corporate matters rather than housing. The housing service itself had been praised for what it achieved, but was advised to provide more evidence on how it did so, and this was certainly achievable.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the contents of the Audit Commission report on the Community Housing inspection of January 2008 be noted.
- 2 the proposed draft action plan to respond to the Audit Commission's recommendations set out in the Housing Inspection Report be approved.
- 3 Progress on implementing the action plan be reported back to the Committee by April 2009.

C16

TENANT FORUM MINUTES

Mrs Cornell said the housing service was good, but that the housing officers had a difficult job. Tenants had confidence in officers, and would have liked to have had the chance to explain this directly to the Audit Commission. Regarding housing for Lebanese evacuees, one of these individuals was now a valuable member of the Tenant Forum.

C17

EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under Section 100 I 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.

REDEVELOPMENT AT HOLLOWAY CRESCENT

Members considered the report of the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager on the work carried out by the Housing Initiatives Task Group on future proposals for Holloway Crescent, Leaden Roding.

Councillor Chamberlain said that Councillor Barker had asked him to convey her support for the proposals in her absence. Councillor Morson said he had attended the presentation by the three housing associations. He said that Swan Housing Association had come across well and had demonstrated a willingness to provide a variety of accommodation with sensitivity to people's needs. He duly proposed the motion, which was seconded by Councillor Chamberlain.

RESOLVED

- 1 that the preferred Housing Association partner to develop sites A and B on the plan before the Committee should be Swan Housing.
- 2 That officers progress work on such development with the preferred partner.

The meeting finished at 9.20 pm.