

**HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00 am on 8 MAY 2008**

Present:- Councillor R H Chamberlain – Chairman.
Councillors E L Bellingham-Smith, E W Hicks, J E Hudson and
D J Morson.

Also present (for the Holloway Crescent item): Councillor S Barker.

Tenant Forum representative: Mr S Sproul.

Officers in attendance: S Clarke (Housing and Planning Policy Manager),
Helen Joy (Tenant Participation Officer), R Millership (Head of
Housing Management), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer)
and Judith Snares (Senior Housing Officer – Homelessness).

HTG40 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J E Menell.

HTG41 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 April 2008 were received, confirmed
and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HTG42 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HTG35 – Holloway Crescent, Leaden Roding

The Task Group considered the report of the Head of Housing Management
regarding the public meeting held on 30 April 2008. Councillor Chamberlain
commented that the meeting had been attended by approximately 100 people,
many of whom had expressed forceful views. Key concerns were set out on
page two of the report now before the meeting. It was now necessary to
determine the approach to be recommended to Community Committee,
following which the preferred option should be brought back before the
residents, and then to the village as a whole.

Councillor Chamberlain suggested that this dual consultation could take place
on the same date, but that it was important to speak first to residents. The
next step would be to prepare detailed plans, following which further
consultation would be required. The Tenant Participation Officer advised that
residents should be given the opportunity to see plans at the earliest
opportunity.

Councillor Morson asked whether the purpose of the report to Community
Committee would be to seek endorsement of plans. He was concerned at
how residents would receive proposals which had already been approved by
the Council. Councillor Chamberlain said that as the Task Group could not
make decisions, it would simply identify a preferred option to bring to
Committee, to be approved in principle. Councillor Hicks noted that following

consultation, final endorsement would be sought from Community Committee in September.

Councillor Barker referred to the concerns expressed by residents and villagers, such as density of units, and the question of encroachment on the Green. It seemed any discussions on specific aspects led to unfounded fears that plans had already been determined.

The timetable for deciding on a plan was discussed. Councillor Morson asked whether options had been presented at the public meeting, which would have provided an opportunity to comment, and to defuse rumours. Councillor Chamberlain said the aim had been to establish the broad concerns. It had been made clear that development of more than just the sheltered housing scheme was being considered. Officers could not develop detailed proposals without initial feedback.

Councillor Hicks said if plans had been produced there would have been complaints about lack of consultation in advance. Councillor Barker said the initial idea had changed, since a mixture of units was now being considered rather than purely social housing. The Head of Housing Management referred to the difficult nature of the public meeting, and the prevalence of rumours, when in fact no proposals had yet been agreed by officers or Members.

Regarding the preparation of plans, the Housing and Planning Policy Manager said offers from Housing Associations were dependent on valuation by the District Valuer. A separate valuation for each of the two sections had been requested. She advised it would be necessary to assess the viability of proposals regarding the bungalows, as this would entail re-settling occupants some of whom were very vulnerable. Concerns had since been expressed by some individuals who had been unable to attend the meeting, and officers felt very responsible towards these residents. Councillor Chamberlain acknowledged the possibility of continued significant opposition, but said at present it was necessary to go forward with a preferred proposal.

Councillor Hicks noted that a main proposal could be prepared for the whole scheme, but that a reserve plan to develop only part of the scheme could also be developed. The Head of Housing Management said that there was little prospect of opposition to proposals relating solely to Holloway Crescent, as the sheltered housing scheme was empty, and residents were happy with the proposals which related to them. She suggested that priority should be given to Holloway Crescent, as objections had been received to the development of Holloway Close, to allow time for people to make decisions to move to the new accommodation in the future. There could be the potential to look at Holloway Close in the future, which would allow people to see how Holloway Crescent had been developed first. The Tenant Participation Officer said the tenants had been invited to visit Vicarage Mead to find out how redevelopment could be managed with residents remaining on site. Mr Sproul suggested allowing officers some leeway. The Head of Housing Management emphasised that a decision was needed on Holloway Close, as residents in this area were feeling very unsettled.

The meeting considered the necessity for Part 2 reports, upon which legal advice would be sought.

Reference was made to the proposal previously made for raising a capital receipt for the Council through sale of part of the site, which would be further considered when the valuation became available. Councillor Barker noted that decisions as to division between shared equity, market and social housing would be based on how these stacked up financially. Councillor Chamberlain invited the Housing and Planning Policy Manager to prepare a firm proposal for the entire scheme, including finances. Such a report should also address concerns voiced at the public meeting, to provide reassurance. Councillor Hudson was keen to allay concerns about encroachment on the Green.

There was discussion of the options for how plans would be submitted and then brought to both Community Committee and residents. The meeting took the view that a single firm option for the whole scheme should be presented to residents, together with the fall-back option (ie development of the sheltered housing block only). The plan should also provide clear comparison with the existing layout.

The Housing Associations had offered to give presentations, and it was agreed that the Task Group would hear such presentations in order to select an option to go forward to Committee. Officers would try to progress the valuation in order to give the Housing Associations sufficient time to prepare plans. It was noted that the timescale was tight, in view of the deadline of 11 June for reports to accompany the agenda for Community Committee.

Councillor Barker left the meeting at the conclusion of this item.

HTG43

MECHANISMS FOR ADDRESSING HOUSING ISSUES

The Head of Housing Management circulated a briefing note reviewing the reporting mechanisms between the Housing Initiative Task Group and Community Committee, and considering whether a separate Housing Committee was necessary. Councillor Chamberlain recalled that the feeling at the last meeting was that such a committee was desirable. In his view, the fundamental remit for a housing committee should comprise housing management and Housing Revenue Account issues, rather than housing strategy. He now invited the meeting to consider the points set out in the report.

The question of housing strategy in the context of social affordable housing and homelessness was discussed. The Senior Housing Officer for Homelessness advised that the recent Audit Commission report on the Housing Service had identified a need for greater links with the private housing sector. She said the report criticised the “fragmented” nature of the current housing service structure, whereby housing matters were reported to three different committees, although co-ordination between officers was good. The Head of Housing Management advised that if Members were to recommend a new Housing Committee, it would therefore be a missed opportunity if its remit did not encompass housing strategy.

Councillor Chamberlain said a housing committee should encompass the full housing service, and the housing revenue account was key. Within this remit would come homelessness, the private housing sector, and certain other main themes addressed in the executive summary of the Audit Commission report. In his view, this was a harsh report, but it should be seen in the context of the prevailing financial situation. Currently the Housing Initiative Task Group was the only forum at which housing matters were addressed, and it was important to involve Members more in policy issues. Councillor Chamberlain said in his view, the priority given to the housing service had slipped, in comparison with other areas. It was desirable to give housing a higher profile and for Members to take ownership of housing policy.

In reply to a question as to how other authorities managed housing matters, officers said that some had a cabinet portfolio holder.

Councillor Chamberlain noted that no response had been received from the Housing Minister regarding the query on the housing negative subsidy, which was currently under review. Officers circulated the Housing Newsletter, which was distributed to tenants, and which referred to this issue. A copy would be sent to the Minister.

Councillor Chamberlain suggested that the Tenant Forum be invited to discuss and provide feedback at the next meeting of the Task Group on the prospect of a new housing committee.

In reply to a question from Councillor Morson, officers said it would be for Members to decide whether there would still be a need for reporting to other committees. It was probable there would always be an element of cross-working between committees, particularly regarding planning matters. Councillor Chamberlain said that whilst division of housing matters was not always clear-cut, it was important to give housing a higher profile.

The Senior Housing Officer for homelessness said that the Audit Commission had criticised as inadequate the profile of both homelessness and private sector involvement, which merited scrutiny at a higher level. Councillor Hicks referred to criticism of the issue of unoccupied houses, which whilst being addressed via the PLACE scheme, required strategic monitoring. The Head of Housing Management emphasised that if Members were to decide on a future housing committee, or a housing and community committee, this should focus on strategic housing, as well as housing management.

Councillor Chamberlain said it was essential that a new structure would have a main committee, as well as a task group. Councillor Hudson referred to the confidential nature of certain aspects of the work carried out by this task group, which would necessitate a further task group. Councillor Hicks referred to officers' concerns about implications for staff time if a new committee were to be established, which would have implications for both housing and committee services. Councillor Chamberlain said that setting terms of reference and scheduling dates for a new committee would facilitate working towards meetings.

Councillor Bellingham-Smith said she was in favour of having a housing committee. Councillor Morson said he was not opposed to the prospect, and that if it proved to work he would support the proposal. Strategic matters should be the priority. Councillor Hudson said he was not opposed, depending on the implications for staff working towards the committee timetables.

In conclusion, the Chairman asked that a note be prepared of main bullet points raised during the discussion, that would form part of the submission to the Constitution Task Group, and who would then decide whether to support the formation of a separate housing committee by recommendation to Council. It was suggested that the Community Committee should also be invited to take a view on this matter.

However, it was made clear that there would be no separate officers' report recommending whether or not a housing committee should be formed, other than a simple statement of reasons identified as salient points by Members. The responsibility for decisions of this kind rested with the Council, advised by the Constitution Task Group.

Members took the view that the Task Group was ready to make such a recommendation now, and all that was needed was a point by point clarification of the reasons stated by Members at this meeting.

RECOMMENDED to the Constitution Task Group that:

1. consideration be given to the view expressed by this Task Group that a separate housing committee be formed, and that a recommendation be made accordingly to Council;
2. the functions of such a committee should encompass housing strategy, the Housing Revenue Account, and all other peripheral housing matters; and
3. in the event that this matter was pursued, the Community Committee be asked to form a view about which of its functions, if any, could be transferred to a housing committee, and that more detailed data be provided to the Community Committee, this data to be added to the briefing note circulated at today's meeting.

The meeting ended at 11.30 am.