

**COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at THAXTED DAY CENTRE at 7.30 pm on
22 JANUARY 2009**

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

Also present : Councillor A J Ketteridge.

Tenant Forum Representatives: Mrs D Cornell and Mr D Parish.

Museum Society Ltd Representative: Mr P Salvidge.

Also attending: Mr M Blackey (Swan Housing)

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager), D
Burridge (Director of Operations), S Clarke (Housing Strategy
and Planning Policy Manager), H Joy (Tenant Participation
Officer), A Knight (Principal Accountant), L Lipscombe
(Emergency Planning Officer), R Millership (Head of Housing
Services), E Petrie (Housing Management Manager), R
Patterson-Smith (Senior Housing Officer – Rents), R Procter
(Democratic Services Officer), C Thomas (HRA Accountant), C
Wingfield (Curator, Saffron Walden Museum).

C46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs J Bullen of Saffron Walden
Museum Society.

Councillor E Hicks declared a prejudicial interest in item 10 on the agenda, as
the owner of the property.

C47 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of 20 November 2008 were received, confirmed
and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

C48 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute C41 – Museum entry fees

Councillor Chamberlain queried the timescale for exploring the
possibility of making entry to the Saffron Walden Museum free to
Uttlesford residents. The Director of Operations replied that the
Council's fees and charges were reviewed annually in November.

C49 CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS

The Chairman said the news that the Rural Housing Trust was to be wound
up would be disappointing for many parish councils. Councillor Abrahams

said that unfortunately a visit by Princess Anne planned for Clavering had been cancelled due to this situation.

C50

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Director of Operations gave an update on four items. Regarding BT payphones, she said this matter seemed to have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion for all parishes involved.

Regarding Thaxted Day Centre, she was pleased that tonight's meeting had taken place at the Day Centre to allow Members to see the renovation. Members agreed with the Chairman that this was a fantastic improvement for the Day Centre's users.

The Director of Operations said she anticipated a full report to this Committee in due course on the proposal for a community toilet scheme, currently being considered by the Scrutiny Committee. A pilot would take place in Felsted where the Council already paid a sum towards a toilet owned by a public house. It was questionable whether funding improvements to such facilities would be a valid investment for the Council, and this scheme therefore represented a possible alternative. She said that the public toilet in Great Dunmow owned by the Council was shortly to be transferred to the town council under existing proposals for the market square.

The Committee then considered the question of housing representation within the Local Strategic Partnership. An increase in focus on the role of housing in place-shaping had been suggested by the Audit Commission, this point also having been raised at an IDeA workshop. Members discussed this suggestion briefly, and concluded that the profile of housing was important and existing provision for representation might not be sufficient.

C51

HOLLOWAY CRESCENT/HOLLOWAY CLOSE

The Head of Housing Services said following Members' agreement in principle that Phase 2 should proceed, further consultation had been carried out. Whilst it was not possible to please everyone in every way, further adaptations had been made to the plans, in consultation with the developer. Revised plans would be presented to the next meeting of this Committee. She then introduced Marc Blackey from Swan Housing, who would now be leading the project following the departure of Trevor Burns.

Mr Blackey said Swan Housing was excited to be taking this project forward. An approach had been made to the Home Communities Agency for funding.

Councillor Chamberlain said the Housing Initiative Task Group fully supported these proposals, which it had looked at on several occasions. Consultation had been carried out, and a further report was due to come before the Task Group in the near future. It was fair to say that a number of people supported the proposal but had not put this on paper, and he believed those who were against it were in a minority. At the March meeting of this Committee it would be right to conclude this process so that the project could go ahead.

The Chairman thanked Officers and members of the Housing Initiative Task Group for their hard work. She noted that no members of the Concern Group had attended tonight's meeting.

RESOLVED to note the consultation work carried out by officers.

C52

REVENUE BUDGET 2009/10

The Principal Accountant presented the Community and Housing Committee's revenue budget for 2009/10. The report asked Members to approve the budget for recommendation to the Finance and Administration Committee. In reply to a question from Councillor Sell, she said Officers were confident they had carefully scrutinised all projected figures and expected no surprises.

RESOLVED to approve the Community and Housing Committee's 2009/10 revenue budget as shown in the appendix to the report.

C53

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES AND RENT LEVELS 2009/10

The Head of Housing Services presented a report setting out estimates for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and setting out proposed increases in rent levels and other charges. Members considered the report and a number of issues were discussed.

The Head of Housing Services said that despite a small degree of leeway from the government in formula rents, the constraints were still challenging. Government guidance stated that the maximum average increase permissible for an individual council was 7% with an expectation that the average

increase would be around 6%. The report before the Committee recommended an average increase of 6.07%.

The Head of Housing Services went on to say that a further constraint was the negative housing subsidy. She also drew to the Committee's attention the need imposed by government for rent convergence, by which rents for similar social housing properties would be based on set criteria. Convergence was to be achieved by 2024/25, but could be much earlier depending on the rate of inflation.

The Tenant Forum representatives said they appreciated the limitations imposed on Officers, but objected to the increase on properties on higher rents of 8.3%. This increase would give a figure of an additional £5.23 per week, which was a huge increase for these tenants at such a time. They asked the Committee to consider instead an across the board increase of 6.07%, or £4.50 per week.

The Head of Housing Services replied that the rents for some properties had to increase by a higher percentage if convergence was to be achieved. If, as recommended, an average rent increase of 6.07% was not applied to all, then those on lower amounts would ultimately have to pay more.

Councillor Chamberlain said the Council was on the tenants' side in this matter, but was unfortunately subject to the government's rules. A question was put as to whether the suggestion made by the Tenant Forum could be incorporated into the recommendation. Officers explained that the complexity of the calculations across a spectrum of rents made it impossible to revise the figures in time for the budget setting meeting. The formula was provided to Councils only in December.

Councillor Redfern was concerned that if the figures were to be recalculated now, the situation for tenants would not be any better next year.

Councillor Chamberlain said tenants' concerns should be recognised and their comments taken into account next year. Mr Parish said he was happy with this approach.

Councillor Sell said that the Council's hands were tied, and suggested that Officers should communicate the reasons for the decision to tenants via the newsletter and at their next meeting.

There was brief discussion of news reports regarding a possibility that councils could keep the negative housing subsidy for new build. Members were pleased that matters seemed to be moving in the right direction, although if such money could also be used for improvements to stock that would be even better. The Council was continuing to make representations to government, and had been invited to join Waverley Borough Council's campaign group.

RESOLVED to approve, for recommendation to Full Council:

- 1 The Housing Revenue Account 2009/10 original budget as shown in Appendix A to the report
- 2 An average increase in dwelling rents of 6.07%

- 3 An increase in garage rents of 6.07%
- 4 An increase in heating charges of 5.5% and sewerage charges to increase in line with actual costs
- 5 Confirmation that charges for warden services be set from April 2009 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 similarly to be set from April 2009 in line with the contract with the Commissioning Body.

C54

MULTI-AGENCY AREA FORUMS

The Community Partnerships Manager gave an update on the January meetings of the area forums. She said all questions raised during the meetings had been sent to the various agencies and full replies would be made public. A final report would be submitted to Annual Council to assess various aspects of the forums.

Members were asked to consider a question put by Councillor Sell at the meeting of the South Area Forum regarding recent news that East Hertfordshire District Council intended to cut funding for the Bishop's Stortford branch of the Citizen's Advice Bureau. Councillor Sell had called for representations to be made objecting to such plans.

Councillor Sell said he understood from speaking to Members at East Hertfordshire that the effect of restructuring the CAB at Bishop's Stortford would be to lose two days per week, resulting in a much reduced service. However, during the difficult financial environment the workload of CABs was increasing, therefore this council should make representations. The Chairman agreed that Uttlesford's grave concerns should be put forward.

There followed a discussion of financial support by parish councils for CABs, which appeared to be inconsistent. The Community Partnerships Manager said she would communicate with parish councils to ensure they were made aware of the option to contribute to their local CAB.

Councillor Hicks said that as chairman of Uttlesford Council for Voluntary Service he had been involved in negotiations to enable the CAB to expand its service to Great Dunmow and that this would greatly help those in the south of the district.

Councillor Menell then referred to questions at the North Area Forum on the National Air Traffic Service (NATS) survey, as she had herself received questions on this matter from a member of the community. Councillor Ketteridge said he was aware of the concerns raised, and said the Lead Officer for the Environment Committee was seeking a further meeting with NATS.

RESOLVED

- 1 to note the report and questions raised at the January forums

- 2 to make representations to East Hertfordshire District Council regarding that authority's intention to reduce funding for the Bishop's Stortford Citizen's Advice Bureau, by means of a letter from the Chairman of this Committee.

C55

LAND ADJACENT TO 4 RANDALL CLOSE, GREAT DUNMOW

Councillor Hicks withdrew for this item.

The Committee considered the report regarding a request for the Council to sell an area of land adjacent to Randall Close to provide a garage for the resident at No. 4 Randall Close. It was noted that the process would be subject to the normal terms and conditions.

RESOLVED to authorise Officers to enter into negotiations regarding sale of an area of land adjacent to Randall Close, Great Dunmow.

C56

LEBANON EVACUATION

The Emergency Planning Officer said her report dealt with the Committee's request for a more detailed explanation of expenditure during the incident, including a comparison between all authorities which had received evacuees. She referred Members to the learning points set out in the report, and said her overall conclusion was that Uttlesford had done a good job comparatively cheaply.

Councillor Chamberlain said that Officers and Members at the time had acted entirely appropriately, and this was a great credit to the Council. Uttlesford had quite rightly provided accommodation to a number of people, some of which had continued on a long term basis. However, he was concerned that a future incident could mean significant expenditure for the Council. Stansted as a 'designated' airport, had a legal and humanitarian duty to assist in such circumstances, and it was therefore important to secure special arrangements with the government.

The Emergency Planning Officer said she would be entering into further discussions with the government on this matter.

Members raised the possibility of investigating funding for such incidents available to emergency services in the district. The Emergency Planning Officer replied that she was looking into forming a memorandum of understanding across the district and its borders. There were many aspects to be considered, including reviewing suitability of rest centres and hotels, and managing situations where there could be significant cultural differences between evacuees.

RESOLVED to note the report and authorise the Emergency Planning Officer to establish plans for any future evacuation of a similar nature.

C57

GRANT REQUEST FROM GREAT DUNMOW MUSEUM

The report of the Curator of Saffron Walden Museum was considered, regarding a request for an increase in the Great Dunmow Museum's annual grant from the Council for the three year period 2009 to 2012.

Members noted that an increase of £300 would be at the expense of other grants in the budget. The possibility of reviewing the grant during the year was briefly considered, but this would involve an element of uncertainty for the Museum. The Curator reminded Members of the agreement by Full Council in December 2008 that there would be no increases in budgets unless they were self funding.

RESOLVED to recommend to Finance and Administration Committee a grant to the Great Dunmow Museum Society of £2,750 per year for the next three financial years, subject to final budget approval in February, such grant to be conditional on working towards the accreditation standard for museums and specifically on producing a draft Acquisition and Disposal Policy for the Great Dunmow Museum Society's annual general meeting by 31 March 2009.

C58

MUSEUM RESOURCE CENTRE PROJECT

The Curator gave a verbal update on the appointment of an architect to take the Heritage Quest Centre project forward. She explained that careful evaluation against set criteria had been applied during the selection process. Following interviews of three practices by the Resource Centre Project Team, Cowper Griffith Architects of Whittlesford had been selected. The Curator described the selection process and the criteria on which the appointment had been made. She said the Heritage Lottery Fund had been informed of the appointment.

RESOLVED to note the verbal report of the Curator on the appointment of an architect.

C59

TENANT FORUM MINUTES

The Committee received the Minutes of the Tenant Forum meeting of 3 November 2008. Mrs Cornell said Tenant Representatives had since then made a visit to the Minister to question the fairness of the negative housing subsidy. They had met tenants from other authorities, who had shared their view. The Minister had assured them that their comments had been taken on board.

The Chairman thanked the Tenant Representatives for their report.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm.