

**Committee:** SCRUTINY 1 – COMMUNITY & HOUSING  
**Date:** 12 JUNE 2002  
**Agenda Item No:** 8  
**Title:** BEST VALUE REVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICES –  
PROGRESS REPORT  
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510508

### **MEMBER REFERENCE GROUP**

Councillors Mrs M Caton (Chairman)  
Mrs J Cheetham, Mr M Hibbs and Mr W Gladman (Tenant Representative)

### **Summary**

- 1 This report outlines the current position with regard to the Best Value Review of the Housing Need, Homelessness, Private Sector and Tenant Participation services and recommends that the Committee notes and comments on the progress made.

### **The Services and their Costs**

- 2 The services under review and the costs, which includes recharges, are as follows:-

<b>❖ Housing Need</b>	<b>Cost</b>
This service area includes Housing Enabling work, advice and waiting list administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Net cost of approximately £53,000 ongoing revenue expenditure in 2002/03 which covers salaries and expenses for the services outlined.</li><li>• Needs survey £50,000 in 2002/03 (one off expense) agreed by Health and Housing Committee 30/5/02.</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Expected spend of Local Authority Social Housing Grant of £3.4m in 2002/03 (based upon identified schemes).</li></ul>

❖ **Homelessness**

This service area includes provision of emergency accommodation and prevention of homelessness.

- Net cost of approximately £37,000 ongoing revenue expenditure 2002/03 which covers net Bed and Breakfast cost, grant to Essex Women's Aid and salaries.
- Costs can vary from year to year depending on numbers placed into Bed and Breakfast. There is very little control on this issue.

❖ **Private Sector**

This service area includes the administration of Capital Housing Grants and the provision of a revenue grant for the Springboard Home Improvement Agency.

- Net administration cost of approximately £13,000 in 2002/03.

Allocated budgets for 2002/03 are:

- ❖ £70,000 Private Sector Renewal Grants.
- ❖ £60,000 Disabled Facilities Grant (subject to government subsidy of 60%).
- ❖ £15,000 contribution towards the running cost of the Home Improvement Agency.

❖ **Tenant Participation**

This service area includes provision of full time Tenant Participation Officer and the services to tenants via Tenant Panels, newsletter publication, residents' meetings consultation and monitoring.

- Net cost of approximately £66,000 ongoing revenue expenditure in 2002/03. This includes salary costs and Tenant Panel expenses.

- 3 It should be noted that of the above services, Tenant Participation is a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) activity. The other three services are General Fund activities. With regard to Housing Need and Homelessness, these services are provided by HRA officers with a recharge to the General Fund.

## Progress to Date

- 4 The Member Reference Group has met on three occasions and there have been two Challenge events held at the end of May. Members of the Council, Officers, Tenant Panel representatives and other interested parties were invited to the Challenge Events. In total about 50 people attended the events. There was lively debate on a range of issues at the events. A list of issues discussed will be available for the meeting marked Appendix 1. It was suggested by those present that some areas for consideration did not require further review by the Council as current policy was thought to be satisfactory. A number of emerging issues clearly need further consideration which include:-

### Homelessness

- Explore the possibility of providing a Homeless hostel, in partnership with another Council or agency.
- Consider if there are new ways of piloting schemes to progress homeless applications without using bed and accommodation. This could include running a 'Homeless at Home' scheme.
- Establish if the service operates effectively out of office hours.
- Consider if service users would benefit if the Council had a dedicated Homeless Officer who may be able to provide welfare support to this group of vulnerable people.
- Increasing the number of Parishes applicants on the Housing Register can include as their areas of choice.

### Housing Need

- Establish those applicants whom the Council would ideally like to house into social housing vacancies.
- Explore shared ownership and low cost market housing opportunities to ascertain if this type of home should be a key element of new developments together with social

housing to rent.

- To ensure that future Housing Needs Surveys/research contains all relevant information on both public and private sector housing need to enable the Council to defend its Section 106 planning policies.
- Need to consider keeping the Housing Needs survey updated on an annual basis.
- Need to review when applicants on the Housing Register, are actively considered.
- Need to maximise existing housing stock by considering not putting applicants 'on hold when they refuse offers.
- Need to consider alternatives to a Private Sector Housing Condition Survey.
- How to encourage local input into an empty homes policy.
- What considerations should be attached to discretionary grants, and the criteria for eligibility.
- Does the Local Home Improvement Agency provide value for money.

#### Private Sector

#### Tenant Participation

- Consider the need to amend the Tenant Compact to allow for just one strategic panel covering the whole District.
- Work towards making TP more representative and democratic with representatives having a longer term of office.
- Consider new ways of involving tenants, but not necessary

requiring them to sit on various committees.

- Is there a need to provide TP reps with financial/practical assistance, which could include carers allowance, to encourage their attendance at Panel Meetings.

### **Fundamental and Specific Questions**

5 The Terms of Reference ask a number of fundamental and specific questions. Initial views based on work to date suggests the following:-

*Question* What is the Council wanting to achieve in the future in relation to these services?

*Response* An improved more efficient service hopefully at lower cost to the Council that meets the needs of residents. The services are needed but there may be better ways of providing them.

*Question* Does the Council have a statutory duty to provide all these services?

*Response* Yes, with regard to assessing need, maintaining a Housing Register, dealing with homelessness, provision of mandatory grants and consultation with tenants. There is no statutory requirement to provide Tenant Participation or any discretionary grants.

*Question* If not, should the Council cease to provide the service and if so what is the likely impact?

*Response* Little scope to cease services. Could cease Tenant Participation, but this would not be popular with tenants or central government. If discretionary grants were discontinued for the elderly and the disabled on low income their homes could fall into an unsatisfactory condition which could adversely affect their health and their ability to remain living in their own homes.

*Question* If the services are to be continued, are there better alternative ways to deliver the service either in-house or by another agency?

*Response* It is thought most of these services are best controlled in house as they are complex and significant as part of the 'overall service. These areas of specific work do not lend themselves to be outsourced in a logical way. However working with partners to achieve results should be further encouraged.

*Question* Is the Council identifying the real extent of housing need within

the District and, if so, is it providing those applicants in the most need with suitable social housing?

*Response* There is a need for the Council to revisit need. Hence the need to consider a policy of obtaining survey information and also about the type of housing provided, eg. shared ownership or low cost market housing.

*Question* Do we make the best use of the voluntary sector in dealing with homelessness?

*Response* Partnership working takes place with a number of agencies including Women's Refuges and Charitable Organisations such as some Housing Associations. The Council also has partnership arrangements with statutory agents for example Social Services.

*Question* Can homelessness be avoided in more cases and does the Council deal with applications appropriately?

*Response* There is a need to consider whether the Council has adequate staffing available to deal with the needs of the homeless which may require a dedicated Homelessness Officer.

*Question* In view of imminent new legislation, does the Council need to reconsider its criteria for applicants being accepted onto the Housing Register and are applicants given enough choice when being considered for rehousing, whilst accepting there is only a limited supply of available accommodation?

*Response* Choice of where an applicant (Housing Register applicant or homeless) is rehoused is very limited. Restrictions on when an application is given active consideration has possibly kept applications down.

*Question* Can tenants be better informed and more involved in decisions affecting their homes, tenancies and their local environment?

*Response* Progress has been made and there is a desire to do more to involve tenants and find out their views of services which could include inviting Members to attend to discuss specific issues.

*Question* Is the Tenant Compact still relevant, in particular, can formal arrangements for tenant's involvement in decisions be improved?

*Response* It is still relevant for tenants who wish to be involved. There is a need to encourage Tenant representatives to take a more strategic view. Success for TP should not be measured by just numbers of people on a panel(s).

*Question* Is the condition of the Private Housing stock at an acceptable level?

*Response* Local knowledge suggest that housing conditions are fairly good – there is still a need to help some, mostly elderly people maintain their homes to an acceptable standard.

### **Further Work to be Done**

- 6 Currently officers are seeking more information, by way of benchmarking with similar sized Councils as Uttlesford and agencies on these services under review. However, in some areas, the Council appears to be working well, for example there is a fast turnover of homeless decisions, the Home Improvement Agency embraces good partnership working. Nevertheless, benchmarking will be a priority during the next stage of the review.
- 7 Now that various views have been expressed on this review and with the emergence of the list of possible areas where policy changes may need to be considered, work can now commence on the preparation of a draft improvement plan. Any draft proposals, with benchmarking information, will be carefully considered by the Member Reference Group before submission to the Scrutiny and Policy Committees. The timetable for which is
  - Benchmarking/Comparing to be completed by 31/8/02
  - Consideration of a draft improvement plan by the Reference Group September 2002

RECOMMENDED that the Committee accepts the report and indicates what else needs to be considered within the specific scope of this Review.

Background Papers: BVPP 2002/03  
Best Value Review Documentation for this review  
(R Chamberlain's file)

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