

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 19 MARCH 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, M J Miller, D J Morson, and G Sell.

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

Officers in attendance: D Burridge (Director of Operations), S Joyce (Chief Finance Officer), S Martin (Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services), R Millership (Head of Housing Services), C Roberts (Democratic Services Officer).

**C60 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Redfern and Yarwood, and Mr P Salvidge of Saffron Walden Museum Society.

**C61 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22 January 2009 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**C62 CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS**

The Chairman said that the formal opening of the new Thaxted Day Centre had been very successful with a commendable address by the Chairman of the County Council, and excellent weather.

**C63 LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT**

The Director of Operations presented her report and gave an update on action regarding Bishop's Stortford Citizens' Advice Bureau. Councillor Sell suggested that in the absence of any reply from East Herts District Council it might be useful for the Leader to approach the Leader of that Council on the matter.

The Director of Operations outlined the forthcoming workshop being arranged by Lisa Lipscombe about Parish Council Emergency Plans.

Members noted the item regarding NATS and that there would be consultation on revised proposals.

In answer to a question the Director of Operations listed local amenities which might be appropriate to transfer to the Town Council at its request subject to the approval of the appropriate committee. Councillors Morson and Sell stressed the need for thorough review and transparency and the importance of consulting the Friends of Bridge End Gardens regarding any transfer.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

#### C64 **PUBLIC CONVENIENCES IN FELSTED**

The Committee received the report of the Head of Customer Support & Revenue Services recommending that the Council withdraw its management and maintenance of the public conveniences in Felsted, and inviting expressions of interest to pilot a Community Toilet Scheme in Felsted as an alternative. Members noted that the conveniences were owned by a brewery and attached to a local public house. Because of age and condition the conveniences were now increasingly difficult to maintain and were attracting criticism from interested parties. There were also issues with accessibility as the facilities fell short of modern standards. The report arose from the scrutiny review of public conveniences which was nearing completion.

Photographs showing the condition of the conveniences were circulated at the meeting together with copies of representations received from Felsted Parish Council.

In response to many questions from Members the Head of Customer Support & Revenue Services explained that because the Council did not own the conveniences, it was not prudent to commit capital expenditure to renovation and major repair. The Council did however carry out routine repairs and maintenance as far as it was practical to do so. Officers were mindful of the reported demand for conveniences in Felsted which was why a recommendation about exploring alternative arrangements had been included in the committee report. He added that if Members were minded to approve the recommendations, a further report containing details of alternative arrangements would be submitted to the next meeting. He explained that these arrangements were based on a successful initiative used

by other Councils known as a Community Toilet Scheme. In answer to a question he added that the public would incur no obligation to pay for convenience facilities at the alternative premises or to buy anything.

Members acknowledged the reported difficulties with managing and maintaining the existing facilities and thanked the Head of Customer Support & Revenue Services for bringing it to the Committee's attention.

Members concluded the debate by stating that they wished to consult further before progressing a pilot Community Toilet Scheme in Felsted to replace the existing facilities. This needed to include writing to the brewery to establish if they would renovate the existing conveniences and further involving the Parish Council. It was agreed that an update and details of any pilot scheme would be brought back to the Committee for approval.

#### RESOLVED

That the Committee notes the report and informs Felsted Parish Council, Greene King and the Landlord of the affected public house, that it is minded to withdraw its management and maintenance of the public conveniences in Felsted and invites their observations with a view to consideration of them at the next meeting of the Committee.

#### C65 **LAND ADJACENT TO WOODVIEW ROAD GREAT DUNMOW GREAT DUNMOW**

The Committee considered a request to purchase an area of Council owned land, used for residents parking, at the rear of Woodview Road, Great Dunmow.

An original request had been for all the land to be incorporated into the garden of no. 37 and this had been declined by Officers, due to the need to retain parking for residents. The site had been determined as being unsuitable for development due to the location of the sub station and access problems. Tenants consulted then had expressed a wish for the land to be retained for parking.

The new proposal was to purchase a reduced area of land but Officers felt the land was more valuable to the Council as parking land and recommended that it should not be sold. If the land were sold as garden land it would realise relatively little

proceeds and alternative parking facilities would have to be found for those tenants who were using it.

*(Councillor M J Miller declared a personal interest in so far as he knew some residents of the area).*

RESOLVED that the request be refused.

C66                    **2009/10 RENT SETTING**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Financial Officer and the Head of Housing Services and the following notice of motion:-

“Following the DCLG announcement on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2009 that the average guideline rent increase for 2009/10 is to be halved from 6.2% to 3.1% we, the undersigned members propose that:-

- a) The Council’s decision on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2009 to increase council house dwelling rents by an average of 6.07% be rescinded (Rule 12 refers)
- b) Subject to there being no significant adverse financial implications for the Housing Revenue Account, the benefits arising from the DCLG announcement be passed on to Uttlesford’s council house tenants.
- c) This matter be the subject of a detailed report by council officers and considered by the Community and Housing Committee on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2009.
- d) The Finance and Administration Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2009 determine this matter based upon recommendations from the Community and Housing Committee.
- e) The Full Council on 21<sup>st</sup> April shall receive a report of the decisions made and action taken.”

Motion signed by the following Members:- Councillors A J Ketteridge, E Hicks, D Sadler; R Chambers; A Walters, S Anjum, K Eden; E Godwin; J Redfern, H Mason and R Chamberlain.

To enable the Council to respond appropriately to the announced intention of the Government to halve the average guideline rent increase and make funding available to support Councils making this change, it was appropriate to consider recommending rescission of the decision taken by the Council

on 10 February 2009 to increase council house dwelling rents by an average of 6.07%.

Members were mindful however of the invidious situation presented by the Government's tardiness in releasing details of the funding to be made available and the revised negative housing subsidy payment, which information ought to be informing the Council's urgently required decision on rent setting. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that there was as yet no confirmation that the Government would compensate the Council for expenditure made in reliance upon the Government press release.

Members felt that due to the incomplete information from the Government a cash limit should be placed on the financial risk to be undertaken by the Council. They agreed that "subject to there being no significant adverse financial implications" in the motion should be understood to mean "subject to there being no greater than £20,000 adverse financial effect" and the motion amended accordingly.

**RESOLVED**

(to enable the Notice of Motion to be debated and voted upon) that Procedure rule 9.1 be suspended for the duration of this item

**RECOMMENDED** that the Finance and Administration Committee

1. agree in principle to amending the 2009/10 rent increase in line with the revised guideline rent increase, subject to there being no adverse financial effect on the Housing Revenue Account greater than £20,000
2. delegate authority to the Chief Finance Officer in consultation with the Head of Housing Services to finalise and implement the revised 2009/10 rent increase in accordance with the above principle
3. delegate authority to the Chief Finance Officer to make the necessary budgetary adjustments within the Housing Revenue Account
4. approve the action set out in the notice of motion placed before the Community and Housing Committee on 19 March 2009
5. at the appropriate time make vigorous representations to the DCLG about the inconsiderate timing of its announcement halving the guideline rent increase.

**C67            TENANT FORUM MINUTES**

The Committee received the Minutes of the Tenant Forum meeting of 12 January 2009. Mrs Cornell and Mr Parish reiterated their view that the Council should exert pressure upon the Government to redress the unfairness of the negative housing subsidy.

The Chairman thanked the Tenant Representatives for their report.

**C68            HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP MINUTES**

The Committee received the Minutes of the Housing Initiative Task Group meeting of 4 March 2009.

In the context of Minute HTG 19 Councillor Chamberlain drew attention to the need to press Government to provide the relevant figures to calculate rent levels before the Christmas holidays to permit discussion before the rent setting meeting.

**C69            OUTWARD BOUND COURSES – URGENT BUSINESS**

An announcement was made about outward bound courses at the request of Councillor Menell.

**C70            CLOSE OF MUNICIPAL YEAR**

The Chairman expressed thanks to Members and officers for their support and attendance during the municipal year and Members reciprocated.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm.