

**HOUSING INITIATIVE WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00 am on 9 JUNE 2009**

Present:- Councillor R H Chamberlain – Chairman.
Councillors J E Hudson, J E Menell, D J Morson and S V
Schneider.

Tenant Forum representative: Mrs E Rogers.

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer), R
Harborough (Acting Director of Development) R Millership
(Head of Housing Services), L Petrie (Housing Management
Manager) and S Walker (Housing Enabling and Development
Officer).

HTG1 WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Schneider to her first meeting of the working group. He also welcomed Nicole Shephard-Lewis, the new Tenant Participation Officer.

HTG2 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bellingham-Smith and Mr S Sproul.

HTG3 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2009 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HTG4 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HTG24(ii) – Negative Housing Subsidy

It had been agreed at the last meeting that representations should be made to the Government asking for the relevant figures to be made available prior to the Christmas holidays to assist in the calculation of rents. Officers would report progress on this to the Community and Housing Committee.

(ii) Minute HTG28 – Affordable Housing Strategy

This item would now be considered at the September meeting of the Community and Housing Committee.

HTG5 ROLE OF WORKING GROUP

The Chairman clarified the function of the working group. He reminded members that the role of Housing within the council had been discussed at the Constitution Task Group where it had been concluded that it should have a greater importance and subsequently the Community Committee had been renamed the Community and Housing Committee. He felt that this Committee

should have ownership of the issues and delegate specific tasks to the Housing Initiatives Group. This would enable the group to look at the issues in depth and make a recommendation to the main committee. One off items requesting a policy decision should go direct to the Community and Housing Committee.

HTG6

POTENTIAL REDEVELOPMENT OF HOLLOWAY CRESCENT AND HOLLOWAY CLOSE

The last meeting of the Community and Housing Committee had approved for implementation the redevelopment of the sheltered block and the associated parking area for phase 1 of the Holloway Crescent development. It had also been agreed in principle to proceed with phase 2 of the scheme after a period of consultation. This had taken place over the last 6 months and the suggestions and recommendations from individuals had been included in revised plans that were now ready for submission. It was noted that despite amendments to the plans there was still opposition to the scheme from the Concern Group.

It was explained that since the scheme had been conceived the housing market had changed dramatically and Swan Housing had indicated that it was unable to proceed on the basis that it could both maximise the number of homes for social renting and provide a capital receipt for use in other housing capital programme schemes. It had therefore asked the council if it might, in principle, be prepared to gift the land to enable the scheme to go ahead. Maximising the number of homes for social rent was a clear priority in the Corporate Plan.

Officers were currently exploring the financial implications for the Council and were liaising with the Council's advisor on the HRA account.

The working group was concerned at the prospect of gaining no capital receipt and cited the original objectives of the scheme which were to provide affordable housing, raise a capital receipt and to enable the pump priming of other regeneration housing schemes in the district. Although the effects of the economic downturn were appreciated there was a reluctance to commit to this course of action when the future market conditions were still unclear. Officers confirmed they were working with Swan Housing Association to build up different possible scenarios.

Councillor Barker said that the affected residents would like to feel that the scheme was moving forward and members were keen for the work to progress, particularly the sheltered housing block where a number of units were currently standing empty. It was agreed that applying for planning permission was a sensible way forward at this time. Applications for alternative layouts could be submitted and determined with a decision on which scheme to implement being taken at a later date when the financial situation was clearer. A key reason for obtaining planning permission at this time was that there was a question mark over future grant funding if the scheme was delayed. The Homes and Communities Agency would not

commit to funding a scheme that did not have the certainty of a planning permission.

It was acknowledged that the working group had concerns about gifting the land to the housing association, but it was pointed out that this was the worst case scenario. It was however recommended that it would be prudent to keep this as an option until such time as the financial situation was clearer.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1 The Community and Housing Committee authorise officers to pursue the provision of affordable housing at Holloway Crescent and Holloway Close.
- 2 An application for consent to redevelop the site for both phase 1 and 2 of the development be submitted to the planning department.
- 3 If possible a capital receipt should be achieved and a further report containing detailed financial information be prepared for the Community and Housing Committee in September.
- 4 The committee agree in principle to a possible gift of land to the Swan Housing Association at nil value subject to the full financial details being provided to Members in a future report which would detail the actual terms of sale.

HTG7

DEVELOPMENT OF GARAGE SITES – NEWPORT WIMBISH CHRISHALL

The Working Group was given details of proposals for the development of small areas of council owned land in Newport, Chrishall and Wimbish. Officers were in the early stages of negotiations with housing associations over these sites.

The Council had also received a request from the Newport Parish Council to take over one of the areas to use as a village carpark. However Members agreed that officers should pursue the provision of affordable housing on this site.

A report would be presented to the meeting of the Community and Housing Committee recommending that in principle these sites be gifted to a housing association, subject to further financial details being supplied, and members of the task group were in favour of this.

HTG8

UPDATE ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMME

The Working Group was given details of the Affordable Housing Delivery programme for 2009/10. The programme was at an early stage but it was hoped that around 120 units could be delivered by the end of the year.

Cllr Menell asked if she could be provided with information about the principles regarding exception sites that she could share with the parish council.

HTG9 HOUSING DIVISIONAL PLAN

The Head of Housing Services circulated the Housing Service Action Plan. This was a comprehensive document that set out the work to be done during the financial year and the dates that this should be achieved by. It included action points to address the comments that had been made by the Audit Commission in the strategic housing review the previous year. An Inspector had recently visited the council and whilst commending officers for addressing most of these issues he noted that no progress had been made on expanding the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme and reviewing the allocation policy.

Members referred to the original Audit Commission report and said that it was difficult to consider it in isolation. This was a small authority and there was a limit as to what could be achieved with the available resources and also the constraints that were often imposed by the Government. It would be more useful to compare Uttlesford against other similar sized rural authorities and this information could be found on the Audit Commission website.

HTG10 REVIEW OF HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY/ CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Working Group considered a report on the need to reconsider the Council's allocation policy and CBL scheme in the light of last year's audit report. At present the council allocated properties via HomeOption (CBL) where applicants were prioritised using a points based system. The current points system was complicated and could be open to interpretation. It could also give a perverse incentive to applicants to become homeless to be housed more quickly. Those who had been on the waiting list for some time could be disadvantaged. An alternative system would be banding according to housing need by specific criteria, and then prioritising by date of application.

All applicants could currently apply to each consortium area but had to apply individually and be assessed by each separate allocation policy. The Audit Commission felt that the Council's CBL scheme, although a positive improvement in many ways, needed to offer greater choice and cited other consortiums that had one central application process. Under this system it was still possible to have local letting policies and monitoring of inward and outward migration to adjust lettings.

Officers suggested that the working group visit other authorities to see how their scheme operated and whether any of the practices could be used in the Uttlesford scheme.

The Chairman said that when looking to review the allocation policies it was important to bear in mind that the role of the Council was primarily to serve the residents of Uttlesford. He had concerns about the CBL scheme, particularly that it appeared to disadvantage local residents who had been on the waiting

list for some time. As Uttlesford was a desirable place to live there were large numbers of people on the housing list. He was concerned that as part of the LDF process this number would be taken as housing need in the calculation of the number of new homes to be built in the District. He also felt that the Government was treating local housing as a national resource and this could be seen in the operation of national policies such as the Negative Housing Subsidy.

The Housing Management Manager replied that the scheme would still be geared primarily to those in most housing need. It could also be weighted to give more points to local residents. She didn't think that the increase in applications was wholly the result of Choice Based letting but the extra choice of this scheme also gave equal opportunity for residents of Uttlesford to apply for housing in other districts. The review of the current policies hoped to develop a scheme that was more transparent and also make it possible to allocate housing to more of a mix of applicants.

It was considered that this review could be delegated to the Working Group from the Community and Housing Committee. A series of meetings would be needed before there could be a recommendation on the way forward. A smaller group of members might be more appropriate for this task but the initial meeting would involve all members and agree the parameters of the review.

RECOMMENDED that the Community and Housing Committee be asked to approve a review of the Council's allocation policy and Choice Based Letting scheme to include the following areas

- a) An assessment of housing need /choice in relation to the housing waiting list.
- b) The Council's allocation scheme.
- c) The viability of expanding the CBL scheme.
- d) Housing need in the Uttlesford District.

HTG10 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held in early July – date to be confirmed.

The meeting ended at 11.50 am.