

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES  
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 17 SEPTEMBER 2009**

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

Also present: Cllr S Barker.

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

Also attending: Mr M Blackie (Swan Housing).

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager), D  
Burrige (Director of Operations), T Cowper (Principal  
Accountant), R Harborough (Acting Director of Development), H  
Harvey (Senior Sheltered Housing and Lifeline Officer), E Petrie  
(Housing Management Manager), R Procter (Democratic  
Services Officer), C Thomas (HRA Accountant), J Snares  
(Housing Options/Homelessness Manager) and S Wood  
(Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager).

**CH19 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

The Chairman welcomed members of the public.

Statements were then made by Mr D Clayden as the owner-occupier of  
Number 30 Holloway Close, Mr R Blacklock, as a resident of Leaden Roding,  
Mrs J Waters, on behalf of the Concern Group, and Councillor G Todd, as a  
member of Leaden Roding Parish Council. Summaries of their statements  
are appended to these Minutes.

**CH20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sadler and from Mr P  
Salvidge, Co-opted Member (Saffron Walden Museum Society). There were  
no declarations of interest.

**CH21 MINUTES**

Subject to the following amendments, the Minutes of the meeting of 18 June  
2009 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct  
record.

An amendment was made to show Councillor Miller as having attended.  
Minute CH4, Chairman's items, was amended to delete the words 'Councillor  
Schneider would be taking over as Chairman of that group' (referring to the  
Sheltered Housing and Lifeline Task Group).

CH22

## **MATTERS ARISING**

### **(i) Minute CH5 – Holloway Crescent and Holloway Close**

Councillors Sell and Morson referred to a statement that information on the amount of the proposed capital sum would be supplied to Members. Officers said that whilst such information could be supplied, the valuations were very complex, and were now considerably out of date.

### **(ii) Minute CH9 – gypsy and travellers report**

Officers reported that the Secretary of State had confirmed the Regional Spatial Strategy requirements, which had been considered by Environment Committee. Uttlesford would be required to provide 25 gypsy and traveller pitches to 2011.

### **(iii) Minute CH10 - long term empty homes**

Officers gave an update on two empty properties, one in Thaxted and one in Stansted. Building Control Officers had inspected the Thaxted property, which had been found to be unstable. It was to be auctioned for redevelopment to be brought back into use. The Stansted property would also be brought back into use, under the PLACE scheme.

### **(iv) Minute CH12 – garage sites development opportunities**

Officers reported that they had met with Chrishall Parish Councillors, and that a report on garage sites would be brought to the November meeting of the Committee.

### **(v) Minute CH15 – review of pest control service**

The Chairman said he attended the first meeting of the Pest Control Review Task Group and the review would take longer than envisaged. A further meeting would take place shortly.

CH23

## **CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS**

The Chairman referred to National Heritage Week, which had just taken place, during which various National Trust properties and museums had granted free admission. He had been disappointed that Audley End had opted out of the scheme. He trusted Members would agree that the Director of Operations should write a letter to English Heritage expressing concern and suggesting the decision be reviewed next year.

CH24

## **LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT**

The Lead Officer said her report, covering various matters, also represented the efforts of many other officers. She took Members through the report, and answered questions.

Commenting on arrangements for repayment of rent to Council tenants, following the Government's alteration to the rent increase, Mr Parish said the Tenant Forum had been disappointed at the length of time it had taken officers to administer the rent repayment, as some councils had acted very quickly. The Lead Officer said this delay was also disappointing for officers, who had worked as diligently as possible. However, it was important that the figures were calculated accurately without later adjustments being required. The Chairman said officers had to deal with what was a shambolic situation, caused by the government.

Councillor Sell asked whether the Council had adequate resources to deal with the reported increase in requests for housing advice arising from the recession. Officers said that an extra member of staff had been taken on, using the Repossession Prevention Fund.

Councillor Bellingham-Smith referred to the closure of Felsted public conveniences, which had been very awkward for the village. Whilst the Lead Officer's report stated no comments had been received, this was only because people were so dumbfounded at the closure. She asked that all options be explored for keeping the toilets open until new facilities could be found, even if this meant volunteers taking on cleaning. Felsted was an expanding village, and the withdrawal of the public conveniences had caused much upset.

The Lead Officer said the Council had had no option but to close this facility, since there was now no effective lease with the building's owner, and it was therefore impossible to insure the premises. The facilities had been in poor condition, and did not represent an appropriate investment for the Council. She suggested the possibility of Felsted Parish Council entering into negotiations with the owner.

Councillor Schneider said she was very disappointed that the owner of the premises had not entered into a contract with the Council. Insurance against accidents was indeed a necessity. She hoped a Community Toilet Scheme could be set up, by either the Parish or the District Council.

CH25

## **HOLLOWAY CRESCENT AND HOLLOWAY CLOSE**

Officers outlined changes to the position regarding the potential redevelopment of Holloway Crescent and Holloway Close which had occurred since the last meeting. The Chairman thanked officers and Swan Housing Association for their work. This had been a difficult project to get off the ground, in the context of a severe economic background. He reminded those present of the Council's previously stated aims in pursuing this project, as set out in officers' reports.

The Chairman went on to say he had been disappointed by the tone and content of a document circulated by the Concern Group. It contained allegations about the conduct of Committee meetings which were not true. Members of this Committee had been open and transparent, and as Chairman, he had been fair. Contrary to what was alleged, it was evident that the Minutes recorded the presence of visitors at the last meeting. The

personal comments which had been made were not helpful, and he asked that future notes circulated should be accurate, and should refer to the published Minutes of this Committee.

Councillor Redfern read out a letter which had been sent to the Committee from residents of the sheltered housing scheme, in which they stated their objection to being associated with the protest group, and indicated their view that officers and Swan Housing had been supportive and informative about the proposals.

The Chairman said it was clear that progress was needed. He therefore moved a proposal, expanding the second option recommended in the report (as set out in the resolution below), which was seconded by Councillor Redfern.

Members asked questions about the objectives of the proposal, and questioned whether the Council's discussions should continue to be confined to Swan Housing. Members also asked questions about the standard of construction which would apply to any development, and in reply to this point officers said quality would be assured. The Lifetime Homes Standard would be applicable to any development, which would also comply with Code for Sustainable Homes level 3 requirements.

With the consent of the Chairman, Councillor Barker addressed Members. She acknowledged the strength of feeling shown by those attending, and explained that when the proposals were first put forward she was enthusiastic at the prospect of developing the whole plot. However, she had come to the opinion that none of the proposals put forward by Swan were right for Leaden Roding, or for the individuals who would be affected. She acknowledged the hard work and consultation done by Swan and by officers. She supported option 2 in the report, with further provisos that the possibility be ruled out of any encroachment on The Green, and that the site should not be considered for development for another ten years, so as to give people certainty.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Barker for her comments. He said he was sure the Council would protect The Green, and that whilst he would reassure residents that he hoped the matter would now be concluded, it was only possible to speak for the existing Council administration.

Daphne Cornell spoke to indicate the passionate support of the Tenant Forum for social housing in Uttlesford. She also raised the issue of rent voids.

The motion as read out by the Chairman was then put, and being carried unanimously, it was

#### RESOLVED

- 1 to authorise Officers urgently to explore a way to deliver the Council's key objectives, with priority being attached to the provision of 5 bungalows on the Council-owned garage site and the redevelopment of the site on which the sheltered

- flats stand, meeting the needs of those currently living in the Holloway Crescent bungalows;
- 2 that Swan Housing Association's Option 1 proposal be rejected on the grounds that it is not able to provide a capital receipt under current economic conditions;
  - 3 that officers' investigations include the possibility of the Council bidding for a Sheltered Housing Grant and developing the garage site, procuring assistance from a Registered Social Landlord to prepare a strong bid;
  - 4 that officers also invite proposals from Registered Social Landlords to develop the garage site, with Swan Housing Association being given first opportunity;
  - 5 that if necessary, the lead officer considers calling an extraordinary meeting of the Committee to expedite decisions following exploration of further options.

## CH26 **2009/10 BUDGET MONITORING**

Officers presented the report, which had been produced in accordance with the budget reporting method and timetable approved by the Finance and Administration Committee on 25 June.

Councillor Sell questioned statements in the General Fund Budget that there were 'no significant variances', in relation to two areas, day centres and community safety. Regarding day centres, in his view there was a significant underspend, which might be a trend, as this was the case last year as well. He hoped this aspect would form part of the review of day centres which the Scrutiny Committee was to undertake. Regarding community safety, he asked why there was a variance. Officers agreed to circulate responses to these questions to Members.

RESOLVED that the Committee approve the budget monitoring report.

## CH27 **REVIEW OF COUNCIL HOUSE FINANCE**

The Lead Officer introduced a report on the Government's proposals to reform council housing finance and the draft response to the Government consultation. The Chairman said there were certain aspects of the proposals to be welcomed. However, this Council was to be allocated a proportion of a £17bn debt, despite it having incurred none of this debt, so in fact there was no real change from the position under the negative housing subsidy.

Mrs Cornell said the Tenant Forum had been through the proposals, and were very concerned that a huge housing debt would have to be serviced by tenants. The Council's responses to the proposals should express the hope that negotiations with authorities should take place.

Councillor Morson said he had two very serious concerns: the Council did not know how much it would have to pay, so there was no knowing whether we might be worse off than before; and he was very uncomfortable about signing

up to a proportion of a debt, no part of which we had incurred. He was concerned that council rents might be increased as a result.

The Chairman agreed with these points. Councillor Schneider said the proposals to pay a part of this debt were unfair, and this Council wanted the money to reinvest in social housing.

Councillor Redfern said the responses needed to make the point that this Council ran a good housing department, and felt we were being punished unfairly.

Various amendments to the proposed responses were agreed, and it was

RESOLVED that, subject to amendments to the draft responses (to questions 6 and 12 detailed below), the Committee approve the Council's consultation response for consideration by Full Council on 20 October.

*Amended response to question 6:* 'The Council welcomes the proposal to abolish the housing subsidy system.

However, as a debt-free Council that has a long history of maintaining its stock in good order, we are most strongly opposed to the principle of having other councils' debt allocated to us, and in turn, our tenants.

Depending on the amounts involved, this could be as unfair as the present subsidy system.

If, as proposed, debt allocation will achieve neutrality with the subsidy system, it would take years before benefits are felt locally. Meanwhile, the unfairness would continue.

The Government has not demonstrated why debt free Councils should be expected to pay for debt that other authorities have not repaid.

If the Government proceeds with this proposal, negotiations with councils must take place over the allocation of debt.'

*Amended response to question 12:* 'We support the proposal to discontinue the pooling system.'

CH28

## **HOUSING STRATEGY**

The Committee considered the draft Housing Strategy and the report of the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager. Councillor Sell congratulated her on an interesting and informative document, which he said showed the need for affordable housing in this district. A recent survey in the national press had identified Uttlesford as having one of the highest priced average housing markets amongst rural authorities.

Members discussed the participation of parish councils in preparing affordable housing scheme proposals. Various views were expressed, including the failure of some parish councils to complete such plans; the extensive work

involved and the benefits of providing parishes with support in preparing plans; low levels of interest in affordable housing in some parishes; and the expectations of landowners for units to sell. Further comments were made on the needs and abilities of parish councils, which could vary greatly.

Councillor Abrahams spoke about the effect of the introduction of the Right to Buy policy on land prices, which had increased substantially over the years. He did not understand it, if it was indeed the case as some Members reported, that some parishes had found no demand for affordable housing, as it was a necessity for many workers living in villages.

Officers said the Council contributed to the post of a Rural Housing Enabler at Rural Community for Essex, and that we were not currently exceeding our allotted share of this resource. Councils could determine their own planning policy for affordable housing, and if Members thought the point had been reached when not enough sites were being provided, this could be addressed. The Rural Housing Enabler would be preparing a programme of works for Essex, and Uttlesford parish councils would have the opportunity to participate.

Councillor Redfern said the property needs of more mature people should not be forgotten. There were many older people who would wish to move from a larger house to a smaller property in their home village, and who were not interested in moving to sheltered accommodation.

RESOLVED that the Committee approve the Housing Strategy 2009 -12.

CH29

## **AREA FORUMS**

The Community Partnerships Manager gave a verbal report on the September meetings of the Area Forums. Questions put at the South Forum had included whether sandbags could be issued directly to residents; concern at the progress of the Local Development Framework; and the closure of the toilets at Felsted. At the North Forum, questions covered services in partnership and the need to ensure localism; and there had been a request for themed evenings.

Members then exchanged views on the format and success of the Area Forums. Discussion included reference to service providers which could be invited to deliver presentations; what could be done to improve attendance; and the work of the Local Strategic Partnership in looking at citizens' panels.

CH30

## **SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW**

The Committee considered a report updating Members on the work of the Sheltered Housing/Lifeline Task Group. Progress had been made, but officers recommended extending the existence of the Task Group as there was a substantial amount of work to be addressed. Councillors Morson and Bellingham-Smith congratulated officers on this important work, and the motion being put, it was

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Committee note the progress made by the Sheltered Housing Task Group, and
- 2 the Task Group continue in existence for a further twelve months, with the reappointment of existing members.

CH31 **MUSEUM RESOURCE CENTRE**

The Lead Officer explained that the Minutes of the recent meeting of the Museum Resource Centre Project Team were before the Committee for information, and that further discussions had taken place this week. A report would be going forward in due course either to this Committee or to Council.

RESOLVED to note the Minutes of the Museum Resource Centre Project Team.

CH32 **TENANT FORUM MINUTES**

Mrs Cornell said that a further meeting had taken place this week. The tenants' autumn newsletter was shortly being sent out, and would include a request for nominations for the new Tenant Forum, whose term of office commenced in February. Terms of reference could be found in the Tenant Compact. She invited Members to encourage tenants to stand.

There being no other urgent business, the meeting ended at 9.30 pm.

**Summary of statement by Dave Clayden**

Thank you for allowing me to speak. My wife and I are the only owner-occupiers at Holloway Close. The uncertainty of the past 18 months has caused us much anxiety, as we have not known whether we would be allowed to stay comfortably in our own home. The situation seems to have moved on, with two proposals to be considered tonight. The first one would put us in the middle of a building site for five years, resulting in us being hemmed in on all sides by garages and houses. That is not what a village is all about. I urge you to choose the second proposal, so that we may regain normality in our lives. I hope Swan will 'pass us by'.

Thank you.

**Summary of statement by Rod Blacklock**

I am a resident of Holloway Crescent. I had trouble downloading the Minutes of the last meeting, at which the website incorrectly states there were no visitors present. We are now assembled under the cloud that is Swan Developments, and their unseen plans. You and the County Councillors have blighted our village with an unnecessary period of uncertainty. I urge Members to release us from this impending disaster.

We are suddenly being urged to support proposal 2 by those, who have until now, refused to support their constituents. There is little or no explanation of



what proposal 2 actually entails. If 'gifting' the land to Swan remains, I urge you to ask why in the recently completed block of Swan flats at Hatfield Heath, only one flat has been allocated to an existing resident of the village? Why has Swan shown so little regard for other local applicants?

Referring to the report, I do not accept that 'exhaustive consultation' has been carried out. Items were bulldozed through Committee. Disposing of the land for nil consideration is just not on. Swan have not provided full financial costings. I object to the phrase 'is to be progressed': it should be 'if progressed'. I accept that the situation at Holloway Crescent needs to be remedied, but for the benefit of local people. It should not be gifted to anyone, but should remain under the protection and control of the Council. It obviously does have long term financial benefits, otherwise why would anyone wish to take on the responsibility?

Our Concern Group urges the Council to rid itself of outside influences and actively promote the benefits of proposals for their existing residents.

#### **Summary of statement by Jo Waters, on behalf of the Concern Group.**

Thank you for letting me speak on behalf of the Concern Group, which represents a large and varied cross-section of the community. I reiterate our support for the redevelopment of the sheltered housing block in Holloway Crescent. Our group is encouraged to see that one of the two recommendations being made tonight suggests exploring provision of 5 bungalows on the garage site, and redeveloping the sheltered flats.

I urge the Committee to support option 2. I question the need for the neighbouring residents to be forced from their homes; the sustainability and level of development planned by Swan for land which forms the centre of the village. I question whether a nil capital receipt can be right. With reference to paragraph 16 of the report, I would disagree that Swan has provided full financial costings. All of Swan's options are a major deviation from the original key objectives in terms of a capital receipt.

We hope that as a wider scheme is now being investigated, the Committee will agree that this is not a viable option, not only for current and future residents of Leaden Roding but also for the Council. We urge you to vote no, to giving the land to Swan; no, to the redevelopment of Holloway Close, and no, to the removal of existing home owners and tenants from Holloway Close as detailed in proposal 1. We ask you to support only the redevelopment of the sheltered housing scheme and the garage area in Holloway Crescent by approving proposal 2.

#### **Summary of statement by Councillor Geoff Todd, Leaden Roding Parish Council**

On the face of it, proposal 2 would be acceptable to us in Leaden Roding. However, can you clarify what it means?

What would happen to the sheltered housing block? We would like the Community and Housing/ Planning Committee to enlarge on this.

It has been stated that the land will most probably be given to Swan Developments. Is this true? What is the Council's position regarding the financial situation?

We would only accept minimal encroachment on the Green.

We need a decision, and not a repeat of this planning upheaval which has been going on for about two years. Please can we have a decision?