

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 10 JUNE 2010**

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

Also present: Cllr A J Ketteridge.

Co-opted
members: Mr D Parish – Tenant Forum.

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager),
D Burrige (Director of Operations), S Joyce (Chief
Finance Officer), R Millership (Head of Housing
Services), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer),
G Smith (Head of Environmental Health) and J Snares
(Housing Options/Homelessness Manager).

CH1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S V Schneider and
M Miller, and from Mr S Sproul and Mr P Salvidge.

CH2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting on 17 March 2010 were confirmed and signed
by the Chairman as a correct record.

CH3 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute CH66 – Chairman's items

In reply to a question regarding the recent housing audit inspection,
the Head of Housing Services said initial feedback had been
received from the Audit Commission, but this was only in draft form,
and a final report would be available in July.

CH4 CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS

The Chairman said he was aware of a request to move forward with a
meeting of the Olympics Working Group. The Community Partnerships
Manager said work was going on with the Airport and the Tourist
Information Centre, and with the County Council.

The Chairman said the recent Government announcement regarding
Stansted Airport was very welcome, but the Council would keep a
'watching brief' and he therefore asked officers in Housing and Planning to
liaise with BAA to ensure Members were kept informed.

CH5 **LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT**

The Chairman asked for certain agenda items to be brought forward, so as to permit two officers to leave the meeting early to meet other commitments. The Committee next considered health and safety inspection of work premises, as set out in the report of the Director of Operations. Revised mandatory guidance had been issued by the Health and Safety Executive, therefore the Council's policies and procedures were being updated. A report would come to the next meeting, prior to the new policy being put in place for next April.

CH6 **PRIVATE WATER SUPPLIES**

The Head of Environmental Health presented a report drawing Members' attention to a new regime for monitoring private water supplies. The report recommended introducing charges to cover reasonable costs of £45 per hour for carrying out such monitoring in addition to the cost of analysis of the water supply as charged by the laboratory. The Head of Environmental Health said officers were recommending a charge based on officers' hourly rate, to permit the recovery of reasonable costs.

Councillor M Foley arrived at this point.

Councillor Redfern questioned whether a minimum fee should be stated. Officers explained an additional charge would apply for sampling, and that currently much of this work was done without applying any charge.

RESOLVED to adopt a charging scheme for a new system of monitoring and assessing private water supplies.

CH7 **HOUSING FINANCE REFORM**

Councillor Howell arrived at this point.

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Finance Officer. The Chief Finance Officer said following comments by this Committee and Finance and Administration Committee, Full Council would agree the final responses from this Council to the Government's consultation. If the Government decided to progress with the proposals, there would be further opportunity to comment.

The proposals as they currently stood were offering an opportunity to councils to 'buy' themselves out of the Negative Housing Subsidy system. The effect of doing so would be to produce a lump sum payment of £81.5 million for which the Council would have to take out new loans. The Chief Finance Officer emphasised this Council would not inherit other councils' historic debt, and this was a self-financing model. He highlighted the fact there could be some risks to the General Fund. He said the Tenant Forum had, in principle, accepted the self-financing proposal, but were concerned about the risk of changes within public finances or political discussion.

Councillor Morson asked how any surplus would be funded. The Chief Finance Officer said the Council would approach the Public Works Loans

Board. Interest and annual principal would be repaid from tenants' rental income; i.e instead of paying the housing subsidy the Council would be servicing a debt.

Councillor Sell asked how the proposed scheme benefited central government, and asked whether the proposals might reduce the likelihood of a housing stock transfer. The Chief Finance Officer said central government would benefit from meeting its objectives to increase the supply of social housing, and would ultimately have a surplus of £4bn. The proposals would remove one of the financial imperatives to transfer, so the likelihood of transfer would be reduced.

Councillor Foley said he shared the concerns of the Tenant Forum regarding any future changes. The Chief Finance Officer said over a period of 30 years there were no guarantees that could be offered. The Chairman concurred and said it was difficult looking at the document as a whole to say what the government would do. However, he viewed the proposals as a step in the right direction, and on the fact of it, this was a good deal for Uttlesford. There was nothing else on the table, and we needed to look at the consequences and decide if there were any changes the Committee required to the responses.

Mr Parish said the Tenant Forum supported the responses to the proposals, as what was suggested was a much better option to the status quo.

Councillor Morson congratulated the Chief Finance Officer on his report. He said it was clear that outcomes of the new scheme were preferable to those under the negative subsidy system. However, he was still unhappy since we were now being invited to take on considerable debt in the same circumstances as under the previous system, under which despite being efficient we had been penalised. He wished the responses to make clear that we objected to either scheme.

The Chairman agreed and suggested the following wording be inserted in the draft responses: at question 4, to change paragraph 4 to state 'The Council strongly feels . . .' and to add a sentence as follows: 'This has been a major campaign for the Council for many years and we would urge the Government to support this initiative'.

The Chairman suggested a letter should also be sent to the Member of Parliament outlining the position of the Council and asking him to discuss the matter with his Government colleagues.

RESOLVED

- 1 To approve the consultation responses in the report subject to the additions requested by Members as set out in the Minute.
- 2 To request the MP to bring to the attention of Government the Council's concerns in accordance with the Committee's comments.

Members noted that no government could bind its successor, and that although the reforms were to this Council's benefit, there was a risk that future reforms of a less advantageous nature could be proposed.

CH8

HOLLOWAY CRESCENT TASK GROUP

The Chief Finance Officer tabled a report setting out how estimated costs of the new build project at Holloway Crescent might be funded, if the grant from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) were to be cancelled. Estimated costs of the project were £560,000, currently expected to be financed as follows: HCA Grant - £225,000, Section 106 contributions - £191,000 and HRA revenue contribution - £144,000. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed the project could proceed without the grant, by making use of cash deposits available to the Council, in line with the Council's capital finance policy. This was a sensible alternative to external borrowing because it avoided borrowing costs and reduced the Council's exposure to the banking market. A variation in the housing finance strategy would need to be approved by the Finance and Administration Committee.

Councillors said it would be disappointing if the project had to be put on hold. They expressed concern on behalf of residents at Holloway Crescent, and asked about options for opposing cancellation of the grant, on the grounds that work on car parking had already started. Members wished to be proactive, and it was agreed a letter should be sent to the MP on this matter. Members also asked whether if the Council funded the project itself, this action would compromise the chance of gaining the grant.

The Chief Finance Officer said many types of grant were currently being reviewed. The commencement of work on a project would not prevent cancellation of a grant, therefore in such circumstances it was always wise to assume some risk until grant money was received. Without studying the grant scheme it was not possible to advise on whether a bid would be compromised by starting the project using the Council's own funds.

It was noted the grant was due to be determined on 22 June 2010, and therefore officers should be given authority to progress the undertaking using alternative funding, should the grant not be made, so as to avoid further delay for residents at Holloway Crescent.

RESOLVED

- 1 to recommend to Finance and Administration Committee a variation to the capital financing strategy to enable the Council to use an additional £225,000 of its own cash deposits as 'internal borrowing' in order to fund the capital programme for the new build bungalows at Holloway Crescent, if required.
- 2 to write to the MP to express concern about potential cancellation of the HCA grant in view of the fact work on car parking provision at the site had already started.

Councillor Sell then referred to Minute HC12 from the Minutes of the Holloway Crescent Task Group, as he wished to ask about a reference to an extra care facility at Mead Court in Stansted. The Head of Housing Services said following a feasibility study remodelling had been considered too expensive, therefore an approach had been made to the PCT and Department of Health to see if there were any other options. The Head of Housing Services said Mead Court often seemed to have a relatively high level of vacancies, indicating facilities there were not fit for purpose. It was early days, but officers would explore some options. Extra care provision was a step up from sheltered accommodation, as it included nursing care and meals on site.

In answer to a question from David Parish, the Head of Housing Services gave an update on the project at The Close, Hatfield Heath. She said work to upgrade some of the flats had already started, and a reasonable quotation for installing a through-floor lift had been obtained.

CH9

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Operations, dealing with a number of subjects.

Regarding Heritage Open Days, the Director of Operations said English Heritage had confirmed such open days were not available at Audley End, as free entry was for properties which were not usually open. A representative from English Heritage had offered to speak this Committee in November.

Regarding National Pet Microchip month, the Council was encouraging take up of micro chipping by offering a discounted micro chipping service.

Regarding Community Achievement Awards, an event had been scheduled for the evening of 6 September.

Regarding the impact of the recession on homelessness, there had been increased use of the service. However, officers had focused on work to prevent homelessness, and succeeded in reducing homeless presentation and acceptance figures, compared with the previous year's figures. It was likely that pressure on the service would again increase during the coming year.

The Community Partnerships Manager tabled a briefing note regarding proposals for a car parking scheme at the Dunmow and Mountfitchet Romeera leisure centres. Such a scheme was contemplated because of various problems associated with unauthorised parking. Under the proposals, Leisure Connection Ltd would engage a parking services company to manage the scheme. Whilst the aim was not to deter legitimate customers from using the car parks, the operation of the scheme would include penalties and enforcement measures. Penalties would include charges for exceeding an initial 2.5 hour free stay, and the possibility of cars being clamped, to which a clamp release charge would apply. Consultation would take place with customers of the leisure

centres, and with the Helena Romanes School and Mountfitchet Mathematics and Computing College.

The Community Partnerships Manager said the scheme would permit customers of the leisure centres to use the car park for the first 2.5 hours at no charge, and they would have ample opportunity to avoid incurring parking charges by completing a form in the leisure centre. It was not intended that this scheme should make a profit, but it should deter unauthorised users of the car parks.

Members discussed the proposals in some detail. Councillor Sell agreed unauthorised use of the car parks could be frustrating for leisure centre customers, but said communication was very important. Councillor Foley agreed with these points, and asked that great care be taken to provide clear signs, as he was concerned at the proposal to introduce clamping. The Community Partnerships Manager said clear signs would be used.

Councillor Redfern asked for more detail on the circumstances in which clamping would apply, as it would be likely some people would be inadvertently caught out, which would result in bad press for the Council. The Community Partnerships Manager said clamping would not be used as a matter of course.

Councillor Howell said in his view the penalties were excessive, as the charges were significantly in excess of what would be charged in the Council's car parks, and the Council did not use clamping. Use of such excessive penalties would give rise to bad publicity, particularly if a sixth form student were to have their car clamped. Although these were leisure centre car parks, there was a perception that they were Council car parks. Councillor Howell said he would not be happy to see this regime introduced, and clamping on Council land should never happen.

The Chairman said the Council was only a consultee in this matter. The Community Partnerships Manager said the proposed scheme would be flexible, and would allow parking attendants to check whether a car was permitted to be there.

Councillor Menell asked whether the proposal had gone out to tender. The Community Partnerships Manager said the company which had been approached was used by Leisure Connection Ltd nationwide. Councillor Redfern asked whether the company would be paid by results, and officers agreed to check this point. The Chairman asked that officers bring to the attention of Leisure Connection Ltd the Committee's concern at the level of penalty charges and to request that the principle of clamping be reviewed. He asked that officers respond to Members at an appropriate time.

RESOLVED

- 1 To note the report of the Lead Officer.
- 2 To note Leisure Connection Ltd's proposals to introduce a parking scheme at the Great Dunmow and Mountfitchet Romeera Leisure Centres, and to request that the

Committee's comments set out in the Minute be taken into account during consultation.

CH10 **COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2010/11**

The Director of Operations tabled a revised committee work programme for 2010/11. Councillor Howell asked that an item about which he had enquired previously in January 2010, empty homes, should be progressed. The Director of Operations agreed a report on this issue would be included in the Lead Officer's report at the next meeting.

Councillor Menell asked Members to disseminate the information from a presentation given before the meeting by the Anti-Social Behaviour Officer.

RESOLVED to approve the work programme 2010/11 as tabled.

CH11 **ALLOCATIONS POLICY**

The Committee considered a report which set out a new allocations policy following the Government's Fair and Flexible consultation document and subsequent statutory guidance. The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said the policy had been approved by the Housing Initiatives Working Group and Tenant Forum. Councillor Redfern questioned the duration of the review period. Officers said a year was necessary in order to have sufficient numbers of vacancies to assess under the new scheme, but would report any significant problems sooner.

RESOLVED to agree the adoption as recommended by the Housing Initiatives Working Group of the new allocations policy identified in the appendix to the report, to be implemented by January 2011, with a review to be carried out in January 2012.

CH12 **DISABLED ADAPTATIONS**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Housing Services setting out the Council's new disabled adaptations policy. She gave a brief overview of the background to the revised policy. Whilst this Council had an excellent reputation for dealing with tenants' requests for adaptations due to disability, year on year demand exceeded the budget for disabled facilities. It was therefore appropriate to introduce a policy for undertaking these adaptations.

The Head of Housing Services drew to Members' attention the fact that significant expenditure related to not so much to carrying out the adaptations themselves, but to the reversal of the works. She wished to ensure those who needed adapted housing obtained it more quickly than at present.

The Chairman said the policy aimed to bring together a number of practices and to highlight areas where there were limited resources.

Councillor Hudson asked about the application of the policy to those in sheltered housing.

The Head of Housing Services said she would like to ensure money used on adaptations was spent more efficiently. She confirmed, in response to questions, that officers tried to match adapted properties with others who needed those facilities, but that this was not always possible if there was no one on the waiting list.

Councillor Menell said it should be the Council's policy that all future housing be disabled compliant. Officers confirmed this was to be the case.

RESOLVED To adopt a new Disabled Adaptation Policy as identified in the report.

CH13 **HOUSING INITIATIVES WORKING GROUP**

The Committee noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Working Group held on 10 May 2010.

CH14 **AREA FORUMS**

The Community Partnerships Manager gave a verbal report on the meetings of the Area Forums in May 2010. These meetings had been themed on the subject of community safety. Alison Cowie, the Director of Public Health at West Essex PCT had given a presentation. The Chairman of the Responsible Authorities Group, Chief Inspector Alyson Wilson, had also attended. Uttlesford's levels of crime were low, compared with other districts in Essex and it was the aim of the agencies to reduce fear of crime, which was disproportionately high.

Issues which had been raised by the public were speeding and speed limits in villages. It was encouraging that people did not have major concerns about crime. The theme for the next area forums was to be health.

CH15 **TENANT FORUM**

The Committee noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Forum on 15 March 2010. The Head of Housing Services thanked the Tenant Forum for the extensive work they had done over the last year which had been helpful to the housing service in making many decisions.

The meeting ended at 9.05pm.