

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 17 MARCH 2010**

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

Tenant Forum Representatives: Mr S Sproul and Mr D Parish.

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager),
D Burrige (Director of Operations), W Cockerell (Principal
Environmental Health Officer), R Millership (Head of Housing
Services), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive), E Petrie
(Housing Management Manager), R Procter (Democratic
Services Officer), J Snares (Housing Options/Homelessness
Manager), and S Wood (Housing Strategy and Planning
Policy Manager).

CH63 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S Anjum, E Gower
and G Sell.

CH64 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2010 were received,
confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record. Subsequently
an error was noticed at Minute CH47 (Matters Arising), and it was agreed
to change the words "National Trust" to "English Heritage".

CH65 MATTERS ARISING

**(i) Minute CH47(i) – Audley End – Representations to English
Heritage**

The Director of Operations had sent a further letter to English
Heritage expressing concern that the matter had not been
satisfactorily considered. The Chairman asked that a reminder be
sent.

(ii) Minute CH50 – Pest Control Review

Councillor Howell asked for clarification of the budget. He said at
Environment Committee a budget had been agreed for purchase of
a pest control vehicle, which was not identified elsewhere. The
Director of Operations said capital would reflect as a recharge for
the service. The vehicles were about to be purchased, and the
review referred to in the previous minutes of this Committee related
to the impact of fees and charges. Councillor Howell said he had
not understood this to be the meaning of the minutes, which he had
taken to refer to a review and update on the recommendation of the
Pest Control Review Task Group, rather than on fees. His

understanding was that the issue would be brought back to the Committee in six months. The Chairman asked the Director of Operations to report further, addressing the points Councillor Howell had raised.

(iii) Minute CH49 – Lead Officer’s Report – Community Achievement Panel

Councillor Menell asked for an update. The Community Partnerships Manager said work was progressing and an event was planned for June or July, although no date had yet been set.

CH66 CHAIRMAN’S ITEMS

The Chairman said Leisure PFI had given a presentation prior to this meeting. Copies of the presentation could be requested from the Community Partnerships Manager.

The Chairman explained the omission of number 9 from the agenda items was due to re-numbering of the report as item 18, under part 2 of the agenda.

The Chairman said the Audit Commission would be attending the offices from 24-28 May to re-inspect the housing service, and would be likely to wish to speak to Members. Unfortunately he would be away during that time, but would be happy to speak to the Audit Commission beforehand, and other Members of the Committee could be approached.

The Chairman said that at the recent meeting of the Housing Initiatives Working Group the subject of increasing levels of antisocial behaviour had arisen. He asked officers to arrange a further meeting of the group to discuss this subject.

CH67 LEAD OFFICER’S REPORT

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Operations. The report gave updates on arrangements to attend the annual Chartered Institute of Housing conference; the national “Scores on the Doors” food hygiene rating scheme; the PLACE scheme; vacant council homes; the impact of the recession on housing options and homelessness; and the housing finance review.

Regarding a request that Members nominate a representative to attend the annual CIH conference, the Chairman suggested he offer this opportunity first to the Administration. If not taken up, the place would be offered next to the Liberal Democrat Group, and then to the Independents.

Regarding the PLACE scheme for long-term empty homes, Councillor Howell said he was delighted at the progress and asked about timescales, as the neighbours to one of these properties in Saffron Walden had certain concerns about the ongoing adverse impact on their property.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer said a response to a notice requiring information had been received, indicating the owner of the property was abroad. Legal advice was now being sought. Options included obtaining an Empty Dwelling Management Order. It was now possible to modify the PLACE scheme to use capital funding to renovate the property. Once legal advice had been obtained, officers would start the process of taking over renovation of this property.

CH68

CESSATION OF SANDBAGS

The Assistant Chief Executive presented the report of the Emergency Planning Officer.

Councillor Menell said whilst parish councils were now aware of the change in policy, she felt the public had not been sufficiently informed. She suggested reminding parish clerks to ensure the policy was publicised.

Councillor Morson said he was concerned that the low level of feedback might indicate not all parish councils were aware of the policy.

Councillor Schneider said she was disappointed at the take-up of some of the information events arranged. She wondered if it would be feasible for the Emergency Planning Officer to visit parish councils to speak to them about training and sandbags.

The Assistant Chief Executive said the Emergency Planning Officer had offered to meet with those parish councils most at threat. Officers had been disappointed at the low take-up rate for information about the sandbag product which they had publicised. Parish councils could store sandbags or equivalent products if they wished, but the ultimate responsibility for protecting their property rested with householders.

Councillor Redfern said she was not sure whether the public appreciated the last point.

The Chairman said publicity through *Uttlesford Life* and parish magazines should take place regarding cessation of sandbags and individual property-owners' responsibility.

Councillor Abrahams said accessing sandbags from a central location was difficult. The Chairman said parish councils should ideally have contact with residents most in need. The Assistant Chief Executive said all parishes which were at threat from flooding had prepared their emergency plans.

Councillor Schneider said many properties had streams and not all owners of such properties were aware of their riparian responsibilities. She asked that *Uttlesford Life* should include information on such responsibilities.

Councillor Bellingham-Smith expressed concern that most parishioners were still not aware that the responsibility to protect their own properties lay with them. The more this was publicised the better, and publicity should be 'splashed' across local press or newsletters.

Councillor Hudson said there was potential for flooding near Rochfords in Stansted. The Chairman suggested the Emergency Planning Officer should be informed.

The Director of Operations said it was important to keep in mind the overarching message: sandbags did not offer an adequate solution to flooding. There were many better ways of protecting property, which required forethought on the part of owners.

Mr Parish said his parish council had dealt with the situation very thoroughly by ensuring every household had been informed.

RESOLVED to note the report.

CH69

COMMUNITY FORUMS

The Community Partnerships Manager presented a report on the implementation of the community forums, which would be considered by the Constitution Working Group and then reviewed at Annual Council. She added that the topic of antisocial behaviour topic would be the theme of the forum meetings in June.

RESOLVED to note the report.

CH70

LORD BUTLER FITNESS AND LEISURE CENTRE

The Community Partnerships Manager gave an update on the discount package provided for customers of the Lord Butler Fitness and Leisure Centre during the closure of the swimming pool. She was pleased to say the pool had re-opened yesterday.

Councillor Schneider asked about the position regarding funding for two years to subsidise free swimming for over people aged over 60 and under 16. She asked whether there would be an extension of the scheme.

The Community Partnerships Manager said the funding arrangement was under discussion. Further information on costs which the Centre had borne as a result was required before agreeing to subsidise again next year.

Members were disappointed at the level of discount the Centre had decided to offer to customers, in view of the pool closure period of seven months. The 10% discount represented only an equivalent of approximately one month's membership.

Further points were made in discussion, in particular that that as a commercial entity the business had lost a proportion of ancillary customer

spending; and that a number of customers who used the pool more often had negotiated individual discounts of up to 40%.

In conclusion, whilst acknowledging the gesture towards compensation, the Committee wished to express some disappointment that only the equivalent of approximately one month's refund had been granted in relation to a period of seven months disruption. The Chairman asked officers to write to the Leisure Centre management to express the view of the Committee and asked for a report on the outcome.

RESOLVED to note the report.

CH71 **HARD TO LET COUNCIL BUNGALOWS**

The Committee considered the report of the Housing Options/Homelessness Manager, and referred also to the minutes of the Housing Initiatives Working Group which had become available after publication of the agenda. The Chairman asked Members to note there was a variance between the recommendation in the report and in the Working Group minutes, and asked them to consider which they preferred.

Councillor Howell asked whether elderly tenants might feel disrupted by the placement of young families in neighbouring bungalows. The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said bungalows were already sometimes used for temporary accommodation. Any problematic situations which arose would be dealt with by housing officers, and there was also now an introductory tenancy policy which made it easier to remove new tenants in such circumstances.

Members noted the Council might lose some bungalows under the right to buy policy. Bungalows designated as "elderly" had to have good access to shops. However, the Council had a number of properties in rural areas which did not have good links. It would be unlikely the Council could resist an application by tenants exercising the right to buy these properties. The Working Group had therefore proposed reviewing the policy after five properties had been re-designated.

RESOLVED that following consultation with the chairman of the Community and Housing Committee, discretion be given to the Head of Division for Housing to change the designation of elderly on some hard to let bungalows to allow them to be advertised as also available to general needs applicants, up to a maximum of five units.

CH72 **HERTFORDSHIRE AND ESSEX HOUSING OPTIONS CONSORTIUM**

The Committee considered a report detailing possible options to enhance the current home option scheme, Choice Based Lettings. Four models were being considered. The report referred to objectives of the Regional Housing Strategy for the East of England and of the Sub-Regional Housing Strategy. These included the provision of mixed communities

and wider choice, and the inclusion of collaborative working. Discussions had taken place at officer level between the authorities of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium and the Committee's views were now sought in order to permit progress in future discussions.

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the recommendation of the Housing Initiatives Working Group, which superseded the recommendation set out in the report. Councillor Schneider proposed and Councillor Menell seconded the motion as recommended.

RESOLVED that the Committee approve as its preferred option a common assessment policy (model 4).

CH73

SAFFRON SCREEN FUNDING

The Director of Operations presented a report. She said the charity, Saffron Screen, was campaigning to raise funds to buy digital cinema projection equipment, and had approached a number of businesses. The Council had also been approached. There was a surplus remaining at close to year end in the Museum Budget, and officers recommended using some of this money to make a contribution of £3,000 to Saffron Screen's fundraising. She highlighted the fact that sponsorship included certain benefits to the sponsor, such as vouchers and use of the cinema for private screenings, and that Members would need to consider how the Council should deal with such benefits.

Councillor Menell welcomed the recommendation and said she was happy to propose the motion.

Councillor Howell said Saffron Screen was a wonderful asset. Whilst he was conscious this was another grant request from the north of the district, he felt the benefit of the cinema reached a wider community, and he would endorse the proposal. Councillor Morson said he agreed with this view.

Councillor Redfern questioned whether it was right to sponsor the charity, which was a not for profit entity, as she recalled a previous occasion when its accounts had shown credit.

The Director of Operations said this report was simply a response to the request received. Officers had not looked into the accounts of Saffron Screen. She pointed out that a further possible benefit from the equipment would be the live streaming of events from around the world.

Councillor Redfern said she would accept the prevailing view of Committee Members.

Councillor Howell said he did not feel concerned, as accounts from over a year ago might not be a good prediction of the money currently available to the charity. He was aware that Saffron Screen had been planning to improve its facilities, and was likely to have had to raise a significant amount of money to do so.

Councillor Schneider said the loss of Saffron Walden's town cinema had been noticed, and Saffron Screen was a fantastic asset. However, she felt uncomfortable with the Council becoming a corporate sponsor. She would support making a grant, but not using public money to gain the benefits of corporate membership.

The Chairman asked officers to seek the opinion of the Strategic Management Board on the appropriateness of the Council accepting corporate membership, including how any publicity would be dealt with. Councillor Schneider said it was important that any arrangements be transparent. Councillor Redfern suggested spreading the benefits across the district, for example donating free tickets to schools for charitable prize draws, or auctioning a private screening.

Councillor Menell said she had just now become aware of a reference in the report papers to a company run by a close family friend, and therefore she would withdraw her proposal of the motion and declare a personal interest.

The motion was then proposed by Councillor Howell and seconded by Councillor Redfern.

RESOLVED to allocate £3,000 to support Saffron Screen in its 'Going Digital' campaign in accordance with its corporate opportunities campaign.

CH74 **HOLLOWAY CRESCENT TASK GROUP**

Councillor Chamberlain asked officers to consider a number of points raised by Councillor Barker in an email she had sent to him earlier.

The Committee noted the minutes of the first meeting of the Holloway Crescent Task Group held on 5 March 2010.

CH75 **SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE STANDARDS**

The Committee considered the report of the Housing Management Manager, which attached a draft set of service standards for sheltered housing and the minutes of the recent meeting of the Sheltered Housing Task Group.

Mr Parish said the Tenant Forum were satisfied with the draft service standards, but had been unanimously disappointed at two aspects, the £10 charge for the 'level 3' option involving no sheltered housing visits; and the fact that the handyman charge was to be paid out of rent rather than the support charge.

The Housing Management Manager gave a brief verbal summary of the proposals regarding charges, emphasising the fact that nobody would pay more for the sheltered housing service than they were paying now, as had

been made clear throughout the consultation. She said the fee would include the 24-hour response service. She reminded the Committee that the proposals had already been discussed by both the task group and this Committee.

The Head of Division for Housing Services explained the way in which the handyman service charge would initially be dealt with. She said she had explained to the Tenant Forum that rent collected service charges were currently pooled from all rents, but there was now a government requirement to separate out service charges from rent. The handyman charge would therefore be looked at as part of a review of all such charges. She had invited the Tenant Forum to be involved in this review.

Mr Parish said whilst he was happy with the explanation, it was the view of the Forum that until the separation of service charges was implemented, the handyman charge should be taken from the support element of sheltered housing costs. Mr Sproul said he felt the difference in costs did not justify pre-empting the review.

The motion was proposed by Councillor Redfern and seconded by Councillor Bellingham-Smith.

RESOLVED to note the minutes of the meeting of the Sheltered Housing Task Group on 26 February 2010 and to adopt the Sheltered Housing Service Standards attached to the report.

CH76 **HOUSING INITIATIVES WORKING GROUP**

The Committee noted the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Initiatives Working Group held on 8 March 2010. The Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager provided Members with a schedule of figures on affordable housing delivery from 2006 through to the current year's programme.

CH77 **TENANT FORUM MINUTES**

Councillor Chamberlain offered his congratulations to Mr Sproul as the new Chairman of the Tenant Forum. Members agreed the contribution of his predecessor, Mrs Cornell, had been excellent, and asked officers to send a letter of thanks.

Mr Sproul thanked Councillor Chamberlain, and said he hoped to arrange training for the Tenant Forum on issues such as understanding the HRA, as there were several new members.

The Committee noted the minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Forum held on 1 February 2010.

CH78 WOODLANDS PARK PLAY AREA (ANY OTHER BUSINESS)

The Chairman said he had consented to dealing with an urgent item, the Woodlands Park play area, as urgent business, as progress needed to be made before the next meeting.

The Committee considered the report. As part of the development of Woodlands Park, a piece of land had been designated as a play area. The Housing Association had contributed £30,000 for play equipment, which had been provided and was now being enjoyed by local children. The play area had been transferred into the Council's ownership, but the Council did not have the expertise to manage the area. Great Dunmow Town Council had agreed to take on its management, and the report therefore asked Members to recommend to the Finance and Administration Committee the transfer of the play area to the Town Council.

Councillor Miller declared a personal interest, as a member of Great Dunmow Town Council.

The motion was proposed by Councillor Abrahams and seconded by Councillor Morson.

RESOLVED to recommend to Finance and Administration Committee the transfer of the Woodlands Park Play area to Great Dunmow Town Council at nil value.

CH79 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded for the following item of business on the grounds that it would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of part 1 of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

CH80 HOUSING POLICY – GARAGE SITES DEVELOPMENT

Members considered the report of the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager. The report asked Members to note the progress in disposing of garage sites for affordable housing schemes, and to recommend to the Finance and Administration Committee the transfer of certain sites for the agreed land values. The motion was proposed by Councillor Morson and seconded by Councillor Bellingham-Smith.

RESOLVED

- 1 To note progress in developing sites owned by the Council suitable for affordable housing
- 2 To recommend to Finance and Administration Committee the transfer of certain sites to Registered Social Landlord partners, as detailed in the Part 2 report.

The meeting ended at 9pm.