

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 9 SEPTEMBER
2010**

Present: Councillor R H Chamberlain – Chairman.
Councillors E C Abrahams, E L Bellingham-Smith,
E Gower, J E Hudson, J E Menell, D J Morson and S
V Schneider.

Co-opted
members: David Parish and Sam Sproul – Tenant Forum.

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

CH16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S J Howell, J A Redfern and G Sell. The Chairman informed Members that Councillor Redfern's absence was sadly due to a family bereavement, and asked that the Committee's condolences be passed to her.

CH17 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting on 10 June 2010 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CH18 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute CH4 – Chairman's Items – Olympics Working Group

The Chairman said he understood a meeting of the Olympics Working Group would shortly be taking place.

(ii) Minute CH7 – Housing Finance Reform

The Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) gave an update. Consultation responses had been duly submitted, and when the Government issued proposals a report would be brought.

(iii) Minute CH11 – Allocations Policy

The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said the implementation of the allocations policy had initially been set to take place by January 2011. However, some amendments to the software were required. Officers were working with the consortium to accomplish these adjustments, which should result in savings, and a provisional implementation date of 1 April 2011 was now envisaged.

CH19

CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS

The Chairman explained the item regarding the Planning and Development Reserve had appeared on this Committee's agenda unnecessarily, as it did not relate to this Committee and had been considered at the Environment Committee earlier this week.

CH20

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Director of Operations presented a report updating Members on items dealt with at previous meetings and providing information from officers reporting to the Committee. She thanked the officers who had contributed, and briefly highlighted areas of the report for Members.

The Director of Operations reminded Members of the forthcoming workshop on emergency planning, which she encouraged as many Members as possible to attend.

Regarding the Community Achievement Awards, the Community Partnerships Manager said this event had been successful, and recipients seemed to have enjoyed the evening. Councillor Menell asked for the Committee's thanks to officers to be recorded.

Regarding the Lead Officer's update on empty homes, the Chairman said Councillor Howell had asked him to pass on his appreciation to officers for the work done on the empty homes programme, particularly with respect to a property in Widdington.

The Chairman said a reference had been made at Environment Committee earlier this week to a figure of 5.5% given by the Housing Auditors as the percentage of empty homes in Uttlesford. The Chairman was concerned that this figure seemed disproportionately high, and asked the Principal Environmental Health Officer to give an analysis.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer said he was working to a much lower percentage than the 5.5% quoted, as his working list comprised 179 long term empty properties. He explained the auditors' figure of 5.5% represented a 'snapshot' of all properties which were empty at a given time, and therefore included those which were the subject of probate proceedings or under renovation. As the working list did not include such situations, it was therefore more representative of the true number of long term empty homes within Uttlesford.

The Chairman thanked officers, and said if the 5.5% were to be widely used this could give a bad impression, as it would mean approximately 1,500 properties were classed as long term empty homes. However, the issue of empty homes was nevertheless important and would be pursued. The Chairman asked that information showing categories of such properties be provided to the Committee at a future meeting.

The Director of Operations then drew Members' attention to the next item in her report regarding the recent pet micro-chipping event. She said whilst it was pleasing that this event had proved so successful, she had had discussions with the Animal Warden about a related issue. There was

unfortunately an increasing problem in re-housing unwanted Staffordshire Bull Terriers, an issue recently publicised by the Battersea Dogs Home and on a website *Mutts in Distress*. She said the charities Uttlesford currently relied upon for re-housing dogs were having to take in greater numbers of this breed, to the extent that finding kennel space or new homes was becoming more difficult. If the situation continued, it would regrettably soon be necessary to have to put down healthy animals.

The Director of Operations then drew the attention of the Committee to the next item in the Lead Officer's report, on the impact of the recession on housing options and homelessness. The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said an open day for Members was planned for October at the new temporary accommodation units at Molehill Green.

The Director of Operations referred to the HCA grant for the work at Holloway Crescent, about which concerns had been raised at the last meeting. Councillor Redfern had approached the MP, and as a result another bid had been submitted for funding to be allocated. The outcome would be known towards the end of September. Members expressed their appreciation of the efforts Councillor Redfern had made on behalf of the Council in this matter.

The Chief Executive then drew Members' attention to the Budget and Corporate Plan consultation. He said the consultation had been carried out via the Uttlesford Voices Citizens' Panel, *Uttlesford Life* and on-line, which was a major step forward in how the Council consulted, and he went on to summarise the main results. The results had been seen by Environment Committee and would be fully considered by Finance and Administration Committee.

CH21

2010/11 BUDGET MONITORING

The Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) presented a report on budget monitoring for financial performance for the period April to July 2010. The report set out a forecast outturn to the end of the financial year. He drew Members' attention to the main points of the report, including a net favourable variance on the Capital Programme, where an overall net underspend of £941,000 was forecast. The Committee's General Fund was forecast to end the year with a net favourable variance of £22,000, and the HRA was forecast to end the year with a net favourable variance of £8,000. The report would be collated into a report covering the Council's corporate financial position to be received by the Finance and Administration Committee.

RESOLVED to approve the report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) on budget monitoring for 2010/11 in respect of various General Fund Service budgets, the Housing Revenue Account budget and Capital Programme Schemes.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH STATUTORY SERVICE PLANS

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Environmental Health, giving information on mandatory annual service plans for the food safety and health and safety enforcement functions. The report set out the aims and resources for the year.

Councillor Schneider asked about inspection of bed and breakfast establishments. The Head of Environmental Health confirmed bed and breakfast business premises were inspected.

RESOLVED to approve annual service plans for Environmental Health for the food safety and health and safety enforcement functions.

DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT

The Principal Environmental Health Officer presented a report on disabled facilities grants. He explained this was a mandatory grant, which was not applicable to Council tenants, but to owner occupiers. This was a Government grant based partly on the Council's budget for spending and also on a complex calculation. The Committee was invited to agree to an increase in the capital budget for such grants, from £110,000 to £200,000 to reflect growing demand.

The Committee was also asked to withhold exercising the discretion to apply a condition that grants in certain limited circumstances should be repaid. The Principal Environmental Health Officer said his advice was that the Council should not impose such a condition. Often the circumstances in which such grants might be claimed back would involve placing an additional burden on the relatives of the recipient, for example when disposing of the home after the death of an elderly relative. There were very limited circumstances in which it was not disproportionately onerous to require repayment of the grant.

The Chairman said, regarding the increase recommended for the capital programme, that essentially this meant the Council was taking a more realistic approach. This might improve prospects for accessing more government grants, although this could not be guaranteed.

Councillor Schneider questioned officers in further detail about the discretionary provision for a repayment condition for grants. She was concerned that people might be deterred from applying for a disabled facilities grant if they knew such a condition would apply.

RESOLVED

- 1 to increase the capital programme budget for Disabilities Facilities Grants for the financial year 2010/11 from £110,000 to £200,000
- 2 the Council's discretion to require by condition the repayment of grant in certain limited circumstances is not exercised.

STANSTED AREA HOUSING PARTNERSHIP

The Director of Development presented a report on a review of governance arrangements for agreeing the use of the section 106 obligation funds received by the Council from Stansted Airport Ltd in 2004 for the delivery of affordable housing. The review was a response to the effect of public expenditure cuts on the HCA's ability to provide subsidy for affordable housing delivery.

A change in the arrangements was now suggested, to enable delegated authority to be given to the Director of Development, so as to simplify the processes for distributing the fund. The complexity of the process had proved difficult to administer and introduced delay into the process. The Director of Development explained the provisions for simplifying the process.

RESOLVED

- 1 To agree to a scheme of delegation to authorise the Director of Development to make available 13.33% of the money paid by Stansted Airport Ltd and the accrued interest to each of the other three SAHP authorities subject to the conditions set out in the report (39.99% of the total pot).
- 2 The Director of Development be authorised to make available to Registered Providers a proportion of the balance of 60% of the money paid by Stansted Airport Ltd and the accrued interest in relation to the subsidy requirements of a particular affordable housing scheme in Uttlesford District that is to be included in the SAHP programme, subject to consultation with the Housing Initiatives Working Group.
- 3 The simplified first letting only cross boundary nominations agreements set out in the report be supported.

AUDIT COMMISSION STRATEGIC HOUSING SERVICES RE-INSPECTION

The Head of Housing Services presented a report on the re-inspection of the housing services in May 2010, indicating the service was now assessed as fair with promising prospects for improvement. The re-inspection report highlighted a number of particular strengths within the service, including Member, officer and partner support to drive forward the delivery of strategic housing services.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing Services, and said when compared to the inspection in 2008 there had been improvements. He referred to comments of the Strategic Management Board, set out in the report, which indicated disappointment at what seemed to be a failure by the inspection team to put the situation in Uttlesford into context, and to rely on pre-conceived ideas about the service.

Councillor Schneider congratulated officers on bringing focus on the Council's strengths to the fore. The Chairman agreed, and said this outcome was a great testament to officers' hard work.

RESOLVED

- 1 the contents of the Audit Commission's re-inspection report on the Community Housing inspection undertaken in May 2010 be noted.
- 2 Officers prepare an action plan to respond to recommendations made by the Audit Commission within their report.
- 3 Details of the action plan be reported back to the next Community and Housing Committee meeting.

CH26 **SHELTERED HOUSING TASK GROUP MINUTES**

The Committee noted the minutes of the meeting of the Sheltered Housing Task Group held on 1 July 2010. Members noted the positive feedback regarding the new sheltered housing service. The Chairman said officers would give a presentation for Members on the new service in due course.

CH27 **HOUSING INITIATIVES WORKING GROUP MINUTES**

The Committee noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Initiatives Working Group held on 5 July 2010.

CH28 **TENANT FORUM MINUTES**

The Committee considered the Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Forum on 19 July 2010. Mr Parish pointed out the Minutes had not yet been approved. The Committee therefore noted the Minutes on the basis that they were yet to be finalised.

CH29 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chairman said this was the last meeting of this Committee for the Director of Operations, as she was due to leave the Council at the end of the month. On behalf of the Committee he expressed sincere appreciation for all her hard work and wished her the best for the future.

The meeting ended at 8.15pm.