

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 11 NOVEMBER
2010**

Present: Councillor R H Chamberlain – Chairman.
Councillors M L Foley, J E Hudson, J E Menell, D J
Morson, J A Redfern, D J Sadler and G Sell.

Also attending: Councillor A Dean.

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

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager),
W Cockerell (Principal Environmental Health Officer),
N Leatham (Housing Programming and Health and
Safety Officer), R Millership (Divisional Head:
Housing and Environmental Services), R Procter
(Democratic Services Officer), G Smith (Head of
Environmental Health) and J Snares (Housing
Options/Homelessness Manager).

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Prior to the meeting a statement was made by Mrs Daphne Cornell in
relation to item 8 (day centres review). A summary of the statement is
attached to these minutes.

CH30

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E C Abrahams, S
Anjum, E L Bellingham-Smith, E Gower, S J Howell and S V Schneider.

*Councillor G Sell declared a personal interest in relation to the Day
Centres Review in that he was Chairman of Stansted Parish Council,
which owned Stansted Day Centre.*

*Councillor J Hudson declared his interest as a member of Stansted Parish
Council.*

CH31

MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting on 9 September 2010 were confirmed and
signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

MATTERS ARISING**(i) Minute CH18 (i) – Olympics Working Group**

Councillor Morson questioned whether a meeting of this group was to take place, as still had not done so. He was concerned that momentum on the Olympics was being lost. The Community Partnerships Manager said she had met representatives of Essex County Council regarding their plans for what they were called 'The Big Event' and she now expected them to revert to her with a date for an event in Uttlesford. The Chairman asked that a further email be sent to the County Council to ensure progress was being made with the arrangements.

DAY CENTRE REVIEW – RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At the suggestion of the Chairman this agenda item was brought forward, as it was the reason for the attendance of a member of the public, and Councillor A Dean had asked to speak on this matter. The Chairman asked that the Committee's thanks to the Scrutiny member/officer task group be recorded.

Councillor Dean thanked the Chairman for inviting him to speak. He referred Members to extensive work carried out by the task group in reviewing the role and operation of the district's day centres. As a result of this review, the Scrutiny Committee had reached two main conclusions, first that the role of day centres as senior citizens' lunch clubs was highly valued; and secondly that the volunteer management committees faced a significant administrative burden, particularly because of increasing legislation. The day centres retained 50% of their lettings income, but the Stansted Day Centre was running on a pilot scheme under which it retained 100% of lettings income. This income enabled Stansted Day Centre to employ a manager.

The recommendation of Scrutiny Committee was that technical support for the day centres and collaboration between them should be developed, along the lines of the Stansted model.

Councillor Dean said it was the feeling of the Scrutiny Committee that day centres would benefit from a fresh approach and that easing the administrative burden for management committees would help the centres provide a better service. The funding for such assistance would need to be considered in detail. In conclusion, Councillor Dean said the agreement of the Committee was sought in principle to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee, to enable further detailed work to be carried out.

Councillor Morson questioned the statement in the report that there would be no financial implications. Councillor Dean said the recommendations did not mention a specific sum at this stage. If it was decided to proceed, it was unlikely the recommendations could be achieved without funding.

Councillor Morson asked whether there was any budgeted funding and if not, whether a bid for funding for these proposals could be put forward. The Chairman said budgeted funding had not yet been set. If the principle of what was recommended could be agreed, the financial implications could then be explored in more detail.

Councillor Sell declared a personal interest in that up until this year his mother had been a member of the Stansted Day Centre management committee and still assisted with bookings. He said as Stansted lacked a village hall the day centre building was well used in the evenings, and this revenue went to the day centre. The day centres needed officer support, as currently they relied on volunteers, some elderly. There was a disparity between the lettings income of the day centres, and whilst the Stansted model might not work for every day centre, the possibility of sharing management committees' experiences could also be explored.

The Chairman asked that officers take all these points into account during further work on the recommendations.

Councillor Morson felt the recommendations should include explicit assent to funding. The Chairman said following agreement in principle officers would work up details and revert to the Committee. He said officers would look at a range of support options, and whilst this budget round would be difficult, the Committee would be flagging up day centres as one of the areas it wanted to progress. In response to a further question from Councillor Morson, officers confirmed further work on the issue of day centres would be reported to the Committee, including costings.

RESOLVED

To note the report of the officer member task group and endorse the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee as follows:

- 1 The Scrutiny Committee acknowledges the valuable role of the day centres in the district. In recognition of their unique position within the community, it is recommended to the Community and Housing Committee that the financial model adopted at Stansted Day Centre is explored with a view to further developing technical support and collaboration across the whole district.
- 2 Management agreements should be reviewed and that status of the ownership of the Stansted centre should be regularised.
- 3 Other findings of the Scrutiny Committee be addressed, as appropriate, respectively by the Council and/or the management committees.

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Committee considered the report of the Lead Officer.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environmental Services drew to Members' attention several points. Regarding the Comprehensive Spending Review, she said officers were seeking clarification as to whether capital receipts from Right to Buy sales would be required to be surrendered in full. At present the Council was permitted to keep 25% of such receipts.

The Chairman expressed concern at such a prospect and suggested the Committee write to the Member of Parliament requesting that he make representations to the Minister. Members agreed with this action.

The Committee then considered the details in the report setting out the effect of the recession on housing options. The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager highlighted funding sources which would be affected under the Comprehensive Spending Review, including the effects of proposed changes to housing benefit. She said such proposals were a cause of concern to the Council, and she referred Members to a warning from the charity Shelter that people were likely to experience shortfalls in private rent. She said the completion of the Council's new temporary accommodation at Molehill Green was timely in view of the current climate. She concluded by saying officers would follow all developments closely and report to Members.

Members asked a number of questions about the new temporary accommodation at Molehill Green. Councillor Sell said he had been informed by an estate agent that the demand for the rental market was very high, to the extent that in London 'gazumping' was occurring. He said Cambridge City Council had recently completed the development of new council houses, and he wondered how feasible it was for this Council to do the same.

The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager said landlords were now asking for two months' deposit, which was unfortunately limiting the number of tenants the Council could assist with its rent deposit scheme.

Members commented on new pressures affecting people seeking housing. Councillor Menell said there was now a change in attitude to renting, and many young people preferred to rent rather than own property.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environmental Services said in response to the point made by Councillor Sell, that the Council was building new housing at Holloway Crescent. She said officers should be congratulated on securing this funding in hard times. The work had to be completed by March, and she was pleased to say the project was currently two weeks ahead of schedule. She outlined the achievement of the housing service, and agreed with a suggestion that the Council had the right abilities in-house to take on such a project itself in future.

Members agreed the development at Holloway Crescent was a welcome initiative.

The Committee then considered an update on the pest control service, following a review of the service last year, which had instigated changes in its fee structure. Officers explained there had been a slight seasonal increase during the first six months of the financial year, but that the number of treatments had declined overall. There had been good progress in promoting the service, but the recession had had a detrimental effect on take-up of this service by some commercial clients.

Councillor Foley suggested officers approach parish magazines in order further to promote the service.

CH35

POTENTIAL SUPPORTING PEOPLE FUNDING CUTS

The Committee considered a report on potential cuts to Supporting People funding. The Divisional Head of Housing and Environmental Services said the report had been prepared on a 'worst-case' basis, but that since the spending review, the Secretary of State had indicated the cuts would not be as substantial as at first thought. However, the cuts were still of concern, particularly as the Supporting People funding was not ring-fenced. If a significant cut to the sheltered housing hourly rate was required, the housing service would have to revisit its sheltered housing budgets. A meeting was due to take place with Essex County Council, following which officers would report to Members.

In response to a question, the Divisional Head of Housing and Environmental Services said the administration grant had been removed from Supporting People in April this year, which had caused difficulties for the Council in accessing existing funding.

The Head of Environmental Health drew to the Committee's attention the potential cessation of funding of the home improvement agency service, which would have a serious effect on many people. Officers had written to the County Council to object to the withdrawal of this funding. Members expressed their serious concern at this situation, and noted officers would update the Committee after the forthcoming meeting with the County Council.

CH36

MOBILITY SCOOTER POLICY

The Housing Programming and Health and Safety Officer explained there was a need for a policy on use of mobility scooters in the Council's sheltered housing schemes, as increasing numbers of people were using such equipment. She said the Council needed to offer clear understanding of the health and safety implications and of the reasons why insurance was necessary. It was vital that tenants were aware of the need for compliance with the Fire Regulatory Reform Order 2005. The policy also provided for charging of electricity costs arising from tenants

charging their scooter batteries from electricity points in communal areas of sheltered housing schemes.

RESOLVED to adopt the mobility scooter policy attached to the report.

CH37

MINUTES OF THE SHELTERED HOUSING TASK GROUP

The Chairman asked that the item relating to the minutes of the Sheltered Housing be brought forward, to enable it to be dealt with at the same time as the recommendation from that task group regarding mobility scooters.

Members considered the minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2010. Councillor Menell said she was aware of instances where elderly people who depended on Lifeline had had to wait for up to a week for British Telecom to carry out repairs to their telephone line. It was a matter for concern that vulnerable elderly people could be left without their Lifeline service for this length of time, and Councillor Menell asked that a letter from the Committee be sent to BT asking that Lifeline customers be given priority for repairs.

RESOLVED

- 1 To take note of the Minutes of the Sheltered Housing Task Group;
- 2 to inform British Telecom of the Committee's significant concerns regarding cases where elderly people who depend on Lifeline have had to wait for up to a week for repairs to their telephone line.

CH38

PRIORS GREEN COMMUNITY CENTRE

The Committee considered the report of the Community Partnerships Manager. The report explained that it had been the intention at the time of transfer of the Community Hall to the District Council that the hall would eventually be transferred to Takeley Parish Council. She said a newly formed management committee of volunteers would take over control of the running and maintenance under a trust deed to be entered into with Takeley Parish Council.

RESOLVED

To recommend to Full Council the transfer of the Priors Green Community Hall to Takeley Parish Council along with the associated section 106 monies.

CH39

ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS AUDIT COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Members considered a report seeking approval of an action plan to address the recommendations of the Audit Commission following its inspection report of the Council's strategic housing services which was published in September 2010.

RESOLVED

To approve the action plan to respond to the Audit Commission's recommendations set out in the Housing Inspection report, and to report to the Committee on progress in six month's time.

CH40

TENANT FORUM MINUTES

The Chairman invited the Tenant Forum Chairman, Sam Sproul, to speak. Mr Sproul said the Tenant Forum were very concerned at the prospect of the Council moving to cabinet-style governance. He had spoken to the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager, and wished to question where the Tenant Forum would stand in light of these changes. He said the coalition government had indicated there should be greater tenant empowerment, and he wished to make Members aware of tenants' concern that they would be side-lined.

The Chairman said whilst the Committee could not answer questions about the future cabinet arrangements in detail, the role of the Tenant Forum would continue. The Forum's concerns expressed at this meeting would be recorded.

Councillor Morson said whilst he was opposed to moving to a cabinet system, that if such a move was now inevitable then a model was needed which took full account of all external groups which Members served. He was sure that if a portfolio holder were to take on the role of this Committee that that person would wish to take an inclusive approach.

Councillor Foley asked tenant representatives to explain in more detail what their concerns were.

Sam Sproul said tenants wanted to ensure that their involvement with the Council would continue to be in line with their current level of participation.

David Parish said he was not so much concerned whether the Tenant Forum would in future report directly to a portfolio holder, but that it should still have a say, much as it did in this Committee.

Councillor Sell said he hoped there would be an expectation that whoever occupied the housing portfolio would liaise with the Tenant Forum. He hoped that when housing matters were discussed under a cabinet that the Tenant Forum representatives could attend as observers.

Councillor Menell said there many changes happening, including the Localism Bill, the 'big society' and the fact that no one knew who of the present Committee would still be here following the local elections in May. In view of this state of flux she suggested all comments be directed through the Committee's Lead Officer to the Leader.

The Chairman said the minutes of this discussion would send out a message that this Council had no plans to devalue the role of tenants. The decision to adopt a new constitution would be taken at the Council's meeting in December. He asked officers to report to the March meeting of the Committee on areas of its responsibilities which might require a 'steer' for the benefit of the Committee's successor.

RESOLVED

- 1 to note the minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Forum held on 29 September 2010;
- 2 a report to be brought to the March meeting of the Community and Housing Committee inviting Members to identify and comment on areas of the Committee's responsibilities where clarification may be needed in going forward to a cabinet system.

CH41

AREA FORUMS

The Community Partnerships Manager gave a brief summary of discussions at the September meetings. She said the topic of health had been discussed, and in particular the implications of the White Paper. There had been significant public interest at the South Forum in a public meeting regarding the new health centre for Stansted.

The theme for the next meetings would be the Local Strategic Partnership.

Councillor Foley expressed disappointment at the attendance figures for the Area Forums, and suggested attendance might be better if some meetings could be held in Thaxted Day Centre.

Councillor Sell said he felt the Council's approach to community engagement needed to improve, and that the executive changes could prove an opportunity for this to happen.

Councillor Menell said it would be helpful if Members were to put forward constructive ideas for improving the area forums, and as chairman of the North Area Forum she would be grateful.

The Chairman said all these points would be recorded and asked that officers ensure all members were aware of Councillor Menell's request. The meeting ended at 8.50pm.

Statement of Member of the Public

Mrs Daphne Cornell - Statement regarding day centres review.

The longstanding partnership between Uttlesford District Council and the voluntary management committees of our day centres is a good example of the 'Big Society'.

With UDC providing the building and its maintenance plus the responsibility of the utility bills, and the management committees being responsible for all of the equipment, furniture, staff wages, PAYE, public liability insurance, etc, it works. As a registered charity the management committee should not be in the business of profit. But we must be able to cover our costs. Whilst making your decision tonight, will you please consider all the volunteer hours given to this service. In the case of Saffron Walden we estimate 10-12 hours per day, that's 50-60 hours per week over 30 years freely given. We feel this makes the contribution from council taxpayers look good value. We do struggle to find volunteers at times but we will cope, with just a little extra help either in officer time or by a grant from our partners, this specifically to be used for form filling, risk and fire assessments, etc, which our volunteers find onerous and unproductive.

If you do agree the recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee tonight, please can we be assured that the Stansted financial model can be given to all day centres without further exploration. After all, the Scrutiny Committee has looked at the review findings on three occasions. Perhaps it is now time for action not words.