

Meeting of the Tenant Forum on Monday 8 November 2010 at 2pm In the Thaxted Day Centre

Present:

George Chesham, Daphne Cornell, Joan Hoadley, John Maddams, David Parish, Effie Rogers, Bethany Purvis and Sam Sproul

Officers:

Russell Goodey (Building Services Manager), Helen Harvey (Senior Sheltered Housing and Lifeline Officer), Lisa Higgon (Housing Officer), Liz Petrie (Housing Management Manager) and Nicole Shephard-Lewis (Tenant Participation Officer)

Apologies:

Paul Simpson, David Rhodes, Angela Hutton, Derek Green, Lorna Plant, and Roz Millership (Divisional Head: Housing and Environmental Services)

Minutes from the last Meeting were signed as a true and correct record

Matters Arising:

David Parish was concerned that a cabinet style system should have been placed on the agenda as a single item. The forum had received detailed information from Peter Snow but it remained unclear how the tenant forum would fit in with a new arrangement. Nicole Shephard-Lewis was in the process of trying to get information from other housing authorities who operate a cabinet style to see how the tenant forum worked within this setup.

Daphne Cornell said she felt that portfolio holders would have too much authority and a committee of individuals making decisions was a fairer and more democratic system. Full council decides over whether to adopt cabinet style system in December and David Parish wished that the concerns of the tenant forum are fully presented to the councillors before the decision is made. The council had only 49 responses to the proposed changes which the forum felt reflected a lack of knowledge rather than the acceptance for the change.

David Parish then proposed that the forum strongly voiced their concerns regarding a cabinet style system going ahead and Daphne Cornell seconded the motion. It was proposed that an email be sent to all councillors.

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Effie Roger asked that Roz Millership be thanked for all her hard work on the annual report. A hardcopy of the amended version is to be sent out to all forum members.

Congratulations were given to Roz Millership on her new post of Divisional Head which now includes Environmental Services.

Comprehensive Spending Review:

Russell Goody read out information emailed by Roz Millership regarding key proposals of the Government's spending review that relate to housing including:

- Council houses "for life" will end for new tenants, with their entitlement assessed at regular intervals
- Ministers are likely to set a target of building 150,000 affordable homes, changing the way councils charge rent to finance them.
- Terms for existing social housing tenants and their rent will be unchanged, with new tenants offered intermediate rents at around 80% of the market rent
- The Government wants to make social housing more responsive, flexible and fair so that more people can access social housing in ways that better reflect their needs
- Investment via the Decent Homes programme will continue to improve the existing social housing stock
- The New Homes Bonus will give local authorities clear financial incentives to ensure that local communities benefit from new housing and economic development in their areas
- The Government will increase housing supply by reforming the planning system so it is more efficient, effective and supportive of economic development
- Support for Mortgage Interest scheme to be extended for a further year
- HRA reform – not clear in the spending review whether council's will be able to keep any capital receipts from RTB sales (not even the 25% they are currently keeping)

Bethany Purvis commented that if social housing rent was to increase significantly then effectively there would not be any social housing. The whole object of housing for people in need would be defeated. The forum all agreed. Sam Sproul went on to say that there had been no concrete information yet on HRA reform from the housing minister and that the forum should speak Sir

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Alan Hazelhurst to bring up the matter with the housing minister. He felt another year had been wasted paying rent to central government with no sign of any definitive conclusions as to the way forward.

Effie Rogers commented that the increase in rents coupled with the decrease in housing benefit did not add up. All comments on the subject should be forwarded to the Chairman.

Proposed Supporting People cuts would be brought up at the Community and Housing Meeting. Liz Petrie explained that these were administered by Essex County Council and that at present the direct effects of the cuts were not known to UDC.

Conditions of Tenancy:

Liz Petrie thanked all those for their feedback and comments on what they feel needed amending/adding. From these comments a draft will be prepared to move forward with. Liz Petrie explained that the current tenancy agreement was not robust enough and that those few tenants that had not maintained their tenancy could not be demoted or evicted as the conditions did not stand up in court in some cases. The Housing Initiative task group have been asked to get their comments back on the draft conditions by early December 2010. The new tenant handbook needs to be put in sync with the new conditions of tenancy agreement. Daphne Cornell proposed that Angela Hutton and Effie Rogers looked into the conditions of tenancy and work with Liz Petrie. The draft copy is to be brought back to the January meeting for the rest of the forum to review.

Local Offers:

Russell Goodey proposed that the repairs service could develop a local offer in conjunction with the tenant forum. A number of possibilities were discussed but it was decided that it would be advantageous to set up a sub-committee. Bethany Purvis and David Parish volunteered.

Russell Goodey assured the forum that despite the council now employing a procurement manager that the voice of the tenant forum in procurement was still essential.

George Chesham queried the life expectancy of a boiler for example, that if it had reached its end would it automatically be replaced even if it were working well. Russell Goodey explained that in many cases when an item reached its expiration date it became obsolete due to a lack of replacement parts that needed replacement as a result of wear and tear, however for those items which were working well, fully maintained, safe and up to current standards the item may remain in a service beyond their predicted expiration. Effie Rogers questioned when the sub-committee would be set up to discuss ways in which the money saving schemes of this nature could be discussed.

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The question of adaptations to properties without council consent was discussed. The council had a duty of care to incoming tenants to ensure that when they took over a property any alteration carried out by a previous tenant met all safety requirements.

Tenant Participation Update – Participation Action plan:

The forum were given the latest version of the Action Plan. Daphne Cornell said it was an ongoing document that would develop with the tenants needs. Effie Rogers was critical of the document. Liz Petrie pointed out that Angela Hutton and Nicole Shephard-Lewis had worked hard on the document and she felt it was a good working plan.

Bethany Purvis shared her experience of participation and said it was not easy to get tenants involved. She said that the freebie TV power downs that Nicole Shephard-Lewis had given her for tenants who hadn't attended the meeting encouraged a larger number of tenants to attend the next meeting. Proving that positive incentives can help attract attendance at events and that can be developed into participation.

Nicole Shephard-Lewis asked if the tenant forum would like to put anything in the next edition of housing news to encourage more members.

Nicole Shephard-Lewis then went on to say that she would be introducing a tenant blog in the next magazine which she hopes will encourage younger and IT keen tenants engage with the council.

The issue of the Christmas meal was raised and forum members decided that in view of the current financial climate a budget meal at the Temeraire would be arranged. The housing team did not want to cancel the meal as it was important to thank the tenant forum who had worked so hard all year.

Update from Other meetings:

Daphne Cornell reported information she had gathered from the TPAS meeting of 27 October 2010.

TPAS EVENT 27/10/10

Before I give my report of the event, can I say a few words on my personal experience as a Council tenant, having lived in the same house for 55 years? How happy, relieved, and grateful we were to be granted the tenancy. Over the years of course we have brought up our children, made the house a home and watched the fields around us being built on to provide homes for others as fortunate as us, so that I consider the average perspective of tenants of UDC.

But I realise that peoples expectations change so I was interested in the first presentation from Kate Newbold TPAS Consultancy Manager. She gave examples of three TPAS accredited landlords on how their plans were developed. Most of the criteria for accreditation UDC, as a Housing Authority would certainly be able to meet.

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Our difficulty may be the empowerment of tenants, how can we empower if it is so difficult to engage.

We were given examples: Young families in exchange for Mum & Dad taking part in focus sessions – Free cinema tickets for the children, bicycle re-cycling scheme, Partnership providing bicycles for young citizens for their views on community clean up events, coach trip focus, day trips provided (whilst captive on the coach), join in discussions on a certain service.

Single Men Tenants

Really not applicable to UDC

Young People

Work based placements

Apprenticeships

Grants for education

If we are to work hard on our tenants' empowerment maybe we should look into some of these examples in more depth.

Kate would not accept that we should give up due to apathy!!

The second speaker was Lynne Foster Director of Support and Transformation CHP

A very lively presentation which could enthuse anyone with much emphasis on all of the unproductive time given over to ticking boxes – preparing for inspections, which is nothing new here as local Govt Officers have been saying this for ages. But Lynne concluded that with the demise of the Audit Commission come the challenge:

How do we maintain standards and services?

Maintain transparency and resident influence

Keep the best results of the previous inspection Regime? (Which did keep everyone focused?)

Reclaim your services (Not what the audit commission said we should provide but the ones tenants want)

Empowerment and involvement again?

The third speaker was Nigel Long Head of Policy TPAS

He spoke beyond the headlines: What's happening in Housing? e.g. negative housing subsidy (No info yet) Will we really keep all the rent income?

New tenants paying 80% of private sector rents will mean more on benefit

Joint tenants panels (Localism) R.S.L. Private Council

Budget proposals: Nigel gave many examples that our officers may be aware of, but as tenant reps should look into in more depth.

I found the event – thought provoking and in parts helpful. So what next?

Effie Rogers gave an update from the Housing Initiative Task Working Group from their meeting 25 October 2010 (full minutes are available online and by request, ER's synopsis is attached).

Performance Indicators:

Void figures: 6 General Needs (3 of which are on offer), 3 Elderly persons bungalows (3 of which are on offer), still a large number of hard to let sheltered properties. An open day was held at Reynolds Court and The Close Hatfield Heath. David Parish felt that a lift at The Close would assist in filling the voids at The Close, a feasibility study had been carried out and it would be possible however it had been put on hold until April as a result of the cost.

Russell Goodey reported 96.88% satisfaction with repairs service.

Homelessness Figures for the first two quarters of this year

April 2010 – August 2010	Number of People
Presented	14
Accepted	6
Rejected	6
Pending decision	2
In Bed and Breakfast	2
16-17 year olds	0

Any Other Business:

Effie Rogers and David Parish also attended the new temporary accommodation in Takeley today, they reported back to the group that the properties had been fitted out well and would provide suitable temporary accommodation for single people and families alike in times of need. The location of the properties had been well thought out with a local shop, pub and bus route.

David Parish wanted it noted that agenda item 11 on the minutes of Community and Housing under risk analysis was open to misunderstanding.

Helen Harvey is to be asked to re-circulate handy person job description. A book is held at each sheltered premises that has a communal area for jobs to be added for the handy person to undertake or pass to repairs if not within the remit of the job.

Next meetings:

Monday 10 January 2011 at 2pm, in the Council Chambers Saffron Walden Council Offices

The meeting closed at 4.45pm