

**COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 15 MARCH 2011**

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

Also attending: Councillor A J Ketteridge.

Co-opted member: Sam Sproul – Tenant Forum.

Officers in attendance: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager), J Burnham (Housing Enabling and Development Officer), W Cockerell (Principal Environmental Health Officer), T Cowper (Principal Accountant), R Harborough (Director of Public Services), R Millership (Divisional Head: Housing and Environment Services), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer), N Shephard-Lewis (Tenant Participation Officer) and J Snares (Housing Options/Homelessness Manager).

CH57 PUBLIC STATEMENTS

Prior to the meeting a presentation was given by representatives of Leisure Connection, on the contract with the Council for provision of leisure facilities at three sites in the District.

CH58 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E C Abrahams and M Miller.

CH59 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting on 20 January 2011 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CH60 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute CH44 – Olympics Working Group

Councillor Sell said he wished, at the risk of repetition, to ask for an update, as he was keen for Uttlesford to gain a tangible legacy from the Olympics.

The Community Partnerships Manager said a meeting with County representatives for the Olympics was arranged for 28 March. Members of the Olympics Working Group had been invited. Further, the possibility was being discussed of holding events at

Saffron Walden Museum and in the Gardens of Easton Lodge to mark the Olympics.

(ii) Minute CH33 - Day Centres Review

Councillor Morson asked whether the Lead Officer would include in her report to the Committee an update on funding for the proposed post of day centres co-ordinator.

The Chairman said events had moved on since the issue had last been before the Committee, and the Lead Officer would refer to day centres in her report.

(iii) Minute CH50 – Housing Revenue Account and Rent Setting

The Chairman said he had received a statement from David Parish, which Mr Parish had asked him to read out to Members. In his statement Mr Parish said he sincerely apologised to the Committee for his report on rent setting, and said he should have made clear that it was his personal view only, which was not representative of the Tenant Forum. He wished to affirm that the Tenant Forum chairman had given the Committee an accurate reflection of the Forum's views.

(iv) Minute CH49 – 2011/12 Revenue Budget – Community Toilet Scheme

Councillor Sell said he had not been contacted regarding the option for a café in Stansted to participate in a community toilet scheme. The Chairman asked for the action point in the Minute to be progressed.

(v) Minute CH51 – 2011/12 Capital Programme – Museum Heritage Quest Centre

Councillor Morson asked for an update. The Director of Corporate Services said Sainsbury's had not appealed against the planning decision.

(vi) Minute CH50 – 2011/12 Housing Revenue Account and Rent Setting

The Chairman drew to Members' attention a copy of a letter to the MP sent on behalf of the Committee, regarding Members' concern about the impact on people of the Government's guideline rent increase.

CH61

CHAIRMAN'S ITEMS

The Chairman said he had accepted one item to be dealt with under urgent business, a report seeking an amendment to the Council's housing allocation policy.

CH62

LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

The Committee considered the Lead Officer's report which gave information on empty homes; the impact of the recession on housing options and homelessness; phase one of the Holloway Crescent development in Leaden Roding; Supporting People; day centres; the Audit Commission's housing re-inspection; the Uttlesford Home Improvement Agency; and a Food Hygiene Rating Scheme, 'Scores on the Doors'. Members commented as follows.

Regarding empty homes, the Principal Environmental Health Officer encouraged any Member who wished to discuss an empty home in their area to contact him directly.

Regarding housing options, the Housing Options/Homelessness Manager reported that the service had been very busy with an increased number of people seeking help. Since the report had been submitted, the rent deposit scheme had been fully utilised, and there were now no more funds in that budget until the new financial year.

The Lead Officer reported that the works at Holloway Crescent had progressed well. An opening event was being arranged for 25 March, and she asked Members who wished to attend to contact the Housing Enabling and Development Officer. Those residents who were moving to the bungalows would do so at the end of April, and every effort would be made to ensure the transition was as smooth as possible for people. A separate report appeared on the agenda regarding phase 2 of the Holloway Crescent development.

Regarding Supporting People, the Lead Officer said funding cuts had been announced of 24%, which was far more severe than had been expected. The Sheltered Housing Task Group had met to look into where potential savings could be made, and had agreed they did not wish to see the service suffer. Steps which were being taken were as follows: the change management team was currently exploring options to protect the service. In particular, one option was to re-charge for certain services, such as cleaning, communal lighting and laundry facilities. Officers had also joined a group of other Essex local authorities to try to find ways of minimising the impact of the cuts.

Regarding day centres, the Chairman noted it had been the intention to bring a further report to the meeting regarding finances available for the proposed role of day centres co-ordinator. However, there had been some difficulties in making progress, and he was pleased that the Tenant

Participation Officer, whose role encompassed assisting the day centres, was present to answer Members' questions.

The Tenant Participation Officer said consultation had been carried out with the Day Centre Forum, but that it had been difficult to agree the way in which a shared resource would operate. Forum members had expressed concern due to variation between the needs of the five day centres, as some felt they did not need the additional resource, whilst others considered their needs to be greater. It had been agreed in principle that having a co-ordinator post would be of some benefit to all, but that there was a need for further detailed work into how the post would work.

Councillor Morson recalled that the situation had been discussed in November and that he had tried at that time to ensure that if the project were to go ahead that there would be some guaranteed funding. He wished to put forward a motion to the effect that a sum of £10,000 be ring-fenced for the day centre co-ordinator's post. On advice from the Democratic Services Officer, the Chairman said a motion without notice on this subject could not be put.

Councillor Sell said day centres needed more marketing support to get more lettings, and that they should have this help, as the centres were an asset for this Council.

The Chairman said officers had made attempts to progress the situation, and that another meeting with the Day Centre Forum had been arranged for 10 May.

The Lead Officer said a volunteer had come forward offering to act as a central co-ordinator and that he had been introduced to all the day centres. However, the committees had decided against using a volunteer in this capacity.

The Chairman asked that Members be kept informed.

Regarding the Scores on the Doors national food hygiene rating scheme, Members asked various questions. In reply to questions, the Principal Environmental Health Officer said there were 14 days to appeal against a rating, following which further assessment would be carried out after 4 to 6 weeks; that there was existing provision for closure of premises where there was significant or immediate health threat; and that the inclusion in the rating system of aspects such as book-keeping, could be considered of interest to the public as these elements reflected the quality of management of the premises.

CH63

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 30 YEAR BUSINESS PLAN

The Principal Accountant explained the context of a 30 year business plan for the Housing Revenue Account, which had been prepared by consultants. The business plan set out the two scenarios under the existing housing subsidy system and on the self financing system which would come into effect in April 2012. He drew to Members' attention key

assumptions made in the report. He said the report indicated that under the housing subsidy system, the Council would not be able to afford an increased need for capital expenditure on housing, but that under the self-financing system, this expenditure would be fully affordable. The period of debt repayment would be 23 years, of which the first 7 to 8 years would be fairly financially constrained. A rise in interest rates would increase the payback period by four years. Officers would report further to Members during the forthcoming year on how the debt would be financed.

The Chairman said this was a subject dear to his heart, and he wished to thank officers for their work on this matter. The Council had made representations to the Government regarding its concerns that its tenants were getting a raw deal, and that the money from rents should be kept locally. He regretted that this Government was not taking this concern on board. This was a huge debt to take on, over a period of time ending a long way in the future.

Sam Sproul said once the Council had paid the government for its housing stock, he understood that the government would take 75% of the money accruing from any tenant wishing to buy their property. In his view this was highway robbery.

The Chairman said this was a comment well made, and the Committee could only note the report and views expressed.

CH64

NATIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING POLICY

The Committee considered a report advising on updates in national policy that would affect the provision of affordable housing in the district. The Housing Enabling and Development Officer said at present the government proposals only applied to housing associations but might be rolled out to local authorities. He highlighted the main provisions, in particular the introduction of the "affordable rent" tenure, which would allow registered providers to charge up to 80% of open market private rents and therefore use the additional rent received to subsidise the build costs of new affordable housing. Money from the New Homes Bonus could be available to 'top up', and would be allocated to housing associations at county level. There were no provisions to ring fence additional rental incomes, so money raised in Uttlesford could be spent elsewhere in the country.

The HCA would monitor the debts of housing associations to ensure they were sustainable.

The Chairman noted the recommendation in the report, which was to authorise officers to enter into discussions. He asked for assurance that any concrete decision to be made would be brought back before Members first, which officers confirmed would be the case.

RESOLVED

- 1 To note the national policy changes
- 2 To approve the proposal to enter into negotiations with registered providers to alter nominations agreements where

applicable in order for them to apply the Affordable Rent formula to approved completions from the 2008-11 programme.

- 3 To approve the proposal that officers are tasked to enter into preliminary discussions with both the West Essex LIP partners and lead registered providers regarding the investment of funding raised through affordable rents and the potential for some broad agreement on the content and terms of tenancy strategies.

CH65

WEST ESSEX DISTRICT COUNCILS LOCAL INVESTMENT PLAN

The Committee considered a report advising on the development of a Local Investment Plan for West Essex which had been produced in conjunction with Epping Forest and Harlow District Councils. The HCA had suggested a joint LIP for these three councils, and the new partnership document which had been circulated to Members in draft form, was considered by officers to be in keeping with the recent Memorandum of Understanding between the West Essex Councils. The Director of Public Services said whilst the document characterised Harlow as the sub-regional centre of the area, the objectives fitted in well with Uttlesford's priorities. The Plan identified a number of investment priorities in the short, medium and long term, and for Uttlesford these were: affordable housing (a category 1 priority across all three timeframes); maintaining the decent homes standard (a priority 1 programme in the longer term); and Gypsy and Traveller site provision (a priority 2 project for the medium term). These priorities had to be balanced against those of Harlow and Epping Forest. Officers would provide updates to Members on the investment plans, which had initially been site-specific, but would proceed now on a more programmed approach.

Councillor Sell asked about implications for the proposed development of Harlow North. The Director of Public Services replied that Harlow North was in Hertfordshire, so did not come within the Harlow district. The issue of Harlow North was not referred to in the Local Investment Plan and none of the participating authorities had yet advanced its proposals to a stage where they needed to be accommodated with existing priorities. Councillor Sell said he was aware of an exhibition at Gilston, at which developers were promoting their proposals for Harlow North.

RESOLVED to recommend to Full Council adoption of the Local Investment Plan.

CH66

HOLLOWAY CRESCENT PHASE 2 DEVELOPMENT

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer presented a report setting out the findings of site appraisals into a new build scheme on the currently unoccupied site at Holloway Crescent in Leaden Roding. He said the Holloway Crescent Task Group had recommended that the Council develop the site itself for new affordable housing using Stansted Area Housing Partnership money. Officers had discussed options for the site with the Parish Council and the Concern Group, and had taken into account their suggestions for the type of accommodation they wished to

be built at the site. The Parish Council had expressed interest in refurbishing the existing accommodation, but officers had explained it was difficult to obtain money for refurbishment.

The figures stated in the report required a slight adjustment, as on the advice of the architect the maximum number of houses for the scheme should be 8, rather than nine or ten units. The costs were adjusted to reflect this fact, as follows: estimated cost of implementing the recommendations would be £878,000; SAHP funding would be £445,000; and a loan against future capitalised rental income would be £438,000. The report highlighted the fact that figures were subject to obtaining accurate quotations for build in addition to local rent levels.

The Chairman said it was excellent that this matter would soon be determined, as great efforts had been made for a long time to ensure the concerns of local people were met, whilst taking into account the interests of the Council, dealing with the sheltered site and using the SAHP money. The result of this hard work would be a credit to all Members who had played a part in achieving this outcome.

Councillor Sell agreed with these comments, and said he was pleased the proposed scheme had got to this stage, and would be using SAHP money. There was a housing need in Leaden Roding, and this was a commendable scheme.

In reply to a question from Councillor Redfern regarding the combination of units which were proposed, the Housing Options/Homelessness Officer confirmed she was content with the proposals for two-bedroomed units, as there were already some one-bed flats in that area.

RESOLVED to recommend to Council to approve the development of 8 new affordable housing units at Holloway Crescent, Leaden Roding using up to £445,000 of Stansted Area Housing Partnership funding and a loan of £438,000 against future rents.

CH67 **TENANT FORUM MINUTES**

The Committee noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Forum which took place on 10 January 2011. The Chairman of the Tenant Forum, Sam Sproul, gave a brief overview of the topics which had been discussed, in particular the role of the handyman for sheltered housing sites.

CH68 **AREA FORUM UPDATE**

The Committee received a verbal report from the Community Partnerships Manager on the Area Forums which had taken place on 1 and 3 March. The subjects discussed at this round of the Forums had been the Coalition Government's concept of the Big Society; the Local Strategic Partnership; and the Access to Services project on behalf of the Healthy Communities and Older People's Group. This project involved working with parish councils to develop models of good practice, for example, car sharing

schemes. Parish Councils were also being encouraged to develop neighbourhood community plans.

The Community Partnerships Manager said the presentation on the Big Society given by the Chief Executive had been well received. The Forums had also provided an opportunity to distribute a community safety survey. She said at the North Forum there had been concern expressed about the future of health services.

CH69

OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY AMENDMENT

The Chairman agreed to hear as an urgent item a report seeking an amendment to the Council's Housing Allocation Policy, on the grounds that an amendment was necessary to ensure the Council was not exposed to legal challenge, and to formalise what had been the Council's practice for many years.

The Housing Options/Homelessness Manager explained that whilst it was the Council's practice to designate its properties as either being for general needs or for people over 60, this policy should be made explicit in the Housing Allocations Policy so as to avoid leaving the Council open to legal challenge on the grounds of age discrimination. Legal advice had been obtained and proposed amended wording was suggested.

RESOLVED to agree new wording for paragraph 13 of the housing allocation policy as stated below:

13. Designation of Property Type – Age restrictions

To make best use of housing stock properties are designated as being either general needs or for older persons or people with disabilities.

Older persons' properties, such as bungalows, will normally be allocated to the following categories of person:

Those aged 60 or over.

Those under 60 with band B medical assessment for mobility who require this type of accommodation.

In areas of lower demand some bungalows may be advertised without an age restriction, however, in the first instance preference will still be given to applicants over 60 expressing interest.

General needs properties such as houses or flats will be allocated to persons under 60 unless there are special circumstances which indicate that a particular general needs property is suitable for an applicant who is 60 or over.

EXPRESSIONS OF THANKS

In recognition of the fact that this was the final meeting of the Community and Housing Committee, the Chairman said the Committee had achieved a great deal over the years, and he wished to take this opportunity to thank

Members and officers, as well as the Tenant Forum and Museum representatives for their contribution. Finally, he wished to thank all those councillors who had served in the Committee over the years.

Councillor Ketteridge thanked Councillor Chamberlain for his chairmanship of the Committee over the past four years, and said he had brought to the Committee his background in housing, which had been of excellent value to the Council.

Sam Sproul expressed his thanks on behalf of the Tenant Forum to the Chairman and to Members and officers for the help and support they had given the Forum.

Councillor Sell endorsed the comments made by Councillor Ketteridge, and said Councillor Chamberlain had chaired the meetings of this Committee in a professional manner, and that he had enjoyed serving on the Committee.

CH70 **EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

RESOLVED that under section 100I of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 part 1 schedule 12A of the Act.

CH71 **LAND ADJACENT TO 25 ASHDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN**

The Committee considered a report requested by Members at the previous meeting regarding the feasibility of developing land adjacent to 25 Ashdon Road, Saffron Walden as affordable housing.

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer highlighted the valuation information set out in the report, and explained the potential build costs. He reminded Members of potential changes in national affordable housing policy, described earlier in the meeting, and advised such changes could have an impact on any decision to sell an area of Council owned land for private development, or whether to develop the plot as an affordable housing dwelling.

Councillor Howell said it would be prudent to await further information on the implications of changes in national housing policy before taking a decision to develop or dispose of this site.

RESOLVED to defer entering into negotiations regarding the sale of the area of land in question until such time as the government determines whether the Affordable Rent tenancy will be extended to local authorities.