

Extracts from Minutes of the Housing Initiative Task Group and Community Committee relating to the Review of the Committee Structure for dealing with the Housing Service

HOUSING INITIATIVES TASK GROUP – 7 APRIL 2008

HTG35 TIMETABLE FOR REPORTS

The Chairman of the Group, Councillor Chamberlain, referred to a meeting of the Constitution Task Group at which the future of the Housing Initiative Task Group had been discussed, it being then thought that the Task group should become a working party. A question arose from this whether the Housing Initiative Task Group, in whatever form, would be the adequate Group to deal with Housing Service needs of the Council in the future. He suggested that there should be a review of the matter examining whether the current format was the correct one or whether a housing committee should be set up for the future needs of the Council. The conclusions of any such review must necessarily be considered by the Constitution Task Group, Community Committee and Council.

Councillor Chamberlain reminded the meeting of the previous forum used by the Council to deal with housing matters and said that in his own opinion the Housing Service had not benefited from being included within a much larger committee as much as its needs became less conspicuous to some members.

He suggested that the appropriate timetable would be:

- 1 Officers to prepare a draft report to be returned to the next meeting of the Housing Initiative Task Group for discussions and amendment
- 2 The Tenant Forum to discuss how it feels the housing service should be addressed, their observations to be input to the same meeting of the Task Group for discussion.
- 3 A second meeting of the Task Group be called to finalise views before consideration of the whole by the Community Committee.

Following examination of the dates of the Committee timetable it was suggested that it would be more practicable, in the light of the Tenant Forum's scheduled meeting on 12 May, for the Task Group to meet before this, so that the Tenant Forum could discuss the Task Group's conclusions on 12 May and so a meeting of the Task Group to finalise matters should be held between 12 May and 19 June.

Councillor Chamberlain itemised matters for consideration in the first meeting of the Task Group;

- 1 whether Members were addressing the Housing service area adequately, especially since they were only six in number;
- 2 the view of the Audit report on the strategic side of the housing service (yet to be received);
- 3 rural excellence;
- 4 the disproportionately weighty and complex implications, of the loss of £5,000,000 from negative housing subsidy upon the housing service compared with the size of the forum considering these matters;
- 5 the lack of an obvious forum for public speaking on the topic of housing;
- 6 the lack of an appropriate forum for considering matters relating to policies and procedures within the housing service;
- 7 the lack of a unified forum to consider performance of the Housing Service, which was variously directed to Tenant Fora and Scrutiny Committee;
- 8 The absence of wholehearted endorsement by all Members of the housing schemes;

Councillor S Barker suggested that the situation might be improved if the Community Committee adopted the practice of the Finance and Administration and Scrutiny Committees of providing a report by the Chairman of the Committee at the commencement of each meeting. The Chairman of the Group agreed that this would be a useful approach and said that he personally felt that a Housing Committee was necessary but that this was only one view and it was necessary for officers to consider the matter and for the Council to decide upon it, taking into consideration the impact upon the Community Committee and other considerations.

The Chairman of the Group invited the observations of the officers present and Mrs R Millership, the Head of Housing Management, emphasised that she thought the Task Group was a useful forum for informal canvassing of ideas. Councillor Morson endorsed the usefulness of the Group for dealing with relatively less sweeping issues. Councillor S Barker, referring to the possibility of a Housing Services Committee, said that a committee that met three times a year would perhaps be appropriate.

Judith Snares (The Senior Housing Officer – Homelessness) agreed that the Task Group formed a good place for informal discussions and that major items should be dealt with at

Committee. The Chairman of the Group said he believed that there would be ample business for a full Committee in this context. The Task Group would be more appropriate for dealing with matters such as Holloway Crescent.

Councillor Hicks said he felt the Housing Committee was an important aspect of the Council and its functions should not be carried out by a discussion group of 6 Members.

Councillor S Barker also felt there should be a full Committee to allocate Housing tasks and resources and to deal with matters such as the current situation in Elsenham.

The Tenant Participation Officer was concerned that officers' time would be further stretched if there was going to be an additional committee to report to.

It was agreed that officers be requested to prepare a paper setting out the considerations that might be relevant to deciding the appropriate mechanism for dealing with housing related matters. This report would be submitted to the meeting in the early part of May.

HOUSING INITIATIVES TASK GROUP – 8 MAY 2008

HTG43 MECHANISMS FOR ADDRESSING HOUSING ISSUES

The Head of Housing Management circulated a briefing note reviewing the reporting mechanisms between the Housing Initiative Task Group and Community Committee, and considering whether a separate Housing Committee was necessary. Councillor Chamberlain recalled that the feeling at the last meeting was that such a committee was desirable. In his view, the fundamental remit for a housing committee should comprise housing management and Housing Revenue Account issues, rather than housing strategy. He now invited the meeting to consider the points set out in the report.

The question of housing strategy in the context of social affordable housing and homelessness was discussed. The Senior Housing Officer for Homelessness advised that the recent Audit Commission report on the Housing Service had identified a need for greater links with the private housing sector. She said the report criticised the “fragmented” nature of the current housing service structure, whereby housing matters were reported to three different committees, although co-ordination between officers was good. The Head of Housing Management advised that if Members were to recommend a

new Housing Committee, it would therefore be a missed opportunity if its remit did not encompass housing strategy.

Councillor Chamberlain said a housing committee should encompass the full housing service, and the housing revenue account was key. Within this remit would come homelessness, the private housing sector, and certain other main themes addressed in the executive summary of the Audit Commission report. In his view, this was a harsh report, but it should be seen in the context of the prevailing financial situation. Currently the Housing Initiative Task Group was the only forum at which housing matters were addressed, and it was important to involve Members more in policy issues. Councillor Chamberlain said in his view, the priority given to the housing service had slipped, in comparison with other areas. It was desirable to give housing a higher profile and for Members to take ownership of housing policy.

In reply to a question as to how other authorities managed housing matters, officers said that some had a cabinet portfolio holder.

Councillor Chamberlain noted that no response had been received from the Housing Minister regarding the query on the housing negative subsidy, which was currently under review. Officers circulated the Housing Newsletter, which was distributed to tenants, and which referred to this issue. A copy would be sent to the Minister.

Councillor Chamberlain suggested that the Tenant Forum be invited to discuss and provide feedback at the next meeting of the Task Group on the prospect of a new housing committee.

In reply to a question from Councillor Morson, officers said it would be for Members to decide whether there would still be a need for reporting to other committees. It was probable there would always be an element of cross-working between committees, particularly regarding planning matters. Councillor Chamberlain said that whilst division of housing matters was not always clear-cut, it was important to give housing a higher profile.

The Senior Housing Officer for homelessness said that the Audit Commission had criticised as inadequate the profile of both homelessness and private sector involvement, which merited scrutiny at a higher level. Councillor Hicks referred to criticism of the issue of unoccupied houses, which whilst being addressed via the PLACE scheme, required strategic monitoring. The Head of Housing Management emphasised that if Members were to decide on a future housing committee,

or a housing and community committee, this should focus on strategic housing, as well as housing management.

Councillor Chamberlain said it was essential that a new structure would have a main committee, as well as a task group. Councillor Hudson referred to the confidential nature of certain aspects of the work carried out by this task group, which would necessitate a further task group. Councillor Hicks referred to officers' concerns about implications for staff time if a new committee were to be established, which would have implications for both housing and committee services. Councillor Chamberlain said that setting terms of reference and scheduling dates for a new committee would facilitate working towards meetings.

Councillor Bellingham-Smith said she was in favour of having a housing committee. Councillor Morson said he was not opposed to the prospect, and that if it proved to work he would support the proposal. Strategic matters should be the priority. Councillor Hudson said he was not opposed, depending on the implications for staff working towards the committee timetables.

In conclusion, the Chairman asked that a note be prepared of main bullet points raised during the discussion, that would form part of the submission to the Constitution Task Group, and who would then decide whether to support the formation of a separate housing committee by recommendation to Council. It was suggested that the Community Committee should also be invited to take a view on this matter.

However, it was made clear that there would be no separate officers' report recommending whether or not a housing committee should be formed, other than a simple statement of reasons identified as salient points by Members. The responsibility for decisions of this kind rested with the Council, advised by the Constitution Task Group.

Members took the view that the Task Group was ready to make such a recommendation now, and all that was needed was a point by point clarification of the reasons stated by Members at this meeting.

RECOMMENDED to the Constitution Task Group
that:

1. consideration be given to the view expressed by this Task Group that a separate housing committee be formed, and that a recommendation be made accordingly to Council;

2. the functions of such a committee should encompass housing strategy, the Housing Revenue Account, and all other peripheral housing matters; and
3. in the event that this matter was pursued, the Community Committee be asked to form a view about which of its functions, if any, could be transferred to a housing committee, and that more detailed data be provided to the Community Committee, this data to be added to the briefing note circulated at today's meeting.

COMMUNITY COMMITTEE – 19 JUNE 2008

C10 HOUSING INITIATIVES TASK GROUP

The Minutes of two meetings of this Task Group held on 8 May and 9 June 2008 were considered. Councillor Chamberlain drew the attention of the Committee to Minute HTG43. The Housing Initiatives Task Group had concluded that there was a case for a housing committee. Any views from Members of this Committee on this matter would now be put forward to the Constitution Task Group in considering whether such a committee should be formed. Housing was one of the greatest areas of expenditure in the Council. The Task Group would recommend to the Constitution Task Group that a separate housing committee should go forward for approval.

Mrs Cornell said that Tenants had been asked for their views. They considered the Task Group to be very good, but felt a separate housing committee would ensure housing matters were not rushed through this Committee. Tenants were quite happy to keep the Council as their landlord.

Councillor Sell said he thought this was the way to go forward, and that if there were to be a housing committee, it would be a lost opportunity if it did not include strategy.

NOTED that the above comments expressed by Members of this Committee would be put forward to the Constitution Task Group.