

Hhc11101s MN

HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN on 1 NOVEMBER 2001

Present:- Councillor Mrs S Flack – Vice-Chairman in the Chair
Councillors R P Chambers, Mrs C M Dean, M A Hibbs,
A J Ketteridge and Mrs J Loughlin.

Also present at the invitation of the Chairman: - Councillor W F Bowker

Also present:- Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen, Mr I Cole, Mr J Grimshaw and Mr Perry (Tenant Panel Representatives)

Officers in attendance:- R Chamberlain, J B Dickson, B D Perkins,
R M Secker and P J Snow

HH6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for absence was received from Councillor R W L Stone.

Councillor M A Hibbs declared his interest in the item relating to land at Usterdale Road and Castle Cross, Saffron Walden.

HH7 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2001 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HH8 WARDEN BEST VALUE REVIEW

The Head of Housing Services reported on the outcome of the Warden Best Value Review and the draft Action Plan prepared by the Reference Group. He explained that extensive consultation had taken place with service users and other interested parties resulting in a high level of response and input to the Best Value process.

The intention was to provide the same level of service to all sheltered tenants which did not exist at the present time. The review report proposed that this could be achieved by wardens working a full structured day rather than the existing arrangement of working for a few hours and being on call for the rest of the 24 hour period. It was also proposed that personal visits should be made to all sheltered tenants each day.

The restructuring would involve two existing wardens carrying out new duties relating to the Lifeline service and to the promotion of welfare and social activity. It would also include the deletion of the equivalent of two posts from

the existing establishment. These proposals were expected to achieve a total annual saving (including extra income) of approximately £48,800. Members were advised that the proposals had been supported by each of the tenant panels.

Councillor Bowker spoke about his concerns regarding security at sheltered housing sites, particularly Gaces Acre at Newport. He expressed the view that the introduction of a mobile service and the phasing out of resident wardens might bring about increased risk of security breaches at sheltered sites.

The officers reported that the effects of the European Working Time Directive, when fully implemented, meant that it would be difficult to maintain the policy of expecting wardens to remain on call for periods of 24 hours. A rolling programme was already in place to improve and upgrade security measures at sheltered housing schemes. It would also be possible to make arrangements for individual officers to make non urgent welfare visits on the basis of need.

Councillor Hibbs said that he was disturbed that, for the second time, established policy had been brought into question by the Best Value process. He considered that the existing warden service and the level of care provided reflected well on the Council and questioned the necessity for seeking budget savings. He felt that the question of working hours should be addressed separately.

In response to these concerns, the Head of Housing Services confirmed that the comments made at Scrutiny Committee 1 on 12 September had been fed into the review process. The savings which were likely to be achieved had to be considered as a by-product of the review rather than its primary purpose. The thrust of the Best Value Review was to improve the efficiency of the service.

Other Members commented that a great deal of work had been put into the Best Value Review and the proposals needed to be taken on their merits. The Leader commented that the Best Value process was imperfect but the Council should take the opportunity to make the most of what it had to offer. The objective should be to seek to achieve the same level of warden service to all sheltered housing tenants.

In response to a question, the Head of Housing Services confirmed that it might prove possible to extend the Lifeline service to other vulnerable groups and the officers, in conjunction with relevant agencies, would assess the suitability of various potential beneficiaries of the service.

Councillor Mrs Dean, who had been a member of the Reference Group, said that she considered the proposals would succeed in making better use of the wardens' time. The review process had included comprehensive consultation arrangements and the proposals had attracted widespread support. Her only disappointment had been that the review process did not include the relevant

job descriptions. Officers confirmed that a copy of the job description would be sent to Councillor Mrs Dean.

A proposal to accept the recommendation was put to the vote and carried.

RESOLVED that the Warden Best Value Action Plan 2001/02 be approved as set out in the appendix to these Minutes.

The Leader drew attention to the absence of any mention of Best Value Reviews in the Council's constitution and scheme of delegation. Members agreed that the process for approving Best Value Reviews should be clarified and

RESOLVED that the Constitution Task Group be asked to consider whether Best Value Reviews could be resolved by Policy Committees, or should be referred to the Council.

HH9

DRAFT BUDGET 2002/03

The Director of Resources presented the initial draft revised estimates of direct costs and income for 2001/02 and estimates for 2002/03. The figures were presented in the context of target committee cash limits and policy priorities approved by the Council on 16 October. The report included details of proposed savings, which were part of a package intended to achieve the target savings identified.

The Committee's cash limit figure had originally been calculated at £586,000 and the savings target at £43,000. Since then, adjustments had been made to the Committee's base budget costs to reflect the addition of the responsibility for public conveniences and health and safety training. The adjusted target cash figure was now £700,000. It now appeared that the Committee would be unable to meet this target cash limit by a figure of £10,000.

The Director of Resources advised Members that unavoidable external pressures meant that the financial position was now more serious than at first thought and the Administration had accepted the prudent use of reserves to achieve the target figure. In particular, insurance premiums had risen sharply and pension fund employer contributions were expected to rise. Interest rates had also fallen more sharply than anticipated following the events of 11 September.

The Administration had now submitted its list of detailed savings proposals which, in the case of this Committee, amounted to £48,000. The Leader explained the background to the savings proposed and said that it had been prudent of the Administration to put forward a target guideline exceeding the original target savings figure. In referring to the proposal to discontinue support of the Wintercomfort charity, the Leader said that it was unfortunately

the case that Wintercomfort had been able to assist only a small number of applicants from the Uttlesford district during the past year.

Councillor Hibbs said that although the Council had no statutory duty in this area it was important to assess how it could work with outside agencies such as Wintercomfort and to examine the viability of helping to fund the purchase of a half way house to help benefit younger homeless people in this area. He considered that homeless people in Uttlesford were often exported to adjoining urban areas and the abandonment of financial support for Wintercomfort would amount to the writing off of these people.

It was proposed and seconded that the Administration's proposals for savings be agreed as recommended in the report. It was then proposed as an amendment that the savings be approved with the exception of the withdrawal of support from Wintercomfort.

Upon being put to the vote, the amendment was defeated on the casting vote of the Chairman. The substantive motion was then put to the meeting and approved on the casting vote of the Chairman. It was therefore

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Administration's proposals for target savings, and the draft net direct cost budgets, as presented at this meeting, be approved, and
- 2 Officers be directed to prepare service plans and full budgets for 2002/03 for consideration during the next cycle of meetings.

HH10

WELFARE WORK FOR ELDERLY AND DISABLED TENANTS

The Committee was advised that the Housing Best Value Action Plan 2000/01 included provision for a review of welfare work during the current financial year. The Head of Housing Services explained the criteria for determining requests for welfare work by elderly and disabled tenants. It was presently the case that internal redecorations were only approved for tenants who were in receipt of housing benefit.

The benefits of these services were fully recognised by Members. It was felt, however, that it was important to ensure that all elderly and disabled tenants were treated on an equal basis and the Council's officers should be able to operate within an agreed financial framework. The tenant panels had expressed their support for these proposals.

RESOLVED that the policy on redecoration requests for elderly and disabled people be amended to enable approved work to be based only on need and carried out within a set budget.

HH11 BUNGALOW ALLOCATIONS

The Head of Housing Services reported that the Council's policy regarding the allocation of bungalows had been identified for review in accordance with the Housing Best Value Action Plan 2000/01.

The Council presently allocated bungalows to applicants where a member of the family was over state retirement age. Bungalows were also occasionally allocated to severely disabled applicants. As a result of this policy the Council was not obliged to allow Right to Buy on this type of housing stock. Very few bungalows had been sold under the Right to Buy provisions.

This policy had occasionally presented difficulties when there had sometimes been a lack of suitable housing applicants in particular villages and bungalows had therefore been used to accommodate homeless households on a temporary basis. This policy had resulted in the full utilisation of vacant stock and protected the Council's overall policy for the use of bungalows.

Members considering the Housing Strategy Statement earlier in the year had concluded that every effort should be made to retain the bungalow stock. However, it was noted that it was now possible to consider applications for sheltered housing from anyone over the age of 60 without compromising the status of the sheltered housing. Accordingly, the report suggested, in the interests of equal opportunities, that the age limit should be lowered to 60 for the allocation of bungalows. Officers reported that the Tenant Panels had given their support to this suggested adjustment of the qualification criteria.

RESOLVED that the age criteria for the allocation of bungalows be amended to enable applicants aged 60 and above to be considered for vacancies.

HH12 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 3 and 8 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

HH13 LAND FRONTING USTERDALE ROAD AND CASTLE CROSS SAFFRON WALDEN

A report was submitted updating members on the current state of negotiations regarding proposals to develop a site fronting Usterdale Road and Castle Cross, Saffron Walden.

The Council had sold a parcel of land to a private developer in 1994, including a covenant on the land transfer requiring the provision of a retail shop with a

selling area of 650 square feet. Although part of the site had been developed it had not proved possible to interest a retailer in the development of a shop on the land in question.

Last year, the Housing Services Sub-Committee had supported a proposal to involve a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) in a scheme to provide four one bedroom flats and a shop with 450 square feet of selling area. Although, planning permission was granted for this development, there was no interest in the provision of a shop and the RSL has been unable to proceed with the scheme.

A further revised application had now been submitted by the owner of the land to replace the approved shop with a fifth flat. This scheme had been approved by the Development Control and Licensing Committee on 3 September. A housing association had now expressed an interest in acquiring the freehold of the site provided it was unencumbered by any restrictive covenant.

Members accepted the reality of the situation, and

RESOLVED that the restrictive covenant on land fronting Usterdale Road and Castle Cross, Saffron Walden be removed provided that the site was developed for social rented housing in perpetuity.

9 FORMER TENANT RENT ARREARS – WRITE OFFS

The Committee received a schedule of former tenants' rent debts to the Council. In response to a question, the Head of Housing Services explained the process of obtaining possession of property in cases where substantial rent arrears had accrued.

RECOMMENDED to Resources Committee that the former tenant rent arrears, as listed on the report to this Committee and totalling £6,609.73, be written off.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm