

**HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 7 MARCH 2002**

Present:- Councillor R W L Stone – Chairman.
Councillors R P Chambers, Mrs C M Dean, Mrs S Flack,
R D Green, M A Hibbs, A J Ketteridge, Mrs C M Little and
Mrs J I Loughlin.

Also present:- Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen and Mr W Gladman (Tenant Panel
Representatives).

Also present at the invitation of the Chairman:- Councillor Mrs J E Menell.

Officers in attendance:- R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, M R Dellow,
B D Perkins and P J Snow.

HH27 **APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was received from Mr J Grimshaw (Tenant Panel
Representative).

HH28 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meetings held on 10 and 23 January 2002 were received,
confirmed and signed by the Chairman as correct records.

HH29 **BUSINESS ARISING**

(i) Minute HH17(i) – Warden Best Value Review

In response to a question, the Head of Housing Services said that he had
received some replies from local surgeries about security measures at
sheltered housing complexes in the district. None of the replies received had
indicated that any difficulties had been encountered in obtaining access to
sheltered housing sites via the keypad entry system.

(ii) Minute HH21 – Housing Strategy Statement 2002

Officers reported that it was too early in the process for a meeting of the Task
Group to be held as a great deal of preliminary work had to be done first. The
Chairman confirmed that if the Task Group considered that a further meeting
was necessary it could recommend accordingly.

(iii) Minute HH22 – Chartered Institute of Housing Conference 2002

It was reported that arrangements had been made for Mrs Bolvig-Hansen to
attend this conference as a tenants' representative.

HH30

HOUSING BEST VALUE REVIEW 2002/03

The Head of Housing Services presented a report setting out the proposed terms of reference for the Housing Best Value Review for 2002/03. A similar report would be submitted to Scrutiny Committee 1 on 13 March. He advised the Committee that Councillors Mrs M A Caton and Mrs J F Cheetham had now been nominated as members of the review team and one further nominee from the Liberal Democrat Group was still awaited.

In response to a question he stated that it had been difficult to make suitable arrangements for a critical friend to be appointed as a part of the review team. He had now arranged for an officer from Braintree District Council with experience in homelessness responsibilities to carry out this role.

Councillor Hibbs expressed concern about the remit of this Committee in relation to the Best Value process. He was worried that responsibility had been taken out of the hands of the relevant Committee and that policy changes could result without this Committee having the opportunity to influence them. He suggested that the terms of reference for the Best Value process should be re-examined. In response to these comments the Leader assured Members that policy committees would continue to make all relevant decisions on the outcomes of Best Value Reviews.

Councillor Mrs Flack declared an interest in this item as a member of the County Council's Scrutiny Panel.

After further consideration, the Committee

RECOMMENDED that Scrutiny Committee 1 approve the terms of reference for the Housing Best Value Review 2002/2003 as set out in the report to this meeting.

HH31

CONSULTATION PAPER – LOCAL AUTHORITY HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

The Committee received a report summarising the contents of a recent Government consultation document setting out proposals for overview and scrutiny of NHS bodies. It was noted that a similar report would be submitted to the Scrutiny 1 Committee on 13 March.

The Government intended that local authority overview and scrutiny committees would represent local views on the quality, performance and development of health services to the local NHS bodies. The aims of local health scrutiny were to ensure that the needs of the local population for health and other related services were adequately met, that those services were sufficiently accessible to all parts of the community, and that they were equally provided for all groups and sections of the local population.

The Consultation Paper envisaged that the local social services authority, in our case Essex County Council, would be responsible for the overview and scrutiny arrangements. Three options had been suggested in the paper which would include a role for district councils. These involved two or more authorities combining together to form a single overview and scrutiny committee, a delegation of functions (but not responsibility) by the county council to the district, and the co-option of district council members onto the relevant county committee.

A meeting had already taken place at officer level between representatives of all of the authorities concerned and this had established a commitment to work together in partnership to ensure that scrutiny was undertaken at the most effective level.

Councillor Mrs J E Menell said that one of the difficulties with making suitable overview and scrutiny arrangements was that much of the health service provision for the population of Uttlesford was dealt with in Cambridge and other external centres.

Councillor Mrs Flack expressed the view that this Committee was dedicated to health and housing matters and was therefore a suitable vehicle to take on the scrutiny of local health services. In her view, there was no need to create another scrutiny body within the Council. This view was supported by other Members who felt that this Committee should act in the scrutiny role in relation to the local Primary Care Trust. In some circumstances it might be a role best carried out in partnership with other authorities but as far as health service provision in Uttlesford specifically was concerned it was agreed that this Committee was the appropriate body to carry out this role.

Officers advised the Committee that the Government was consulting to see what local authorities wanted but was concerned to ensure that health authorities were not subjected to multiple scrutiny arrangements. Health scrutiny and overview would inevitably involve taking a wider strategic view of the provision of NHS and related services throughout the county.

After further discussion, Councillor M A Hibbs proposed that this Committee should exercise the scrutiny role in relation to the Uttlesford PCT and all other health service provision for this area and that members of wider scrutiny and overview committees should be Members of this Committee. He further proposed that, in conducting a scrutiny role, it was vitally important that all relevant background paperwork should be made available by the health body concerned.

The Director of Community Services said it was appropriate that the District Council should have a role in overseeing health services but asked Members to agree that the officers should be able to continue their discussions with other authorities on a wider county basis. The Committee supported the view that Uttlesford should continue to work together with other authorities where appropriate. These proposals were all put to the vote and carried and it was

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Government be advised that this Committee should exercise the scrutiny role in relation to the Uttlesford PCT and all other health service provision for this area; and
- 2 the following principles be adopted:
 - (a) members of wider scrutiny and overview committees should be Members of this Committee;
 - (b) adequate background papers should be made available to scrutiny committees; and
 - (c) this Council will work together with other authorities where appropriate.

Councillor A J Ketteridge declared his interest in this item as a Member of the PCT Scrutiny Group on the care of elderly people.

HH32

SUPPORTING PEOPLE – COMMISSIONING BODY REPRESENTATIVE

The Committee was advised of the need to select a Member to serve on the new “Supporting People” Commissioning Body for Essex. In accordance with the procedure rules and delegation scheme, the responsibility for appointing a Member to serve on this body would rest with the Council.

From April 2003, the Commissioning Body would be responsible for the funding arrangements, from a central Essex “pot” of money, of all existing schemes where supported housing costs were currently funded from a variety of service providers, including district councils. The funding would consist of a grant from the Government equal to the total cost of all existing schemes.

Members agreed that the role of the Member representative on this body would be of great importance and that full and regular liaison arrangements should be maintained with this Committee.

RECOMMENDED that the Council appoint a Member representative to serve on the Essex wide Supporting People Commissioning Body.

HH33

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES ENFORCEMENT POLICY

The Principal Environmental Health Officer presented a report suggesting a proposed Environmental Services enforcement policy drafted to cover all aspects of the Council’s enforcement responsibilities and powers. A similar report would be submitted to the Environment and Transport Committee on 19 March. It was a requirement to publish such a policy which must be made readily available to the public and to businesses in the district. It was proposed to produce a guidance leaflet in summary form and to publish a full copy of the enforcement policy on the Council’s Internet site. Feedback would be invited from members of the public and local businesses.

Members commented on various aspects of the proposed policy. It was agreed that reference should be made in the document to the need for co-ordination with other regulatory services such as building control. The Committee also agreed that reference should be made to the border inspection post located at Stansted Airport.

After further discussion, it was

RESOLVED that the Environmental Services enforcement policy be adopted subject to the following additional comments and amendments:

- 1 In place of “to take no action” under Enforcement Options substitute “to issue appropriate advice”;
- 2 Include a specific reference to border inspection post activities at Stansted Airport in relation to food safety policy;
- 3 Include under “Aims and Principles” a statement confirming that Environmental Services would work closely with other regulatory services such as Building Control.

HH34

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT – UPDATE

The Chief Accountant reported on two important developments since the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget was agreed and rents set during the previous Committee cycle.

The first concerned the cost of software updates needed to implement the DTLR’s progression to formula rents. It had been reported at the previous meeting that this was likely to involve significant extra cost and an indicative figure of £70,000 had been included in the budget to provide for the necessary software enhancements. Discussions had taken place with the software supplier and preliminary indications were that the necessary upgrade could be provided at minimal or no extra cost. However, Members were advised that considerable extra work would be required to input the data needed to calculate the formula rent itself.

The second development concerned the use of “rent free” weeks as an aid to managing the level of rent arrears. This aspect had been highlighted by the Best Value Inspectorate who considered that this accepted “good practice” could provide a means of improving the Council’s performance.

In this context, officers had now realised that there would be 53 rent weeks between 1 April 2002 and 31 March 2003, rather than the 52 assumed when the budget figures were prepared. Without action, this would have meant an additional week’s rental income, net of rent rebates, would be paid by tenants during the year.

It was recognised that a 53 week rent year would provide the opportunity for a “rent free” week without the normal pre-requisite of a higher rent increase. Although the timescale was very limited, officers had consulted the Chairman who had agreed that the necessary arrangements should be put in hand to

achieve a “rent free” week during the year. The week commencing Monday 31 March 2003, the final one of the rent year, had been selected so as to maximise any beneficial effect on the end of year arrears figure. Members were advised that there were no budget implications arising from this decision.

Members were anxious that tenants should be given adequate warning about these arrangements and officers undertook to publicise the matter at the appropriate time.

RESOLVED that:

- 1 the action taken by officers, in consultation with the Chairman of this Committee, to arrange a “rent free” week in the week commencing 31 March 2003 be approved; and
- 2 unless there were good reasons for acting otherwise, the opportunity to have a “rent free” week whenever there were 53 rent weeks in the year be adopted as policy.

HH35

CHAIRMAN’S URGENT ITEMS

- (i) Pre-paint repairs and redecoration programme 2002/03

The Head of Housing Services said that the Chairman had agreed to this matter being considered as a late item and a report was circulated at the meeting. Tenders had recently been received for pre-paint and redecoration work to 455 Council owned properties within the 2002/03 planned programme. The total tender figure was £205,000 against an approved budget of £175,000, representing a budget shortfall of £30,000. In accordance with Standing Orders, it was necessary for the Committee to approve an adjustment to the budget before the contract could be let.

It was noted that balances were available to cover these additional costs from the Housing Repairs reserve account should this be necessary but that officers would endeavour to minimise the impact by making adjustments to the overall repairs programme.

RESOLVED that the approved budgets for the pre-paint repairs and redecoration programme for 2002/03 be increased by £30,000.

As part of the consideration of this item, some Members expressed concern that the Committee no longer received information about the letting of contracts coming within the remit of the Health and Housing Committee. The Director of Community Services reminded Members that the Council’s policy was that only items for decision should be referred to policy committees. He undertook to consider ways as to how best this information could best be made available to Members.

HH36

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 item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of Exempt Information as defined in paragraphs 3 and 7 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

HH37

FORMER TENANT RENT ARREARS – WRITE OFFS

The Committee received a schedule of former tenants' rent debts to the Council. The Head of Housing Services explained the process for taking action against tenants in these circumstances and for making subsequent checks once debt had been written off. He confirmed that detailed statistics regarding rent arrears would be produced at the end of the year.

RECOMMENDED to the Resources Committee that the list of former tenant rent arrears, as listed on the report to this Committee and totalling £14,792.48, be written off.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm.