

**HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 26 FEBRUARY 2004**

Present:- Councillor C A Bayley – Chairman.
Councillors K R Artus, W F Bowker, S Flack, D W Gregory,
M A Hibbs, E W Hicks, B M Hughes, R M Lemon, A Marchant
and V Pedder.

Tenant Forum Representatives:- I Blows and J Bolvig-Hansen.

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird, R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, I Orton,
B D Perkins and P Snow.

HH54 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor B M Hughes declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of the item relating to housing grant assistance to almshouses because of her position on the Saffron Walden Almshouse Trust.

HH55 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2004 and of the Extraordinary Meeting held on 2 February 2004 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HH56 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HH41 (i) – Hatherley House and Court, Saffron Walden

The Head of Housing Services confirmed that the exchange of contracts at Hatherley House was due very shortly and that all necessary arrangements to separate the services would be put in hand between exchange and completion.

(ii) Minute HH45 – Rowntree Way, Saffron Walden – Parking

Members were advised that a site meeting had taken place with concerned residents at Rowntree Way at which the practicalities of providing rear vehicular access had been discussed. Further discussions would take place and the Committee would be notified of any progress achieved.

HH57 YOUTH SHELTER AT LITTLE WALDEN

The Director of Community Services confirmed that the item relating to the youth shelter at Little Walden had been withdrawn from the agenda and would now be considered at a future meeting.

HH58

AUDIT OF THE IMPORTED FOOD SERVICE BY THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY

It was reported that a full audit of the Imported Food Service provided by the commercial team within Environmental Services had been carried out recently by the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The audit had covered the second part of the service relating to the importation of products not of animal origin (PNOAO) and the controls implemented by the service. It had been the first full audit of its kind to be carried out by the FSA.

The principal finding of the audit was that the service was essentially untargeted and should move towards being more proactive. This had been found to be particularly so in relation to the availability of comprehensive up to date procedural guidance and access to all relevant reference texts. As a result of this outcome, an action plan had been prepared and this was attached to the report as an appendix.

Councillor Bowker said that the full audit report had been deposited in the members' room but it was not always clear which reports had been deposited in this way. He suggested that all such documents should be listed in the members' bulletin to make clear which documents were available for inspection. Generally speaking, this was already the case.

A further report on progress would be made to the Committee in six months time.

RESOLVED that the draft action plan, submitted as an attachment to the report to this meeting, be adopted.

HH59

HOUSING GRANT ASSISTANCE TO ALMSHOUSES

Councillor B M Hughes left the room while this item was being considered.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer advised Members that requests had been received from two separate almshouse trusts within the district requesting financial assistance for the refurbishment and repair of vacant units of accommodation that were unsuitable for re-letting.

The Council had approved a new regime of housing assistance to the private sector in June 2003 which included provision to give assistance to landlords on low income to encourage the return of empty homes to useful occupation up to a maximum grant of £3,000. However, almshouse trustees did not fit into the legal definition of a landlord and the occupiers were not classified as tenants. It was therefore necessary to clarify that the current scheme was applicable to almshouse trustees.

Members discussed the general implications of making grant assistance to almshouse trustees and considered whether the general level of financial reserves held by individual trusts was a relevant factor in such cases. The general feeling was that trustees were bound by the requirement to bring into use unoccupied properties and to house those on the list as being in need of housing accommodation. The key point was that the overriding objective of

the Council was to bring back unoccupied property into occupation and that the Council would have the right of first nomination after the grant was paid.

RESOLVED that it be confirmed that current housing renewal assistance was available to the trustees of almshouses where refurbishment or repair was necessary to enable re-letting to take place, subject to the criteria in the policy set by the Council in June 2003.

Councillor B M Hughes returned to the meeting for the consideration of the next item.

HH59

RENT COLLECTION SERVICE

The Head of Housing Services reminded the Committee that the general rent collection service had been withdrawn in 1995. A service had continued to be provided for those tenants who were unable to pay their rent by other means and about 300 tenants had opted to continue to have their rent collected.

The number of tenants using the collection service was gradually dwindling to the point where only 110 tenants were still in receipt of this service. Following a review and discussions with many of the tenants concerned, only four had indicated that they definitely did not have any other way of paying their rent, and it was now recommended that the service should be discontinued.

The Head of Housing Services emphasised that the review of this service had not been approached as a cost cutting exercise, but in terms of health and safety considerations and it was recognised that many of the tenants concerned would need to be treated in a careful and sensitive manner. The potential withdrawal of the rent collection service had been discussed at a recent Tenant Forum meeting and officers had been requested to keep a watchful eye on those people considered to be vulnerable. Nevertheless, the discontinuance of the rent collection service would provide additional resources some of which could be utilised to concentrate on the reduction of long term rent arrears.

It was recognised that many of those tenants who had continued to take advantage of the rent collection service were either elderly or located in very rural parts of the district. A number of methods were suggested for maintaining contact with those tenants concerned including the use of mobile police vans and enlisting the support of parish councils. Members were given an assurance that officers would continue to visit vulnerable tenants as often as was considered necessary within the resources available.

Councillor Hibbs suggested a review of support and visiting arrangements for all vulnerable and elderly tenants that would consider the revenue and other implications of any change of practice. The Committee agreed with this suggestion and officers were asked to submit an interim report to the next meeting of the Committee in May. In the meantime, officers would continue to try to persuade all tenants to switch to alternative methods of rent payment.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the rent collection service be discontinued by 1 July 2004 and that discussions take place with all involved tenants to provide for alternative rent payment arrangements;
- 2 a review take place of support and visiting arrangements for all vulnerable and elderly tenants and an interim report submitted to this Committee at its May meeting.

HH60

SERVICE PLANS 2004 – 2005: HOUSING AND HEALTH SERVICES

The Committee received a report containing an overview of service planning for the authority as a whole and a summary of the specific service plans for Housing and Health services during the coming year.

The Performance Manager drew attention to the service planning template and to Appendix A to the report which described the service planning process. The key aims of the service plans were also set out and the Head of Housing Services explained that many of these were directly related to issues set out in the Quality of Life Plan. The aspirations set out in the service plans formed the basis of resource allocation within the authority and the targets underpinning the service plans were linked to the staff appraisal process.

The Director of Community Services drew Members' attention to a number of aspects of the Council's responsibility for health care provision in the district that had not been included in the summary. These included working with the Primary Care Trust and responding to NHS consultations, as well as making a formal declaration to improve the health of the people of Uttlesford, and he confirmed that these were commitments for the forthcoming year.

Councillor Hibbs asked that account should be taken of the question of sustainability in delivering housing services and the Head of Housing Services confirmed that it was a requirement to include sustainability targets in all tender documents produced by the Council.

RESOLVED that the service planning process be noted and the service plans for housing and health services 2004/05 be confirmed.

HH61

HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME (SUPPLEMENTARY)

The Head of Housing Services reported details of the extra resources that had been identified for housing projects during the period 2004/07. This was because the Council had been able to retain for use on housing projects some of the Right to Buy housing capital receipts over the next three years as part of the transitional arrangements. The three main areas of work that would benefit from this programme were a major refurbishment scheme at Vicarage Mead, Thaxted, a programme of replacement sewerage treatment plants, and work to ensure that the Decent Homes Standard could be met in advance of the Government's 2010 deadline.

A number of aspects of this programme were discussed in detail and Members expressed their satisfaction that the funding for the detailed programme of work set out in the report was now in place.

RESOLVED that the programme of work, as identified in the report, including refurbishment work at Vicarage Mead, Thaxted, be approved, to be funded from the extra housing related resources available to the Council in the period 2004/07.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm.