

**HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 4 NOVEMBER 2004**

Present:- Councillor M A Hibbs – Chairman.
Councillors C A Bayley, S Flack, D W Gregory, R M Lemon and
A Marchant.

Also present:-Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen (Tenant Forum Representative).

Officers in attendance:- R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, P O'Dell, L Petrie
and P Snow.

HH29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Boland, W F Bowker, K J Clarke and E W Hicks and from Mr I Blows (Tenant Forum Representative).

Councillor Flack declared a personal interest in respect of the item relating to the flat at Leaden Roding. Councillor Hibbs declared a personal interest in relation to a housing matter at Rickling, should it be raised at this meeting.

HH30 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2004 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the addition under Minute HH25 "Sale of Land" of the following:

Councillor Hibbs declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of this item and left the room during the discussion and voting thereon.

HH31 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HH21 (i) - Parking at Rowntree Way, Saffron Walden

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) reported the receipt of a letter from the Area Highway Manager stating that Essex County Council was not prepared to allow parking on the verge at this location as it was adjacent to a busy junction and was both undesirable and contrary to established road safety principles. A tenant in Rowntree Way had raised this matter with Sir Alan Haselhurst MP earlier this year and a copy of the Area Highway Manager's response to Sir Alan had also been received.

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) advised Members that the "no parking" notices had now been removed. It was quite clear that residents were still continuing to park on the green verge and that the Council would be subject to criticism if it did not take action to require this activity to cease.

He reminded Members of the offer made to residents to assist with the cost of providing parking on their front gardens and said that no responses to this offer had been received. He suggested that the Council should now explore the possibility of constructing a plastic based ground reinforcement material to provide a means of access for vehicles across the grass verge area.

Councillor Bayley said she was concerned about a vehicular crossing being provided over a footway. The Chairman agreed this was not strictly desirable but said that there were many similar vehicular crossings in Saffron Walden and other places in the district. The Committee agreed that doing nothing was not an option in this case and that the officers should be requested to explore and identify the most cost effective method of providing vehicular crossing facilities for the benefit of residents in Rowntree Way. The officers would pursue this matter and report back to the Committee at a future meeting.

HH32

UNDER OCCUPATION AND INCENTIVES

A report was submitted on the progress that had been made to deal with the under-occupation of council houses together with what incentives might be needed to assist tenants to transfer to smaller and more suitable accommodation. Members were reminded that a target had been included within the Quality of Life Corporate Plan to undertake a survey of under-occupied council houses and to see what solutions might be available.

A survey had been undertaken in the parishes of Barnston, Great Dunmow, Saffron Walden, Stansted and Stebbing involving the despatch of more than 200 questionnaires to family homes where records indicated possible under-occupation by tenants of 60 years and above. A response rate of approximately 75% had been achieved and a number of tenants had received an informal visit from a housing officer to discuss the options available to them in more detail.

The Senior Housing Officer reported on the outcome of the survey which appeared to indicate that the incidence of under-occupation was not a serious problem requiring the availability of further incentives. Only a relatively small number of tenants in this category appeared to need further assistance to move to smaller accommodation. The majority of tenants who had been contacted had either decided they did not want to move, were already on the transfer list, or had now completed the relevant application forms.

There was a strong recognition that a number of sheltered accommodation units had become difficult to let and that sheltered bed-sit units, in particular, were generally considered unpopular. The Executive Manager (Housing Services) suggested that the way forward would be to continue to refurbish existing sheltered units, such as had happened at Oakroyd House in Great Dunmow and was presently under way at Vicarage Mead in Thaxted, to provide high quality accommodation for elderly tenants.

Councillor Flack pointed out that some elderly tenants did not necessarily wish to be accommodated in sheltered units and preferred instead to move to smaller and more manageable accommodation. The Senior Housing Officer

confirmed that the Council's policy was not to offer only sheltered units in these circumstances.

Councillor Gregory said that he had consistently argued for modern sheltered units to be provided as part of major new developments in the district but, for a variety of reasons, this had not happened. Something more imaginative needed to be done to assist tenants who were reluctant to move. The Chairman commented that the Council did not wish to be in the position of enforcing the relocation of tenants living in under-occupied accommodation and that the ability to obtain better quality planning agreements would help to resolve the question of under-occupation generally.

It was apparent to Members that the problem of under-occupation was less serious than had been thought to be the case and that many tenants requiring help to move to smaller accommodation could be assisted within the context of existing housing provision.

RESOLVED that the progress report be noted and that no further action to deal with under-occupation needed to be taken as the Council would continue to concentrate its efforts on providing quality sheltered housing accommodation with a view to encouraging transfers to take place within the existing housing stock.

HH33

HOMELESSNESS ACTIVITY

The Committee received a report dealing with homelessness activity for the first half of the financial year. The chart indicated that the number of homeless cases dealt with by the Council had declined significantly during this period. The Senior Housing Officer said that the effect of the Homelessness Act 2002 combined with the employment of a Housing Support Officer had impacted on the homelessness figures by enabling more preventative work to be carried out. There was, however, a recognition that homelessness pressures might increase as a result of less favourable economic trends, including higher mortgage interest rates.

Members were pleased to note that homelessness activity had diminished in the April to September 2004 period and asked that arrangements be made to make a presentation about homelessness activity prior to the Committee's next meeting. This would commence at 7.00 pm with the start of the meeting deferred until 8.00 pm.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and that arrangements be made to provide Members with a presentation, prior to the next meeting of the Committee, explaining the preventative work carried out in relation to homelessness activity.

HH34

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSE CONDITION SURVEY

The Principal Environmental Health Officer requested the Committee to consider commissioning a private sector house condition survey in the district. It was noted that the last survey had been carried out in 1993 and that GO-

East had commented on the lack of up to date information about the private sector when reviewing the Council's housing strategy.

The Quality of Life Plan had allowed for the carrying out of a survey and budgetary provision in the sum of £70,000 had been made in the Service Plan as an estimate of the likely cost.

Councillor Flack drew attention to the dangers of sudden cost escalation and suggested that consideration be given to the possibility of tendering on the basis of what value could be obtained within the available budget of £70,000.

Councillor Gregory declared his personal interest as a private sector tenant. He asked whether non-housing association tenanted property would be incorporated within the proposed survey. The Principal Environmental Health Officer confirmed that the commissioned survey would examine all categories of property not included in the public sector.

The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) confirmed that the commissioning of the survey would be subject to the full tender process as the value was estimated to be in excess of £50,000. The normal procedure would be for officers to report back to Committee if the tenders received were over budget provision. Councillor Flack's suggestion could be put into operation if Members so wished. The difference is that tenders would be invited on the basis of the value to be obtained for a fixed sum rather than on a competitive price basis. The Committee agreed that the suggested approach was a sound one in the circumstances and it was

RESOLVED that a private sector house condition survey be carried out during the financial year 2005/06 and that the officers prepare a brief for consideration prior to the tender invitation process.

HH35

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH BEST VALUE REVIEW

A report was submitted containing details of the progress made in delivering the Best Value Review of Environmental Health which incorporated the draft Service Improvement Plan as already considered by the Scrutiny 2 Committee. The Principal Environmental Health Officer referred to the presentation that had taken place prior to the meeting and offered to answer any questions Members had regarding this review.

The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) referred to a note that had been circulated concerning the net reduction in income for the Border Inspection facility at Stansted Airport following the transfer of responsibilities to HM Customs and Excise. A number of Members referred to the costs associated with providing food inspection and other services at Stansted and said that the Council should receive greater recognition of the financial burden borne in relation to these activities. The Principal Environmental Health Officer pointed out that BAA was not directly responsible for these services many of which were provided for small companies operating at the airport. He had spoken recently to officers at the London Borough of Hillingdon about the difficulties associated with providing services at a large international airport

and said there might be scope for discussing a voluntary Section 106 Agreement with the airport authorities.

Members also discussed the monitoring of health promotion activities provided within the Uttlesford district and it was suggested that a representative from the Primary Care Trust (PCT) should be invited to address the Committee on a regular basis. The Chairman said that the Committee had no significant role in relation to health service matters and there was presently some uncertainty about the division of responsibilities between environmental health services and health promotion. He expressed the hope that this matter would be clarified in the near future.

RESOLVED that those aspects of the Draft Improvement Plan relevant to the Committee be approved for inclusion in the Service Plan.

HH36

RENT DEPOSIT SCHEME

The Committee received a report about the feasibility of introducing a Rent Deposit Scheme (RDS) as a means of assisting housing clients to obtain accommodation within the private sector. This was in the context that local authorities were now expected to provide comprehensive housing advice and appropriate assistance not only to those who were statutorily homeless but also to those who were either intentionally or non statutorily homeless. The prevention of homelessness was now seen as a high priority.

Officers had investigated two models for running a RDS scheme. One would involve paying a fee to an outside agent to administer the scheme with the Council making referrals of suitable candidates and providing the rent deposit guarantee but with the agent working with the clients and landlords to arrange the actual lettings. The other option would be to run the scheme in house. Members were advised that this could initially be done within existing staff resources but could have staffing implications should the scheme prove to be successful. Both models relied on the careful vetting of clients to ensure that they were suitable for this type of scheme.

Members were reminded of the experience faced by the Cambridge based charity, Wintercomfort, which had operated a rent deposit type scheme within the Uttlesford area but which had failed for the reasons explained.

The Committee also considered the impact that a RDS would have on the level of homelessness in the district, particularly bearing in mind that a key objective of the homelessness strategy was to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. The Senior Housing Officer said that it was difficult to estimate the effect that the operation of such a scheme would have on homelessness within the district but it was likely that there would be a reduction.

RESOLVED that the Resources Committee be recommended to budget a sum of £25,000 for a Rent Deposit Scheme in 2005/06, subject to approval of the scheme to be adopted at a future meeting.

HH37

FLAT AT LEADEN RODING

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) reported on the circumstances relating to the probable vacancy of a three bedroom general needs flat at Leaden Roding and invited Members to consider options for the future use of this accommodation. It was noted that the remaining occupants of this four unit block comprised two lease holders and one housing association tenant.

The Committee recognised that there were a number of options for dealing with this general needs flat and it was agreed that these should be explored thoroughly before a decision was made on whether the flat should be sold or offered for letting whether on a long term or temporary basis. It was agreed that, for the present, the flat could be let on a temporary basis.

Councillor Flack described some of the difficulties that had arisen in relation to tenancies in this area. She referred to two recent break-ins at the sheltered accommodation and suggested that the area would benefit from the provision of more lighting.

RESOLVED that officers be asked to explore various options for the future use of a flat at Leaden Roding, including the leasehold or freehold disposal of the flat, or its use on a temporary letting basis, and report back with recommendations in due course.

HH38

SERVICE PLANS BUDGETS AND COUNCIL PRIORITIES 2005/06

The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) presented a report outlining the Committee's initial draft General Fund revised estimates of direct costs and income for 2004/05 and estimates for 2005/06, prepared on the basis of existing approved levels of service. Draft Service Plans had also been circulated with the report, including an indication of spending pressures likely to arise next year and results from the prioritisation exercise carried out recently by the working group set up by the Resources Committee. The Resources Committee would consider the Service Plans and the results of the prioritisation exercise and issue further guidance to Committees in due course.

Members noted that the sum of £4,520 in respect of Best Value Review consultants, included in the adjusted base direct costs for 2004/05, could now be deleted as the sum was now proposed for funding from the earmarked Best Value Review Reserve. The increase in costs for management and administration was attributable to the effects of restructuring as far as it related to environmental and cultural services.

The Chairman referred to the net reduction in income for the Border Inspection facility at Stansted Airport following the transfer of responsibilities to HM Customs and Excise. This matter had already been discussed in relation to the Best Value Review of the Environmental Health Service. Members were disappointed to note the loss of income for this service and referred also to the financial implications arising from the location of a major international airport within the Council's district. The officers were asked to identify what costs were involved in the provision of services on the airport site

and to report back with a view to representations being made to the Government in due course.

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) referred to a number of minor amendments within the Housing Service Plan. The Committee agreed that the suggested amendments should be incorporated in the Plan.

In conclusion, Members urged that in progressing the recommended outcomes from the Prioritisation Working Group, it was important to ensure that the Council's statutory responsibilities were fully safeguarded and the implications of any reduction in service taken into account.

RESOLVED that:

- 1 the revised 2004/05 Budget and the draft 2005/06 Budget be approved and submitted to the Resources Committee;
- 2 the elements of the draft Service Plans, as far as they related to this Committee's activities, be approved, for consideration by the Resources Committee, subject to minor amendments as agreed at the meeting;
- 3 The prioritisation analysis contained in appendix 3 to the report be noted without particular comment at this stage; and
- 4 A report back be made to Members seeking to identify the full costs to the Environmental Health Service arising from the location within the Council's district of a major international airport at Stansted, with a view to appropriate representations being made to the Government.

HH39

DRAFT CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2005/06

The Committee received a report dealing with the draft General Fund Capital Programme for 2005/06.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer commented that discretionary private sector grants could be utilised in whatever way the Committee wished. There had been under spending in relation to this grant facility in previous years and the opportunity was available to expand the circumstances under which grants or loans could be made available.

RESOLVED that the draft Capital Programme be noted for consideration by the Resources Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.35 pm.