

HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 8.00pm on 6 JANUARY 2005

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

Also present:- Mr I Blows and Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen (Tenant Forum representatives).

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird, D Burrige, R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, P O'Dell, R Millership, E Petrie, G Smith and P Snow.

Prior to the meeting, the Housing Support Officer gave a presentation explaining the Council's statutory responsibilities in relation to homelessness provision.

HH40 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Boland, W F Bowker, K J Clarke, E Gower and A Marchant.

The Chairman referred to the recent death of Mr J Surrey, a long standing Council tenant who had been a serving representative on the Council's first tenant panel.

Councillor Hibbs declared a prejudicial interest in relation to a proposed right of way over land adjacent to Woodside, Rickling as a practicing architect in the district.

HH41 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2004 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HH42 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HH34 – Private Sector House Condition Survey

Councillor Flack drew attention to an apparent inconsistency in the figures included in the budget report for the proposed private sector house condition survey. The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) confirmed that the budget provision for this item had been agreed as £80,000 and all future reports would reflect this corrected figure.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer referred to the new definition of unfitness included in the recent Housing Act and advised that it would be necessary to defer commissioning the survey until further clarification regarding this definition had been received.

(ii) Minute HH37 – Flat at Leaden Roding

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) confirmed that he would arrange for a further check to be carried out on the adequacy of existing lighting at this location.

HH43 SERVICE PLANS BUDGETS AND COUNCIL PRIORITIES 2005/06

The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) invited Members to consider the Committee's General Fund Budget with a view to submitting appropriate recommendations to the Resources Committee and Council. His report contained full details of the base budget, prepared on the basis of current levels of service provision, a refined list of spending pressures previously considered, and proposals to achieve the budget reductions required following the resolution made by the Council on 14 December 2004. Appendix 2 to the report presented a number of options to meet the savings target by reference to particular services corresponding to headings in the budget book. He said that the reference in paragraph 9 of the report to the cost of the private sector stock condition survey should be £80,000 and not the £70,000 figure mentioned.

Councillor Flack asked whether the cost of conducting the stock condition survey would be built into the base budget in future years, as this was more correctly a one off cost. The Executive Manager confirmed that the survey would be funded from reserves, but that government guidelines required the cost to be built into the base budget for 2005/06, although the budget for 2006/07 would be drafted to indicate this expenditure being removed from the budget.

The Chairman said that there were a number of pressures on the Committee's budget and that it would be necessary to defer some items of expenditure. This would be a difficult exercise as, to some extent, the savings target conflicted against the spending pressures.

He guided the Committee through the various service headings where possible savings targets had been identified and Members commented on the particular items listed.

It was generally accepted that the suggested target of £1,000 could be found from within the homelessness budget from efficiency savings.

As far as public conveniences were concerned, the suggested savings would be more difficult to achieve. It appeared to Members that there was not much potential scope to meet the target. The Executive Manager (Environmental and Cultural Services) explained that it would be expensive to discontinue one or more of the super loos located at the Common and at Swan Meadow in Saffron Walden and at Stansted, as the Council would have to pay contract penalties and disconnection costs. There would also be a loss of income and it was estimated that it would cost in the region of £90,000 to terminate the contract for each site and to make good following disconnection.

The Chief Executive commented that in terms of the revenue budget for the forthcoming year, it would not be sensible to incur disconnection costs and the best approach might be to re-examine the whole leasing arrangement with a view to deciding how to proceed in 2006/07 and beyond. It was pointed out that the super loo in Stansted was the only public convenience available in the village.

The Committee then examined possible savings within the Public Health Budget. The officers indicated that it was intended to submit a report to the next meeting containing suggestions to increase fees and charges. It was suggested that it would be possible to save the suggested target of £1,000 by reducing non-statutory services such as pollution control monitoring and health promotion. Members were unhappy with any suggestion that pollution control monitoring would be reduced. The maintenance of full monitoring was considered to make an important contribution to the Council's case in relation to noise monitoring at Stansted Airport, particularly in terms of monitoring background noise levels. The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) confirmed that there was no earmarked reserve relating to Stansted Airport.

The Committee then turned to the proposal to reconsider spending pressures for a new post of health promotion officer and the provision of clerical support for environmental health officers. Members recognised the need to meet the savings targets identified, but felt strongly that the weaknesses highlighted in the best value review of the environmental health service could not be adequately addressed unless the health promotion post was filled, as this would enable the service to function properly in this vital area. The Chief Executive pointed out that a reduction of £17,000 from within the spending pressures proposed for approval would still leave an increase in investment in this area of some £60,000. Therefore, a £17,000 reduction could not be seen as a decrease in existing budget provision.

The Chairman conceded that this comment was a fair one, but said that the Committee had already deferred additional expenditure of some £45,000 arising from recommendations contained in the best value review. He considered that the Committee should be given more information on the implications that would arise from an additional reduction in proposed expenditure.

The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) urged Members to reach a clear decision that would enable the overall savings target to be met as it was otherwise possible that the Resources Committee would seek to make the required level of savings on this Committee's behalf. He conceded that, in relation to statutory services, it was difficult to reach a decision based on the level of service that it was necessary to provide. Councillor Flack suggested that the appointments could be deferred until a later stage during the financial year. The Executive Manager said that it was not possible to achieve savings by deferring appointments in this way.

It was agreed that it would be possible to achieve savings of £2,000 in the animal warden service by a combination of increased fees and charges and arranging appropriate sponsorship. However, it was perceived that there might be difficulties in identifying a suitable sponsor. Members agreed that the dog chipping service was a valuable one which should be priced in such a way that it did not act as a deterrent to dog owners in the district.

There was also felt to be sufficient scope within the pest control service to achieve savings of at least £3,000.

A number of Members expressed the view very strongly that the proposed health promotion officer post should not be identified as a target saving as it was integral to meeting the performance improvements contained in the best value review. The Chairman suggested that the Committee could look for other ways of securing the required savings of £17,000 within the public health budget but that it was not possible to identify this level of saving at the present time. It was then proposed and seconded that the validity of the saving target of £17,000 be accepted, but that the Committee could not agree to the health promotion post not being filled as it was felt this would inflict serious damage on the service.

The Chief Executive commented that the officers would carry out a further examination of the public health budget to see whether further efficiency savings could be secured to bridge the necessary gap and that the Resources Committee would be asked to examine any options so identified.

After further discussion, the Committee agreed an overall approach to the 2005/06 General Fund Budget as contained in the following recommendation.

RECOMMENDED to the Resources Committee that:-

- 1 subject to part 4 of the recommendation, the base budget for 2005/06 be approved;
- 2 again, subject to part 4 below, approval be given to the general approach to spending pressures set out in the report;
- 3 the following items be submitted for consideration, as part of this Committee's contribution to the savings targets for services identified at the Council meeting on 14 December 2004;
 - Homelessness - £1,000
 - Public conveniences - £400 (the full target of £4,500 being unachievable without a reduction in service provision)
 - Animal warden - £2,000
 - Pest control - £3,000; and
- 4 the Committee accepted the validity of the saving target of £17,000, but felt that the possible achievement of this by not agreeing to the new health promotion officer post would inflict serious damage on the public health service and requested officers to bring forward further options at a later date to save the sum concerned.

HH44 CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF HOUSING CONFERENCE 2005

The Committee was invited to appoint representatives to attend the Annual Chartered Institute of Housing Conference at Harrogate in June 2005.

RESOLVED that the Chairman, or Chairman's representative, a senior housing officer, and Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen be authorised to attend the Chartered Institute of Housing Conference in June 2005.

HH45 COMMON/SINGLE HOUSING REGISTER

A report was submitted advising the Committee of the outcome of discussions with Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) about the possible introduction of a common housing register. This was a facility whereby an applicant for housing could submit a single application to any one of the partner agencies, allowing for the application to be considered for any suitable vacancy arising within the available housing stock. Officers had been asked to investigate the possible creation of such a scheme as part of the Quality of Life Corporate Plan.

Following discussions with a number of RSL's, it had been concluded that a number of practical difficulties would arise if such a system were to be adopted. For example, allocation and IT systems would need to be compatible and there would be staffing and financial implications. Accordingly, this was not felt to be a viable option, but there were areas of mutual concern that would continue to be discussed with RSL's.

RESOLVED that no further action be taken regarding a common housing register and that officers continue to work with RSL's to address the issues identified in the report.

HH46 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2004/05

The Committee was advised that that part of the capital allocation for disabled facilities grants (DFGs) had been expended, but that there was flexibility to enable the continued payment of DFGs that were expected to be completed during the remainder of the financial year. Subject to the overall total capital allocation remaining the same, it was suggested that the allocation for DFGs be revised upwards during the remainder of the financial year and that provision be made in future years for an increase from £60,000 to £90,000. Members were in favour of this suggestion.

RECOMMENDED to the Resources Committee that the capital programme for private sector housing be amended in 2005/06 to allow for an additional bid for disabled facilities grant funding from £60,000 to £90,000.

HH47 PARKING AT ROWNTREE WAY SAFFRON WALDEN

The Committee considered a further report concerning parking problems at 17-27 Rowntree Way, Saffron Walden where some of the residents had been using the grassed amenity land fronting their properties as a parking area. The land was maintained by the Council, but was subject to ultimate control by Essex County Council as the highway authority.

At a previous meeting, officers had been asked to investigate the feasibility of installing plastic grass grid blocks to facilitate access to the tenants' front gardens. Representatives of Essex County Council had now confirmed that the proposed material was unacceptable and that any crossover would have to be constructed to that Council's specification. The County Council had stressed that under no circumstances should any of the area concerned be used for the parking of vehicles.

The report presented two options for the Committee's consideration. One was for the provision of four crossovers at an approximate cost of £16,000. This cost would be funded from the decent homes budget. The second option would be to erect some form of obstruction to prevent parking altogether.

Members accepted that this was a difficult problem to resolve, but that it was imperative to arrive at a solution that would enable the occupiers to park their vehicles away from the road itself as this was close to a junction. On balance therefore, Members felt that the first option would provide the best solution and it was proposed and agreed accordingly.

RESOLVED that the allocated budget of £10,000 to resolve parking problems in relation to 17-27 Rowntree Way be increased to £16,000, funded from the Decent Homes Budget, to enable the construction of a crossover facility for the four properties concerned, following further discussion with the occupiers, and with Essex County Council, and that a report back be made in the event that this option did not prove to be viable.

HH48 POLICY REVIEW OF GARAGE SITES

A detailed report was presented asking Members to review the future use of 28 garage sites throughout the district on which car owners had erected garages at their own expense. The Council was currently charging what was referred to as a "ground rent" for these garages, but no formal agreements existed. Many of the structures concerned were now thought to be beyond economic repair.

There had been minimal investment in these sites as resources had been concentrated on improving and repairing stock. It was suggested that the Committee should now consider initiating a planned programme of improvement and review for these sites, some of which were in prime locations with development potential.

Members were advised that, in legal terms, any garages so constructed on Council owned land were the Council's property and the Council may be held

responsible for loss or damage suffered by a third party arising from the condition of the structures. It was noted that some residents had made arrangements to sell the garages they had erected when moving from the area although any such agreements had no legal validity.

Members agreed that this unsatisfactory position should be regularised and that the Council should investigate realising the development potential of the sites concerned. It was noted that some of the sites could be utilised for affordable housing schemes. It would be necessary to serve notice of termination before April this year and officers gave assurances that full consultation would be carried out with those tenants concerned.

RESOLVED that:-

- 1 a programme of reviewing garage sites be prepared with a view to possible redevelopment;
- 2 existing tenants be advised accordingly, arrangements be made to review and update "tenancy" agreements, and that notices of termination be served where appropriate; and
- 3 a review of charges be undertaken and that no further "ground rent" lettings be accepted until such time as the review of sites had been completed.

HH49 **ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COSTS DIRECTLY ATTRIBUTABLE TO STANSTED AIRPORT**

In response to a request made at the previous meeting, the Principal Environmental Health Officer reported on those additional environmental health costs associated with the location of Stansted Airport within the District. The report included a table identifying those costs concerned. These included items such as food safety and health and safety inspections as well as the monitoring of air quality and noise levels close to the airport perimeter.

Members reiterated their concerns about the added burden that was borne by Council Tax payers in Uttlesford as a result of the requirement to provide the services listed and agreed that now would be the appropriate time to make suitable representations to the Government drawing attention to this burden. The Committee took the view that individual companies benefiting from the provision of the services should also be approached.

RESOLVED that representations be made to the Government, and to companies that benefit from the services provided by the Council, drawing attention to the financial burden borne by Council Tax payers in Uttlesford resulting from the location of a major international airport at Stansted.

HH50 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

Having declared his interest in the following item of business earlier in the meeting, Councillor Hibbs left the meeting and took no part in the voting or discussion thereon.

The Vice-Chairman of the Committee, Councillor Bayley, took the Chair for the remaining item of business.

RESOLVED that under Section 100 A (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 paragraph 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

HH51 RIGHT OF WAY – LAND ADJACENT TO WOODSIDE RICKLING

Consideration was given to a request to acquire a right of way over an area of Council owned land adjacent to 6 Woodside, Rickling. It had already been agreed that the plot concerned would be sold at a valuation made by the District Valuer, subject to endeavours to find a satisfactory parking solution for the tenants concerned.

The comments of Councillor Wilcock, one of the ward members for Newport, were read to the meeting. Councillor Wilcock's view was that a right of way over the adjoining land should be offered.

Members agreed that it was necessary to obtain the best possible price and that access via the removal of the hedge at the front of 6 Woodside was appropriate.

RESOLVED that access to 6 Woodside be arranged via the removal of the front garden hedge.

The meeting ended at 10.00 pm.