

HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 25 JANUARY 2005

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

Also present:- Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen and R W Livings (Tenant Forum representatives).

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird, D Burrige, R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, M Dellow, R Millership and P Snow.

HH52 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Bayley declared a personal interest in relation to the rent setting and housing revenue account item as tenant of a Council owned garage.

HH53 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 January 2005 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HH54 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HH42(ii) – Flat at Leaden Roding

Members noted that the matter relating to the adequacy of existing lighting at Leaden Roding had now been resolved.

(ii) Minute HH47 – Parking at Rowntree Way Saffron Walden

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) reported further on discussions that had taken place with affected residents about parking problems at Rowntree Way. Those residents consulted had now expressed themselves satisfied with the arrangements proposed to take place and it remained to reach final agreement with Essex County Council.

Councillor Bayley said that the grass verge had now become extremely rutted as a result of excessive use and she understood that a local resident had slipped over on the rutted area. She asked Officers to investigate if short term remedial work could be undertaken to level the highway verge area. The Executive Manager responded that residents had a responsibility to help maintain the verge in a reasonable condition but that he would arrange for the land to be inspected to see what could be done.

HH55 PUBLIC HEALTH BUDGET - PRIORITISATION

Following on from the decisions made at the Committee's last meeting in relation to the General Fund Base Budget for 2005/06, the Executive Manager (Environmental and Cultural Services) invited Members to consider priorities within the Public Health Budget with a view to meeting the required target savings. The prioritisation exercise approved by the Council had indicated that a £17,000 saving was required from the Base Budget. At its previous meeting, the Committee could not find any areas of spending that could be reduced to meet the saving identified.

Officers had now reconsidered this matter and were proposing an arrangement whereby the target savings could be found by deferring the provision of administrative support for Environmental Health Officers and assuming extra income of at least £500 from a review of fees and charges to be undertaken by the Environment Committee.

In this context, Members sought an assurance that the work of undertaking administrative support for Environmental Health Officers would not be lost and that any income over and above the £500 projection resulting from the review of fees and charges would be channelled back into this area of spending as soon as possible. It was proposed and seconded that the arrangement suggested in the Report be approved subject to the assurance referred to.

RECOMMENDED to the Resources Committee that:-

- 1 The following savings be confirmed to meet the target saving of £17,000 from the Public Health Budget as identified by the Council on 14 December 2004;
- 2 The fees and charges option be pursued to achieve the best possible return (subject to review by the Environment Committee – minimum target £500);
- 3 The remaining £16,500 of spending pressures be deducted from the post of administrative support for Environmental Health Officers;
- 4 If the increase in fees and charges were to exceed its £500 projection then the income be retained to fund this post;
- 5 Any additional savings resulting from the review of Public Health Budgets be retained for this purpose also;
- 6 An assurance be sought that the funding of administrative support would not be lost and would be reinstated as soon as practicable.

HH56 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES 2005/06

The Chief Accountant presented a detailed report explaining the background to the draft estimates for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and inviting the Committee to determine rent levels for 2005/06 in the context of the statutory requirements for rent restructuring and convergence ("formula rents"). He explained that HRA working balances at 1 April 2004 had been maintained at their budgeted recommended minimum level of £500,000 but that accelerated spending on decent homes in 2003/04 had caused additional revenue contribution to capital of £64,000 to keep the major repairs account (MRA) balance at its budgeted level of £940,000. As a result of a number of variations, the year-end Housing Repairs Account balance was £73,000 less than estimated.

Members were advised of the HRA's revised estimate for 2004/05 and the estimates for 2005/06 and the report set out the major components of the variations contained within those estimates. The report also contained an explanation of the impact of the ODPM Subsidy Rules. Under the formula rents process, a converging pattern for all similar social housing properties should be achieved over the next seven years. Rents would gradually be adjusted year by year to move closer to the formula rent derived from the ODPM formula.

Reference was also made to the "Supporting People" arrangements introduced from April 2003 that meant tenants receiving warden services must now pay charges designed to cover the full cost of those services. The task of separating out service charges in relationship to the provision of common services at flats had been deferred last year and staffing circumstances were such that it would be necessary for the undertaking of this complex task to be deferred again.

Mrs Bolvig-Hansen responded to the recommendations in the report on behalf of the Tenant Forum which had met recently to consider this matter. She expressed disappointment with the outcome on the review of rent levels but said that the Forum had recognised the realities of HRA financing. The Chairman said he was sympathetic to the views expressed by the Tenant Forum representatives.

The Programme Officer said that she had identified under spending in the windows replacement budget as it was not considered advisable to carry out this type of work in the winter months and suggested that the unused resources should be utilised to programme additional kitchen work during the remainder of the financial year. Members were fully supportive of this approach which would have no overall effect on the total budget.

RECOMMENDED to the Council that:

- 1 the draft Housing Revenue Account estimates be approved, as presented, reflecting the following ODPM expectations for 2005/06 on the basis that any effect of those decisions would be reflected in the published budget book;
 - a. *A weekly dwelling rent increase of 4.03% plus or minus one seventh of the resulting difference from the ODPM formula rent for 2005/06 limited so that no tenant would have an increase exceeding 3.6% plus £2;*

- b. Supporting People current weekly charges to tenants be increased from April 2005 in accordance with the contract with the Commissioning Body;*
 - c. As in (b) above, protection be increased against the “un-pooled” element of the warden services charge for all those tenants at 31 March 2003 ineligible for grant assistance under “Supporting People” from April 2005;*
- 2 garage rents and heating charges not be increased from April 2005;
- 3 Consideration of new charges for common services at flats be deferred

The meeting ended at 8.10pm