

**HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00am on 17 SEPTEMBER
2007**

Present: Councillors E L Bellingham-Smith, R H Chamberlain,
J E Hudson and J E Menell.

Tenant Forum representatives: Mrs D Cornell and Mr S Sproul.

Officers present: S Clarke, R Goodey, L Higgon H Joy, R Millership, J Snares
and P Snow.

HTG1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Councillor R H Chamberlain be elected Chairman of
the Task Group for the ensuing year.

HTG2 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor D J Morson.

HTG3 TERMS OF REFERENCE

Members noted that the terms of reference of the Task Group were to meet as
and when required to discuss specific housing issues, and, where necessary,
to make recommendations to the Community Committee. There were no
decision making powers and the Group was time limited to the next Annual
Council meeting.

The Chairman commented briefly on the expected role of the Task Group and
said it was likely that there would be further changes to the committee
structure. He hoped that discussion would be as non-political as possible.

HTG4 CHOICE BASED LETTINGS – NEW ALLOCATIONS POLICY

A draft of the suggested new allocations policy based on a choice based
lettings (CBL) system was submitted for Members' consideration.

Mrs Cornell said that tenants generally felt that the introduction of CBL was a
cosmetic exercise and that it gave the false impression of extending choice to
tenants. However, as this was a Government led initiative it seemed there
was no option other than to try it.

The Housing Officer took Members through the draft document and
highlighted proposed changes. She said that the Government intended that
CBL should be adopted generally by 2010. Uttlesford was involved in a
consortium with five other authorities. Phase one, to be introduced by 5
November this year, would involve Uttlesford, Epping Forest and Brentwood.
Phase two would follow in 2008.

Choice based letting would allow applicants to bid for up to three properties during each cycle. The first distribution to applicants would be on 9 November. Further publicity would be given to CBL in the meantime and it was intended to hold one or more workshops for Members and other interested parties. Computer access would be provided in reception areas to assist applicants in making expressions of interest.

In response to a question, the Housing and Planning Policy Manager confirmed that the Council had no option other than to introduce a CBL scheme. The external audit had been based upon the presumption of CBL and centrally funded grant money would be returnable if the scheme was not introduced.

The Chairman accepted this analysis but asked for a report back to Members in a year's time. In the meantime he asked for any problems and complaints to be fully documented to enable a full evaluation of the process to be carried out. He further requested quarterly reports to be submitted to this group, or to the Community Committee.

The Senior Housing officer (Homelessness) said that short lists would continue to be produced and compared with the locator system. By this means she hoped it would prove possible to spot gaps in the bidding system and take corrective action.

Publicity for the new system would be given by placing leaflets in different locations and these would be printed in a number of different languages. Information would also be provided through the tenants' newsletter. The Chairman asked that any publicity leaflets be sent to all Members for information.

Members were then guided through the draft allocations scheme page by page. The comments of the Council's Solicitor had already been incorporated into this document. Members made a number of suggestions to clarify and refine the wording to remove any ambiguity and it was agreed to distribute the amended document to Members by e-mail, including amendments included by the legal officer.

Following further discussion, The Task Group agreed to proceed as set out below.

RECOMMENDED to the Community Committee that:

1. the draft Housing Allocations Scheme be approved for adoption, subject to any amendments agreed at this meeting;
2. arrangements be made for quarterly update reports to be given to the Community Committee or this Task Group as appropriate, and for a full evaluation of the CBL system after 12 months of operation.

The Head of Housing Management said that Lisa Higgon and Judith Snares had largely driven this project in the recent absence of Liz Petrie and due recognition of this extra work should be noted in the Minutes.

HTG5 HOMELESS STATISTICS

The Task Group considered the homeless statistics as tabled at the meeting. The Senior Housing Officer (Homelessness) commented on the impact of the evacuation of the Lebanese refugees and said that, without this factor, the homeless figures were largely unchanged.

As a result of Government pressure the number of units used to house homeless people had been reduced but it had now become difficult to achieve further reductions. The current homeless figures were summarised.

Councillor Menell commented on the number of single homeless applicants and this was agreed to be a matter of concern. Members agreed to continue to monitor this matter.

HTG6 TENANT ELECTIONS

The Tenant Participation Officer reminded Members that elections to the Tenant Forum took place every two years. No contests had been required to date.

It was intended to adopt a different approach this year with a view to identifying a wider range of candidates. One idea was to speak to tenants in different locations face to face in an effort to recruit younger tenants and someone who would be able to represent the various ethnic groups. This approach had already been tried in Great Dunmow and it was intended to extend it to Stansted and Thaxted.

Councillor Menell suggested using Buffy Bus to reach parents of young children. Mrs Cornell asked that officers target other areas outside Saffron Walden.

Nominations had to be received by 8 November and a ballot would be held if required within two weeks. Ballot papers would have to be returned within two to three weeks after they were issued. Whether or not a ballot was required, the new Tenant Forum would be installed by next February.

HTG7 NEGATIVE HOUSING SUBSIDY – PETITION

Members noted the motion approved at the recent Community Committee meeting calling upon the Government to remove the unfair burden on Council tenants within Uttlesford of the payment of negative housing subsidy.

Mrs Cornell said that tenants considered this payment to be wholly unreasonable and wished to support a petition asking for the abolition of negative housing subsidy. The Head of Housing Management commented that there was a petition relating to this topic on the Prime Minister's website.

The Chairman asked for a communication to tenants explaining the effect of negative housing subsidy in plain English, incorporating a tear off slip to be

returned as part of a proposed petition. It was agreed that the letter to tenants should include a list of different projects on which this money could be spent, such as new housing.

It was noted that the tenants' newsletter would be sent out at the end of September or early in October.

Councillor Hudson asked whether the lost income, if recovered, would be ring-fenced. The Chairman commented that the 'lost' £4.24 million would be utilised on the existing housing stock or on new housing initiatives. The Council would not be allowed to transfer this money to the General Fund as it would be part of the Housing Revenue Account.

The Head of Housing Management advised Members that a consultation paper had recently been issued on the housing subsidy system.

RECOMMENDED to the Community Committee that:

1. a formal representation be sent to the Government on the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system, as a follow up to that Committee's motion; and
2. that a letter written in plain English be sent to all Council tenants explaining the effect of negative housing subsidy, and incorporating a tear off slip which tenants would be invited to sign and return as part of a petition deploring the loss of this rent income.

HTG8

STOCK OPTIONS – ANNUAL REVIEW

The Head of Housing Management reported that a stock options appraisal three years ago had concluded the Council could afford to retain and manage its housing stock. The report stated that the Council would remain a viable landlord for the next five years.

Recent events had had the effect that the Council's status as landlord was now more uncertain and might not continue to be viable after five years. The annual review report was awaited and it appeared that another stock condition survey was needed as some costings were now outdated.

The Chairman noted the current position but said that further discussion would have to await the availability of more up to date information.

HTG9

PROCUREMENT

(a) Decent homes/HHSRS

The Building Services Manager advised Members that last year's programme had been completed with the exception of 30 cases where the tenant had refused permission. He warned that the Decent Homes programme could fail next year on one item.

The Chairman asked whether the new procurement arrangements had been helpful. In reply the Building Services Manager explained how the procurement arrangement with Braintree was working. A sum of more than £400,000 a year now had to go through the procurement hub to comply with the European specification. This had proved to be a huge task but a number of contracts had now gone through the hub and were being overseen by Braintree. The agreed framework had been set for three years. Under this arrangement, members of the hub could use the same framework agreement and buy at the same prices. He was presently reviewing whether this was resulting in any savings and the impact on work quality.

The Chairman said that Members would need to be told if the arrangements were not working and asked that a report back to this Group be made in due course.

(b) Sustainability/energy efficiency issues

Members were advised of progress with the programme to achieve efficiency savings on boilers and on other energy saving measures such as timber sustainability and the removal of lead from paints. This would involve surveying every one of the Council's housing stock and would be a difficult task.

Reference was made to the decision of the NHIC to shortlist the remodelling of Vicarage Mead, Thaxted for their awards ceremony on 22 November. This would be attended on behalf of the Council by Helen Joy and Russell Goodey. The short-listing of Vicarage Mead reflected great credit on the Council generally and on those members of staff concerned.

Mr Sproul asked how the quality of the procurement process was evaluated. In response, the Building Services Manager explained that monthly meetings took place with contractors and there was a site inspection for all completed contracts. Quality inspection was an integral part of the process which was designed to ensure value for money.

HTG10 EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY

It was reported that attempts had been made to establish a citizens' panel but this had proved unsuccessful. It would be possible to co-opt tenant representatives as there were existing vacancies. These would be publicised in the tenants' newsletter.

HTG11 GREEN PAPER – CONSULTATION

The Head of Housing Management said that comments on the recent Green Paper had to be submitted by mid-October. The Council's response would include a request to overhaul the HRA subsidy system which presently provided a disincentive to run an efficient service. It would also state that local authorities were good providers of the housing service and the Council would welcome the ability to retain capital receipts to utilise on new build schemes.

The Chairman commented that the Council should use any opportunity to criticise negative housing subsidy and he asked for it to be recorded that the Council's preference was to act as a builder rather than just an enabler.

Councillor Menell asked when the last land survey had been carried out. The Head of Housing Management pointed out that land holdings were regularly reviewed and there were sites that could be developed. As one example, a survey of ad hoc garage sites had been carried out recently.

Councillor Menell also asked whether future housing provision could be offset against the overall housing requirement in Uttlesford. There was a suggestion that only major development sites could be counted in this way. The Housing and Planning Policy Manager said that she would clarify the position and advise Members accordingly.

A response to the Green Paper would be sent by officers on the lines discussed.

HTG12

POLICY ISSUES

(a) Re-modelling sheltered accommodation

The Housing and Planning Policy Manager said that Supporting People had established an Older Persons Project Group. It appeared that there were many people living in sheltered accommodation who did not need direct support. One idea under discussion was to extend funding to people remaining in their own homes, including those in the private sector.

Mrs Cornell commented that people would be able to say if they did not need support and would not then pay the Supporting People element. In this case she posed the question of how warden support would be funded.

The Chairman agreed that this would turn on its head the concept of warden support. He thought it would be helpful to seek councillors' views and this subject might merit a meeting of the Task Group in itself.

Reference was then made to Holloway Crescent at Leaden Roding where all the sheltered units were now vacant. Members needed to address the question of whether sheltered units were required at this location. The land was a valuable asset and the site should be examined to evaluate whether there should be a mixed development or whether the site should be handed over or sold.

The Head of Housing Management also referred to Mead Court at Stansted and said that initial discussion on future support service provision would start shortly.

The Chairman said the site at Leaden Roding was a major asset and would need careful consideration. He suggested a site visit might prove a useful way forward. There were a number of options and he asked officers to prepare some outline proposals for future discussion.

It was clear that there were a number of matters to be considered and he suggested a future meeting of the Task Group should concentrate on two or three specific issues aimed principally at established the nature of housing need in the district.

(b) Short stay accommodation

Members were advised that there was nothing new to report since the recent Community Committee meeting.

HTG13

PROGRAMME OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members agreed the following programme of future meetings:

- A meeting on Monday, 12 November to consider housing strategy.
- A meeting on Wednesday, 5 December to consider sheltered housing and the capital programme (since changed to Monday, 10 December).
- A meeting on a date to be arranged in January 2008 to consider rent setting ahead of consideration by the Community Committee.

The meeting ended at 12.25pm.