

**HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00 am on 7 APRIL 2008**

Present:- Councillor R H Chamberlain – Chairman.
Councillors E W Hicks, J E Hudson and D J Morson.

Also present (for the Holloway Crescent item): Councillor S Barker.

Tenant Forum representatives: Mrs E Rogers and Mr S Sproul.

Officers in attendance: S Clarke (Housing and Planning Policy Manager),
R Goodey (Building Services Manager), Helen Joy (Tenant
Participation Officer), R Millership (Head of Housing
Management), L Petrie (Housing Management Manager),
C Roberts (Committee Officer) and Judith Snares (Senior
Housing Officer – Homelessness).

HTG35 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E L Bellingham-Smith
and J E Menell.

HTG36 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2008 were received, confirmed
and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HTG37 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute HTG29 – Negative Housing Subsidy

In answer to a question from Mrs Rogers, the meeting was informed that as
yet no reply had been received from the Department of Communities
regarding the impact of negative housing subsidy.

HTG38 TIMETABLE FOR REPORTS

The Chairman of the Group, Councillor Chamberlain, referred to a meeting of
the Constitution Task Group at which the future of the Housing Initiative Task
Group had been discussed, it being then thought that the Task group should
become a working party. A question arose from this whether the Housing
Initiative Task Group, in whatever form, would be the adequate Group to deal
with Housing Service needs of the Council in the future. He suggested that
there should be a review of the matter examining whether the current format
was the correct one or whether a housing committee should be set up for the
future needs of the Council. The conclusions of any such review must
necessarily be considered by the Constitution Task Group, Community
Committee and Council.

Councillor Chamberlain reminded the meeting of the previous forum used by the Council to deal with housing matters and said that in his own opinion the Housing Service had not benefited from being included within a much larger committee as much as its needs became less conspicuous to some members.

He suggested that the appropriate timetable would be:

- 1 Officers to prepare a draft report to be returned to the next meeting of the Housing Initiative Task Group for discussions and amendment
- 2 The Tenant Forum to discuss how it feels the housing service should be addressed, their observations to be input to the same meeting of the Task Group for discussion.
- 3 A second meeting of the Task Group be called to finalise views before consideration of the whole by the Community Committee.

Following examination of the dates of the Committee timetable it was suggested that it would be more practicable, in the light of the Tenant Forum's scheduled meeting on 12 May, for the Task Group to meet before this, so that the Tenant Forum could discuss the Task Group's conclusions on 12 May and so a meeting of the Task Group to finalise matters should be held between 12 May and 19 June.

Councillor Chamberlain itemised matters for consideration in the first meeting of the Task Group;

- 1 whether Members were addressing the Housing service area adequately, especially since they were only six in number;
- 2 the view of the Audit report on the strategic side of the housing service (yet to be received);
- 3 rural excellence;
- 4 the disproportionately weighty and complex implications, of the loss of £5,000,000 from negative housing subsidy upon the housing service compared with the size of the forum considering these matters;
- 5 the lack of an obvious forum for public speaking on the topic of housing;
- 6 the lack of an appropriate forum for considering matters relating to policies and procedures within the housing service;
- 7 the lack of a unified forum to consider performance of the Housing Service, which was variously directed to Tenant Fora and Scrutiny Committee;
- 8 The absence of wholehearted endorsement by all Members of the housing schemes;

Councillor S Barker suggested that the situation might be improved if the Community Committee adopted the practice of the Finance and Administration and Scrutiny Committees of providing a report by the Chairman of the Committee at the commencement of each meeting. The Chairman of the Group agreed that this would be a useful approach and said that he personally felt that a Housing Committee was necessary but that this was only one view and it was necessary for officers to consider the matter and for the Council to decide upon it, taking into consideration the impact upon the Community Committee and other considerations.

The Chairman of the Group invited the observations of the officers present and Mrs R Millership, the Head of Housing Management, emphasised that she thought the Task Group was a useful forum for informal canvassing of ideas. Councillor Morson endorsed the usefulness of the Group for dealing with relatively less sweeping issues. Councillor S Barker, referring to the possibility of a Housing Services Committee, said that a committee that met three times a year would perhaps be appropriate.

Judith Snares (The Senior Housing Officer – Homelessness) agreed that the Task Group formed a good place for informal discussions and that major items should be dealt with at Committee. The Chairman of the Group said he believed that there would be ample business for a full Committee in this context. The Task Group would be more appropriate for dealing with matters such as Holloway Crescent.

Councillor Hicks said he felt the Housing Committee was an important aspect of the Council and its functions should not be carried out by a discussion group of 6 Members.

Councillor S Barker also felt there should be a full Committee to allocate Housing tasks and resources and to deal with matters such as the current situation in Elsenham.

The Tenant Participation Officer was concerned that officers' time would be further stretched if there was going to be an additional committee to report to.

It was agreed that officers be requested to prepare a paper setting out the considerations that might be relevant to deciding the appropriate mechanism for dealing with housing related matters. This report would be submitted to the meeting in the early part of May.

HTG39

HOLLOWAY CRESCENT LEADEN RODING – UPDATE ON PLANS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

The Head of Housing Management and the Housing and Planning Policy Manger updated the meeting on action taken pursuant to the policy recommended to the Community Committee regarding Holloway Crescent development. Approaches had been made to the housing associations and the District Valuer and pursuit of the question of access to the rear of the properties had been postponed pending receipt of the capital valuation.

The Head of Housing Management mentioned that advice had been received from Go-East and English Partnerships regarding the Council considering formation of a local housing company. She said that it was now almost unheard of for a Council to gift land at all.

Members discussed this situation and the Chairman of the Group suggested that the Task Group should recommend to the Community Committee that no land be gifted, but that efforts be made to maximise the number of units to be provided.

Councillor Hicks enquired whether, if a company were formed, there would be any constraints on the ratio of affordable to other accommodation, bearing in mind the possibility that sheltered apartments might be transferred on to a third party in time.

Mrs E Rogers too was concerned that in the long term the whole development could be splintered away and she asked that the ratio of different types of development be established. Members agreed that information should be obtained from the English Partnership on this question. In answer to a question from Councillor Morson, the Chairman confirmed that it was necessary to make progress with Holloway Crescent and he suggested that:

- (i) at the next meeting a speaker should be invited to address the Task Group on the matter;
- (ii) the Community Committee should be informed of the view of the Task Group that land should not be gifted away and that therefore a search should be instigated for a scheme and a source of capital receipts, and that in the meantime more clarity should be sought from the housing associations as to the consequences of any such scheme.

Members were also concerned to establish the density of any possible development and the mix of types. It was noted that it would not be sensible meantime to re-let vacancies in that particular.

The Chairman referred to the possibility of broader development, but stressed that there should be no commitment to gifting land and that research of broader possibilities should specifically exclude anything which could not be achieved without gifting land. Once a scheme had been formulated it would be important to have a discussion with the Task Group about detail since, whatever the scheme it would certainly be a role model for others and it would be important that the design received the influence of the Group.

Councillor S Barker stressed the importance of planning for consultation and Mrs Millership gave details of plans for a meeting and consultation with the residents of the bungalows in Holloway Crescent and residents of Holloway Close in the next week. It was noted that there was a general wish to protect The Green. Officers agreed to keep the Parish Council informed. Mrs Clarke would pursue matters with the Housing Associations.

The following timetable was agreed for further progress.

Next meeting of Task Group – 8 May 2008.

Items

Draft Officers' report on Housing Committee
Holloway Crescent – presentation of all further information obtained by officers and discussion of appropriate work for Task Group.

Meeting of Tenant Forum – 12 May

To receive a verbal report on the discussions of the Task Group of 8 May.

Meeting of Task Group – 9 June (provisional date depending on the outcome of the Council meeting on 22 April 2008)

To receive the observations of the Tenant Forum and finalise the report to the Community Committee regarding the appropriate Member mechanism to deal with the Housing Service.

The meeting ended at 11.15 pm.