

**HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES  
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00 am on 8 DECEMBER 2008**

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

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

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer) R Goodey (Repairs Manager), R Millership (Head of Housing Services), L Petrie (Housing Management Manager) and S Walker (Housing Enabling and Development Officer).

**HTG17 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor D J Morson and S Clarke.

**HTG18 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2008 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**HTG19 BUSINESS ARISING**

**(i) Minute HTG13(i) Negative Housing Subsidy – meeting with the Minister**

It was reported that representatives of the Tenant's Forum had been invited to represent the Eastern Region at a meeting on 19 December at the DCLG regarding the issue of negative housing subsidy. Mr Sproul said that the Forum had sent a letter to the Minister asking what was planned for the £200m of housing subsidy funds that the Government had collected. At the meeting it was hoped that the tenants would highlight the particular concerns of Uttlesford and officers would prepare a briefing note outlining the effect that the loss of this money had on the housing service. The Chairman asked the tenants to report back to the meeting in January.

**ii) Minute HTG16(i) Recycling Collections**

Mr Sproul said that he had not yet received a reply from the Director of Operations about possible restrictions on collecting recycling from properties in cul-de-sacs. The Chairman had ascertained that it was Council policy to restrict collections from cul-de-sacs if doing so would prevent damage to properties or the vehicle. However, this decision would not be taken until there had been discussions with the residents about alternative arrangements. Officer would seek a formal reply to the tenant's forum.

### **iii) Minute HTG15 Affordable Housing Delivery programme**

The Housing Enabling and Development Officer presented the latest figures on the likely delivery of affordable housing to the end of the financial year. Members were pleased to note that over 100 new homes for rent and shared ownership were due to be completed. Officers said that there was a discernable slow down due to market conditions and the building programme had slipped by a couple of months. The group was warned that the target for the provision of affordable homes might not be met next year.

AGREED that the following information be provided for the next meeting

- 1 An update of the 2008/09 housing delivery figures.
- 2 A revised programme for future build to include notes explaining the relevant changes.

It was suggested that there should be publicity about the new affordable properties once they had come on line at the end of the year.

There then followed a discussion on the allocation of the new housing and whether it was restricted to residents from the local area. Members were informed that recent changes to legislation provided for people from outside the district to apply to be on the register if they qualified for housing in the District and if they had housing need. They were also entitled to be on the list of those authorities in the Choice Based Letting partnership.

Members asked if figures were available to show the extent of this practise and commented that it would have the effect of inflating the figures for housing need. The Chairman was particularly concerned as figures for housing need were used by the Government to calculate the number of new homes required in the LDF. The Head of Housing Services said that there had been a suggestion for the Partner Authorities to move toward a shared register which would help to avoid this duplication. But in any event the data from all local authorities was sent to the Government's central data base, so there should be an accurate picture of housing need nationally.

These issues would be addressed in the Affordable Housing Strategy which was currently being drafted.

AGREED that the following items be submitted to the next meeting

- 1 Figures on the number of allocations made to residents outside the district.
- 2 The draft Affordable Housing Strategy.

HTG20

### **VOID PROPERTIES LETTINGS**

#### **(i) Void property statistics**

The Head of Housing Services circulated statistics which set out the reasons for refusal of a property under the Choice Based Letting Scheme. The Chairman was concerned that it appeared that out of 250 lettings there had been 120 refusals, which amounted to almost 1 in 3. The Housing Management Manager explained that the rationale of Choice Based Letting was to put choice in the hands of those people who needed housing. Residents regularly expressed an interest in more than one property and this distorted the figures. It could be the case that the person at the top of the housing list would qualify for all three of their choices and so would have to turn down two of them. However unlike the old system, once a property was turned down it could be offered immediately to the next person who had expressed an interest. This had the effect of speeding up the letting process. Also under the old system this information had not been recorded so it was difficult to draw comparisons.

The group asked a number of questions about the reasons for refusals. Officers said that some of categories should be broken down into greater detail to give a truer reflection of the refusal reasons.

Liz Petrie said that as the scheme had been operating for nearly a year she had recently sent a questionnaire to tenants asking for their views on the scheme. She was in the process of analysing the data and this would form part of a review of the scheme.

AGREED that a report on the review of the Choice Based Letting Scheme be considered at the next meeting of the Task Group.

The Head of Housing Services had prepared a graph to show the number of void properties by week. It was no longer a requirement to report this information to the Government but it was kept for internal use. The Chairman said that it was important to know how well the Council was performing in this area and asked if the information could be broken down into more detailed categories.

## **(ii) Repairs to void properties**

The Repairs Manager presented a report explaining the repair and updating work that was required to be undertaken before a vacant property was re-let in a reasonable condition. The average cost of the work was around £300 for basic work such as painting for a general needs property, but this amount increased for a sheltered property, special adaptations or if more extensive repairs were required. Some of these costs could be recharged if the works were the result of the previous tenant's negligence. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep the costs of the repairs within a reasonable band and the provision of the service was now being reviewed.

A review team of officers and tenant forum representatives had been set up to see how the current processes could be improved. This included looking at best practise, and to this end meetings have been arranged with Tendring District Council to share experience and to carry out a benchmarking exercise.

A main priority was to review the re-let standards and information was being obtained from other authorities. There was no doubt that the public's expectation as to what was acceptable had increased over the years and this would have to be taken into account. A new letting standard was being produced and would be put before members in due course. Once more information was available the HITG would be asked for suggestions for improvement although consideration would need to be given to budget constraints.

In answer to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that wherever possible the void repair work was funded from capital budgets as this was a more effective way of obtaining financing.

The Repairs Manager said that the one suggestion that had come out of the recent meetings was to increase the recharging rates for damaged properties. There was a noticeable increase in the amount of damage to properties and more effort could be made to gain photographic evidence and pursue this through the courts. Although there was support for this approach there were questions around cost effectiveness and enforcement.

Another proposal was to review the tenancy conditions. The aim was to make the tenant more responsible for the condition of the property and the Repairs Manager said he would like the tenant to sign the tenancy agreement at the same time as viewing the property. It was also important that the tenants' handbook was updated as soon as possible.

As a way forward the Chairman summed up the following points that had come out of the discussion.

- There should be limited recharging for transfer cases.
- There was a need to review the re-letting standard; a degree of flexibility should be built in.
- There was support for the tougher line taken on recharging.
- The majority of the void budget should be funded by capital.
- The council should aim to keep up with the decent homes standard.
- An extra £200k would have a huge impact on the service that could be provided and the Tenant Forum Representative should put the relevant details before the meeting with Ministers.

It was AGREED that a follow up document, setting out what was achievable within the available budgets, be considered at the next meeting

HTG21

## **HOLLOWAY CRESCENT**

The Group was informed that the consultation meeting on the second phase of the project had taken place with local residents the previous week. The meeting had again raised objections to the first phase of the development. Councillor Barker had circulated an email asking various questions about the design of the scheme.

It was AGREED that officers prepare a report for Community Committee on 22 January setting out any new comments that had been made at the consultation and recommending final approval of phase 1 of the project.

HTG

**NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on Monday 9 February at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 11.40 am.