

**HOUSING INITIATIVES WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.00 pm on 8 MARCH 2010**

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

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

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer) L Petrie
(Housing Management Manager), J Snares (Housing
Options/Homelessness Manager) and Suzanna Wood (Housing
Strategy and Planning Policy Manager) and Sophie Walker
(Strategic Housing and Enabling Officer).

HWG29 APOLOGIES

It was noted that the Head of Housing Services was currently unwell and unable to attend the meeting. Members sent their best wishes for a speedy recovery.

HWG30 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2010 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record subject to an amendment to recommendation 5 in minute HWG26 to state that the final decision on the new allocations policy would need to be a recommendation to the Community and Housing Committee.

HWG31 BUSINESS ARISING

Minute HWG23 - Place Scheme update

The Chairman asked whether the Government had agreed for the scheme to be amended to allow the grant to be used to fund the refurbishment work associated with Empty Dwelling Management orders. An update would be given at the Community and Housing meeting.

HWG32 HOLLOWAY CRESCENT UPDATE

The planning permission for the 5 bungalows had been granted and work was expected to begin on site in mid March. Officers were currently looking for a solution for the displaced parking and the residents would be consulted on the proposed plans.

The Holloway Crescent Task Group had held its first meeting. It was considering options for phase 2 at the site and would report back to the working group in due course.

HWG33 DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Working Group was given details of the figures on affordable housing delivery from 2006 through to the current year's programme. Members found this to be very useful information and asked for the schedule to be circulated to members of the Community and Housing Committee.

Councillor Menell said that she would like to see more schemes on parish council exception sites as those that had been built had been very successful. It was reported that the Rural Housing Enabler in Essex would be sending a pack to all parish council's explaining the scheme and an associated event was being arranged. Councillor Menell asked if it would be possible to obtain copies of the pack to send to all district councillors.

HWG34 UPDATE ON ALLOCATION POLICY AND CHOISE BASED LETTING SCHEME

It was reported that the first phase of the consultation, to seek views on the major issues and the different options was now underway. For phase 2, it was expected that the draft allocations policy would be available by the end of the month and this would be subject to an 8 week consultation. This results of this and details of the proposed allocation policy would be considered at the Community and Housing Committee on 10 June and there would need to be a meeting of the working group before that date.

HWG35 HERTS AND ESSEX HOUSING OPTIONS CONSORTIUM

The working group was advised that discussion that had taken place with the members of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium on possible ways to enhance the current HomeOption choice based letting scheme. This had resulted in the report before members which set out options on cross boundary allocations and possible enhancements to the current scheme. The six authorities were now seeking the views of their members and would report back to the consortium. Any changes to the current scheme would only go ahead if there was consensus from all of the partners.

It was noted that it was an expectation of the Department for Communities and Local Government that there should be greater access and choice to housing. Cross boundary bidding and one point of access was seen as an opportunity to provide people with real choice.

If cross border working was to be introduced the allocations policy would be centred on four possible models.

- Model 1 - retention of own allocation scheme

There would be no cross boundary working but customers would be able to view available properties across all areas via the free sheet or the website. Housing applicants had the opportunity to join any housing register, so as long as they were on the register for an authority in the consortium they could

express and interest. The applicants would only have priority in terms of local connection with their own area.

- Model 2 - retention of own allocation scheme with an over arching sub-regional policy

Each authority would retain its own allocations scheme locally. Prior to any expressions of interest around 5-10% of vacant properties, selected randomly would be for cross boundary bidding.

- Model 3 - voluntary sub-regional policy for difficult to let policies

The members would pool all difficult to let properties and advertise them as being available to all applicants across the partner authorities.

- Model 4 - common assessment policy

All members would allocate accommodation across all areas under one allocation scheme. Each authority would have to operate either a banding or a points based system. Local connection could be given greater priority within the band.

Members questioned the likely take up from residents outside of Uttlesford. This was hard to quantify, there were a number of people from outside the district on the list, but it was also the case that people tended to have a connection to an area and most people were seeking properties in their local area. In any event a safeguard could be built into a scheme to ensure priority for local residents.

Councillor Chamberlain proposed that the council continue with model 1. He said a cross border scheme might serve to contravene council policy, particularly in connection the provision of labour for Stansted airport and perceived demand for housing in relation to the LDF. He thought that addressing housing need should take a bottom up approach and the authority's priority ought to be to help local people. From the figures provided he considered that was a sufficient number of Uttlesford residents on the housing list to be dealt with under this council's own allocation scheme.

In answer to a question, officers said that, as with the allocation policy, any cross border working should be looked at with the tenants and prospective tenants in mind, and model 4 would give them greater opportunity to move. Some members pointed to the advantages of option 4 in terms of cost savings. It was felt that if the council could build in necessary safeguards, it was worth pursuing this option, particularly as it was considered to be the way forward by the Audit Commission and the Government.

On being put to the vote the proposal for option 1 was lost. A further proposal was then tabled to recommend option 4 and this was carried

RECOMMENDED to the Community and Housing Committee that the working group's preferred option is Model 4.

The report also set out other potential enhancements to the scheme. These included a common application form and on line registration, inclusion of private and shared ownership accommodation, inclusion of a consultation model and looking for a more consistent approach to the rules for local connection. It was agreed that officers discuss these issues further with the Consortium and report back to the working group.

HWG36 HARD TO LET BUNGALOWS

The working group was advised that there were a few elderly persons bungalows in the district in isolated locations that had proved very difficult to let to people over 60 and as such remained empty for long periods. It was therefore suggested that the 'elderly' designation on certain bungalows be changed to allow general needs applicants to express an interest in them. The first preference would still be to allocate to an elderly person if they came forward.

Members welcomed this idea in principle, as a way of addressing void time, but were concerned to give a blanket discretion to officers without knowledge of the type and number of properties involved. It was also confirmed that the properties could be subject to right to buy. The working group agreed to this request with the proviso that the decision was made in consultation with chairman of Community and Housing Committee and there was a progress report back to the working group in due course.

RECOMMENDED that following consultation with the Chairman of the Community and Housing Committee, discretion is given to the Head of Division for Housing to change the designation of elderly on some hard to let bungalows to allow them to be advertised as also available to general needs applicants, up to a maximum of five units.

HWG37 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on 10 May 2010 at 2.00pm when the draft allocation policy would be discussed.

HWG38 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The chairman suggested various issues for the future work programme of the committee as follows

- Allocations policy
- Housing Strategy - action plan review
- Antisocial behaviour – current policies, issues and how to address these.

Councillor Menell suggested that, as council properties often had very large gardens, it might be possible to let part of this land for allotment use. It was agreed that officers would obtain a legal opinion and report back to the next meeting

The meeting ended at 3.40pm Page 4