

**HOUSING INITIATIVES WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 2.00 pm on 20 JANUARY 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 representative: Mrs E Rogers and Mr S Sproul.

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer) W Cockerell
(Principal Environment Health Officer) R Millership (Head of
Housing Services), L Petrie (Housing Management Manager),
J Snares (Housing Options/Homelessness Manager) and
Suzanna Wood (Housing Strategy and Planning Policy
Manager).

HWG20 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

HWG21 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2009 were received,
confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HWG22 DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Working Group was updated on the affordable housing programme for
2009/10. The schedule showed those units that were planned for delivery in
this financial year. A more detailed forward programme would be circulated at
the next meeting. It was noted that there were delays in some of the projects
due mainly to weather conditions. The delay at the Rochford Nurseries site
had been due to the submission of a new planning application for smaller
units.

The Chairman thought that the Community and Housing Committee should
have access to these figures and it was suggested that a summary be
included within the Lead Officer's report.

HWG23 PLACE SCHEME UPDATE

The Principal Environmental Health Officer updated the group on progress
with the Place Scheme initiative. The Government had given the consortium a
significant grant but the take up of the scheme had so far been poor. The
consortium had therefore asked if some modifications could be made to the
scheme; to use the interest accrued on the grant to employ an empty homes
officer to help to publicise the scheme and to seek an amendment to the
scheme so that the grant could be used to fund the refurbishment work

associated with Empty Dwelling Management order acquired by the Councils. The result of this request would be known by the beginning of February. It was noted that that £50k had already been put in this Council's budget to assist with work required in relation to the management order. Members recognised the benefits of the scheme and welcomed any measures to increase participation.

HWG24 HOLLOWAY CRESCENT UPDATE

The working group welcomed the news that the bid for this scheme had been successful. The planning application had been submitted, and if approved it was hoped that building work could commence in March/April. Members thanked officers for the tremendous amount of work that they had put into progressing this scheme.

The Chairman suggested that the Community and Housing Committee consider setting up a time limited Task Group to look the next steps in relation to this site.

HWG25 HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager reported on progress toward addressing the issues in the Housing Strategy Action plan. The report showed the many points that had been addressed and set out those area where progress was still needed. It was agreed that a similar report could be submitted to the working group on a 6 monthly basis.

HWG26 REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S ALLOCATION SCHEME

The working group received a report which provided an update on the progress with the review of the Council's Allocations Policy and Choice based Lettings scheme and sought approval as to the means and nature of the consultation.

The last meeting had approved the scope of the review and the intention to have a new housing allocations policy for the district in place in 2010. It had been agreed that this meeting should look at the implications of leaving the CBL scheme, arguments for and against the points and banding systems and details of what was legally required to be provided and what matters were discretionary under the scheme. Members received detailed reports on all of these issues.

The council was required to consult stakeholders and residents on changes to the scheme and the report gave details on the proposed consultation, which would be in 2 phases.

Phase 1 - to seek views on the major issues and the different options available. This would run until the beginning of March

Phase 2 - Consult on the draft revised allocation policy, taking into account the views expressed in phase 1. The consultation would also include all other matters already within the allocations policy. This consultation would run for a further 8 weeks.

It was important to consult widely throughout the district and a number of different methods of providing the information were suggested, including:- using the Council's website, contacting those on the housing list, targeting parish council's and the tenants forum and using Uttlesford Life, Area Forum, local press and village news letters.

Choice Based Letting

The report included a detailed document on the implications of leaving the CBL scheme. It was noted that the scheme had been driven by tenants and the Chartered Institute of Housing who had wanted more choice for homeseekers. The report set out the advantages of the scheme. It was also noted that it was operated in partnership with 5 other authorities and to pull out would be a costly and retrograde step for the authority and tenants.

Members agreed that CBL was successful in giving service users more choice and that the option of leaving the scheme would be too costly in terms of money and reputation. The proposed review of the allocations policy was the ideal opportunity to look again at how CBL was working within Uttlesford and identify any improvements that could be made.

The Chairman said that he still had reservations about this scheme because it was up to the residents to express an interest in a property. He was concerned that there might be categories of people who would miss out on an allocation and wanted assurance that the vulnerable groups would be adequately covered within the new written policy.

Officers advised that the current scheme had been equality impact assessed and that there was already a list of people for whom officers made bids on their behalf. Member said that there appeared to be an established good custom and practice in respect of vulnerable people but this needed to be clearly spelt out in the policy document and in the consultation.

Allocation Scheme

The Head of Housing Services reported new statutory guidance from the Department of Communities which gave greater flexibility to authorities in devising their allocation scheme as long as it reflected the views of the wider community.

Officers had carried out a detailed analysis of the different schemes and had concluded that the banding system was the best option. This was used by most authorities, was more transparent to the different levels of need across the district and easier to administer. Once someone was allocated to the band they would remain in date order on the list moving up the housing register as previous people from that band were housed. However priority would always go to those in the band above if the property was suitable for their need. This

would make it clear to those on the lower bands how they were likely to be housed as opposed to the existing point system that was complex and difficult to understand.

It would be up to the council to decide the criteria that applied to these bands and also the weight to be given to a local connection. People could move up and down the bands as their circumstances changed. Members raised a number of issues including the likely effect on the homeless figures and the need to include provision for emergency situations but otherwise agreed that a banding system appeared to have many advantages over a points system.

Members agreed the consultation format and period and asked officers to prepare a draft policy based on the initial consultation results and good practice for the next meeting.

It was reported that the consortium was starting to consider the principle of cross border allocations. Members although cautious about this suggestion agreed in principle that officers could discuss with our partners a move towards more joint working on some aspects of the HomeOption scheme.

It was RECOMMENDED that

- 1 Members note the preliminary work completed in taking forward this project
- 2 The formal consultation on how the council allocates its properties is approved.
- 3 Officers prepare a draft revised Allocation Policy based on feedback from findings and the initial consultation.
- 4 Officers talk to the consortium about joint working on the HomeOption scheme
- 5 The outcome of the consultation be reported to the HIWG for members to make a final policy decision.

HWG27 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on 8 March 2010 at 2.00pm when the draft allocation policy would be discussed.

HWG28 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

It was reported that there had been a recent consultation on the new TSA standards. The Housing Management Manager would prepare a draft response and circulate it to the group for comments.

The meeting ended at 3.40pm