

HOUSING SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 23 JANUARY 2001

Present:- Councillor R W L Stone – Chairman.
Councillors Mrs C A Bayley, R A E Clifford, R D Green, Mrs C M Little, R A Merrion, A R Row and G Sell.

Also present:- Councillor R P Chambers.

Tenant Panel representatives:- Mrs Bolvig-Hansen, Mr Smith and Mr Perry.

Officers in attendance:- R H Chamberlain, Mrs M H Cox, Mrs A Dellow, M R Dellow, D B Demery, J B Dickson and P J Snow.

HS35 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs M A Caton, R C Dean and M A Hibbs.

HS36 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2000 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

HS37 DRAFT REVENUE ESTIMATES 2001/02

The Sub-Committee received the draft Revenue Estimates 2001/02 which now included internal charges and previously identified growth items. They now gave the complete picture apart from any new growth items or savings or any implications of new Capital Programme items.

RESOLVED that the draft Revenue Estimates be approved and forwarded to the Community Services and Policy and Resources Committees.

HS38 DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES 2001/02

The Sub-Committee received the draft estimates for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and were asked to determine the rent level for 2001/02 in the context of the new statutory framework for housing starting in April 2001.

The Corporate Director-Finance explained the base position of the budget. The HRA working balances at April 2001 were £187,828 below the recommended minimum level of £500,000. This was partly due to an increased expenditure on unprogrammed repairs and partly to an over

estimation of the rent level income. It was important that the balances were restored and the detailed figures showed additional planned maintenance programme items, totalling £270,000 being transferred to the HRA Capital Programme in 2000/01. This would permit the HRA working balance to be restored to its prudent target level of £500,000 by 31 March 2001.

The report set out the revised estimates 2000/01 and the estimates 2001/02 and explained the significant variations in the figures. The report then explained the impact of the DETR subsidy rules. The guideline rent level increase, recently issued by the DETR, was for an average increase of £2.08 per week, the maximum increase for any local authority. This figure had been used for calculating housing subsidy implications and also as the base position for preparing the detailed estimates. Members were advised of the changes that the DETR had introduced to take effect from April 2001. The major change was the introduction of the Major Repairs Allowance. This would enable funds to be targeted for HRA capital purposes which had previously paid for rent rebates or were transferred to the General Fund. The report then further informed Members of the impact of the new financial framework.

Members discussed the increased cost of non-programmed repairs. Because the revenue cost of the repairs at its increased level had not been allowed for in the base budget, the work had been funded during 2000/01 at the expense of the programme of planned maintenance, but this would not be possible in the future. The guideline rent increase could not cover the £215,000 increase in response repairs projected in the Housing Strategy. It had therefore been necessary to reduce the estimate by £205,000 from its projected level in 2001/02 in order to allow a rent increase no greater than the DETR guideline.

When garage rents had been increased by 20p in the previous year's budget, tenants' panels had felt that they were still too low and had asked officers to obtain comparative information from neighbouring local authorities. Uttlesford's rents were the lowest in the sample. The rents were currently £4.00 per week and if they were increased by 80p or £1.00 the additional income would assist in funding the asbestos management work needed to comply with health and safety requirements, which was a particular problem for many of the Council's garages.

The Corporate Director-Finance then explained the options for dwelling rent increases. It would not be sustainable to have an increase below the DETR guideline of 4.05% (£2.08 per week). Any increase above the guideline would make more resources available for repairs, but a sustainable rent level would not be achieved unless at least £85,580 additional income was achieved. This would require an average increase of £2.62 per week. Failure to increase rents to at least this level would result in reduced repairs or increased rents in 2002/03. If £28,000 were raised by increasing garage rents by £5.00 per week, an additional £177,000 would still be needed to reinstate the repairs budget at the Housing Strategy level. To achieve this, a rent increase of £3.21 per week would be required. It was noted that an increase of £3.00 per week would produce £145,000 and with the additional £28,000

from garage rents, an additional £173,000 could be added to the repairs budget. The remaining shortfall would then be just £32,000.

A combined meeting of the tenants' panels had been held on 18 January 2001. Mrs Bolvig-Hansen reported on this meeting. She said that the tenants had discussed the report in detail and although £3.00 a week was a relatively large increase, the tenants had felt that it was essential that the repairs budget should be maintained. All tenants at the meeting had expressed satisfaction with the services provided by the Council and, having taken into account the issues raised in the report, considered that the higher rent increase was the best way forward.

Other Members agreed that it was important for the Council to have a good quality housing stock. Councillor Clifford felt that the Council could not justify an increase in the garage rent from £4 - £5.00 which was an increase of 25%.

Councillors Mrs C A Bayley and R D Green declared an interest in the increase of garage rents and did not vote on this particular item.

Councillor Chambers thanked the tenants' panel representatives for participating in this process and for putting forward their views. He asked that the Council take their opinions seriously.

RECOMMENDED that the estimates proceed for further consideration by Community Services and Policy and Resources Committees and be amended to reflect

- 1 an increase in garage rents from £4.00 to £5.00 per week,
- 2 an increase in dwelling rents , above the DETR guideline, by an average of £3.00 per week – giving a rent multiplier of 2.161
- 3 the additional £173,000 income generated, £28,000 from garage rents and £145,000 from dwelling rents, being added to the repairs budget.

HS39

HOUSING BEST VALUE REVIEW ACTION PLAN

Members received a copy of the Housing Best Value report. This had already been submitted and approved by the Member Reference Group and the Best Value Sub-Committee. However, the Policy and Resources Committee, at its last meeting, had agreed that the service committee should consider the action plan formally. Most of the points within the action plan would require further detailed work and further reports to Committee.

Councillor Row felt that the Council needed to consider the issue of stock transfer as soon as possible. He hoped that the dates to consider this matter, as set out in the Best Value Action Plan, would be adhered to.

RECOMMENDED that the Housing Action Plan be agreed.

HS40 SHELTERED HOUSING VACANCIES – ADVERTISING

The Housing Best Value Review had looked at the Council's void period figures. It had been found that if the figure for difficult to let sheltered accommodation, mostly bedsits, could be improved, it would have an impact on the void figures. The waiting lists for some of the schemes were very small or did not exist. The Action Plan proposed that these vacancies could possibly be advertised in local newspapers and at the Council offices. Members agreed that this was a sensible way forward and it was

RESOLVED that the policy of advertising hard to let sheltered units, as outlined in the report, be approved.

HS41 CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF HOUSING CONFERENCE 2001

The Chartered Institute of Housing Conference would be held between 19 and 22 June 2001 in Harrogate. Members agreed that it was appropriate for one Member to attend this conference, but there might be a case for more than one officer to be present given the information that could be obtained and networking with representatives from other Councils. Councillor Row had represented the Council for the last few years in his capacity as Chairman of the Community Services Committee, and indicated that he was willing to stand down if there was another Member who would be interested in attending.

RESOLVED that Councillor Mrs C A Bayley be appointed as the Member representative to attend the Chartered Institute of Housing Conference 2001, in addition to the Housing Services Manager.

HS42 REPORTS OF REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE BODIES

The Sub-Committee received a report from Councillor Mrs Flack regarding the matter of break-ins at a number of sheltered units. These had occurred when residents had left windows/doors open and were in another part of the building. Councillor Mrs Flack thought the situation might be helped with the fitting of stops to windows and chains on external doors.

RESOLVED that officers investigate the possibility of fitting window stops and chains and report back to the the Sub-Committee.

HS43 TENANT PANEL MEETINGS

Members received the Minutes of the Tenant Panel meetings that had been held since the last meeting of the Sub-Committee.

Mrs Bolvig-Hansen reported that there appeared to be more interest from tenants in attending the meetings to discuss particular points of concern. She said that the Tenants Panel representatives took their job very seriously, particularly in the light of the stock transfer issue. She asked that Members bear the panels in mind when they were approached by Council tenants.

HS44 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business, on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of Exempt Information, as defined in paragraphs 7 and 8 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

HS45 SCHEDULE OF RATES CONTRACTS

Members were asked to approve an extension to the schedule of rates contracts. The contract period was for three years and six months with an option to extend for a further 18 months. The contract had already been extended by one year and could be extended for a further six months to terminate in October 2001. With mutual agreement, the contract could be further extended. There was some uncertainty with regard to the future of the housing stock and the impact of the Best Value Review of Housing. Consequently officers had negotiated an extension to the existing contracts so as to terminate in April 2001.

RESOLVED that an extension to the Schedule of Rates contracts to terminate in April 2003 be approved.

HS46 RADWINTER ROAD/THAXTED ROAD ALLOTMENT LAND

The Chairman agreed to the consideration of this item on the grounds of urgency as the financial timescales required the matter to be discussed before the next meeting of the Sub-Committee.

Members were given details of a proposal to dispose of non-statutory allotment land adjacent to the Radwinter Road cemetery, Saffron Walden.

RECOMMENDED that the proposals outlined in the report for the disposal of the allotment site be approved.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm.