

**HOUSING STRATEGY WORKING PARTY held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 10.00 am on 11 JULY 2003**

Present:- Councillors C A Bayley, W F Bowker, M A Hibbs,
R M Lemon and Mrs J Bolvig-Hansen (Tenant Panel
Representative)

Officers Present:- R Chamberlain, A Collison, A Dellow, E Petrie and
P Snow

HSWP1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

It was agreed to appoint C A Bayley as Chairman for this and for future meetings of the working party.

HSWP2 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2003 – 2008

Members had already received a draft of the proposed Homelessness Strategy and the Head of Housing Services explained that an approved draft of the document must be submitted to GO EAST by the end of July. Under the terms of the relevant legislation, the Strategy would be a five-year document covering the period 2003/2008. The intention was to fine-tune the document and submit a final draft to the Health and Housing Committee and to the Council for final approval. However, the timetable of meetings dictated that the draft would have to be submitted to GO EAST before formal approval could be obtained.

Members noted that there had been a big increase in homelessness this year. Considerable problems had resulted in the rehousing of homeless applicants especially as no new Housing Association nominations had arisen recently and bed and breakfast accommodation was the only emergency means available to house homeless people. There had been a particularly steep increase in single person homelessness. The heavy workload involved meant that most of the work involved in dealing with homelessness was now reactive.

It was clear that the Government was keen to see the problem of homelessness nationally dealt with more quickly and that emergency bed and breakfast accommodation should be used, if at all, for a maximum period of 6 weeks.

A combination of increasing workload in relation to the homeless service and new regulations indicated a need for additional staffing resources. The Head of Housing Services reminded Members that the employment of a dedicated officer had been flagged up in the recent best value review and was now needed, in his view, in order to move towards the ability to provide a better and more pro-active service. A homelessness officer would also be able to forge better links with the private housing sector as well as providing welfare services. In fact, he said that a homelessness officer was now essential to meeting the targets set out in the draft homelessness strategy.

To achieve the Government's targets, it might become necessary to suspend normal allocations, with the exception of sheltered accommodation, because the Council would be in breach of its legal obligations if the maximum six week period was exceeded. Although such action would be for the minimum possible time, it was regarded as a significant part of the strategy.

Members were anxious to ensure that the Council could meet its statutory obligations and provide a good service. It was recognised that this area had been identified in the best value review for future action and it seemed appropriate to follow that recommendation through at the earliest opportunity. It was expected that an informal budget strategy meeting of the Resources Committee, involving chairmen of service committees, would take place before the next committee cycle and Members agreed to ask that meeting to consider favourably the recruitment of a dedicated homelessness officer. Government grants would be likely to cover the entire cost in the current year and more than 50% of the cost for a period of two further financial years with the balance being met from the General Fund. Beyond the two year period, it was likely that the Council would have to fund the full cost.

The Accountant advised the Working Party that the cost of bed and breakfast accommodation was offset by a rebate but this was really a paper transfer only. The only income received by the Council was in the form of a Government housing benefit subsidy for bed and breakfast provision but this rarely amounted to more than 45% of the rebate awarded. The remaining cost was met by the Council.

Following the initial presentation, Members asked a series of questions about the operation of homelessness policy and discussed various options for improving the service provided. A number of key points emerged from this discussion as summarised below:-

- That it was necessary to challenge the stigma associated with homeless provision;
- That it was essential to improve the collection of relevant data to measure both current performance and future improvements;
- That officers should explore options for the possible resuscitation of an appropriate rent deposit scheme;
- That officers investigate changes in bed and breakfast accommodation policy;
- That officers explore the possibility of providing specialist temporary accommodation within the District, possibly in conjunction with adjoining local authorities;
- That further information be gathered about the 'Connections' service coordinated by Essex County Council, and its possible application to homeless provision in Uttlesford; and
- That concerted attempts be made to build up better working relationships with private housing landlords throughout the District.

The Working Party then took the opportunity to examine the draft Homelessness Strategy page by page and a number of editorial suggestions were made.

The Head of Housing Services said that he would take on board all comments made at this meeting and send a redrafted strategy document to all Members of the Working Party for comment.

RECOMMENDED that the Resources Committee be urged to approve the employment of a dedicated homelessness officer, subject to approval by the Council (and the Health and Housing Committee) of the revised Homelessness Strategy 2003/2008 and that relevant costings be prepared.

The meeting ended at 11.45 a.m.