

**HOUSING STRATEGY WORKING PARTY held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 3.00 pm on 5 AUGUST 2003**

Present:- Councillor C A Bayley – Chairman
Councillors 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, M R Dellow,
H Frost, R Millership and P Snow

HSWP3

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2004

A draft Housing Revenue Account Business Plan (HRABP) had just been prepared by officers and was circulated to Members for consideration at this meeting. It was explained that a suggested final version of the Business Plan would be submitted to the October meeting of the Health and Housing Committee and to the following Council meeting although it would have to be submitted to GO EAST by the end of September.

The main purpose of the HRABP was to set out objectives and strategies for the management and improvement of the Council's housing stock. The Housing Services Manager reminded Members that a further stock options appraisal would have to be undertaken, as required by the Government, at an estimated cost of £30,000. Although present indications were that 89% of the Council's housing stock had achieved the Decent Homes Standard it was a national Government target that 100% of the housing stock would have to meet the standard by 2010.

There was still uncertainty about the financial position of the Housing Revenue Account capital financing as it was not yet clear whether current arrangements would continue beyond the financial year 2003/04. Ministers had indicated that transitional arrangements would be made for debt free authorities but the date for this to become effective was still unclear. This could be either April 2004 or April 2005 depending on the Parliamentary timetable.

A programme of Housing Capital improvement proposals had been prepared and tenant representatives had now voted on their preference for the order of priority that these proposals should take. The absolute priority would be determined following further work on 'Decent Homes' expenditure projections. The programme was felt to be realistic and achievable subject to the precise financial arrangements to be settled by the Government, although it was possible that circumstances might impose some constraints, e.g. if Right to Buy receipts failed to meet estimated levels.

The Working Party examined the business plan in detail and made a number of editorial and other suggestions for amendments to the document. Councillor Hibbs referred to the lack of any reference to sustainability. He felt, and the meeting agreed, that there was sufficient in the document already to justify a reference to sustainability in particular relation to the achievement of greater levels of energy efficiency. Members agreed that the Council had a

good track record in this particular regard and it was only right that the document should reflect the progress being made.

There was also agreement that a clear explanation should be provided in the tenants' newsletter that the Council's housing stock was already in good order and that many other local housing authorities were struggling to achieve standards already attained by Uttlesford. It was felt that a letter addressed to tenants by the Chairman of the Health and Housing Committee would be useful to further emphasise this point.

A discussion also took place about the difficulty increasingly faced by many young people in the District in getting onto the housing ladder. Fears were expressed that because mortgage interest rates were at an historically low level, those currently purchasing houses could face future difficulties when interest rates increased.

Officers advised that it would be unwise to underestimate the determination of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to reach its Decent Homes targets and to obtain clear and accurate information about the condition of the housing stock held by local housing authorities. Uttlesford was unusual in maintaining its stock in such good condition and in the high levels of tenants' satisfaction that had been achieved. It should not be assumed that these conditions applied in most other local authority areas. It was, therefore, vital that the information supplied to the Government was credible.

Members were still unhappy that the Council was being forced to incur expenditure on a stock options appraisal when such a survey had been conducted comparatively recently. However, it was agreed that the Council had little option but to accept the Government's direction to conduct an options survey on this occasion but that careful consideration should be given to incurring such expenditure on a continuing basis. It was agreed to advise the ODPM that this was not felt to be necessary.

The meeting acknowledged that Members had not had sufficient time to absorb the detail of this very comprehensive draft Business Plan and that they should be invited to submit any further comments they may have direct to the officers. Based on comments made at the meeting, and any further comments received, an updated document would be prepared for consideration by the Health and Housing Committee on 23 October.

The Chief Accountant pointed out that two more consultation documents on Capital Financing were expected to be issued by the ODPM very shortly but there was no indication of the real timescales at this stage. In certain circumstances it might be necessary to call a further meeting of the Working Party but it was more likely that relevant information could be circulated by means of the Members' Bulletin and that a further meeting should not be needed. It was agreed that any such meeting would only be convened if absolutely necessary.

RECOMMENDED that

- a) Officers update the HRABP as agreed at this meeting;
- b) An updated list of priorities be prepared to utilise the potentially available transitional funds; and
- c) The Council (and the Health and Housing Committee) be asked to consider the updated Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2004 for submission to GO EAST by the required deadline.

The Meeting ended at 4.20 p.m.