

HOUSING STRATEGY WORKING GROUP HELD AT 9.30 AT COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN ON 28 NOVEMBER 2006

Present: Councillor M A Hibbs – Chairman
Councillor E J Godwin.

Mrs D Cornell (Tenant Forum representative)

Officers in attendance: R Chamberlain, P Clanchy, S Clarke, J Farnell, R Goodey, L Grinnell, R Millership, P O'Dell, L Petrie and P Snow

HS1 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Mr R Livings (Tenant Forum representative).

HS2 CAPITAL AND REVENUE PROGRAMME 2006/07 AND 2007/08

The Housing Programme Manager outlined the planned programmes of work as set out in the summary circulated at the meeting and said that the full detail had been lodged in the Members' Room. A copy was also available for Tenant Panel representatives if required.

The key question to address was the continuing sustainability of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) over the next few years. The tendering process was now underway. It appeared that the painting programme was under budget. This was because so many windows had been replaced that there were now fewer to paint. Re-cladding work undertaken had also resulted in fewer repairs. The overall effect of these trends had resulted in savings of £153,000.

Another factor was the increase in the budget for disabled adaptations as there was added pressure from Social Services to keep tenants in their homes.

As part of the process of achieving the Decent Homes Standard, officers had been overwhelmed with requests for kitchen and bathroom adaptations. These were relatively easy to programme and additional bathroom adaptation work had been scheduled. Although the Council was now on target to achieve the standard for Decent Homes, the intention to aim for Decent Homes Plus had been abandoned as unrealistic.

A further target was to provide smoke alarms for general needs properties at a programmed cost of £40,000 a year over a five year period. The cost of the contract for the modernisation of the sheltered block at Vicarage Mead had risen as a result of unforeseen work needed to provide additional floor support. On the other hand, funds from land sales had increased at a greater rate than had been expected.

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) said that he wished to emphasise the excellent results achieved on procurement and the good relationships that had been built with the Council's tenants. This was particularly evident at Vicarage Mead now that the first phase was at an end and he suggested that a visit by Members should be arranged.

Mrs Cornell expressed her support, on behalf of tenants, for abandoning in the short term the intention to achieve Decent Homes Plus standard so that efforts could be concentrated on items such as door replacements. The Executive Manager (Housing Services) commented that the Council had wanted to achieve the Decent Homes standard by April 2007 and would meet this target ahead of time.

In referring to the tenants' newsletter, Mrs Cornell asked that more relevant statistics should be included in this document to highlight the successes achieved. In response it was stated that extracts from the annual booklet could be included in the next newsletter.

The Chairman asked whether it was a statutory requirement to carry out disabled adaptations? The Building Services Manager said that demand had been generated by a number of factors and the Council worked in close co-operation with Social Services to carry out adaptations where they were considered necessary. Some other authorities in Essex had adopted a different approach. The Council's general approach was to consider whether it was possible to relocate the person concerned but this was often not possible because alternative accommodation was rarely available. In the longer term, he anticipated that more tenants would require adaptive work but the Council would always have to take account of limited budgets.

The Chairman said he was concerned by the implications of a dramatic increase in adaptation work because of the impact on future budgets. It was confirmed that the HRA would go into deficit in this event and he asked that the Community Committee should be requested to identify sources of additional funding to meet this likely demand.

Councillor Godwin initiated a discussion about the achievement of lifetime home standards by developers. She said that developers must be made to adhere to appropriate standards in new homes and that the Development Control Committee should be advised if this was not happening. Officers commented that these standards were now being incorporated where appropriate but it must be appreciated that the maintenance of items such as stair-lifts was an expensive item for developers.

Consideration was given to the overall effect of all of these trends on the HRA and capital budgets for next year. It was hoped that any shortfall would be made up by an increase in capital receipts. The Executive Manager (Finance and Asset Strategy) said that he had only just seen these figures and he would arrange for the draft estimates to be submitted to the Community Committee on 18 January. Following this, the Operations Committee would take a view on the availability and use of capital receipts.

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) advised that the Council would be obliged to work with a housing association on any future major scheme. That would not prevent work on adaptations continuing as there would be sufficient scope to proceed in a different way.

RECOMMENDED to the Community Committee that the planned programme of revenue and capital schemes be approved.

HS3 **REVIEW OF HRA BUSINESS PLAN**

The Housing Programme Manager confirmed that an options appraisal would be needed next year to ascertain whether tenants would be better off under different management. The position was not as healthy as last year as pooled capital receipts had resulted in a dramatic fall in funding. This meant that some hard decisions would be needed next year on matters such as disabled adaptations and voids.

The Chairman commented that Members appreciated the Council was in a transitional phase and this would result in lower capital receipts. The Business Plan was well set out but he felt that it disguised the funding allocated to Decent Homes and it would therefore be helpful for the Community Committee to be given a statement setting out an estimate of total spending in this area.

The Housing Programme Manager said that she would arrange to distribute a copy of the quarterly report to GOEast setting out these details in full.

RECOMMENDED to the Community Committee that the HRA Business Plan be endorsed.

HS4 **UPDATE ON HOUSING STRATEGY STATEMENT PROPOSALS**

The Executive Manager (Housing Services) said that views were now needed on the document to be prepared next year. It would not be a requirement to produce a fully updated strategy statement but he advised that it would be prudent to prepare one. The statement would reflect a number of areas where changes would be required such as housing management, affordable housing, fuel policy, homelessness, issues concerned with the elderly, and engagement with the private sector.

This would have resource implications but would be valuable for use as an internal working document. It was likely though that the Government would seek early information about the Council's policies so the revised statement would have a dual purpose.

Mrs Cornell referred to the need for the Council to sign up to new partnership working and the Chairman confirmed that there was a full awareness of tenants' needs. He drew attention to the concept of fuel poverty, as highlighted in the

Stern Report, arising from an increase in the cost of energy. He said that he would like to see the Council's position on fuel poverty stated more clearly as he felt that, although this matter was being addressed, Uttlesford was not good at singing its own praises.

The Energy Manager commented that he had never been asked to produce a strategy on fuel poverty although he had contributed to a report on the Home Energy Conservation Act outlining a list of measures needed to improve energy conservation. There was an energy rating for each property updated to take account of benefit records. The effect was that no-one in a Council property was classified as being in fuel poverty. This nevertheless disguised those single tenants living in larger units of accommodation who might have difficulty in meeting heating bills. The remedy for this problem was transferring these tenants to smaller accommodation but this was now more difficult than when cash incentives were offered, a policy scrapped some time ago.

He said that he had written to all benefit recipients reminding them of the schemes available and he had collaborated on leaflets issued by the PCT. Many of these recipients were in the private sector and there was 100% grant funding available in these cases. This information could be co-ordinated as part of an overall strategy document.

The Chairman commented that it should not be too difficult to pull this together and to combine the policy with a statement about where we could go from this point on.

The Energy Manager said that more could be done if the overall approach was broadened to include sustainability. There was a contradiction in that new central heating systems had the effect of taking people out of fuel poverty but the result was to consume more energy so the trend was not sustainable. It was now more difficult to make progress because the Council was replacing gas boilers rather than installing new systems and the scale of improvement had slowed down.

Councillor Godwin thought that more pressure should be placed on developers to improve standards of energy conservation in new-build properties. The Energy Manager confirmed that the building regulations had been tightened considerably and standards were now 20% more efficient than at the same time last year. He said that the building regulations standard was now better than last year's eco standard.

The Chairman nevertheless felt that there was a continuing problem with larger housing developments. Overall policy was encouraging higher standards but there were limits to what could be achieved in the private sector. It was necessary to explain very clearly to councillors what was being done and how matters could be improved.

He further commented that the housing department had been very well run and it was necessary to ensure that the Council did not lose focus under the new structure, as strategy and management would be split between two directorates.

It was agreed that this Working Group would continue to meet on a regular basis to review and formulate a framework for future strategy. Two Members would be appointed at the next Council meeting to replace Councillors Bayley and Bowker.

RECOMMENDED to the Community Committee that adequate resources be made available to produce a new housing strategy and that this should be widened in scope to incorporate all aspects of sustainability.

The meeting closed at 11.00am.