

**HOUSING STRATEGY WORKING PARTY held at 7.00 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 25 JULY 2000**

Present:- Councillor M A Hibbs - Chairman.
Councillors E C Abrahams, Mrs C A Bayley, Mrs D Cornell, Mrs C M Little,
Mrs J E Menell and R W L Stone.

Also present:- Mrs J Bolvig-Hanson, Mr D Reynolds and Mr J Smith
(Tenants representatives).

Officers in attendance:- P Bruty, R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, M Dellow,
Mrs H Frost, R Harborough and P Snow.

HSW1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr J Grimshaw and from Councillor A J Ketteridge.

HSW2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Members agreed that, since this was likely to be the only meeting of the Working Party required to be held this year, the appointment of a Vice-Chairman was unnecessary.

HSW3 DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY STATEMENT 2001/05

As a preface to the debate on this item, the Chairman explained that little change had been required to the Housing Strategy Statement since the document prepared last year. The detail and structure of the document had been completely altered in 1998 in accordance with revised guidelines issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and the only redrafting required this year was to update the text in accordance with recent developments and to change relevant financial and other statistical information.

The Housing Services Manager updated Members on the reasons for the text alterations and explained the further drafting changes which had been necessitated by revised pages 5, 23, 24, and 25 circulated at the meeting. He said that there had been an encouraging degree of response from the various agencies consulted, and from tenants, and there seemed to be an increasing awareness of the importance of the strategy document. The consultation process had been conducted in April and May of this year and a summary of responses received had been included in the draft document.

The Working Party then considered the document page by page and suggested a number of alterations or additions to the text. These amendments are summarised at the end of this Minute immediately before the recommendation.

The Housing Services Manager emphasised the changes necessitated by the current Best Value Review of the Housing Service. This review was part of a statutory process and might result in changes to Council policy when the key conclusions were considered at the end of the review.

Other major factors influencing the Council's strategic objectives were the proposed changes to the Housing Subsidy arrangements from 2001/02 and the recent Green Paper on housing policy which envisaged possible future legislation.

The Chairman suggested that the comments on page 32 under key objective 7 should be amplified to explain more clearly why the options appraisal in relation to the Council's housing stock, carried out by consultants during the course of the current year, was a salient factor with regard to the Best Value process. There was general agreement that the document should reiterate that any change in the ownership of the housing stock would only come about after a full process of debate and decision within the Council and following full consultation with tenants. He reiterated that whatever the Council concluded to be the best outcome from this review could be vetoed by tenants following the statutory consultation process. It was therefore agreed that the text should be expanded to explain this process and the reasons for it.

Reference was made to the problem of over occupation of property by applicants on the Council's waiting list. She felt that in some cases, there appeared to be no adequate remedy to help the applicants concerned. This was because some were considered to have adequate living space and were therefore unable to acquire the necessary number of points to be considered for housing. It was agreed to include some reference to this potential problem within the document.

Reference was also made to the problem of elderly people resident in privately rented accommodation who were unable to acquire enough points to be given a high priority for rehousing. The Housing Services Manager outlined that more points were awarded to tenants wishing to move from General Needs to more suitable accommodation in order to release this type of accommodation for families. However, the points issue in question may need to be reviewed when the opportunity arose. It was pointed out that Housing Need was part of the Housing Year 2 Best Value Review.

The Working Party also briefly discussed the position of ex-agricultural workers required to vacate their existing accommodation. Officers explained that retired agricultural workers could only be displaced when the farmer was able to demonstrate a justifiable need for replacement staff, necessitating the availability of vacated accommodation.

Members also discussed the reasons for the small increase in rent arrears revealed on page 19. It was thought that a little more text on this issue should be placed in the text of the document.

The Chief Accountant then circulated a revised sheet consisting of the extrapolated housing funding statement giving alternative scenarios A and B. Scenario A reflected the assumption made when preparing the budgets for 2000/01 that a sufficient major repairs allowance would be available from 2001/02 to fund both the repairs and improvements programmes. No allowance had been made in this scenario for transitional arrangements. On the other hand, scenario B reflected the assumption made in the Council's current budget strategy that transitional arrangements for the major repairs allowance would be spread over five years and would not permit full funding of both the repairs and improvements programmes until 2004/05. This scenario also envisaged that additional rent increases might be needed in 2000/01 over and above what was allowed for in Government issued guidelines in the event that transitional arrangements were made.

All financial evaluations made were based on educated guesswork as it was unlikely that the outcome would become known until later this year, possibly not until Christmas 2000. It was agreed that as no announcements had been made it would be appropriate to include scenario B in the document.

The Housing Services Manager referred to the chart about projected housing need included after page 35 of the document. The chart indicated that if trends continue, the number of applicants regarded as being housing need would reduce during the lifetime of the strategy. However all

projections were made on the assumption that all new housing schemes produced vacancies as hoped. There was likely to be a change to projected housing need following a review of the 20 point threshold in 2001/02 as part of the Best Value review process.

Summary of text and other amendments made to the draft Housing Strategy Statement

Page 5, final paragraph - insert the word "no" at the end of the second line;

Page 6, first paragraph - insert Performance Indicators in full in the third line and in all other places where PIs are referred to.

Page 7 - include Private Sector Housing as one of the services to be reviewed in year 2 (2001/02);

On the same page make it clear that consultants would be associated with the work undertaken as part of this review.

Page 11 - insert a reference to the potential need of sheltered housing;

Page 14 - insert in the final paragraph on that page the words "which could for example include units above retail properties" after the words "Existing Satisfactory Properties are existing properties";

Page 16 - in the final line of that page insert the words "the young and" immediately before the words "elderly people";

Page 22 - in the fourth line under A "underoccupation" include some explanatory text to amplify the reference to "all the schemes";

Page 32 - as part of Key Objective 7, amplify the comments about the review of the Council's housing stock to explain that this is a requirement of the Best Value process, that until now it has been the Council's policy to retain its housing stock and that a positive decision of the Council and full consultation with tenants would be required before disposal could take place;

Page 33 - substitute extrapolated housing funding statement (scenario B) for the extrapolated statement on page 33;

Further to the comments included earlier in this Minute, it was agreed that it might become necessary to carry out a fundamental review of the housing point scheme at a future date. Part of any such review would involve consideration of the needs of the categories of applicant discussed at this meeting. It was then

RECOMMENDED that the draft Housing Strategy Statement for 2001/2005, as amended by the comments included in this Minute, be recommended for approval to the Community Services Committee.

HSW4 BEST VALUE REVIEW - FUTURE OF HOUSING STOCK

At the request of the Chairman, Members discussed the necessity for the Housing Strategy Working Party to continue in operation. This matter had been considered at the Annual Council Meeting when it was decided that the Working Party should remain in existence for the current year.

Members agreed that the Working Party might prove to be a suitable forum for the consideration of some of the key issues highlighted by the Best Value Review, particularly the future ownership of the Council's housing stock.

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm.