

HOUSING STRATEGY WORKING PARTY held at 6.00 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 23 JULY 2001

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

Tenant Panel representatives:- Mr J Grimshaw and Mr J Sumner-Smith

Officers in attendance:- R Chamberlain, W Cockerell, Mrs M Cox and
Ms H Frost.

HSWP1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A R Row and
Mrs J Bolvig-Hanson.

HSWP2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Councillor Mrs C A Bayley be appointed Vice-
Chairman of the Working Party.

HSWP3 THE HOUSING STRATEGY STATEMENT 2002-2006

Members received the draft Housing Strategy Statement for 2002 – 2006. The draft document had to be with the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) by 30 July 2001, followed by submission of the final approved document in September 2001. The document was an update of that approved last year and included comments made by the Local Government for the East of England (Go-East) following last year's submission. The statement had also been reviewed in light of the commitments made in the Best Value Performance Plan and the recent Housing Best Value Inspection Report. It also included the results of consultation with various agencies carried out in April/May 2001. Once the document was approved by this Working Party, it would be the subject of a further round of consultation before being submitted to the Housing and Health Committee in September 2001.

The Working Party then considered various aspects of the document.

(i) Housing Inspector's recommendations and comments

The Working Party was advised of the recommendations of the Best Value Inspector and officer's comments on how these were to be addressed. Members noted that the review had been generally positive.

The Inspector had questioned the accessibility of the out of hours service. Currently anyone phoning the Council out of hours was invited to leave a message or in the case of an emergency, telephone the out of hours service at Cambridge. It was thought that it would be preferable to access the emergency number through just one phone call. Officers considered that the current systems worked well, but they would look at the possibility of a change of arrangements to accommodate the Inspectors concerns.

In respect of repairs, it was expected that the proportion of expenditure on planned maintenance would be increased and therefore responsive repairs would subsequently be reduced. The Chairman felt that the proposed system of appointments should apply to Council officers as well as to contractors.

The Inspector had referred to the rent collection procedures. Officers drew attention to the revised procedures which had seen an improvement in the number of rent arrears cases. Members commented that the new Working Family Tax Credit might have an impact on tenants' rent levels and it was agreed that this should be mentioned in the next tenants' newsletter. The working party felt that rent statements should be considered. Officers would investigate this further including its frequency and how to distribute it in the most cost effective way.

The Inspector had asked the Council to consider introducing a Council wide anti-poverty strategy. Whilst this was not considered a major problem in Uttlesford, Members felt there were a number of welfare related issues which would be addressed as part of the Best Value Review of housing need. The inspection had made a number of suggestions about improving tenant participation. Some parts of the present system were working well, although improvements could be made. This would be part of a Best Value Review in 2002/03.

(ii) Housing Action Plan

Members considered the Housing Action Plan which had arisen from the 2000/01 Housing Services Best Value Review. Members made the following points

In certain cases, it might be appropriate to offer tenants general assistance to encourage them to move to a smaller property from a larger under occupied property.

The Chairman asked whether a Health and Safety Audit had been carried out in order to establish works that might be required to Council properties. He referred to older properties that might still have asbestos materials and also to a single paned glazed panels next to the front door of some properties. Officers agreed to investigate these specific points.

(iii) Strategy Statement

The Working Party then considered the Strategy document as a whole and made suggestions for revision and additions to the text.

With regard to the use of private sector housing, it was felt that the only such housing that was significantly under utilised in the District, was properties over shops. The statement should include a reference to encourage town centre landlords to release property for residential use.

Councillor Hibbs asked that there be an annual review of the number of repair work inspections.

The final page of the strategy gave a summary of the estimated total need and vacancies to be created up to 2005/06. It was pointed out that if all the possible schemes went ahead, the need figures could be reduced significantly.

RESOLVED that the draft Housing Strategy Statement 2002 - 06 be recommended for approval to the Housing and Health Committee in September 2001.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm