

Housing Best Value Sub-Committee - 17 July 2003

Minutes of the meeting of the **Housing Best Value Sub-Committee** held on **17 July 2003** when there were present:-

Cllr P F A Webster (Chairman)

Cllr K A Gibbs
Cllr T Livings

Cllr P K Savill
Cllr Mrs M S Vince

OFFICERS PRESENT

S Neville - Residential Services Unit Manager
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

10 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 June 2003 (adjourned) and 5 June 2003 (reconvened) were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

Minute 4 - Relating to the Homelessness/Housing Strategy Action Plans - Progress Report

Mental Health

Officers were due to meet Social Services representatives on 13 August on the difficulties being experienced in obtaining information from Social Services relating to the quantification of supported housing needs. It would be appropriate to hold in abeyance expressing concern on this matter to the local Members of Parliament pending the outcome of the 13 August meeting.

Domestic Violence

There had been some media interest in the consultation being undertaken with other authorities on the possibilities for developing a facility for men suffering from domestic violence. Officers would be reporting back on this subject within six months.

Elderly and Frail Elderly

It was agreed that it would be appropriate for the Sub-Committee to convene during August to consider the paper being produced on current and proposed activities with regard to "joined up working" between agencies in the development of older persons' strategies.

There had been initial officer discussions with the Springboard Housing Association and Social Services on possibilities relating to expanding the Handy Persons' Service. There was a need to involve health partners on possibilities for introducing some form of accredited contractor services. Discussion had also been held on the possibility of establishing a gardening service. Members concurred with the Chairman that a report on these aspects should be available for the Sub-Committee by the middle of August.

Rural Needs

Whilst it was not a statutory requirement to meet twice yearly with Parish/Town Councils to discuss Housing Strategy issues and local housing need, it could be seen as good practice in terms of establishing robust strategies.

Members recognised that it would not be possible to pursue discussions if Parish/Town Councils continued to show little interest. It was agreed that officers should report to the next meeting on the responses received from Town/Parish Councils to the latest invites.

Private Sector Housing

Whilst the Council's consultants had now submitted a draft final housing stock condition report, officers had decided that its content was unacceptable. It was difficult to understand and contained factual and calculation inaccuracies. The total report cost was £32,000 and £10,000 had been paid to date. Payment of the next tranche had been withheld pending resolution of the outstanding issues. There was a possibility that elements of the survey work will have to be started again.

Meeting the Needs

Re-organisation at the Springboard Housing Association had delayed some of the progress in identifying possible schemes for the St. Marks Field site capable of attracting Housing Corporation funding. The Head of Housing, Health and Community Care was arranging to meet Springboard's new Chief Executive to discuss the matter and it was hoped to be able to update the August meeting of the Sub-Committee.

Minute 5 – Homelessness Best Value Review Action Plan

Anti-Poverty Strategy

It was agreed that officers should report on the Anti-Poverty Strategy by the middle of August.

Review of Points Allocation Policy

It was agreed that a progress report should be submitted to the August meeting.

Interim Accommodation

Officers would report to the August meeting on investigations into a current case involving the use of interim accommodation.

The Development of Realistic, Challenging Performance Indicators

It was agreed that Indicators should be justified. Any proposals should be submitted to the August meeting of the Sub-Committee.

Expenditure on Homelessness

Elements of the costing associated with homelessness had been reported to the last meeting of the Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The Residential Services Unit Manager advised that he would consult the Head of Financial Services on the specific question of providing information on the expenditure on homelessness (including staff costs) as a proportion of the Council's overall budget.

Minute 6 - Housing Management Best Value Action Plan

Inclusions in “Your Home” and Rochford District Matters

Officers would confirm at the next meeting which editions of “Your Home” and Rochford District Matters refer to the compliments received from the tenants of The Lavers.

Anti-Social Behaviour

Officers would check the status of Government proposals involving the withdrawal of benefits from persons behaving in an anti-social manner.

Minute 7 - Matters Arising from Supplementary Information

Definitions of Homelessness – Eligibility Depending on Immigration Status

It was agreed that it would be of value for officers to issue to Sub-Committee Members the proposed contents of a briefing paper aimed at assisting understanding of the eligibility and rules that apply when applicants request housing. The paper could then be endorsed at the next meeting.

Housing Needs Study

Members concurred with the view of the Chairman that a report setting out proposals for Sub-Committee involvement in the forthcoming Housing Needs Study should be submitted to the next meeting.

Keyworkers and Affordable Housing

It was agreed that it would be appropriate for the Sub-Committee to give further consideration to the Council's approach with regard to keyworkers and affordable housing at its next meeting, by which time Members would have attended the training session on this subject.

11 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Sub-Committee considered the report of the Head of Housing, Health, and Community Care on the Draft Homelessness Strategy. The final version of the strategy, incorporating any changes requested by the Sub-Committee, would be presented to Full Council on 29 July 2003.

Members proceeded to give page by page consideration to parts 1 to 6 of the Draft Strategy.

During debate and in response to Member questions, the Residential Services Unit Manager advised that:-

- With the nature of inter-agency working and the connections people often had with various areas around the country, it was difficult to be precise about the number of people facing housing difficulties in Rochford District alone. The reference to chaotic lifestyles in the introductory section had not been intended to include domestic violence as such, the support mechanism associated with this being mentioned later in the strategy document.
- Suitability relates to the size, location and cost of accommodation. Where a homelessness application is made, availability is determined by the Council, with the possibility of the right of appeal to the County Court. The proposed aim in the strategy was to ensure there was sufficient suitable accommodation available to prevent people from having to make a homelessness application, in which case the judgement of suitability would be made by the individual. After some debate it was agreed that the aim should be removed from the strategy.
- In the majority of cases where an applicant is found to be intentionally homeless they have not deliberately set out to become homeless but this has arisen as an indirect consequence of their actions.

- The Government intends that by 1 April 2004 bed and breakfast will not be used for families except in an emergency and even then for a maximum of six weeks. An emergency was where the Local Authority had less than 21 days notice of homelessness. The target in the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan is to cease the use of bed and breakfast entirely by 1 April 2004. This is an unrealistic target and officers will be reviewing the background to its inclusion in the Plan.
- It would be appropriate to delete the proposed section on housing need pending the availability of new up-to-date figures. When a section is included there should be a financial ceiling associated with the income of persons seeking a unit of low cost market housing.
- The Head of Revenue and Housing Management would be consulted on the possibilities for widening the role of the Council's Tenant Participation Officer to include involvement with persons who are or may become homeless.
- One of the problems of the current data associated with homelessness was its format. There was often difficulty in being able to obtain appropriate statistics from agencies involved in a number of service areas. A new software package to improve the keeping and analysis of data had been acquired and officers were reviewing the possibility of a further package relating to housing advice. Proposals for improving the quality of homelessness data were included in the Action Plan.
- When a homelessness application is made, enquiries have to be made to decide what, if any, duty the applicant is owed. Those who are found to be eligible for assistance, homeless, in priority need and not intentionally homeless are owed a "full duty". This means the Council has a duty to reserve accommodation for them. This duty is normally discharged by an offer of permanent accommodation from the allocation scheme. The trend was generally that of an increase in the total number of people waiting to move into permanent accommodation. It was not necessarily the case that all those on the Council Housing Register would wish to be considered for Council rented accommodation only - they may be interested/suited to other forms of affordable housing. Whilst for statistical purposes officers had to identify a specific reason for homelessness, such as parents no longer being able to accommodate, cases often involved all sorts of factors.
- The termination of a short-hold tenancy often came about due to the decision of a landlord to sell a property.
- Reference to the Basildon Women's Refuge was included in the strategy. It may be possible to expand on the refuge system generally.

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- The figure associated with net expenditure on homelessness and housing advice services was General Fund expenditure. This could be detailed in the report.

Having considered Sections 1-6 of the draft Strategy, Members concurred with the view of the Chairman that it would be appropriate to adjourn and reconvene at an early future date to facilitate detailed consideration of Section 7 (Action Plan).

The meeting adjourned at 1.00pm.