

Community Services Committee – 1 June 2006

Minutes of the meeting of the **Community Services Committee** held on **1 June 2006** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr R A Amner
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs B J Wilkins

Cllr Mrs P Aves

Cllr Mrs L A Butcher

Cllr T E Goodwin

Cllr C J Lumley

Cllr P R Robinson

Cllr Mrs M J Webster

Cllr Mrs C A Weston

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs L Hungate and Cllr J Thomass.

OFFICERS PRESENT

G Woolhouse - Corporate Director (External Services)
D Timson - Property Maintenance & Highways Manager
M Martin - Committee Administrator

ALSO ATTENDING

M Elsworth, Lead Housing Inspector for the East of England

176 HOUSING INSPECTORATE – REPORT ON GENERAL FUND HOUSING SERVICES

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (External Services) introducing a “Voluntary Improvement Work” report produced by the Housing Inspectorate following a visit to the Council earlier this year.

The Chairman welcomed Mr Elsworth to the meeting.

Members were advised that of all the recommendations made, there were a number of key findings as follows:-

- The Inspector was of the view that the delivery of affordable housing had not been a high corporate priority to date. A lot of work had already been done to address this and joint work between Planning and Housing was improving. It was suggested that the Council might wish to appoint a Member champion for housing and raise awareness by appropriate training.
- Capacity issues around private sector housing had been addressed and the team was now at full strength. The last private sector stock condition survey information was now out of date and could not be used as a basis for future decision-making and resource allocation.

However, the Inspector was pleased to note that the Council had agreed funding of £40,000 to address this.

- There was a lack of clarity about how service plans fitted with corporate priorities and there were a number of examples where performance was being observed rather than managed.

In response to Member questions, the following was noted:-

- Affordable housing is achieved at a cost, which is borne by the private housing sector although grant may be available from the Housing Corporation.
- The 4 yearly Housing Needs Study considered the provision of affordable housing. Issues such as income levels within the District together with market forces needed to be taken into account to provide the right mix of housing and the Council would take such decisions through the planning process.
- Where developers worked with the Housing Associations, affordable housing should remain available in perpetuity for social rent. Housing Associations had to work with the local authority to develop schemes which meet housing need.
- A number of powers existed to deal with long-term empty properties and details around these would continue to be brought back to Members.
- Across the District almost 90% of housing was owner occupied.
- Discussions were taking place with Housing Associations to meet the decent homes standard by 2010.
- The Council would retain the role of strategic housing authority.
- Provision within the Council's Capital Programme for private sector disabled facilities grants had been substantially increased. Whilst a variety of adaptation needs existed, there were common ones such as stair lifts, averaging around 10 per year. Where potential existed, shared contract tendering with other local authorities would be investigated to obtain economies of scale. An Essex-wide contract for stair lifts was in place. It may be possible to achieve better prices for small items through existing contracts.
- The report had indicated that less than 1 per cent of the population came from black and minority ethnic communities and 17 per cent of the population were aged over 65. There had never been any intention of suggesting that the Council was failing in its duties to ethnic minorities, those with special needs or the elderly.

- It was appreciated that a number of difficulties had to be faced by the Council in approving supported housing developments that served the whole community.

Members thanked Mr Elsworth for his attendance at the meeting.

Resolved

That the recommendations from the Housing Inspectorate be adopted, as set out in the appendix 2 to this report. (CD(ES))

177 RACIAL INCIDENTS IN COUNCIL ACCOMMODATION

The Committee received the report of the Corporate Director (External Services) identifying the occurrences of racial incidents in Council accommodation over the past year.

Members thanked the officer for the report and noted the absence of racial incidents in Council accommodation in 2005/06.

178 LAND OFF ORCHARD AVENUE AND REAR OF WEIR GARDENS, RAYLEIGH

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (External Services) seeking Members' views on the valuation and subsequent sale of the ends of the gardens belonging to Council owned properties in Weir Gardens, Rayleigh.

The Committee concurred with the view of the Ward Members that the proposed development would be detrimental to the interest of the tenants and on a Motion moved by Cllr P R Robinson and seconded by Cllr Mrs L A Butcher it was:-

Resolved

That the request to sell the plots of land at the end of the gardens of numbers 37, 41 and 43 Weir Gardens be refused. (CD(ES))

179 PROPOSED HOUSING STOCK TRANSFER – CONTRACTORS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (External Services) asking Members to consider interim arrangements to ensure the smooth transfer of services to the new Rochford Housing Association, subject to the successful outcome of the tenants' ballot.

Members noted that:-

- 40 tenants were surveyed each month indicating satisfaction rates of around 98%.
- There would be no additional cost to the Council.

Community Services Committee – 1 June 2006

Resolved

That the contracts, as set out in the officer's report, be extended on existing terms and conditions, with index linking, until 31 March 2008. (CD(ES))

The meeting closed at 8.30 pm.

Chairman

Date