

Housing Best Value Sub-Committee - 3 June 2003

Minutes of the meeting of the **Housing Best Value Sub-Committee** held on **3 June 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

R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
G Woolhouse - Head of Housing, Health & Community Care
S Clarkson - Head of Revenue and Housing Management
S Neville - Residential Services Unit Manager
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

4 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 April 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

Minute 3 - Homelessness/Housing Strategy Action Plans - Progress Report

Mental Health

It is noted that, at its next meeting, the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be considering the recommendation that the County Council be advised of this Council's concern about the difficulties being experienced in obtaining information from Social Services on the quantification of support housing needs. Whilst there was partnership working with the local Social Services team, District Officers were still experiencing difficulties obtaining appropriate information.

The Sub-Committee concurred with the view of the Chairman that, should the information not be forthcoming within a month of a resolution by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it would be appropriate for concern to be expressed to the local Members of Parliament.

Domestic Violence

Members agreed that Officers should continue to consult other authorities on the possibilities for developing a facility for men suffering from domestic violence and report back to the Sub-Committee within six months.

Young People

The Council's Tenant Participation Officer was addressing the widening of publicity about the availability of the housing register to young people. It was noted that a likely outcome of publicity was raised expectations/demand, which may mean future consideration should be given to property re-designation. The Sub-Committee would receive further detail on this aspect within six months, probably allied to the outcomes of the frail elderly study and decisions about the future use of elderly persons' accommodation.

Elderly and Frail Elderly

It was noted that Officers are still awaiting information about the release of funding for the Hardwick House project. The Sub-Committee agreed that, if appropriate, a press release (copied to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, local MPs and the Local Government Association) should be issued in a few days time outlining the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister delays. The Press Release should include reference to:-

- Potential problems with the encroachment of winter.
- The possibility that budget estimates would become outdated.
- Activity already undertaken to move residents out of Hardwick House on the basis that the scheme work would commence quickly.

It was agreed that the paper being produced to identify current and proposed activities with regard to "joined up working" between agencies in the development of older persons' strategies should, if possible, be available for the Sub-Committee by 21 July. Should the end of July prove more practicable for report production, the Sub-Committee could convene in August to give detailed consideration to its contents.

It was noted that reports on the frail elderly needs survey and the possibilities for expanding the handy persons' service would be produced by mid-July. The Head of Revenue and Housing Management confirmed that it would be possible to report back by 1 November on possibilities for introducing a form filling service for the elderly in both the Private and Social Housing Sectors. The Head of Housing, Health and Community Care advised that it would be possible to report on the possibilities for introducing some form of accredited contractor services, such as gardening, by 30 September.

Physically Disabled

It was agreed that, in reporting to the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee on proposed Government changes to grant arrangements, it would be appropriate for Officers to include reference to the possibilities for an increase in publicity on the availability of property adaptation services (to accord with the philosophy of equal access to all). The report would need to

detail increases in demand which could be anticipated from greater publicity and financing possibilities.

Rural Needs

Officers would advise a future meeting whether there had been an increase in interest from the Parish/Town Councils on proposals to meet twice a year to discuss housing strategy issues and local housing need.

Private Sector Housing

The Head of Housing, Health and Community Care advised that he knew of no reason why the housing stock condition survey should not be available over the next three weeks. A progress report would be submitted to the Sub-Committee in July.

General Needs and Supply

The Sub-Committee would be advised on the take-up associated with the invitations to management organisations to be involved in joint working.

Homeless/Housing Advice

It was noted that, in view of statutory deadlines, the main elements of the Council's Homelessness Strategy would have to be agreed by Full Council by the end of July. The Strategy could include outline proposals and indicative costs for creating an independent housing advice service separate from the service dealing with homelessness. The draft Strategy would be brought to the Sub-Committee in the first instance. Members endorsed the principle of, wherever possible, including indicative costs for proposals within the Draft Strategy.

People Leaving Hospital

With regard to proposals for introducing a unit providing accommodation for intermediate care and home care support staff in one of the Council's Sheltered Housing Schemes, it was noted that Social Services had some concerns that Spa Court may not be appropriate given the impending refurbishment programme.

The Sub-Committee concurred with Officers that a report should be submitted to the Community Services Committee on 1 July with a view to ensuring that a Unit is provided at the most appropriate Sheltered Scheme.

Meeting the Needs

It was noted that the County Council had yet to commence its review of existing contracts.

The Sub-Committee agreed it would be of value to have an indication of progress on the identification of possible schemes for the St Marks Field site (capable of attracting Housing Corporation funding) at the next Meeting.

5 HOMELESSNESS BEST VALUE REVIEW ACTION PLAN

The Sub-Committee commenced a page by page review of the Homelessness Best Value Review Action Plan. Observations were made as follows:-

Adequate Publicity for Homelessness and Advice Services

It was noted that information on services was included on the Council's website and at reception areas, local GP surgeries, libraries and the Citizens Advice Bureau. It was confirmed that leaflets could also be provided to Town/Parish Councils and churches. It was noted that Officers were working on the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Evaluate Customer Satisfaction

It was noted that there has been an increase in the number of survey forms returned.

Reference was made to the current process relating to homelessness appeals. It was noted that some authorities did not include review by an Appeals and Licensing Committee within the process as there was provision to appeal to the County courts. Members of the Sub-Committee did not favour the removal of Councillors from the review process. Reference was made to the possibility that a change in the way in which documentation is produced for appeal hearings, with a summary sheet and appendices rather than a full report, could lead to a speedier process.

Develop more formal working arrangements with registered social landlords

So far 10 units had been procured for use as temporary accommodation in agreement with the Springboard Housing Association. Any new scheme proposals involving the development of unused Council land would be reported into the committee process in the first instance.

Improve quality of interim/temporary accommodation

The work on developing and implementing improvements to Hatfield House hostel had been completed.

Review Allocations Policy to ensure homeless people receive appropriate priority for permanent accommodation

The definitions of priority were set out within the legislation. It was possible to modify the level of points awarded according to factors such as unacceptable behaviour/whether applicants were connected to the District. A report on points allocation would be submitted to the September cycle of meetings and the Sub-Committee would be fully involved in the review process. Officers would provide appropriate background information to enable the Sub-Committee to give particular consideration to the mechanisms used for income levels (particularly around capital aspects) and how they related to the award of points.

Improve Monitoring of Persons in Interim and Temporary Accommodation

As with many aspects of the housing service, achieving the optimum level of contact with residents was a question of balance.

Investigate ways of better monitoring the usage of interim accommodation

This target was driven by a number of cases involving applicants who had been approved for interim accommodation but had appeared to have other accommodation available.

Improve facilities for the protection of property

This was about moving away from using garages as secure, weather-proof, accessible storage facilities. It was envisaged that the costs for alternative options would be available by October. Officers would be advised if there was any slippage.

Develop realistic, challenging Local Performance Indicators

It would be preferable to have one or two effective indicators.

Improve range of temporary/interim accommodation available

Whilst discussions with private agents were on-going, the availability of properties was subject to prevailing market forces. Some local authorities tied themselves in financially with property companies. This was an option which Rochford may need to review in the future.

Having reviewed the action plan schedule, the Sub-Committee recognised that the majority of initiatives aimed at addressing homelessness had significant cost implications. Members concurred with the view of the Chairman that it would be of value to receive information on the expenditure

on homelessness (including staff costs) as a proportion of the Council's overall budget.

6 HOUSING MANAGEMENT BEST VALUE ACTION PLAN

The Sub-Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management setting out the updated Housing Management Best Value Action Plan and the comments of the Tenants Association.

In discussing the continued difficulties in engendering tenant participation, it was noted that externally set targets did not take account of Authority size. It was also noted that reference to the unpooling of support service costs related to the identification of costs associated with providing warden services at sheltered accommodation. Officers were in the process of reducing costs.

The Sub-Committee commenced a page by page review of the Housing Management Best Value Review Action Plan. Observations were made as follows:-

Review The Provision Of Bed-Sit Accommodation

It was noted that funding was available for The Lavers 2002/03, Spa Court 2003/04 and Britton Court 2004/05.

The Sub-Committee agreed that it would be appropriate to refer to compliments received from the tenants of The Lavers in "Your Home" and Rochford District Matters.

Review IT Systems

It was noted that, in addition to the £20,000 included within the action plan, there would be supplementary costs associated with acquiring and maintaining a more powerful server. Officers were reviewing this aspect and considering other possibilities, such as sharing systems with other Authorities.

Improved Communication with Tenants

Officers were considering the possibilities for introducing an arrangement for leasehold tenants to share the purchase of property freehold. As part of this process, legal services would be consulted on ensuring covenants were in place restricting development opportunities.

Review the Estate Management Procedure

Work on this had commenced.

Implement an Anti-Social Behaviour Policy

It was noted that the Government was considering proposals whereby benefits would be withdrawn from persons behaving in an anti-social manner.

Consider the Implementation of Neighbourhood Wardens

This was a project for future consideration.

7 MATTERS ARISING FROM SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

On 27 May, the Head of Housing, Health and Community Care had written to Members of the Sub-Committee setting out supplementary information associated with matters raised at the first meeting. Observations were raised on this information as follows:-

(1) Community Strategy – Decent Homes

It was noted that, at present, the legislation associated with Decent Homes only applied to social housing. There were moves to extend definitions to the private sector where vulnerable groups are involved. The Government determined standards of vulnerability. Part of the Council's role as a strategic housing authority was to know about the private sector.

(2) Community Strategy – Adequate Supply of Appropriate Housing

The Sub-Committee concurred with the Chairman that the current draft Community Strategy should make reference to ensuring an adequate supply of appropriate housing within the District as far as is practicable.

(3) Community Strategy – Key Workers and Affordable Housing

Responding to Member questions, Officers advised that:-

- it was for the Local Authority to determine the definition of key workers.
- Using current definitions, key workers come from the public sector area of employment.

A Member referred to the difficulties associated with defining "key worker" and "affordable housing". The term "key worker" could be seen as somewhat nebulous. A high proportion of affordable housing projects were subject to rental arrangements. It could be seen as unfair that certain categories of worker may benefit from low rents over long periods of time, despite rises in income over the length of their career. Both key worker and affordable housing arrangements could possibly be unfair to persons in real need.

(4) **Community Strategy – Supported Housing**

It was observed that the term Supported Housing could, potentially, be interpreted in a number of ways.

(5) **Definitions of Homelessness – Eligibility Depending on Immigration Status**

Responding to Member Questions, Officers advised that-

- Certain persons subject to immigration control were not eligible for housing.
- Officers would produce a briefing paper to assist Member understanding of eligibility and rules that apply when applicants request housing.

(6) **Consultation Paper – Temporary Accommodation for Homeless Households**

(Note: Councillor Mrs M S Vince declared a personal interest in this item by virtue of residence in proximity to Albert Jones Court)

The Sub-Committee considered the details of a consultation paper sent to the Leader of the Council by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister relating to proposals for the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

Responding to Member questions, Officers advised:-

- It was understood that the Government would introduce a bidding process mechanism for the purposes of Local Authorities achieving financial assistance to meet new requirements.
- The proposals would prohibit the use of bed and breakfast for families except in emergency situations of up to six weeks. The Council would have need to review the suitability of accommodation in each case and, if an applicant was vulnerable, certain accommodation may not be suitable.
- At the current time, the Authority was assisting 13 households for which alternative accommodation would have to be found if the contents of the Consultation Paper became law.
- In that the majority of the Council's Sheltered Housing accommodation comprised of units within blocks, any re-designation proposals would have to be evolved in a measured way.

During debate, the Sub-Committee recognised that, notwithstanding the consultation process, the Government was likely to proceed with proposals with a view to legislation being in place by 1 April 2004. A key concern was the potential financial implications. If the Local Authority was required to meet all the conditions set out in the paper, the Government should be able to indicate the financial assistance they would provide to facilitate implementation.

(7) **Housing Needs Study**

Members endorsed the observation of the Chairman that it would be of value to ensure that statistical references within the next Housing Needs Study were as robust as possible.

Responding to Member questions, Officers advised that:-

- The Housing Market had moved on since the last study, which was now becoming out of date. It was important to give early consideration to how the forthcoming survey was to be conducted and to the introduction of appropriate budgetary provision.
- It would be useful for the Sub-Committee to be involved in the identification of contractors and the study process.

The Meeting commenced at 2.30pm and adjourned at 4.28pm.

The Meeting would re-convene at 2.30pm on 5 June 2003