

MINUTES OF HOUSING COMMITTEE HELD ON

4 September 2008

7.30pm – 9.09pm

PRESENT

COUNCILLORS

Joshua Jolles (Chairman)

Lee Dangerfield (Vice Chairman)

Simon Carter

Bob Davis

Mike Garnett

David Kirton

Chris Millington

Lesley Rideout

CO-OPTEES

Darrell Thomas
(Leaseholder Rep)

Elsie Matthews
(Tenant Rep)

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Simon Carter declared a personal interest in agenda item 9, Review of Housing Needs and Allocations Policy, on the grounds that he was the Chairman of a local homelessness charity that may be affected by changes to the policy.

15. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 3 July 2008 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

16. MATTERS ARISING

None.

17. WRITTEN QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

A list of questions and their responses are at Appendix A of these minutes.

18. **NON-CONTENTIOUS BUSINESS**

RESOLVED that agenda item 7, Committee Forward Work Plan, be taken as a non-contentious item.

19. **COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN**

RESOLVED to note the Committee Forward Work Plan.

20. **EMPTY HOMES UPDATE**

The Committee received a report providing an update on the Council's empty homes performance in relation to Council owned properties.

The improved performance was welcomed. Members discussed the cost of bringing empty homes back into use and the proposal to carry out a feasibility study of introducing yearly inspections for tenanted properties in an attempt to monitor the condition of properties on an ongoing basis.

RESOLVED

- (i) to note the current progress and continued improvement in performance;
- (ii) to receive a report on the feasibility of introducing a yearly inspection regime of tenanted properties in Harlow.

21. **REVIEW OF HOUSING NEEDS & ALLOCATIONS POLICY**

The Committee received a report summarising the outcomes of a recent review of the Housing Needs & Allocations Policy.

The report and the recommendations for policy and practice changes were discussed at length.

RESOLVED to agree the amendments to the Council's Allocations Policy as detailed in paragraphs 20 to 38 of the report.

22. **FORMER TENANTS' WRITE OFFS**

The Committee received a report seeking approval to write off former tenant rent arrears in accordance with Standing Orders.

RECOMMENDED to the Policy and Resources Committee that the cases listed in Appendix 1, a total debt of £13,144.65, be written off.

23. **REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES**

None.

24. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE

APPENDIX A

WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. QUESTION FROM MR HOAD

Why is a tenant on Housing Benefit reported for fraud if they do not report any changes in their circumstances, but a landlord who can only pay the mortgage on the tenant's property through this benefit is not reported for fraud if the mortgage is not paid by the landlord?

REPLY FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Housing benefit is awarded to pay all or part of a tenants rent liability. Claimants have a legal responsibility to report any changes that may affect this award, and failure to report any changes may be considered to be fraudulent.

Once payment has been made, whether to the tenant or the landlord, it is not a matter for the Council to determine how this money is used. If a landlord is using rent received to pay a mortgage, it is not classified as benefit fraud if he or she chooses not to pay their mortgage.

2. QUESTION (1) FROM MR ROBERTS

How many of the 78% of home-seekers (5813) on the current housing register are Harlow residents?

REPLY FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Out of the total of total of 5813 home-seekers, 93.4% are resident in Harlow.

3. QUESTION (2) FROM MR ROBERTS

Given the increasing number of people on the housing register has the Council considered increasing the level of social affordable housing on all new build applications to 50%? If not, why not?

REPLY FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Councils are encouraged to set appropriate targets for affordable housing in their planning policies.

The Council regularly considers and determines an appropriate target for the amount of social housing on new build developments. Targets were last reviewed in 2007 following a rigorous review of housing need.

The Council's Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document currently states a minimum requirement of 33% of dwellings to be affordable at eligible sites. This planning guidance contributes towards ensuring resources are targeted at meeting the housing need in Harlow whilst ensuring schemes are economically viable.

The Council is currently undertaking a further planned Strategic Housing Market Assessment, and as part of this work will again formally review the target for affordable housing early next year.

4. **QUESTION FROM MS. MACKENZIE**

At the Special Forum held on 31st July 2008, the Council (and Keir Harlow Ltd), failed to satisfy leaseholders with regard to its explanation for the huge increases in service charges. The Council failed to explain how it monitors and controls costs and what it is doing to control costs in the future. Most importantly the Council has failed to offer any credit or reduction to the charges levied. The Council will be in no doubt of the extreme level of dissatisfaction expressed by leaseholders at the Forum.

The Council will also be aware that a further Forum was requested to enable further questions to be raised and answered and that leaseholders intend to take the matter further if the Council continues to fail to provide satisfaction. We, therefore, request that in order to avoid lengthy proceedings that the Council reviews its current stance with regard to service charges and also facilitates a further Special Forum within the next month.

REPLY FROM THE CHAIRMAN

As stated at the Special Forum, the Council has reviewed the level of service charges in response to concerns raised by Leaseholders and has confirmed that the level of charges is accurate. The Council has simply recharged the actual cost of services provided, which has meant that some estimated bills for 2008/09 have decreased and some have increased.

Leaseholders have raised concerns around service delivery and standards and these will be kept under review and monitored through the Leaseholder Service Improvements Team as well as the Council's performance management arrangements with Kier Harlow Ltd.

The Council will continue to work with leaseholders and respond to any concerns raised through its performance monitoring arrangements and complaints procedures. Regular updates will be provided at the forums and service improvement teams, including the next Leaseholder Forum due in November.

5. **QUESTION FROM MRS BILSLAND**

What is the Council doing to house young Harlow families with children who are renting privately in inadequate accommodation at rents they cannot afford and have been waiting years on the Council's register for Council accommodation?

REPLY FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The Council and its social landlord partners work together to provide as much affordable housing as they are able to within existing resources. However, like many other Councils, there is a shortage of affordable homes in Harlow as there are many more people on the housing register than there are properties becoming available.

Residents living in private rented accommodation may apply to join the Council's housing register and applications will be prioritised in line with the Council's allocation scheme and policies.

A review of the Council's allocations policy and scheme is being considered later at this Committee meeting, and as stated earlier a Strategic Housing Market Assessment is being undertaken to ensure that planning targets for new affordable housing are relevant. In addition, help can also be sought from the Council to consider whether there are other opportunities for affordable housing through, for example, shared ownership.

The recent Government announcements in relation to support of housing markets may provide additional resources and opportunities for the Council and its partners in their role of tackling acute housing need, and this is currently being considered.