

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE WAYTEMORE ROOM,
BISHOP'S STORTFORD ON TUESDAY,
21 JULY 2009 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Woodward (Chairman).
Councillors P Ballam, N Clark, K Darby,
A D Dodd, P Grethe, G Lawrence, G McAndrew
(substitute for Mrs D M Hone), V Shaw,
J J Taylor.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillor R L Parker

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Anne Freimanis	- Chief Executive
Claire Bennett	- Housing Strategy and Policy Officer
Linda Bevan	- Committee Secretary
Lizzie Clarke	- Community Safety Officer
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Brian Simmonds	- Head of Community Safety
Tracy Strange	- Head of Health and Housing
Paul Thomas	- Environmental Health Manager

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Cathie Anslow	}	- Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)
Gail Cambery		
Steve Henning		- Riversmead Housing Association
Michelle Locke		- South Anglia Housing Association

APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs D M Hone. It was noted that Councillor G McAndrew was substituting for Councillor D M Hone.

CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Councillor V Shaw to her first meeting of Community Scrutiny Committee and the Chief Executive who was attending for George A Robertson who was unwell.

RESOLVED ITEMSACTIONMINUTES

In relation to Minute 693 - Annual Report 2008/09 and Work Programme 2009/10 it was noted that the last line of the penultimate paragraph should read "invited to a future meeting".

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the meeting held on 7 April 2009, as now amended, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PANEL - 6 JULY 2009

Councillor K Darby, Chairman of the Health Engagement Panel (HEP) presented the Minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2009. She reminded Members of plans for a "Select Committee" style meeting in October 2009 on drugs and alcohol and that all Members of the Community Scrutiny Committee were invited to attend.

Councillor R L Parker drew attention to the latest report on health in East Herts which had been attached to the Members' Information Bulletin (MIB). He commented that it showed that residents in East Herts continued to enjoy a level of health above the national average.

ACTION

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the Health Engagement Panel meeting held on 6 July 2009 be received.

ANNUAL REPORT FROM CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAU (CAB)/EAST HERTS CITIZENS' ADVICE SERVICE (EHCAS)

Cathie Anslow and Gail Cambery gave a presentation on the work of the EHCAS over the past year. They explained how the work related to the aims of East Herts Council and the Community Strategy Action Plan. They gave details of the restructuring which had taken place because East Herts Council had notified them of a forthcoming reduction in its grant to them. Paid staff had been reduced and opening hours had been curtailed. The Final Salary Pension Scheme was under review. The EHCAS now operated in Bishop's Stortford and Hertford/Ware with an outreach facility in Sawbridgeworth Library and at Buntingford. They were pleased to report that the number of voluntary staff had remained the same and the number of clients dealt with had increased. Customer satisfaction had also remained broadly similar although one element had decreased.

They circulated some figures of clients dealt with and the topics concerned. They highlighted those issues particularly relevant to the Council, e.g. benefits, housing, debt.

They said that EHCAS had made a successful bid for Central Government funds and received funds from Buntingford Town Council.

They expressed concern about the future as staff were being stretched to their limit and if more funds were lost, the EHCAS would be opened for fewer hours. However, they concluded that they were proud that their voluntary advisors had stayed with them through the recent upheavals and more people had been helped.

ACTION

They responded to a number of questions from the Committee. They explained that they were looking for different ways to provide their service, e.g. via telephone. It was important to obtain long term funding rather than funding for short term projects in order to lease premises and offer permanent contracts to staff. They were working with a housing association on issues of fuel efficiency and debt. They had received funds from Lloyds TSB and Ware Charities.

The Chairman asked if people sought advice from the EHCAS by way of complaint or confusion or before approaching the Council or Job Centre eg on housing benefit, council tax and job seekers' allowance queries as these were the highest categories in the EHCAS statistics. Gail Cambery said one issue often led onto others and clients were signposted to the Council where appropriate. Other agencies were aware of enquiries received by the EHCAS and the Job Centre often referred its clients to them. The Chairman suggested that it was important to foster close liaison and to feedback at a more grassroots level, and seek to reduce duplication or other agencies not getting their advice right rather than to aggregate statistical and other points at higher levels. He said East Herts Council and Department of Works and Pension were keen to support the added value of EHCAS and if other agencies were not getting information to their own clients effectively 'first time' then they needed to be told and to change what they were doing.

In response to a question about whether all clients visits were appropriate, Gail Cambery explained that they did not ask clients to complete a form before their queries were dealt with because some clients did not have strong enough literacy skills.

She confirmed that the EHCAS was aware of grants offered by local charities and received a grant from Sawbridgeworth Town Council.

ACTION

She hoped to be able to provide a facility in The Priory, Ware in future.

The Committee decided that the presentation should be noted and thanked the CAB representatives for their attendance and work.

RESOLVED - that the presentation be noted and the CAB representatives be thanked for their attendance and work with East Herts residents.

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR RIVERSMEAD AND SOUTH ANGLIA HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

The Executive Member for Housing and Health submitted a report on performance on undertakings by the main housing associations, which had taken over the Council's housing stock.

These undertakings concerned nominations for tenancies, the right to buy clawback agreement and spending on aids and adaptations for tenants. Details of each housing association's performance were given. Fewer properties had been sold than expected which had given the Council less income.

Michelle Locke, for South Anglia Housing Association and Steve Henning, for Riversmead Housing Association gave presentations on the work of their organisations in 2008/09.

Michelle Locke gave details of income collection maintenance, improvements to homes and estates, community development and resident involvement. She referred to the new vehicle which had been purchased for the road show visiting the housing association's tenants to assist in a wide variety of issues.

The Chairman commented that he received comments on repairs to social housing and asked how these were monitored. Michelle Locke explained that performance

ACTION

targets were set for repairs e.g. response time and customer satisfaction was monitored.

In response to another question, she said arrears had been reduced through debt counselling and the hard work of staff on this.

She agreed to provide a written response on the following:

- Performance figures on “tenant satisfied with their views being taken into account” for 2007/08 and to comment upon last year’s figures in comparison, highlighting any plans to address differences between the figures;
- Performance figures - Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) and Local Performance Indicators (LPI’s) and to outline the performance management of the service received from Anglia Maintenance Service (AMS) on reactive maintenance requests;
- Expectations/predictions for enquiries and completions for Right to Buy sales;
- Feedback on results from the “Have Your Say” and status surveys.

Councillor N P Clark commented that it was important that the Council took the reduction in right to buy receipts into account when deciding its budget and was realistic over potential sales in the coming year.

Steve Henning referred Members to the brochure he had circulated in advance of the meeting. He said Riversmead Housing Association believed housing was the bedrock of wellbeing and affected education, health and employment. He referred to the large investment in new housing planned by Riversmead Housing Association. This would include development in the rural areas and garage sites. He said the area had an increasingly ageing population and that the housing association was aiming to develop centres of

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excellence for sheltered housing. He gave details of the housing association's work including repairs, income collection, customer satisfaction, improvements to homes and community development. He referred to the challenging times ahead with the government imposed cap on rent increases.

The Chairman asked what the housing association was doing to reduce its carbon footprint. Steve Henning said a survey of the association's operations was being undertaken eg travel plans, contractor's waste disposal. This would be published at the end of the year and some "quick win" actions would follow. The Chairman asked to be kept informed of these actions.

Councillor N P Clark asked for more detail on how the Riversmead Housing Association dealt with anti-social behaviour. Steve Henning said the association took a multi-agency approach and tried to intervene at an early stage to prevent the situation escalating until an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order) was needed.

Councillor P Grethe commented on how stressful it could be for elderly residents to be moved when sheltered housing was refurbished. Steve Henning said this was fully recognised and staff and a panel of older residents helped with this. The association was seeking to provide sheltered accommodation in towns so travelling, access to health care, etc was easier for the elderly.

In response to a question from the Chairman, Steve Henning said garage sites which would be developed for housing consisted of neglected areas where units tended to be used for general storage rather than parking vehicles. The development did not significantly displace vehicles to on-street parking.

ACTION

The Committee thanked the Housing Associations for their presentations and decided that the performance on the undertakings and of the Housing Associations in 2008/09 should be noted.

RESOLVED - that (A) performance on the Housing Associations' three remaining stock transfer undertakings be noted; and

(B) performance by Riversmead and South Anglia Housing Associations for the year 2008/09 be noted.

REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES IN COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL SERVICES - COMPLIANCE WITH CORPORATE POLICY

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report reviewing fees and charges for community and cultural services for 2009/10. Fees and charges had been assessed against corporate policy and it was shown that they complied with the Corporate Strategy on fees and charges.

A revised Appendix 'A' was circulated at the meeting.

Councillor N P Clark asked for confirmation that rises in charges at leisure centres needed the approval of Council. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to pass this request to the relevant Director.

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The Committee decided to inform the Executive that the fees and charges complied with the Council's strategy.

RESOLVED - that the Executive be informed that the fees and charges for community and cultural services as submitted in the revised Appendix 'A' circulated at the meeting comply with the fees and charges strategy.

ACTIONREVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES IN THE HEALTH AND HOUSING SERVICE - COMPLIANCE WITH CORPORATE POLICY

The Executive Members for Community Safety and Protection and Housing and Health submitted a report reviewing fees and charges for the health and housing service for 2009/10. Fees and charges had been benchmarked with other authorities and they had been set out on a cost recovery basis. Some fees were statutory but the Council had discretion on other charges.

The details of certain fees were given, e.g. surrender of unfit food, basic food hygiene courses, health and safety visits to businesses.

An increase in the fee for surrender of unfit food was discussed in detail and the Committee decided to recommend this to the Executive as detailed below.

The Committee decided not to charge for health and safety visits because of the low volume of requests for these.

Councillor G McAndrew questioned the advisability of running food hygiene courses. He suggested businesses sending staff to them could use the courses at Hertford Regional College or private courses. Officers said the courses helped to prevent food poisoning but agreed to investigate the running of them by the Council.

The Committee noted the fees and charges complied with the Council's Strategy subject to the comments now detailed.

RESOLVED - that the Executive be informed that:

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(A) the fee for issuing a certificate following surrender of food should be amended to £42 per hour or part thereof plus disposal costs;

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(B) all other fees and charges for the Health and Housing Service comply with the fees and charges strategy; and

(C) consideration should be given to discontinuing Food Hygiene courses, in the light of the subsidy given to them by the Council and the other providers available, e.g. Hertford Regional College.

REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES IN LICENSING – COMPLIANCE WITH CORPORATE POLICY

The Executive Member for Community Safety and Protection submitted a report reviewing fees and charges for the Licensing service 2009/10. Fees and charges had been benchmarked with other authorities and set out on a cost recovery basis. Some fees were statutory but the Council had discretion on a small number of charges.

Councillor P Ballam queried the fee for the sex establishment in Hertford. She said that Members had suggested it was too high in the past. This was a discretionary fee and the Head of Community Safety suggested it could be reviewed as part of the annual review of Licensing Policy.

The Committee decided to inform the Executive that the fees and charges complied with the Council's fees and charges strategy.

RESOLVED - that the Executive be informed that all discretionary fees and charges for Licensing comply with the Council's fees and charges strategy.

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MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THE HOMELESS AND HOMELESS PREVENTION STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2008-2013

The Executive Member for Housing and Health submitted a

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report on the Homeless and Homeless Prevention Strategy 2008-13.

It was reported that local authorities were required to carry out a homeless review and to develop and publish a strategy based on the review every five years. The Council's second Homeless and Homeless Prevention Strategy had been published in 2008.

It was reported that the Council and its partners had made significant progress on providing and improving services to those people who were homeless or potentially homeless. Details of progress on the action plan for the strategy were given. Three significant actions had been achieved. These included improvement in the quality and appropriateness of temporary accommodation (Action 13); halving the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010 (Action 11) and working with partners to increase homeless prevention initiatives for young people (Action 9).

Councillor G McAndrew asked how the Council had achieved the reduction in numbers in temporary accommodation. It was explained that the Council had greater powers to move people on once it took the service back "in-house" and staff had worked hard to find better solutions.

Councillor N P Clark said it was important for the Council to take into account in budget preparations any loss of income expected, if the unused hostel could not be sold because of the economic downturn.

The Committee decided to note the progress and commend the Officers as now detailed.

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RESOLVED - that the progress on the Homeless and Homeless Prevention Strategy Action Plan 2008-13 be noted and officers be commended for the very positive progress and outcomes, particularly on Actions 11 and 13.

MEMBER INVOLVEMENT WITH COMMUNITY SAFETY CONSULTATION

The Executive Member for Community Safety submitted a report on increasing Members' involvement with Community Safety Consultation and the importance of public and Members in identifying community safety priorities.

It was reported that the Community Safety Partnership was a multi-agency group which sought to address crime and disorder, measure performance and engage with communities on community safety issues. The Community Safety Plan 2008-11 set out the strategic obligations for the partnership. The Plan was revised annually and an action plan was produced. The Partnership was also obliged to consult the community annually.

The Partnership wished to explore how Members could have more involvement with consultation on community safety.

It was suggested that Members could help by:-

- identifying community groups which could participate in partnership consultation;
- identifying key community leaders/stakeholders who could participate in the consultation; and
- assisting with promoting Community Safety Partnership consultation events and opportunities.

ACTION

The Head of Community Safety explained there would be some changes to legislation to enable the Council to scrutinise the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. This would mean it was even more important for Members to be involved in community safety.

The Chairman suggested a questionnaire could be sent to all Members to initiate their involvement in community safety.

The Committee decided to support greater involvement of Members in community safety as now detailed.

RESOLVED - that (A) the need to promote greater Member influence in the annual Community Safety Partnership public consultation be supported;

(B) Members be invited to get involved in partner consultation and engagement methods by identifying community groups and key community leaders/stakeholders who could participate in consultation and assisting with promoting new Community Safety Partnership consultation events and opportunities;

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(C) Members' skills and knowledge in developing community safety priorities be used; and

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(D) a questionnaire be sent to all Members to initiate their involvement in community safety.

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COMMUNITY SCRUTINY HEALTHCHECK - FEBRUARY TO MAY 2009

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted an exception report on the performance of key indicators relating to Community Scrutiny Committee for February to May 2009.

ACTION

Members discussed the report and commented on the number of indicators where information was not yet available. The Chief Executive explained the report showed the year end position. Many targets were new and information was awaited for them. She highlighted the reduction in people in temporary accommodation, pressure on affordable housing and rising numbers of benefits' claimants. She pointed out that some unit costs had been introduced.

Councillor A Dodd asked about funding for PCSOs and the Chief Executive confirmed this compared well to other Districts in Hertfordshire. Councillor Dodd suggested PCSOs should visit primary as well as secondary schools.

Councillor N P Clark asked if unit costs would be benchmarked to other authorities. The Chief Executive said officers could look at where this was possible but there were many variables between different authorities.

The Committee decided to receive the report.

RESOLVED - that the Community Scrutiny Healthcheck February to May 2009 be received.

WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10

The Chairman submitted a report inviting the Committee to review its work programme.

The Scrutiny Officer pointed out two joint meetings of the Scrutiny Committees to consider the Council's budget on 19 January and 16 February 2010.

Councillor N P Clark asked for clarification on whether all Members of Scrutiny Committees would have full voting and debating rights at these meetings. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to provide a written answer on this.

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ACTION

The Scrutiny Officer also urged Members to attend the Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee meeting on 25 August 2009 which would consider the analysed data from the Place Survey.

She explained that 'Markets in East Herts' had been identified as a priority topic for review for the Committee and asked if the Committee wished to set up a task and finish group to consider this. Councillor N P Clark expressed an interest in being involved in this and the Scrutiny Officer undertook to seek nominations from the Group Leaders for five to seven Members. The Group would meet in September to scope the review and report back to the Community Scrutiny Committee in October for its approval.

RESOLVED - that the work programme for 2009/10 be approved and a task and finish group be established to review markets in East Herts.

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The meeting closed at 10.30 pm.