

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD
ON TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2005 AT
7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor J O Ranger (Chairman).
Councillors K A Barnes, R N Copping, G Francis,
Mrs M H Goldspink, D L E Hollebon,
G McAndrew, D E Mayes, D Richards,
T K H Robertson.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Miranda Steward	- Executive Director
Tracey Ferguson	- Head of Environmental Health
Paul Griffin	- Community Safety and Partnerships Manager
Jeff Hughes	- Head of Democratic Services
Will O'Neill	- Head of Community Development
Mary Orton	- Assistant Director (Policy and Performance)
Sheila Winterburn	- Environmental Health Manager
Bryan Thomsett	- Head of Environmental Planning

FORDHAM RESEARCH LIMITED

Jim Davies

520 APOLOGY

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor A D Dodd.

521 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised that, with the Committee's consent, he proposed to consider the item entitled "Review of Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy" before the item entitled "East Herts Community Safety Strategy 2005-2008".

The Chairman commented that whilst scrutiny differed from authority to authority, this Committee should be aware, when considering a report on any matter, of what was to be achieved through the scrutiny process. For example, the Committee should satisfy itself that best policy and advice goes forward to Council via the Executive for approval on any matter.

In relation to the review of Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, the Chairman reminded Members that this policy had been produced approximately two years ago. It was now being reviewed in the light of experience following its implementation. The Scrutiny Committee would need, he suggested, to satisfy itself that the policy was appropriate for the authority. If not, then it would be for the Committee to put forward suggested amendments to Council via the Executive for approval. Additionally, the Chairman reminded Members that the Authority's discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant (BFG) budget for 2004/05 was £50,000. If Members felt it appropriate, Council could be invited to increase this budget.

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr J Davies of Fordham Research Ltd, the consultants engaged by the Authority to undertake a stock condition survey.

RESOLVED ITEMSACTION522 MINUTES

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2004 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

523 REVIEW OF PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY

The Committee considered a report by the Executive Member for Community on the key findings of a recent Private Sector House Condition and Energy Efficiency Survey. The survey, Members noted, assessed results against the proposed Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) and Decent Home Standard.

The Committee noted that the Executive Member had also reviewed the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy with regard to those findings and highlighted the experience gained by the Authority since the policy had been introduced in July 2003.

The Executive Member invited the Scrutiny Committee's views on whether or not safe play areas for children should be included in the policy in response to a request from Council to carry out further research on this matter.

The Executive Member further invited the Committee to examine the potential to include loans and equity release schemes in the policy.

Mr J Davies of Fordham Research Ltd gave a presentation on a summary overview of the comprehensive stock condition survey carried out on behalf of the Authority.

Mr Davies outlined how the survey was undertaken and how survey data was weighted by dwelling and household variables.

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The Committee noted that, in total, it was estimated that there were 55,576 dwellings in the district, of which 940 were vacant.

Mr Davies gave a breakdown of the relative percentage of the overall stock that was owner occupied, rented from a registered social landlord, and rented from private landlords.

Mr Davies advised that the survey had studied faulty dwellings and associated repair costs. From the survey results, it had been concluded that the average cost per dwelling of urgent repairs (ie those needed to be done within the next year) was £809 - giving a total district-wide cost of £45 million. The private rented sector showed the highest urgent repair costs as did vacant and older dwellings.

The Committee noted that, under the provisions of the Housing Act 1985, a dwellinghouse was fit for human habitation unless it failed to meet one or more of eleven requirements and, as a result of that failure, was not reasonably suitable for occupation. An estimated 1,667 dwellings were deemed unfit (3% of the housing stock). This compared to a national unfitness rate of 4.2%.

Mr Davies highlighted that an important part of any stock condition survey was the measurement of energy efficiency. The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) was the Government's recommended system for home energy rating. A high score (on a scale from 1 to 120) meant a dwelling was more energy efficient. Mr Davies stated that the average SAP rating for all dwellings in the District of East Hertfordshire was estimated to be 51 (national average - 51).

Under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, the condition of dwellings was looked at taking into account the potential hazards of a dwelling in relation to any persons using it rather than a study of the fabric condition of the

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home. It was estimated that approximately 7.4% of dwellings required a mandatory response, which was above the estimated level of unfitness in the district of 3%.

Mr Davies stated that one important issue in the Stock Condition Survey was to consider to what extent households were able to fund any necessary improvements. Mr Davies outlined the main findings of the survey on this matter, highlighting that to carry out all urgent repairs required to owner occupied dwellings would cost an estimated £30.8 million. This figure could be reduced dramatically when taking into account household income and equity levels.

Mr Davies concluded that the survey for the Authority had revealed that the District's dwellings were in similar conditions and energy efficiency levels compared to those found nationally. The costs of making the necessary improvements to dwelling condition may, however, be quite prohibitive. He stated that the Council would need to consider a package of measures (including both grants and the use of owners' own finances) to achieve considerable improvements to the housing stock, particularly in order to prevent further deterioration.

In the light of Mr Davies' presentation, the Committee considered the Authority's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, particularly those issues identified by the Executive Member in the report now submitted.

The Committee considered the Executive Member's proposed amendments to the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, as now detailed.

In relation to the issue of possible discretionary DFG to provide safe play areas for disabled children, the Committee agreed that no amendments should be made to the existing policy.

The Committee supported the Executive Member's recommendations (including additional recommendations

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tabled at the meeting) subject to a number of minor amendments as now detailed.

RESOLVED - that the Executive be informed that the Committee considers the following amendments to the private sector housing assistance policy should be approved:

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(A) Decent Home Grant assistance be limited to £1000 for works within the curtilage, but not part of the dwellinghouse itself, increasing to £3000 where the household contains a vulnerable person; where this does not cover the full cost, priority will be given to works to remove hazards;

(B) 8.3.2.e of the assistance policy be amended to remove the age restriction on vulnerable households eligible for installing or extending central heating;

(C) 8.3.2.a of the assistance policy be amended to clarify that seriously defective boilers and sanitary facilities can be dealt with under the heading of disrepair;

(D) The £1000 limit be increased to £2000 for energy efficiency works in hard to heat homes, i.e. those where the construction may preclude the installation of usual cost-effective insulation measures;

(E) 8.3.2 d be amended to allow the full cost of renewing old inefficient boilers, for vulnerable households (i.e. remove the £1000 cash limit for this group);

(F) to criterion 8.3.2.c of the eligible works “providing a satisfactory internal arrangement, as part of a larger grant” be added the words “or as required to remove an unacceptable risk as assessed by the Housing Health and Safety Rating

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System”;

(G) the Decent Home Grant condition period following completion of works, relating to the repayment of grant, be extended from 8 to 10 years;

(H) applicants who have secured employment within the district as a Priority One Key Worker, may be offered an interest free loan of up to £10,000 towards their means tested contribution for renovation works to a property which has been empty for more than six months prior to purchase, for use as their home. This grant is to be repayable to the Council on the sale of the property;

(I) no amendment be made to the policy to add the provision for safe play areas to the criteria for discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants;

(J) Pension Credit be added to the income related benefits listed in paragraph 8.3.3 of the policy. Receipt of a specified benefit entitles the applicant to pay no contribution towards the cost of eligible works;

(K) to clarify when one quote may be acceptable for grant works, to terms and conditions clause 10.25 be added the words “or for works of less than £5000, where the Environmental Health Manager is satisfied that best value is achieved and obtaining more quotes is not necessary or practical in the circumstances”;

(L) to add to the outcomes, listed at 8.2 of the private sector housing assistance policy, which will be considered for discretionary disabled facilities grants: “To pay the calculated means tested contribution towards a mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant, where the applicant has made a previous contribution to a Decent Home Grant, within the same timescales and with the same provisions as

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would apply for successive mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants”, and

(M) the final sentence of 8.4 of the assistance policy, for those not eligible for Decent Home Grant, be amended to state the eligible measures for Energy Grant as “Eligible works are energy efficiency works, such as loft, tank, pipe and cavity wall insulation, and improved heating systems and controls, but not replacement boilers”.

524 EAST HERTS COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY
2005-2008

The Executive Member for Crime and Disorder submitted a report inviting the Committee to scrutinise the Authority’s draft Community Safety Strategy.

The Committee noted that the draft strategy outlined five headline priorities that the Authority would seek to address. It also noted that draft objectives and targets “sat” below those priorities.

The five headline priorities had been adopted by the Responsible Authorities Group (RAG).

The Committee noted that the five headline priorities were (in no particular order):

- Anti Social Behaviour
- Violent Crime
- Acquisitive Crime
- Feelings of Community Safety
- Drugs and Alcohol

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The Executive Member highlighted that, under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, all Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships were required to develop three year community safety strategies. These strategies were created from audits of crime and disorder that provided a picture of the major issues within a local authority's area. For the District of East Hertfordshire, the draft strategy now proposed would be the third produced by the Partnership.

The Committee noted that the crime and disorder audit had illustrated that the district had one of the lowest levels of crime in the county and in the eastern region. The most important issues highlighted by those consulted as part of the audit was anti social behaviour and community disorder as opposed to crime.

The Committee supported the five key areas identified for the Partnership to work on in the next three years.

Beneath each headline priority was a performance management area and an annual action plan. The targets within the strategy had to be signed off by the Government Office for the East of England. The targets included within the draft strategy had yet to be agreed by all parties within the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Home Office.

The Committee noted that some of the identified draft targets needed to contribute to an overall crime reduction target of 12.5% across the district. This target would enable the Authority to meet the national Public Service Agreement 1 target imposed on partnerships to reduce crime nationally by 15%. Other targets had been locally set to address specific issues raised through the audit.

The Committee further noted that the RAG would be meeting in January and February 2005 to ensure that the proposed strategy for the Authority's area was shaped in a way that most benefited its residents and could be

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delivered by all members of the Partnership.

The Committee supported the proposed five key areas for the Partnership over the next three years.

The Committee made a number of suggested amendments to the draft strategy and requested officers to consider making further amendments to:-

- take account of input from local Members on crime and disorder issues.
- clarify with members of the Partnership whether or not anti social behaviour and community disorder were, in themselves, crimes.
- highlight the effectiveness of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) and Dispersal Orders and to clarify that the use of these measures were not a first step leading towards the use of ASBO's (rather the measure to be applied would be the one deemed most effective to deal with the situation whether it be an ABC, Dispersal Order or an ASBO.
- identify more objectives based on the themes of "prevention" and "rehabilitation".
- highlight, wherever appropriate, the need to provide more police foot patrols.
- differentiate between individuals who were "ringleaders" of crime rather than groups of people behaving/enjoying themselves in public.
- highlight, particularly in relation to people's perceptions, the role the Council can play in terms of crime reduction measures, eg through the provision of street lighting.

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The Committee agreed to request the Executive to endorse the headline priorities in the draft Community Safety Strategy 2005-2008, and consider the suggested further amendments now detailed. The Committee further agreed to request officers to submit the proposed action plan associated with the Community Safety Strategy to its next meeting for consideration.

RESOLVED - that (A) the Executive be invited to endorse the headline priorities and content of the draft Community Safety Strategy 2005/2008, as now amended and to consider the suggestions for further amendments as now detailed, and

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(B) officers be requested to report back on the action plan associated with the draft Community Safety Strategy 2005/2008 to the next meeting.

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525 EAST HERTS COUNCIL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME

The Assistant Director (Policy and Performance) submitted a report on the Council's proposed Local Development Scheme (LDS).

The Committee noted that the LDS was an important document that detailed the timetable and programme for the future production of new planning documents required under the provisions of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. It was intended to submit the LDS to the Secretary of State for approval in March 2005 following ratification by the Council.

The Assistant Director invited the Committee to consider the proposed LDS and forward any comments or suggestions on its content to the Executive.

To assist the Committee in its deliberations, the Assistant Director tabled a summary document which detailed all the forward planning documents covered by the LDS. The

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LDS effectively provided a key point of reference for the local community and stakeholders to find out what documents the Council would be producing in order to plan for the future of East Herts.

The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the LDS to its next meeting (10 February 2005). Its views, if any, thereon would be reported to Special Council meeting on the 9 March via the Executive.

RESOLVED - that consideration of the proposed local development scheme for the Authority be deferred to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 10 February 2005.

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526 FORWARD PLAN FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee Chairman submitted a forward plan for the work of the Committee.

The Committee supported the proposed forward plan subject to deferral of the item relating to "Choice Based Lettings" to a future meeting.

RESOLVED - that the forward plan for Policy Development Scrutiny Committee, as set out in the appendix to the report now submitted, and as amended by the deferral of the item relating to "Choice Based Lettings" to a future meeting be approved.

The meeting closed at 10.20 pm.