

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE WAYTEMORE ROOM,
COUNCIL OFFICES, THE CAUSEWAY,
BISHOP'S STORTFORD ON TUESDAY 27
JULY 2010, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Woodward (Chairman)
Councillors S A Bull (substitute for P R
Ballam), N P Clark, K Darby, A D Dodd,
P Grethe, Mrs D Hone, G E Lawrence,
V Shaw.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors D Andrews, W Ashley,
M G Carver, L O Haysey, R L Parker,
N C Poulton and R I Taylor

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Claire Bennett	- Housing Strategy and Policy Officer
Lorraine Blackburn	- Committee Secretary
Lorna Georgiou	- Performance and Improvement Co- ordinator
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Claire Pullen	- Community Planning and Partnerships Manager
Paul Pullin	- Economic Development Manager
Mekhola Ray	- Community Projects Team Manager
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and

Community
ServicesALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Gail Cambery	- East Herts Citizens' Advice Bureau
Chris Ellison	- South Anglia Housing Association
Jeff Farrington	- East Herts Citizens' Advice Bureau
Chris Wright	- Riversmead Housing Association.

152 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors P R Ballam and J J Taylor. It was noted that Councillor S A Bull was substituting for Councillor P R Ballam.

153 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor P Grethe declared a personal interest in the matter referred to at Minute 157 - Annual Reports by Housing Associations and CAB (EHCAS), by virtue of the fact that she was a Board Member of Riversmead Housing Association.

Councillor S A Bull declared a personal interest in the matter referred to at Minute 157 - Annual Reports by Housing Associations and CAB (EHCAS) by virtue of the fact that he attended meetings with Officers of South Anglia on behalf of the Council.

154 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reminded Members that Community Scrutiny Committee had been alternating venues and that the meeting to be held on 26 October 2010 would be held in Hertford.

RESOLVED ITEMS

155 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2010 were approved as correct record, subject to the following amendments:

It was noted that Councillor M R Alexander had been in attendance at the meeting.

Minute 523 - Role and Effectiveness of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), fourth paragraph, first line delete “?”.

Minute 524 - Review of Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan, second paragraph, last line delete “this is not a sentence”.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2010, as amended, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

156 HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PANEL: MINUTES AND VERBAL UPDATE

Councillor D Hone provided a summary of what had recently taken place from a Hertfordshire County Council Health Scrutiny perspective and in relation to topics and presentations covered at East Herts Health Engagement Panel meetings on 11 February and 22 June 2010.

Updates were provided in relation to the Hertfordshire County Council’s Health Plan and the Urgent Care Centre in Bishop’s Stortford. It was noted that a Government White Paper had been circulated for consultation purposes. Issues in relation to the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow were considered, including transportation problems and the possibility of a shuttle bus from Harlow Town Centre to the Hospital.

Councillor M Wood expressed concern at the lack of momentum in relation to the Urgent Care Centre in Bishop's Stortford. Councillor R L Parker stated that there had been a number of meetings held concerning how health services were run and that these meetings were continuing.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Minutes of the Health Engagement Panel meetings held on 11 February and 22 June 2010 be received; and

(B) the update of Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee be noted.

157 ANNUAL REPORTS BY HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS AND CAB (EHCAS)

The Executive Member for Housing and Health submitted a report advising Members on the progress made following the large scale voluntary transfer of housing to Riversmead and Stort Valley Housing Associations (now South Anglia Housing Association). Subsequent progress reports had been presented to Performance Scrutiny and Community Scrutiny Committees.

It was noted that the majority of issues incorporated within the "Delivery Promises" following the transfer of stock, had ended but three were longer term and were being monitored by the Housing Service. The report now submitted, explained the nomination percentages achieved, the Right to Buy Claw-back agreement and Aids and Adaptations including the targets and spends now achieved.

The Officer gave a verbal update on the spend on aids and adaptations for 2009/10 for South Anglia as £341,123. She also clarified that the target spend figure on the table in paragraph 2.5 of the report now submitted was for each housing association and not a combined total.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark regarding whether claw back was a linear decline, the Housing Strategy

and Policy Manager explained that it was and that it was set at a 5% decline each year. The Finance Section was monitoring matters.

Councillor R L Parker thanked the two housing associations for the way they continued to operate. He referred to the fact that the Council had secured 100% nomination rights (against a target of 75%) and the positive figures in relation to spends on aids and adaptations. The number of homes sold under the Right to Buy Scheme had dropped, but this was a reflection of the national picture.

Members received the report and the progress made.

RESOLVED – that the performance of both Riversmead and South Anglia Housing Associations on the three remaining stock transfer undertakings for the year 2009/2010 be noted.

158 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VISITING SPEAKERS

The Chairman welcomed Guest Speakers, from Riversmead and South Anglia (Circle Anglia) Housing Associations and from the East Herts Citizens' Advice Bureau (EHCAS). The Chairman referred to the set of prepared questions set out in Essential Reference Paper 'B', which had been circulated to them prior to the meeting.

(A) In response to the question set out in the report now submitted concerning feedback gathered from residents and how this had improved service quality:

Summary from Riversmead HA:

Evening meetings with residents had been difficult, so a variety of methods had been adopted including focus groups and mystery shopping. Groups set out to look at what tenants wanted most, e.g. improvements to kitchens and bathrooms. Leaseholders were also consulted on their needs. A Home Improvement Officer was now in place. Chris Wright referred to and supported the need for co-regulation to give customers

the chance to influence the work of the Association.

Summary from South Anglia HA:

Chris Ellison referred to the announcement of the Tenant Services Authority and residents' self-regulation. This was welcomed by both housing associations. Key initiatives which they wanted to pursue included customer scrutiny and performance and the development of a Panel, customer engagement and making the hours more accessible. An "E-learning" initiative was about to be launched for customers covering issues such as how the housing business was managed. A "Have your Say" consultation had been launched in 2009/10 and circulated to 1500 customers seeking feedback on various services. Engagement was also sought via the Doorstep Challenge, customer satisfaction surveys and the need to bring customers into the day to day operation of the business. Initial concerns had been expressed by contractors on customer involvement, but ongoing feedback was positive on this.

In response to a query from Councillor K Darby about support given to residents to get the best out of the consultation process, both Associations agreed that training residents was important to the engagement process together with the timely provision of feedback following the consultation processes. Riversmead HA had used Mystery Shopping and customers worked with internal auditors. It was hoped that further work could be built upon volunteer initiatives. Newsletters were used and increasing use of the internet.

The Chairman stated that it was interesting that one fifth of residents had stated that their views were not taken into account. Riversmead HA suggested that this might be influenced by the age profile of respondees. A grounds maintenance procurement exercise was currently underway which had residents involved.

South Anglia referred to issues relation to repairs and the environment (i.e. grounds maintenance, parking, lighting and security) of concern to most residents.

Councillor N C Poulton referred to the positive benefits of a Neighbourhood Officer's quarterly meetings, the monthly walkabouts and the newsletter.

Summary from the CAB:

Satisfaction surveys had been carried out and in 2009-10 the CAB had achieved a 95% satisfaction rate. CAB users were least satisfied with the opening hours. Gateways Services had been introduced with 10 minute interviews to determine whether clients could be helped quickly or whether further longer appointments needed to be made. CAB Services had been introduced in Ware and Buntingford, Sawbridgeworth. Services were also shared at County level. A "Virtual Call" service had been introduced which "hunted" for a CAB adviser from all Offices. The CAB was looking to join up with other bureaux with the aim of providing a five day a week service. An audit of the CAB's policies and procedures had been carried out. They had achieved an 80% pass on the quality of advice provided.

(B) In response to a question set out in the report now submitted concerning working with LSP Partners to improve housing or life chances of East Herts residents:

Summary from Riversmead HA:

The Chief Executive of Riversmead sat on the Board of the LSP. Work had been ongoing to align community engagement work with the priorities set by the LSP to bring matters in line with the Sustainable Community Strategy and other themes. Riversmead had funded PCSOs, various initiatives were hosted with Hertfordshire Constabulary for example, the FIT project led by the Police on family intervention in Hertford. This had attracted a lot of attention. Work was ongoing with young people and diversionary activities and outreach work. Riversmead were partnered with the credit union and the CAB. A furniture recycling project was in progress. Attempts to look at more work on a mobile basis rather than static basis were being reviewed.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark regarding mentoring young people, Riversmead stated that the FIT project was one such project. Work was also being developed in relation to a Corporate Social Responsibility portfolio involving staff members becoming involved in the community.

Summary from South Anglia HA:

South Anglia had localised its Delivery Plan within East Herts in relation to Community Strategies and LAA targets. A multi-agency approach had been adopted e.g. the doorstep challenge – there had been three in East Herts last year, working with the PCT to access health and a range of services. 500 people had attended a programme of diversionary activities. Work was also undertaken to help victims of abuse. Partnership working and referrals to the CAB was ongoing. The HA continued to sponsor a PCSO who had been a great help in tackling burglary and graffiti. What match funding had been achieved was explained. The joint reception with the Council in Bishop's Stortford had been a key success in helping achieve cost savings against economic challenges.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark regarding mentoring young people, South Anglia stated that support was being given to apprenticeship schemes.

Summary from the CAB:

The CAB stated that they were involved with the LSP at the Forum level which was a useful source of projects and how the CAB could help. A lot of work occurred with the CVS who gave a lot of general advice about partnership working. The CAB was also part of the Hertfordshire County Council's CAB. Generally partnership working was very strong. A Concession Group had been established to help in providing information about debt. For the short term, a part time debt adviser had been employed. 132 people with a total debt of £1M had been helped. These people had been referred from a number

of sources including South Anglia. 223 people had gone into bankruptcy. The CAB had provided 906 people with Housing Benefit Advice to owners and occupiers. Training four volunteer advisers had been provided to help in relation to debt cases which were becoming more and more complex. Government funding had been received to allow the CAB to open up an extra day.

In response to a query from Councillor A D Dodd concerning money and credit card debt, both Riversmead HA and the CAB confirmed that feedback was provided to both the Government and other agencies.

(C) In response to a question set out in the report now submitted concerning support or projects provided for East Herts residents in relation to the economic climate in the past year.

Summary from Riversmead HA:

Riversmead HA said that 99.4% of rent had been collected and that discussions were taking place with residents on new methods to help with the payment of rent. The closure of Post Offices had not had a negative effect on the payment of rent. Fuel poverty and fuel efficiency and methods to drive fuel bills down had been addressed. The provision of affordable homes was progressing. A £45M programme was available to build affordable homes with half of that sum to be directed into the modernisation of older homes such as Beacon Court, Bircherley Green.

Summary from South Anglia HA:

South Anglia HA had developed an inclusion plan, i.e. a special services plan for shared equity owners had been developed which helped owners sell back part of their ownership to the HA. Incentive schemes to encourage residents to pay by Direct Debit. Rent Collection showed that South Anglia was in the top quartile in terms of rent collected in rural areas. The financial inclusion work had achieved a drop in the number of cases referred to Court by 49% by way

of advance advice from external agencies. Affordable housing was still being built and 42 shared ownership homes had been sold. News was awaited regarding the development of Plaw Hatch in Bishop's Stortford.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark, Riversmead advised that their percentage of voids was 23 days and South Anglia, 22 days.

(D) In response to a question set out in the report now submitted concerning (a) the changing demographics and steps to develop and sustain community cohesion; (b) what support had been given to vulnerable and disabled residents (c) work with migrant workers and residents from BMI Groups and (d) whether Equalities Impact Assessments had been carried out on the services offered.

Summary from Riversmead HA:

Much of the work undertaken had been around upgrading housing and developing flexi-care. Under-occupation was been investigated and a report was due out shortly and an action plan would be developed. Work was ongoing at maintaining the quality of life for residents in terms of aids and adaptation work and in encouraging people to release larger properties so that these could be better used. The budget of £348,468 for aids and adaptations was confirmed for this year. Procurement prices were being reviewed in an effort to drive costs down. All Riversmead Policies were Equalities Impact Assessed. The need to understand diverse needs was acknowledged.

Summary from South Anglia HA:

The Self Referral system and how this worked in relation to minor aids and adaptations was explained. An equality impact assessment had been carried out in relation to flexi-care services. Work was underway at profiling groups to establish whether the service offered fit the groups' needs. Further work on profiling was needed to match the needs of the vulnerable and the need to enhance their lifestyle. It was

anticipated that further work would be undertaken in relation to homelessness, working in partnership on this issue, review cases and to prioritise those in need of “Sanctuary Rooms” and appropriate adaptations to doors. A “Hate Crime” policy had been established. A case study involving a family in Benington where the house had fallen into disrepair was used to illustrate an example of involving the local community to achieve lasting positive benefits.

Close work was undertaken with mental health teams. The budget for aids and adaptations had been confirmed for the year. It was hoped that this could be enhanced further by other contributions. The issue of shower adaptations and delays by occupational health assessments was explained.

Summary from the CAB:

Confirmed that the majority of clients were vulnerable, including those who were elderly some with mental health problems and of the problems experienced in dealing with agencies and technologies, e.g telephones “press 1 for x, 2 for y etc”. Statistics were provided from these user groups in terms of their ages and vulnerability. The CAB had helped residents claim £300,000 of benefits. A project funded by Lloyds Bank had helped provided advice to help migrant works to understand their rights and responsibilities which had helped them integrate with the community. All services were constantly monitored to meet the needs of local people and the profile of the area.

(E) In response to a question set out in the report now submitted concerning the steps taken to reduce the “carbon footprint” of their business.

Summary from Riversmead HA:

Riversmead HA had established a carbon baseline and had set a 10% reduction which was considered achievable over the next five years. Boilers used in properties were condenser boilers which generated less CO₂ and were cheaper to run. A dedicated officer had been employed to

look at sustainable issues and these were reflected back into the Corporate Social Responsibility Plan as many journeys were made on the Association's behalf e.g. contractors movements to and fro. In terms of procurement, materials were bought locally where possible. Priority was given to those contractors who drove down their carbon footprint. Solar Panels were used where possible. Schemes which were supported higher ecological development issues. The roof space of properties was insulated where possible and this had improved matters. It was noted that it was difficult to access the roof space of some properties. All homes were built to a decent homes standard.

Summary from South Anglia HA

One of the challenges was considered to be travel and the need to get people to use bicycles. This was difficult. Customers were targeted in terms of those experiencing fuel poverty and initiatives were being run looking at the impact of usage and utility bills. Condenser boilers were used and investigations continuing on how the HA could feed into the grid system. Some older properties made it difficult to initiate retroactive fits to reduce energy loss. The benefits of using low energy bulbs were noted but the cost of replacing those bulbs was high. The possibility of procuring a bulk supply was being investigated.

Summary from the CAB:

Offices were fitted with energy saving initiatives and staff were encouraged to walk or cycle to work. Use of the telephone was encouraged to access the CAB's services.

(F) In response to a question set out in the report now submitted concerning identifying one project or activity from 2009/10 which has had the greatest positive impact or influence over the wellbeing of a community or group of individuals.

Summary from Riversmead HA:

Work at Bircherly Court, Hertford, was considered to be a genuine partnership in terms of energy and learning outcomes from a District and County Council perspective. Riversmead HA was very proud at how an old building could get a new lease of life and of the positive implications across the district of this development.

Summary from South Anglia HA:

The work undertaken in terms of estate service and the “best practice” achieved and the excellence of South Anglia’s estates. All residents’ surveys undertaken showed people were concerned about the environmental quality of the area immediately around their homes. Customer consultation centred around tighter neighbourhoods and the need to take ownership of these areas. Statistics were referred to in relation to satisfaction surveys within the district before and after community involvement in improvement projects. There were 14 schemes in East Herts which had received additional expenditure of £250,000 to spend on the environment.

Summary from the CAB:

The CAB referred to the funding which was secured to provide further services. The CAB thanked the Council for its continued funding support and stated that without it, it could not have provided the necessary infrastructure.

The Chairman thanked Mr Wright, Mr Ellison, Ms Cambery and Mr Farrington for attending and for their detailed responses to the questions raised.

RESOLVED – that the updates from Riversmead and South Anglia housing Associations and the Citizens’ Advice Bureau be received.

At 9.20 pm, the Chairman, with the consent of Members suggested a five minute recess. The meeting reconvened at 9.25 pm.

159 TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT: MARKETS IN EAST HERTS

Councillor Hone, Chairman of the task and finish group, introduced the report and thanked Members and Officers for their contributions. She said that group members were very aware of the economic importance of markets, particularly to the vitality and vibrancy of town centres as well as the benefits to the community. Members had also recognised that market traders and farmers market producers were an important part of the small business infrastructure of East Herts.

The report contained a modest budget request and whilst Members were acutely aware of the financial pressures on local government at the present time, they also felt that the investment the Council had made in markets cut across economic, social and heritage priorities.

The Economic Development Manager submitted a report presenting the key recommendations and actions arising from the Task and Finish Group's review of markets in East Herts. He asked the Committee to note an amendment to the Executive within the report's recommendations. The second bullet point in point three should read "by £4,000" (not "to £4,000"). The scope of the review, membership, intended outcomes, evidence from witnesses and site visits were set out in the report now submitted, together with a summary of the key recommendations.

Councillor W Ashley supported the work of the task and finish group and asked Officers to explain of nature of the expenditure reductions which could be achieved by a review of the market process.

The Economic Development Manager explained that a reduction of £12,000 had been achieved by replacing the waste compactor system. This reduction, when combined with reductions in support costs for markets and increased rental income as a result of monitoring pitch spreading practices, would achieve estimated total cost reductions of approximately £32,000. These figures were estimates and

were not included in the report because they have not gone through audit or health check processes.

Councillor N P Clark expressed concern that last winter, the Sawbridgeworth Farmers Market had been set up on an icy car park. This was noted.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked the Task and Finish for its excellent piece of work and for their suggested revisions to the Markets Policy.

The Committee requested that the Executive be informed that Members commended and support the recommendations contained in the report now submitted.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be informed that Community Scrutiny Committee supports and commends the revised Markets Policy and the key recommendations set out in the report now submitted.

DCCS

160 REVIEW OF DISCRETIONARY COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAMME

The Head of Community and Cultural Services submitted a report setting out proposed changes to the policy and criteria relating to the Council's discretionary grants schemes following a review of the current policy and an Equalities Impact Assessment. A summary of the recommended changes to the existing criteria was set out in the report now submitted.

Councillor N P Clark queried a proposal for Officers to waive the requirement to have one third of the total project cost at the time of application and to find 50% match funding for certain applicants. He sought clarification as to whether the applications would be signed off at Director level. The Community Planning and Partnerships Manager explained that these applications would be presented to an Officer Assessment Panel for decision, comprising Councillor L O Haysey and the Director of Customer and Community Services.

Councillor L O Haysey thanked Officers for undertaking what she considered was a substantial piece of work, so that clear processes were in place.

The Committee supported the proposed criteria and policy changes to the grant schemes as detailed in the report now submitted.

RESOLVED – that proposed criteria and policy changes to grant schemes falling within the remit of the Directorate of Customer and Community Services be approved. DCCS

At 9.45pm, the Chairman sought support from Members to approve a resolution to enable the meeting to continue beyond 10.00 pm. This was not supported.

161 CONSULTATION ON MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN SAVINGS

The Director of Customer and Support Services submitted a report regarding savings agreed last year for inclusion in the four year Medium Term Financial Plan 2010/14 and of further savings to be achieved in the context of the Emergency Budget to be considered by the Executive on 7 September 2010. Four suggestions were attached to the report now submitted in relation to service cuts in Community and Cultural Services of £38,909, Museums £5,560, Arts Development £5,000 and Funding for Care for Energy Services.

Councillor N P Clark was concerned that there was insufficient information available on which to make judgement on further savings in relation to the emergency budget. He suggested that an additional meeting of Community Scrutiny Committee be convened to consider the MTFP further.

The Director of Customer and Community Services stated that Members' advice was sought on the information as presented.

Councillor M Wood stated that there would be a lot of concern to any suggestion to cut support to museums. The Chairman noted that the Council brought in a further £6,000 for a cost of £5,560 and suggested that this be left as it stood. Councillor N C Poulton added that he was a Council representative on the Museums Partnership and that it would be a loss to residents if financial support was reduced, stating that the museums brought a great deal of benefit to the area.

Members did not support a suggestion to cut either the Museums Partnership Budget or the HCC Museums Services Budget.

Members requested that the two budgets for Museums comprising £5,560 be left in the baseline budget.

In relation to the general indicative saving across all Community and Cultural Services activities of £38,909, Councillor V Shaw pointed out that the Committee had just agreed to support some additional funding for Markets investment. She suggested that the markets budget should be protected from the current round of savings or all the hard work of the task and finish group would be wasted. This was agreed by Members.

RESOLVED – that the Committee's comments as detailed above be referred to the Executive.

DIS

At 10.00 pm, in the absence of a resolution to extend the duration of the meeting, the remaining items of business on the agenda, as now detailed, were deferred to the next meeting.

- Community Scrutiny Corporate Health Check March to May 2010;
- Work Programme

The meeting closed at 10.00 pm

Chairman

Date