

## HOUSING PANEL

3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2002 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillors Boyle, Flint, Franks, Hand, Hussain, Jenkins, McCowen, Patterson, Roden, Shaw, Stewart and Mr F Fowler (Co-opted Member)

### 17 ELECTION OF CHAIR (REF: 1)

**Resolved:** That Councillor Jenkins be elected Chair of the Panel for the current Municipal Year.

### 18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (REF: 2)

**Resolved:** An apology for absence from this meeting was received from Councillor Ahmed.

### 19 MINUTES (REF: 3.1)

**Resolved:** That the Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2002 be taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### 20 HOUSING INVESTMENT PROGRAMME STRATEGY (REF: 6)

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) reminded members of the favourable assessment given by the Government Office to the current year's Housing Strategy and Housing Revenue Account Business Plan which had been rated 'well above average'.

He circulated a working draft of the Strategy for 2002- 2005 for comment.

He reported on the issues and priorities proposed to be featured in the Housing Investment Programme Strategy 2002 – 2005, particularly the emphasis placed on the new corporate objectives and the 2010 vision, and the contribution that Housing would make to achieve those goals.

He outlined the forthcoming process whereby the Executive, at its meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2002 would be recommended to approve delegated authority to the Director of Housing & Social Services in consultation with the portfolio holder for Housing & Welfare Rights for the submission of the draft Housing Investment Programme bid and Housing Strategy Statement and accompanying documents to meet the Government's deadline of the 31<sup>st</sup> July. It was intended that the views of the Housing Panel would be reported verbally to the Executive on 8<sup>th</sup> July.

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) also submitted the following draft documents to be considered in conjunction with the Strategy:

- i) Developing a Homelessness Strategy for Luton; and
- ii) Developing a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Strategy.

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) also tabled for information an extract from the draft Best Value Review Report of Landlord Services which related to the Repairs Service and which would be drawn upon within the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

The Panel made the following comments :

#### Housing Strategy 2002 – 2005

Members expressed concern that the General and Black Minority Needs Survey 1999/2000 showed demand rising over the following 5 years to 9255, over half of which would be looking to the Council for help. Comment was made on the need for Government assistance to meet the generally increasing social housing demands and for the Strategy to include projections in respect of housing demand, with a realistic estimate of what the Council was able to supply and also highlighting the

shortage of land. The Strategy also needed to highlight the social consequences of failing to adequately address this short fall.

Members discussed the need to ensure the provision of affordable social housing both inside and outside the Borough boundaries and for the housing shortages being faced in Luton to feature in County Structure Plan considerations.

It was felt that the statement relating to Crime and Disorder could be expanded on the grounds that the Council should work towards a freer exchange of information with the Police Authority on appropriate housing issues providing this did not contravene the Data Protection Act. It was agreed that this matter would be referred to the Head of Housing (Landlord Services).

In relation to the development of employees, Members discussed the need for staff to adopt a minimum standard of service whereby employees took a more proactive and joined up approach in providing Council services. The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) advised that staff were already expected to assume this role but commented that this issue might be more appropriately considered in conjunction with the Landlord Services Best Value Review.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the Action Plan for 2002-05. This document was a new approach that identified the key activities for the ensuing 3-year period. This was a "live" document, that would continually be updated as and when revised data was received.

It was subsequently agreed that the section relating to Tenant Participation should be redrafted to provide greater clarity in respect of the actions proposed for 2003/04 (ref p29). In addition the section regarding the Regional Housing Strategy (ref p27) should be reworded to more accurately reflect the aspirations detailed under "Out of Borough Development" concerning establishing contact with neighbouring authorities in order progress discussions about joint development outside the Borough boundaries.

#### Developing A Homelessness Strategy for Luton

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) reported that this Strategy was not necessary for the HIP process however, it was being submitted to the Panel as a basis for discussion and would, in due course, be used to consult with stakeholders

He reported that the thrust of the Homelessness Strategy was to identify alternatives to Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The number of homeless was expected to increase whilst conversely housing availability was likely to diminish.

Members felt that there was a need to highlight within the Strategy that there was an issue in relation to homeless people where the Council had no statutory duty to provide housing.

#### Developing A Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Strategy

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) reported that this Strategy was also not necessary for the HIP process however, it too was being submitted to the Panel as a basis for discussion and would, in due course, be used to consult with stakeholders.

In relation to data sources the Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) agreed to obtain data from Housing Association partners and RSLs regarding the ethnicity of their tenant population.

With regard to Interpretation and Translation services Members noted the high demand for interpreting and translation from Housing and comment was made that should the issue of an overburdened service be raised as a result of the Best Value Review then an appropriate solution would need to be identified. This could mean the subsequent employment of an additional member of staff if necessary.

In respect of Older Persons (p19) the Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) agreed to review the wording in the commentary relating to providing housing near to relatives.

**Resolved:** That the issues and priorities proposed to be featured in the Housing Investment Programme Strategy outlined in the report of the Director of Housing and Social Services together with the views detailed above be commended to the Executive.

**21. IMPACT OF DEREGULATION OF THE HOUSE RENOVATION GRANTS SYSTEM (REF: 7)**

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) submitted a report concerning the impact of deregulation of House Renovation Grants System in respect of which he sought comments in order to report these to the Executive on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2002.

Members were informed of the need for the Council to have a published policy on renovation grants in place to be able to take advantage of the de-regulation. Appendix A of the report comprised the current policy decisions of the Council in relation to the grants system, which had been drawn from the various decisions of the Council over the years. The Policy would need to be endorsed by the Council, published and would be subject to consultation. Consultation would follow as part of the best value review of Private Sector Housing, which was about to commence.

The new regulatory framework would offer the opportunity to develop low cost loans and /or equity release schemes to enable owner-occupiers to fund repairs and renovations to their homes. The development of proposals within the framework would be the subject of a more detailed report later in the year or in early 2003, with a clearer exposition of any financial commitment and implications.

With regard to Renovation Grants the Panel discussed the policy decision confirmed by the Executive at minute EX/601/01 that such grants were confined to the Housing Plus area for the purpose of remedying unfitness or serious disrepair. Members were reminded that the Housing Plus Area comprised the older central part of Town (essentially Biscot, Dallow and part of High Town wards), which had been shown by the Council's Private Sector House Condition Survey 2000 to contain both the highest levels of disrepair and unfitness, together with the highest levels of social deprivation. In order to prevent further deterioration in the housing stock the Council, therefore targeted its resources to this area. A discussion ensued whereupon some Members expressed an opinion that the provision of grants should be based on need and not necessarily on geographical location. Moreover, the Panel expressed a desire to see the benefits coming from such a policy and whether the geographical method was the best approach.

The Head of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) advised that this issue would be addressed within the Best Value Review of the Grants System which was about to commence.

Resolved: (i) That the Renovations Grant Policy Statement be endorsed to the Executive; and

(ii) That the Executive note the issue raised by the Panel over the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the current policy whereby Renovation Grants are only made in respect of properties within the Housing Plus Area. .

**(Note: The meeting ended at 8.15 p.m.)**