

**HOUSING SUB COMMITTEE  
11 MAY 1999**

Present: Councillors Barnard, Harrison, Miss Haydon, Mrs Hirst, Mrs Pile,  
Ryan, Mrs Shillcock, Worrall and Wheaton

**1. Election of Chairman**

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Harrison be elected Chairman of the Sub-Committee.

**2. Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Mrs Pile be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Sub-Committee.

**3. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Sub Committee held on 2 March 1998 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**4. Management of Rent Arrears (Item 1)**

The Sub-Committee considered a report arising from a number of recommendations made by the Council's External Auditors in the annual management letter. Two recommendations related to the collection of housing rents. These were that members should monitor the progress being made during 1999/00 to improve the collection of housing rents and in particular the long term debts due from former tenants.

Various statistics were used to illustrate the performance in rent collection making comparisons with the collection of Council tax and National Non-Domestic Rate (formerly business rates). The auditors recognised that the authority had put in place measures to improve the rate of collection from current tenants but considered that attention needed to be given to various issues associated with the recovery of long term arrears from former tenants.

The Sub-Committee noted, that, whilst the officers were not complacent, the auditors criticisms were considered to be unfair as they did not take account of the prevailing circumstances during the year, in particular, the fact that the statistics referred to did not compare like with like when addressing former tenants' debts. The officers explained the basis on which debts were adjudged to be unrecoverable and were therefore written-off and advised the Sub-Committee that, during the year in question, less of these debts had been written-off than would normally have been the case. Hence the statistics appeared less favourable than was actually the case. Moreover, it was noted that "Introductory Tenancies" had provided a means by which prompt action could be taken against new tenants who failed to pay their rent.

Although it recognised that the courts tended to take a sympathetic line with debtors in Council-owned property because of their circumstances, the Sub-Committee agreed that the Council should continue to take a tough stance against debtors. It was stressed that the greatest concern was to pursue those who “won’t pay” rather than those who “can’t pay” as the Sub-Committee recognised the need to protect the vast majority of its tenants from extra costs arising from the need to make good the revenue shortfall caused by the debtors, whilst having regard to genuine cases of hardship..

**RESOLVED** that

- i Members reject as flawed the criticisms of the level of rent arrears made by the External Auditors;
- ii Performance continue to be monitored carefully and recommendations for further improving collection of current and outstanding arrears be presented to future meetings of the Sub-Committee for consideration;
- iii The success of “Introductory Tenancies” in tackling breaches of tenancy agreements be noted;
- iv The Borough Council’s tough approach to the management of rent arrears be endorsed and the Sub-Committee’s appreciation for the work that this entails be conveyed to staff; and,
- v The report be referred for information to the next meeting of the Audit and Performance Review Committee.

**5. Bay House – Flat Management Issues (Item 2)**

The Sub-Committee considered a report in relation to concerns raised by tenants regarding conditions at Bay House caused by anti-social behaviour and lifestyles of a minority of tenants which contributed to the discomfort of other residents and the general difficulties of managing the property. It was noted that there were other examples of these concerns in other flatted accommodation in the Borough which needed further consideration.

The report presented the results of a survey of tenants seeking their views about the accommodation and the general environment at Bay House. The officers reported that, in view of the concerns, more stringent procedures had been introduced, ensuring that the property was visited on a more regular basis and that any resident lodging a complaint was contacted immediately. In addition, the part-time caretaker acted swiftly to address problems.

The Sub-Committee, whilst noting that there were issues regarding sustainable communities and the Council’s allocations policy to be addressed in the future, the most important step would be to ensure that action was taken to secure the property and, as far as possible prevent non-residents gaining access as many of the problems appeared to stem from people other than the residents. Thereafter other security measures such as surveillance of the property and its car park would be considered.

It was recognised that the majority of residents were good tenants and noted that some had given an indication that they were proposing to establish a tenants' association.

**RESOLVED that**

- i The current higher level of housing management activity be maintained at Bay House to ensure a prompt response to incidents in the block;
- ii A Package of improvements at Bay House including door entry upgrade and other appropriate measures be presented to the Social Services and Housing Committee for approval out of Capital Programme.
- iii Further work be commissioned and reports prepared on the longer term implications for housing management to successfully manage flatted accommodation across the Borough.

**6. Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions - Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation – England: Consultation Paper (Item 3)**

The Sub-Committee considered a report seeking its approval to a response to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Consultation Paper on the Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation.

The officers answered a number of questions arising from the report, in particular indicating that any fee associated with the licensing function was likely to be whatever constituted a reasonable sum to cover the actual cost of the work.

The Sub-Committee stressed that it was important that any new legislation should not discourage people from providing vitally needed accommodation or drive the business underground which could lead to more serious problems. There was also a hope that some clarity might emerge in the definition of what constituted a house in multiple occupation, given the confusing nature of existing legislation and case law.

It was agreed that a copy of the letter sent to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions would be circulated to each Member of the Sub-Committee.

**RESOLVED that**

- i The principle of a self-funding licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation be supported.
- ii The Director of Public and Environmental Services, in consultation with the Director of Social Services and Housing and the Chairman, submit a response to the consultation document having regard to local circumstances, the Borough Council's housing policies and professional experience.

**7. Information Items**

The Sub Committee noted the following items submitted for information only on which the officers answered a number of questions:

- Best Value in Housing Framework – Forward Planning (Item 4)

- Supporting People (Item 5)
- Buying-Back Ex-Council Flats and Houses – Financial Incentive Scheme (Item 6)
- Housing Major Repairs & Improvement Programme (Item 7)
- Single Allocation to Local Housing Authorities for Capital Investment in Housing (Item 8)
- Social Housing Programme – Position Statement (Item 9)
- Housing Services Management Information 1998/99 (Item 10)

Arising on item 7, it was noted that, in view of British Gas Transco's failure to complete their work on time, a number of the Council's contracts could not be completed on schedule. It was therefore agreed that a letter would be written to the company expressing the Council's concern in the strongest possible terms.

#### 8. **Exclusion of the Public and Press**

**RESOLVED** that pursuant to Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, members of the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following Items which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information under the following categories of Schedule 12A of that Act:

- |     |   |           |
|-----|---|-----------|
| (3) | Information Relating to Occupiers or Former Occupiers of Council Property                                     | (Item 12) |
| (7) | Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (other than the authority) | (Item 11) |

#### 9. **Request for Local Authority Social Housing Grant (Item 11)**

The Sub-Committee considered a report seeking approval to the grant of an allocation from the Local Authority Social Housing Grant budget 1999/2000 to assist with the funding of the purchase and repair of a block of 12 flats.

In response to a question, the Sub-Committee was advised that the property was understood to be available with vacant possession but that this would be checked.

**RESOLVED** that an allocation of £527,457 (+/-5%) be approved from the 1999/00 Local Authority Social Housing Grant budget to assist with funding the purchase and repair of an existing block of 12 two-bedroomed flats to be offered to applicants on the Housing Register or existing Council tenants.

#### 10. **Information Item**

The Sub Committee noted the following item submitted for information only:

- Possession Proceedings (Item 12)

The meeting commenced at 7.30pm and concluded at 9.45pm

**CHAIRMAN**

