

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)**5 DECEMBER 2005**

Chair: * Councillor Blann

Councillors:	* Arnold	Miles
	* Knowles	* John Nickolay (1)
	* Lavingia	* Anne Whitehead

* Denotes Member present
(1) Denote category of Reserve Member

[Note: Councillor O'Dell also attended this meeting to speak on the item indicated at Minute 211 below].

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS - NIL**PART II - MINUTES**203. **Attendance by Reserve Members:**

RESOLVED: To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Member:

<u>Ordinary Member</u>	<u>Reserve Member</u>
Councillor Seymour	Councillor John Nickolay

204. **Declarations of Interest:**

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

<u>Member</u>	<u>Nature of Interest</u>
Councillor Blann	Declared an interest in that he was secretary of an organisation with a concessionary let of a community hall.

205. **Arrangement of Agenda:**

RESOLVED: That (1) agenda item 9 be considered after item 7 and before item 8;

(2) all items be considered with the press and public present.

206. **Minutes:**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2005 be deferred until the next ordinary meeting of the Sub-Committee.

207. **Public Questions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 8.

208. **Petitions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 9.

209. **Deputations:**

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were received at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 10.

210. **Stanmore Multi-Storey Car Park: Reference from the Overview and Scrutiny meeting held on 22 November 2005:**

Further to the reference from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 22 November 2005, consideration of which had been deferred from the Sub-Committee's meeting on 29 November 2005 to this meeting, the Executive Director (Urban Living) tabled a document which included a draft response to issues that had been raised at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, as well as additional information

compiled at the request of a Member. He proposed to present a detailed chronology of events dating back to the 1990s at the Sub-Committee's next meeting on 9 March 2006. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would also receive an update on his research at its 30 January 2006 meeting.

In response to questions posed by Members, the Executive Director (Urban Living) stated that there were two reasons for which a Section 106 Agreement payment made to the Council had been subsequently repaid:

1. When the costs of this refurbishment had been weighed against the future lifespan of the car park structure itself, it had not represented good business sense to use the Section 106 monies to refurbish the existing structure, yet the terms of the Agreement required the funds to be used solely for this structure;
2. The Section 106 Agreement had required work to commence on the car park within 5 years of the start of work on the Sainsbury's store; this period had now elapsed.

RESOLVED: That (1) the reports be noted; and

(2) a report, including an outline of the history and concerns surrounding parking in Stanmore, be presented at the next meeting of the Sub-Committee to be held on 9 March 2006.

211. **Attendance by the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Development and Housing:**

Members were invited to pose questions to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Development and Housing, who was in attendance at the meeting.

- 1) Has the lack of an Executive Director, the numerous vacancies as a result of the Middle Management Review (MMR), and the loss of the Director of Strategy had an effect on the services in your portfolio?

The Portfolio Holder informed the Sub-Committee that, despite some dramatic changes across the Council, there had also been significant improvements, including:

- The Building Control Department was recognised as one of the best in London
- The development of the Local Development Framework was ongoing, and key deadlines had already been met
- The Housing Options Appraisal had been completed and was about to be signed off by the Leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups
- Harrow had won an E-Government excellence award
- 98% of rent had been collected
- The number of families housed in Bed and Breakfasts had been reduced
- A Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategy had been introduced

Responding to questions from Members, the Portfolio Holder stated that the whole of London had experienced difficulties in recruiting Planning Officers, and that Harrow would consider a range of measures to fill current vacancies. He stressed that these vacancies would not impact negatively on services as there was now a new Director of Strategy, and steps had already been taken to recruit a permanent Director of Corporate Property.

- 2) Are you content with the level of Planning Enforcement?

The Portfolio Holder informed the Sub-Committee that, at the time of the meeting, there was one Enforcement Manager who worked two days per week, and six and a half full-time Planning Enforcement Officers. The Council was attempting to recruit staff to fill further vacancies, and this recruitment exercise would have a positive impact on the delivery of services.

In response to questions posed by Members, the Portfolio Holder informed the Sub-Committee that the legal processes of enforcement were long and cumbersome, and that officers were dealing effectively with their caseloads.

- 3) Are you confident that we have sufficient measures in place to achieve the Decent Home Standard by 2010?

The Portfolio Holder informed the Sub-Committee that Harrow had made good progress in meeting the Decent Home Standard by 31 March 2010. It was also

noted that the Decent Home Standard had been determined by Harrow, and set higher targets than those set by Central Government. The process of recruiting partner contractors had already begun. One such project had started work in October 2005, while the remainder of projects would commence in September and October 2006.

4) Are there any significant areas where you see an overspend in the year 2005/6?

The Portfolio Holder stated that Urban Living was expected to achieve the agreed outturn by March 2006. Although there had been concerns expressed about the Utility Expenditure Budget, the Portfolio Holder stated that this would be contained within the existing departmental budgets.

212. **Your Home, Your Needs Best Value Review Update:**

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Corporate Property, which provided an update on progress against key recommendations highlighted by the Audit Commission in their inspection of the Housing Service in November 2003. The officer present noted that recommendations pertaining to ALMO were no longer applicable as Harrow had chosen to disband ALMO.

The following key areas of improvement were identified:

- A Black and Minority Ethnic housing strategy had been introduced
- Performance Indicator targets had now been set for the top quartile
- A review had been conducted into leaseholders
- Contact information had been improved and a handbook produced
- Good progress had been made on tenant arrears

The officer stated that there was still work to be done on the Tenant Compact, which would incorporate the outcome of the Housing Options Appraisal, while staffing issues had caused the launch of the decoration voucher scheme to be postponed until March 2006. The decision not to opt for ALMO had also called for a review of the current staffing structure.

Responding to questions from Members, the officer stated that since September 2005, some tenancy checks had been completed, but that, as yet, there was no information available regarding feedback; she agreed, however, to provide Members with information as it became available. It was explained that the main purpose of the tenancy checks was to ensure that properties were not being sub-let or overcrowded by their official tenants. In response to concerns raised by a Member, officers acknowledged that the performance of the community hall care-taking staff had been unsatisfactory, but stated that steps had been taken to make sure that, in the future, staff would be present to open halls at the times booked.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

213. **Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy - Update:**

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Corporate Property, which outlined progress made following the introduction of the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. An officer provided Members with a background to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, explaining that the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 had removed many of the provisions governing the way authorities carried out private sector housing renewal, and at the same time had given them wider powers to provide assistance to repair and improve private sector housing. The Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy was a requirement of the Regulatory Reform Order, and had been adopted by Cabinet on 15 July 2003.

The officer informed the Sub-Committee that the largest number of grants awarded in 2005/06 were Home Safety Grants, which provided sums of up to £1000 for home security measures. The Sub-Committee was informed that a review of the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy would be conducted on the basis of the results of the Private Sector Stock Condition Survey and the Housing Needs Survey, once these were completed in mid 2006.

Responding to questions from Members, the officer explained that under the Safeshome Project, the Police informed the Council of individuals who had been victims of multiple crimes. Community groups had been approached to determine whether minority ethnic groups could be better incorporated into the project. The officer noted that elderly women were more likely to be the victims of crime, and that, as such, this group were awarded a large number of the grants. At the request of a Member, the officer agreed

to provide the Sub-Committee with a breakdown indicating the gender of grants recipients.

The officer informed the Sub-Committee that there were around eighty referrals for Disability Facilities Grants pending at the time of the meeting. As a result of staffing problems since December 2004, together with the length of the process itself, which involved the premises being visited by both an Occupational Therapist and Surveyor, there had been some difficulties in dealing with referrals quickly. Now that there was a full complement of staff, however, the officer advised that this situation would improve.

RESOLVED: That (1) the report be noted;

(2) an information item on the proposed amendments to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy be presented to the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Sub-Committee at its September 2006 meeting;

(3) the amended Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, upon its completion, be presented at a future meeting of the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

(Note: The meeting having commenced at 7.32 pm, closed at 8.56 pm)

(Signed) COUNCILLOR ALAN BLANN
Chair