

**ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY
SUB-COMMITTEE**
17 DECEMBER 2003

Chair: * Councillor Blann

 Councillors: * Billson (2)
 * Ismail (1)
 * Mrs Kinneer

 * Lavingia
 * Miles
 * John Nickolay (3)

 * Denotes Member present
 (1), (2) and (3) Denote category of Reserve Member

PART I – RECOMMENDATIONS - NIL
PART II - MINUTES
62. Attendance by Reserve Members:
RESOLVED: To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Members:

Ordinary Member

 Councillor Lent
 Councillor Janet Mote
 Councillor Seymour

Reserve Member

 Councillor Ismail
 Councillor John Nickolay
 Councillor Billson

63. Declarations of Interest:
RESOLVED: To note that there were no declarations of interests made by Members in relation to the business transacted at this meeting.

64. Arrangement of Agenda:
RESOLVED: (1) That all items be considered with the press and public present;

(2) That 'Any Other Urgent Business' be added to the agenda.

65. Minutes:
RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 October 2003, having been circulated, be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

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

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

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

69. Private Sector Housing Renewal Grants Policy:

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Chief Environmental Health Officer which outlined grants and loans available to homeowners and tenants.

 Officers informed the meeting that the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 had removed many of the detailed provisions that governed the way authorities carried out private sector housing renewal. This meant that local authorities now had wider powers to provide assistance to repair and improve private sector homes. As a result, Harrow has developed its own Private Sector Housing Renewal Grant Policy, which was approved by Cabinet on 15th July 2003 and had been widely published.

Those who had already applied for grants would be dealt with under the old rules while

only new applicants would be assessed under the new policy. Therefore, Officers proposed that they would report back to the Sub-Committee in a year's time, when a number of applicants would have been through the new system.

The Private Sector Housing Renewal Grant Policy was designed to achieve good quality, secure and affordable housing. The report listed the priorities for provision of grant aid in order of importance. The top priority was the provision of mandatory disabled facilities grants to those who qualify.

Officers explained that Home Repair Grants were available for minor repairs of up to £5,000 and was non-repayable if the occupant did not move. The equity release scheme was designed so that it was acceptable to all of the Muslim community and was an essential supplement that would lever in private sector money.

The Housing Renewal Assistance Grant was available to enable a dwelling to be made fit for habitation and was repayable upon sale of the property. There was £1 million available for these grants and this money would begin to be recycled over a 6/7 year period as homes were sold and grants repaid. Home Safety Grants was targeted at the victims of domestic violence or to help vulnerable people prevent burglaries. Officers were currently attempting to arrange a direct referral scheme with the Police.

Officers explained that nomination rights to properties could be granted to the Council as part of the conditions of the Empty Properties Grants and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Grants. Disabled Facilities Grants operated under rules set by central government, and the amount of the grant was repayable upon disposal of the property.

The policy would be reviewed in the future and the effectiveness of the strategy would be assessed. The policy had a direct effect on CPA and Best Value indicators and any reduction in the budget would have a knock on effect.

In response to a question from a Member, officers explained that disabled applicants for grants could be referred by organisations such as Age Concern, although the majority were direct applications.

Following questions regarding staffing levels, officers commented that although it had previously been a problem, staffing was now at an adequate level, although failure to successfully retain staff could lead to difficulties. In response to further questions, officers estimated that 10p in every £1 of grant money was spent on delivery, which was relatively cheap.

Officers explained that while the use of loans and grants did not directly provide properties with cheaper rent, it did increase the volume of stock available. Officers commented that they tried to get as many dilapidated homes back into use, such as disused flats above shops. Several of the dilapidated properties around Harrow were owned as part of property portfolios, with one individual owning up to 25 dilapidated properties. Officers were investigating the use of CPO's (Compulsory Purchase Orders), but these took a long time to implement. However, overall the empty homes strategy had been very successful, with 639 homes back in use since 1997.

RESOLVED: That (1) the Private Sector Housing Renewal Grant Policy and the contents of the report be noted;

(2) a further report be submitted to the Sub-Committee in one year's time.

70. **Arms Length Management Organisation for Management of Council Housing Stock:**

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Executive Director, Urban Living which had originally been submitted to Cabinet in November, updating the meeting on the development of the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO).

The foundations for the creation of ALMO's was laid in 2000 when the Government introduced the Decent Homes standard. This introduced a basic level of amenity all homes were expected to reach by 2008. In response, the majority of local authorities appraised their situation and assessed the condition of their housing stock. Harrow were aware of their stock condition following a survey in 1995, indicating that their stock was in good order, but there was a funding gap for improving their condition. Officers identified that the majority of the funding gap was on the Rayners Lane Estate. Following consideration by Cabinet, the Rayners Lane Estate was transferred to Warden Housing, while the rest of the housing stock would be transferred to the ALMO. Officers confirmed that the ALMO would act as a private company, owned by the local authority. The scheme had received a number of approvals from Cabinet and work had

begun on creating the ALMO.

The attraction of the ALMO was that it could generate funds for the improvement of the housing stock. If the ALMO received a two star rating from inspectors the Council would receive funds for improving the housing stock. The authority had a bid for £12 million approved, and would receive £5 million over the next two years to improve the condition of the housing stock to help reach the decent homes standard by 2008.

The original go live date was 1 April 2004, although that date was now currently under review. Officers had decided that it was important to carry out a 100% postal survey to ensure that the scheme had the full support of residents, an element which would be key to gaining the two star rating. A telephone survey was currently being undertaken, to ensure that tenants understood the implications of the ALMO.

In response to a question from a Member, Officers explained that some early surveys had received relatively low response rates as little information was then available. There was evidence that 'Homing In' was read by an estimated 70% of tenants, and this had carried information on the ALMO. There had been meetings to inform residents, but turnout had been low. There was an independent tenants' advisor whose contact details had been distributed to tenants, who could give impartial advice. In response to further questions, officers commented that they had come across little opposition yet, although apathy from residents was a problem.

During discussion of the potential improvements to Council stock, Officers commented they were aware of the concerns of leaseholders over the potential to be saddled with large bills for works. Consultation would take place with leaseholders to try and resolve this.

In response to further questions, Officers confirmed that they were happy with the agreements made so far, as they acted as a statement of intent for a long-term relationship between the Council and the ALMO. However, some of the detail of the delegations was still to be resolved. One area still for determination was the management of the Housing Revenue Account. Rents would be collected by the ALMO, but it was still to be decided whether the Council would retain management of the account, with the associated staff costs, or whether its management would be delegated to the ALMO.

RESOLVED: That (1) a report on the ALMO be submitted to the Sub-Committee three months after the 'go live' date;

(2) the report be noted.

71. **Briefing Note on the Council's Relationship with Local Transport Providers:**

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Head of Professional Services (Urban Living) which outlined the influence the Council had over local transport providers.

Officers explained that there were three main areas of influence with transport providers: formal/statutory consultation; liaison meetings; and informal officer-level contacts. Statutory and formal consultation worked both ways, with the Council required to consult transport providers on certain issues. Liaison meetings included Members, Officers, user groups and senior representatives of transport providers. These meetings were very credible and had an important influence. Officers explained that the authority had no direct control over transport providers, but did have influence. Results were achieved through dialogue and consultation.

A Member commented that the report did not recognise the effective work of Harrow Public Transport Users Association (HPTUA) and its chairman. Members also noted how important it was that Officers continued to maintain successful relationships with transport providers.

Members noted that it often felt as if they were just lobbying transport providers and that TfL often had an alternative agenda. Members suggested that they would like boroughs to have more influence.

RESOLVED That (1) the important work carried out by the liaison meetings be noted; and

(2) the report be noted.

72. **Review of Waste Strategy (1999 - 2005):**

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Area Director (Urban Living) which updated Members on the review of the Council's Waste Management Strategy and

Recycling Plan.

Officers explained the main elements of the Council's Waste Management Strategy and Recycling Plan, which had begun in 1999. The report outlined the progress made in attaining the targets set out in the plan, such as the expansion of the Green Box scheme.

Officers highlighted that the 1999 Strategy had not set any targets for recycling at the Civic Amenity Site as at the time, emphasis for recycling had been on kerbside collections. However, a lot of work has been done at the Civic Amenity Site and it was hoped that at least 50% of the waste delivered to the site could be diverted from landfill, through increased separation of waste on-site and additional processing of the residue, off-site.

In discussion of the Sub-Committee's Review of Waste Management Strategy, an Officer commented that the final version of the Mayor's Waste Management Strategy still had not been published and anticipated aspects of the strategy were expected to be altered.

Officers informed the meeting that the new concept of Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) had been introduced, allowing landfill allowances to be traded between authorities. The Chair and Officers agreed that this would make a big difference to waste management policy. It was explained that the Mayor's strategy document would outline what was expected of authorities, and authorities would need to respond with Implementation Plans to achieve the targets set in the Mayor's strategy. West London Waste Authority (WLWA) had already employed consultants to consult with member boroughs on a potential joint waste management strategy with a view to enabling all WLWA members to meet their statutory targets. Officers commented that investment and commitment from the boroughs would be required, as would a regard for public opinion.

The Chair suggested that it would be important for the Sub-Committee to look at the situation when more information was available. He proposed that the Portfolio Holder's attention should be brought to the fact that no sites had been identified for Waste Management Sites in the latest draft of the UDP. A Member commented that waste planning sites often suffered from a 'not in my backyard' attitude from residents, although it was a nettle that needed to be grasped.

In response to a comment from the Chair, Officers commented that several different methods had been used to ascertain why households were not participating in the Green Box scheme. He added that there were some problems with boxes disappearing. The possibility of putting barcodes on Green Boxes was to be investigated, and Officers commented that this would allow prizes to be used as incentives for recycling.

The Chair noted that the strategy had met its targets to date, but commented that the target for 2005/6 was double the present level.

RESOLVED: That (1) the Portfolio Holder be urged to take all necessary action to ensure the borough achieves its targets;

(2) the Portfolio Holder and the Chief Executive be made fully aware of the possible consequences of the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) on the borough's finances;

(3) the work done by Community Recycling Officers be recognised, but the Portfolio Holder be requested to intensify efforts to encourage participation in the Green Box scheme, to help enable the Council to meet its targets;

(4) in light of changing waste management policy, the Review of Waste Management Strategy be ongoing until the full realisation of the impact of LATS, WLWA and the borough's revised policy are known.

(Note: The meeting having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.27 pm)

(Signed) COUNCILLOR ALAN BLANN
Chair