

**REPORT OF HOUSING COMMITTEE**  
**(MEETING HELD 15 SEPTEMBER 1999)**

**1. PROVISION OF HOUSING ADVICE (REPORT A) (MINUTE NO. 28).**

The Committee has considered whether the Council should continue to provide a two-tier Housing Advice Service once the contract expires on 31 March 2000. The contract to run the Housing Aid Centre was let to Shelter on a competitively tendered basis in 1997.

The services provided by the Council's own employees include a statutory duty to provide advice and assistance to homeless households, advice to housing applicants, advice to existing Council tenants on tenancy matters and dealing with issues of harassment and illegal eviction in the private rented sector. The services provided by the Housing Aid Centre include the provision of information, advice and advocacy to members of the public on a wide range of housing related matters such as landlord and tenant issues, availability of accommodation, housing benefit and independent advice on homelessness issues. Shelter have also carried out research for the Council on specific housing issues.

As part of its efforts to achieve the savings target set by Policy and Resources Committee, various options for delivering the Housing Advice Service in the future have been investigated. Discussions have taken place with Shelter.

The options are as follows:

Option 1

Continuing with the current arrangements, requiring a competitive tendering process to be carried out later this year or an extension of the existing contract by 1 year.

Option 2

The Council could seek to let a contract for housing advice with a reduced specification which could include a requirement to use existing Council offices, computers and telephones, no requirements for research and training, a reduced requirement to provide statistical information, a reduced number of employees and reduced opening hours. This would also involve a new tendering process later this year.

Option 3

The Council could carry out a Housing Advice Service using its own employees. The additional workload could be absorbed by existing Housing Needs Officers if an additional post was created.

#### Option 4

Shelter have also proposed that if the Council provides them with a grant of £25,000, they will continue to deliver the existing service during 2000/2001. They would meet the additional costs of £55,000 from their resources and would use the year to look at alternative ways of delivering the service.

The current annual costs of the Housing Aid Contract is £80,150. If Option 1 was selected it is likely that the costs would remain at a similar level depending upon the competitiveness of the tenders received. If Option 2 was selected the service could be provided for approximately £30,000 per annum. If Option 3 or 4 were selected the service would cost approximately £25,000 per annum.

The transfer of undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations offer protection to employees where services transfer to another provider. However, after consideration, it is not believed that these regulations would apply if the work was absorbed by existing employees. Tenants, at the regular liaison meeting, could see the advantages and disadvantages of the service being provided either in-house or independently, but had no strong views as to which was preferable. They did however, feel strongly that it is an important service and that the level of service should not be reduced.

Having considered the options for providing housing advice, the Committee has agreed to select Option 3 so that the hours that the service is available can be extended and made available in all the Towns in the District. A housing advice contract will not therefore be let beyond 31 March 2000. An additional post will be created so that the housing advice role can be absorbed by the Council's Housing Service.

## **2. COUNCIL OWNED SHELTERED SCHEME FOR OLDER PEOPLE AT BARFIELDS COURT IN LYMINGTON (REPORT E) (MINUTE NO. 32).**

Barfields is a Council owned sheltered housing scheme for older people. It consists of two buildings on the same site, linked at first floor level by a corridor. The two buildings are managed as separate schemes, with their own staffing arrangements and social activities.

The development comprises mainly bedsits, with a small number of one bedroom flats. All have shared bathrooms. Because of the shared facilities, the accommodation has been difficult to let, despite extensive marketing.

Work was completed earlier in the year to convert 12 of the bedsits in the older part of the building into one-bedroom self-contained flats. Tenants have been very impressed with the work. Work is starting later this year to convert a further 12 bedsits in the newer building into one bedroom flats.

The Committee has now considered the way forward for the remainder of the two buildings. While the bedsits with shared facilities are difficult to let, there is still a demand for good quality affordable rented sheltered housing in Lymington, with 33 applicants currently on the Housing Register. There is no Council owned sheltered housing scheme in Lymington for frail older people, although there is a clear need for this type of accommodation.

From investigative appraisal work undertaken by officers and using information from the Older Persons' Housing Strategy, the committee considers that the best option for the future is to convert the two phases of the development into one sheltered housing scheme for frail older people, including the conversion of all the bedsits with shared facilities into self-contained flats.

Members received details of the financial estimates together with the total design work costs. Initial estimates suggest that the total cost of the work could be in the region of £1 million. This equates to approximately £30,000 per improved flat, which includes work to communal areas. The total design work could amount to £60,000. The design work would be phased over 2 financial years, with £17,000 being committed in 1999/2000 and £43,000 being committed in 2000/2001. The fees would be paid on a phased basis through a variation to the housing management contract and would be financed using reserves from the Housing Revenue Account.

Members were aware that tenants at Barfields have been fully consulted on the work that has taken place to date and that they are very pleased with the results. Initial consultation has taken place with tenants on the latest proposals and they support the concept of converting Barfields into one-bedroom self-contained flats. However, the tenants have asked that they be fully consulted before, during and after the design work and that their views be incorporated into the suggested report to the Housing Project Control Sub-Committee when members will be considering the design proposals.

After consideration of the details, members agreed that the Housing Management Contractor be commissioned to carry out the design work and that the budget for this work be met from reserves on the Housing Revenue Account. Members also agreed that the tenants at Barfields be consulted before, during and after the design work and that members be given the opportunity to consider the design proposals at a future meeting of the Housing Project Control Sub-Committee.

### **3. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY (REPORT F) (MINUTE NO. 33).**

The Committee has considered and approved a number of minor changes to the allocations policy to comply with the decision of the Committee on 28 June 1999. The section of the allocations policy which details the local connection requirement for village areas has been changed to ensure that allocations are made to those in housing need with the strongest local connection.

The tenants present at a liaison meeting on 31 August 1999 supported the proposed changes to the allocations policy. There were varied views on whether employment in a village should be a criteria for being eligible and on balance the tenants agreed that no change should be made to the current policy in this regard.

### **4. TENANT PARTICIPATION COMPACTS (AGREEMENTS) (REPORT H) (MINUTE NO. 35).**

The Committee received details of the Government's framework regarding tenant participation compacts as part of a Government initiative to improve local services, to increase local democracy and to strengthen and sustain local communities.

'Tenant participation compacts' are a tool to assist tenants in deciding how they wish to be involved in influencing and shaping the decisions taken by the Council in respect of their homes, in a way which meets their needs and priorities. The compact will form an integral part of the best value regime with tenants being consulted on housing issues. Housing Authorities will need to show that they have taken positive action to promote, encourage and support participation, and have given all tenants an opportunity to become involved. Members received details of the standards for the framework.

Housing Authorities' Performance on developing 'tenant participation compacts' will need to be reported annually and will be audited and inspected as part of the best value regime. The Council's performance on tenant participation will continue to be assessed as part of the annual Housing Investment programme process which decides what housing category resources will be available each year. The Tenants' and Residents' Joint Committee will need to agree a programme of work to ensure that a 'tenant participation compact' is developed by 31 March 2000. The government guidance also suggests that members should be involved in the process from the outset.

The Government has announced that a total of £12 million is being made available nationally during 2000/2002 to help implement 'Tenant Participation Compacts'. Ministers are proposing that while all authorities with over 1,000 homes should receive at least £10,000 allocations, various factors need to be taken into account.

Additional resources will be required in 2000/2001 and may be required during 1999/2000. It is anticipated that most of the costs will be met by the additional resources that the Government is making available.

The Committee has agreed that 3 members, 2 from the Conservative group and 1 from the Liberal Democrat group, be nominated to work with the Tenants' and Residents' Joint Committee on this important issue.

The tenants considered and welcomed this issue on 31 August 1999 and are looking forward to the opportunity to work with members and officers.

Cllr Mrs D Wilson  
CHAIRMAN

(ctteemtg/cttee/HC150999) report

**CONSULTATION PAPER – HOUSING TRANSFER PROGRAMME (REPORT G)  
(MINUTE NO. 34).**

The Committee has agreed that Policy and Resources Committee be recommended to approved the proposed response to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) consultation document by 15 October 1999.

Members received details on the problems which would be caused on the current timetable. Whilst the government accepts that these problems exist they also need to have a mechanism in place to manage the process, and particularly the impact on the Public Sectors Borrowing Requirement.

The Committee received details on the following DETR options for the future, and considered the proposed response to the Consultation Document:

Option 1

Continue to run an annual bidding round, but allow two years to complete transfer.

Option 2

Continue to run an annual bidding round, but not impose any time limits to complete transfer.

Option 3

Allow Councils to apply at any time and not impose any time limits to complete transfer.

The tenants are in support of the proposed response to the Consultation Document.

It is anticipated that the proposals will eventually reduce the cost of housing stock transfer if they are implemented.