

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet **Date:** 4 November 2014
Subject: Housing
Portfolio Holder: Cllr D Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy

At its meeting on 21 October 2014, the Housing Scrutiny Panel is due to review the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy, which were introduced in September 2013. The Cabinet asked the Housing Scrutiny Panel to review them after 12 months' operation.

The main issues due to be reviewed are as follows:

- The Residency Criteria for joining the Council's Housing Register, including whether or not the minimum period of residence should be increased to 5 years;
- Whether there should be any exceptions to the Residency Criteria, particularly for those in work in the District or seeking work or long-term training;
- Whether the financial thresholds for excluding applicants from the Housing Register due to their income and/or assets should be lowered and, if so, to what level;
- Whether the penalties for refusals of offers of accommodation should be strengthened;
- Increasing the incentives to encourage under-occupying Council tenants to downsize; and
- Whether Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies, currently granted for new lettings to Council properties comprising 3 bedrooms or more, should be extended to all sizes of property

I held informal discussions with Cabinet colleagues in advance of the Scrutiny Panel meeting, to help inform my initial views on the major aspects to be considered under the 12 month review. I also took into account the approach taken by six other Essex local authorities. I then made a formal Portfolio Holder Decision setting out the key issues I feel the Scrutiny Panel should consider.

I considered this essential, since it should give the Scrutiny Panel and officers direction on the general approach I feel should be taken, in an effort to prevent any unnecessary work and to assist with avoiding any recommendations being put forward to the Cabinet by the Scrutiny Panel that would not be supported.

Following the meeting of the Scrutiny Panel, the revised Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy will be drafted and sent to an external Legal Advisor for advice. Any advice given will be incorporated and a consultation exercise will then be undertaken with all interested partner agencies, including local councils, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and other Registered Providers of Housing within the District.

In the new year, the Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel will submit the Scrutiny Panel's report to the Cabinet, setting out the proposals for the revised Scheme and the outcome of the consultation.

Council House-building Programme

The Council House-building Cabinet Committee met on 13th October 2014 to consider 14 feasibility studies for potential development sites on Council-owned land (mainly difficult-to-let garage sites) in Loughton and Buckhurst Hill. As usual, all the relevant Ward Members were invited to attend and give their views on the individual sites.

The sites that the Cabinet Committee agreed at the meeting were viable for development were at: Kirby Close, Whitehills Road, Bushfields, Chequers Road (2 sites) and Ladyfields in Loughton; and at Hornbeam Close (2 sites), Bourne House, Pentlow Way and Loughton Way in Buckhurst Hill.

A decision was deferred on two further sites at Lower Alderton Hall Lane, Loughton and Hornbeam House, Buckhurst Hill - where alternative designs were requested in order to improve upon: the proposed parking, the proximity to the existing trees, arrangements for refuse collections and access by emergency vehicles.

It was agreed not to pursue one site, at Marlescroft Way, Loughton, due to it being in a flood zone. It was agreed that the future use of these garages should be considered by the Oakwood Hill Environmental Task Force, which is considering the use of garages on the estate as one of the many improvements identified (see below).

Further meetings of the Cabinet Committee are scheduled for November 2014 (where a further 8 sites will be considered for Loughton) and December 2014 (where a number of sites in Epping, Coopersale and North Weald will be considered).

Once all of the feasibility studies presented to these three meetings have been considered, the sites that have been identified for development will be arranged into development packages for future years of the Housebuilding Programme and planning permission will be sought for each of the sites over the coming year.

Further feasibility studies will also be undertaken over the next year for the remaining sites previously identified as potentially being suitable for development.

Oakwood Hill Environment Task Force

The Task Force that I set up to look at environmental improvements at the Oakwood Hill Estate, Loughton has met on two occasions so far, and has identified a number of potential improvements for the £200,000 allocated by the Council from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund and the £200,000 match-funding from the County Council, including:

- Footpath improvements
- The creation of a "public space", possibly outside of the shops including the removal of the pedestrian deterrent paving outside of the shops;
- Additional off street parking
- Improved landscaping
- Increasing the frequency of the weed-killer treatment
- Additional dog waste bins
- CCTV installation in higher risk areas
- Cleaning or replacement of the fascias and soffits of the blocks of maisonettes

- Introduction of a colour coding to the blocks on the Estate to fall in line with the Estate plans on display around the Estate
- Clearance of the culvert running through the Estate.

Essex County Council Highways attended the last meeting and, after an estate inspection, indicated that (subject to a more detailed survey) it may be possible to resurface the whole of the estate's footpaths.

Redress Schemes for Lettings Agents and Property Managers

New legislation has come into force which requires all lettings agents and property managers (with a few exceptions) to have joined a government-approved 'redress scheme' by 1 October 2014. These schemes have been set up to provide private tenants, landlords and leaseholders dealing with property managers and lettings agents in the private residential sector access to an independent organisation to deal with concerns about the service they have received. This will make it easier for tenants and landlords to complain about bad service and prevent disputes escalating.

Importantly, local authorities are the enforcing authorities and we can make a penalty charge of up to £5,000 for failure to belong to one of the three Redress Schemes that have already been set up. Local authorities are being encouraged to charge the full £5,000 penalty, but need to be aware that agents have a right of appeal on specified grounds, which includes the fact that that they were unaware of the requirement.

To make it less likely that letting agents and property managers are unaware of the requirement and that such appeal would be successful, officers are currently writing to all of the agents in the District that do not currently appear to belong to one of the three redress schemes, advising them of the requirement to sign up and informing them that we will issue a notice of intention to charge if they fail to do so.

It is my intention to recommend that the Council charges lettings agents and property managers that fail to meet the requirements the full £5,000, as recommended by the government, and I will be including this proposal within the Schedule of Housing-Related Fees and Charges for 2015/16, when it considered by the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee in November.