

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 15<sup>th</sup> December 2015

**Subject:** Housing

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor D Stellan

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**Recommending:**

**That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.**

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## **Council Housebuilding Programme – Current Position**

On 4 December, we are due to take possession of 12 converted and refurbished flats at Marden Close, Chigwell Row. The scheme has included the conversion of 20 difficult-to-let bedsits and the ground floor hall of Faversham Hall into 12 self-contained flats, to be let at social rents. I was pleased to visit the works prior to the hand-over, along with officers and the local ward member, Cllr Brian Sandler. We were all delighted with the quality of the refurbished homes that will be provided for residents of the Epping Forest District.



Phase 1 of the Housebuilding Programme continues to make progress after its delayed start. However, the contract completion date of 13 November 2015 was not achieved by the contractor, Broadway Construction Ltd, so a Certificate of Non-Completion was served on the contractor and we are now exercising our right to start deducting liquid and ascertained damages, in accordance with the terms of the contract. The contractor has indicated that they expect to complete the 23 new homes, across all 4 sites in Waltham Abbey, by April 2016.

Tenders have now been received for the construction of 51 new affordable rented homes in Burton Road, Loughton, which forms Phase 2 of the Council's Housebuilding Programme. The tenders are currently being evaluated and are to be presented to the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee in January 2016, where a decision will be made on the contractor to design and build the new homes. Works are due to start around April 2016 and will take around 20 months to complete.

Planning applications have been submitted for all 9 sites that make up Phase 3 of the Housebuilding Programme. These are located in Epping, Coopersale and North Weald. Planning permission has already been granted on three of the 9 sites, with the remaining applications being determined in December 2015.

Eight planning applications have also now been submitted for the sites in Buckhurst Hill and Ongar that make up Phase 4 of the Programme and Pellings LLP, the consultants for our Development Agent, East Thames, will shortly be submitting planning applications for a further 13 sites in Loughton that will make up Phase 5 of the Programme.

### **Tenant Satisfaction ('STAR') Survey**

We have just completed a Customer Satisfaction Survey of our Council tenants, using an independent consultant. The survey is carried out every three years using the 'STAR' system (Survey of Tenants And Residents). This anonymous postal survey was sent to a random sample of a third of our tenants (2,215), including both general needs and sheltered housing tenants (but not leaseholders).

We had a good overall response rate of 36%, which is in line with response rates achieved by many other councils, and is well in excess of the STAR target. Our consultants have produced a report on the findings, and the following satisfaction ratings were given by tenants in the following areas:

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| • Overall satisfaction with landlord services             | 87% satisfaction |
| • Quality of the home                                     | 85% satisfaction |
| • Value for money, for the level of rent charged          | 82% satisfaction |
| • Value for money of service charge                       | 73% satisfaction |
| • Listens and acts on views                               | 62% satisfaction |
| • Being kept informed of things that might affect tenants | 82% satisfaction |
| • Final outcome of enquiry                                | 77% satisfaction |
| • Repairs and maintenance overall                         | 84% satisfaction |
| • Last completed repair                                   | 87% satisfaction |
| • Neighbourhood as a place to live                        | 87% satisfaction |

The results were reported to the Housing Select Committee for consideration on 10th November 2015 and provides an up-to-date picture of tenants' satisfaction with their homes and with the housing services we provide. The feedback is being analysed to see where improvements and changes can be made. The data will also allow us to compare our performance over time and to benchmark us against other social landlords.

Tenant satisfaction surveys are no longer required by the Government to be carried, but with 6,500 tenants paying rent for housing services, I think that it is important to continue seeking our tenants' views every three years.

### **Annual Report to Tenants 2015**

Under the 'Housing Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England', published by the Homes and Communities Agency, all registered housing providers (which includes the Council) are required to produce an Annual Report for their tenants.

There are four consumer standards in the Regulatory Framework and the Annual Report sets out the ways that the Council is meeting its obligations under these standards. These are:

- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (Involving our tenants)
- Home Standard (Housing repairs and maintenance)
- Tenancy Standard (Housing applications and lettings, Setting and collecting the rents)
- Neighbourhood and Community Standard (Managing tenancies and estates, Older peoples services)

The Council is in the process of producing its 'Annual Report to Tenants 2015', which shows how the Housing Service has performed against its own targets and previous performance - including performance against the 'Tenant-Selected Indicators' (a suite of performance indicators determined by the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation). The Framework also requires the Council to publish information on complaints on an annual basis, so this is also included in the Annual Report. It also covers the objectives and key achievements of the Housing Service, and plans for the future.

The Annual Report will be sent to all Council tenants in mid-January 2016 and will be published on the Council's website. Copies of the report will also be provided to all members, and further copies will be available from the Information and Customer Relations Team at the Civic Offices.

### **Expansion of Services and Opening Hours at the Limes Centre, Chigwell**

Following the re-development of the Limes Farm Hall, Chigwell, the new Limes Centre was opened in February 2012. The Limes Centre is an important community facility on the Limes Farm Estate and includes the following services:

- A Local EFDC Office - which currently opens each morning between 9am and 12.30pm, providing a housing management service to both the Limes Farm Estate, and other parts of Chigwell and Buckhurst Hill
- Non-cash payment facilities for Housing and Council Tax (from the New Year)
- Benefits and Council Tax Advisors - available to give advice during normal office hours each Wednesday
- Debt Advice Service - provided by the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau two mornings each week
- "True Stars" Children's Centre - which operates from and within the facility, Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5pm
- NHS Health Clinic - which provides a baby clinic and a range of other services for the community
- Youth Club - provided by Red Balloon Company and supported by Community Services
- Job Centre Plus drop-in Centre - on Thursdays from 11am to 2pm
- Community Café - on Monday mornings from 9am to 11am

In addition to the above services, which provide a "multi-agency hub" for local people, the Limes Centre has a large main hall and smaller activities hall which are available for hire, for both regular bookings and one-off events, including evenings and weekends. Currently, these bookings include sports clubs such as Judo and Karate, a range of fitness and

wellbeing sessions such as Tai Chi and Yoga and many children's parties and large faith gatherings at weekends.

In order to make the best use of the Local EFDC Office's facilities, the Cabinet agreed earlier in the year that an additional part-time (18 hours) Housing Officer is appointed on an 18 month contract, to enable the opening hours of the Local EFDC Office to be extended to normal office hours, Monday to Friday. This will be supported by staff from Community Services and Finance. The Limes Centre will then be marketed across the locality as a general Council service facility.

Unfortunately, recruitment problems for the Housing Officer post have caused some delays in extending the opening hours; however, these have now been overcome and it is expected that the hours will be extended to normal office hours from 4 January 2016.

Following an initial 6-month pilot period, a report will be submitted to the Housing Select Committee to consider a review of the success or otherwise of the additional services and extended opening hours, and whether or not the additional part-time Housing Officer post should be made permanent.

### **New Repairs and Maintenance Hub – North Weald**

We need to re-locate our Housing Repairs Service from the Epping Depot to enable the proposed re-development for the St Johns Road area of Epping to proceed. Having searched for alternative vacant buildings around the district and other potential development sites to relocate to, with none found to be suitable, I am recommending to the Cabinet that a new Repairs and Maintenance Hub be constructed on a Council-owned vacant brownfield site in Blenheim Way, North Weald. I am also recommending that the new Hub should be funded by the Housing Revenue Account.

This move also creates the opportunity for the Housing Repairs Team to be co-located with the Housing Assets Team, currently based at the Civic Offices. Not only would this result in operational benefits but it would also free-up accommodation at the Civic Offices (on the ground floor, close to Reception) to assist with the Council's Accommodation Strategy.

Subject to the Cabinet agreeing my recommendations I will, of course, keep members informed with the progress of the project.

### **Gas Servicing and Breakdown Service – Outcome of Tenders**

Following a competitive tender exercise, I am recommending to the Cabinet that Gracelands CMS Ltd be appointed to undertake the programmed servicing and breakdown and emergency repairs to Council-owned gas appliances across the whole of the district for the next 10 years. The EU-compliant tender exercise was based on an assessment of both quality and price - with a 60% weighting for quality and a 40% weighting for price.

Gracelands CMS Ltd has a long track record of undertaking a variety of maintenance-related contracts for the Council, and I our current contractor for gas servicing and breakdowns. Therefore, the transition process to the new contract will be seamless from the tenants' perspective. It is also pleasing to report that Gracelands CMS Ltd is a local company, employing local labour.

### **Syrian Refugees**

There is little further to report on the position with the Council's offer to provide two Council flats this year to Syrian refugees. Although some refugees are expected to arrive in Essex before Christmas, we have been advised that they will not be accommodated in the Epping Forest District. In the meantime, no Council properties are being kept empty to accommodate refugees; they will only be made available if and when they are required.

We have recently received a letter from Richard Harrington, Minister for Syrian Refugees, confirming that funding that has now been secured through the Government's Spending Review to assist with local authority costs over the next 5 years. The Minister has also advised that 55 local authorities will be receiving Syrian refugees into their communities before Christmas and that "many more" have agreed to assist refugees in the coming months and years. The Home Office's experience so far has been that the majority of Syrian refugees have arrived in family units, including people of working age. The Minister has said that the Home Office will be working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to focus on getting refugees into work in the UK.