

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 19 February 2008

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stallan

Item: 6(g)

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted

Wickfields, Chigwell

An event to commemorate the re-opening of Wickfields Sheltered Housing Scheme, Limes Farm, Chigwell was held on 31 January 2008, to which all Members of Council and residents were invited.

The Council transferred Wickfields to Home Housing in 2006, through a small-scale stock transfer. The reason for the transfer was to enable a major improvement / conversion scheme to take place, primarily to convert all the difficult-to-let bedsits into self contained one-bedroom flats.

The scheme was officially re-opened by the Chairman of Council, who unveiled a bird table and bird bath, as a gift to the residents. The Leader of Council gave a short speech on behalf of the Council and guests were able to visit some of the converted flats.

Annual Housing Awards

Judging for the second Annual Housing Awards has taken place. There are now three awards:

- Neighbour of the Year Award
- Services to Housing Award
- Gardener of the Year (New this year)

The Judging Panel comprised Cllr John Wyatt (Asst Housing Portfolio Holder), Molly Carter (Chair, Tenants and Leaseholders Federation) and Alan Hall (Director of Housing). Nominations were received for all three categories, with a particularly high number of nominations for the new award of "Gardener of the Year". The Judging Panel had the benefit of seeing both photographs and videos of the nominated gardens, taken in the Summer when they were all in full bloom.

The winners will be announced at the Civic Awards Ceremony in March, to which the winners have been invited.

"Home Truths" – Report on the Cost of Housing in the East of England (NHF)

Each year, the National Housing Federation (NHF – effectively, the national "trade body" for housing associations) produces a report on housing costs in the East of England (which comprises 48 local authority districts) and gives comparative data for each of the Districts in the Region. This year's report has just been published.

The report provides the following information, relating to 2006, in respect of the Epping Forest District:

- Epping Forest had the highest average property price in Essex and the 4th highest in the East of England
- The ratio of average incomes to property prices was 12.9 (meaning that the average property price is 12.9 times the average annual income)
- Epping Forest had the highest ratio of incomes to property prices in Essex, and the (equal) 2nd highest ratio in the East of England
- Epping Forest DC had the 2nd highest number of households on its Housing Register in Essex and the 10th highest in the East of England

Small Council Development Sites

It is pleasing to report that five of seven small development sites in the ownership of the Council were transferred to Estuary Housing Association at the beginning of January 2008. Construction is due to commence on the first site in early March 2008. The five sites will provide 20 affordable homes, with a mix of social rented and shared ownership (S/O) properties. The locations, tenure and mix are as follows:

(a) Homefield, Waltham Abbey	3 houses (rented)
(b) Hillyfields, Loughton	3 bungalows (rented)
(c) Oakfields, Loughton	3 flats (rented)
	3 flats (S/O)
(d) Hornbeam Rd, Buckhurst Hill	4 flats (S/O)
(e) Oakley Court, Loughton	4 flats (S/O)

In addition, a site to the northern end of the shops at Pyrles Lane, Loughton is due to be transferred in the near future, to provide a further 9 flats. The transfer has been delayed due to the need for two leaseholders to obtain the consent of their mortgagees to a deed of variation to their leases, enabling the development to proceed.

The 29 affordable homes are being subsidised through the provision of free land and a £1m social housing grant from the Council.

A revised planning application for a development of a further 18 properties - to the rear of 2-56 (even) Acres Avenue, Shelley, Ongar - was submitted by Estuary in December 2007, which will be determined shortly. Estuary has submitted a bid to the Housing Corporation for funding, to enable all of the homes to be provided as affordable housing. If this bid is not successful, either some of the homes will need to be sold on the open market or the Council will need to provide the required grant funding.

A further package of small Council-owned potential development sites is being discussed with Home Housing, one of the Council's Preferred RSL Partners. A report on this package will be considered by the Housing Portfolio Holder in the near future, once discussions with planning officers have been completed.

Review of Works Unit and the Future Delivery of the Housing Repairs Service

As part of the Report on the Top Management Restructuring, it was agreed that a review of the Council's Works Unit and the future delivery of the housing repairs service should be undertaken. The review is being led by the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property & Resources), assisted by the Chief Works Officer and others.

Good progress is being made with the Review and a report on its outcome will be considered by the Cabinet in the near future.