

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 17 February 2009

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stallan

Item: 7(h)

Recommendation:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Housing Strategy 2009-2012 (Consultation Draft)

At its last meeting, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered a Consultation Draft of the Council's proposed new Housing Strategy, which identifies current and future housing needs and sets out the Council's strategic housing plans for the medium term. It has been produced, initially, as a Consultation Draft in order to seek comments and feedback from a wide range of stakeholders that may have an interest in the Council's future housing strategy. After the three-month consultation period, I will consider all the responses received and then propose the final version for adoption by the full Council in Spring 2009. The final version will last for a three-year period, although it will include a Key Action Plan, which will be reviewed and updated annually.

The Consultation Draft provides details of the recently completed Strategic Housing Market Assessment (which is an approach advocated by the Government to replace housing needs surveys, that were previously undertaken by local housing and planning authorities).

In order to provide consultees with an opportunity to receive presentations on the main elements of the Consultation Draft, and to provide informal feedback, officers are holding a one-day Housing Strategy Conference during the consultation period, on 18th March 2009, at Jubilee Court (sheltered housing scheme). The Scrutiny Panel has nominated three members to attend as its representatives.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

In the light of the current economic climate, the Council is implementing a number of ways to provide support to local residents experiencing difficulties. One of these initiatives is the introduction of a Mortgage Rescue Scheme, for home-owners facing difficulties paying their mortgage, and at risk of homelessness through repossession, to retain possession of their homes. The Council is working in partnership with Moat Housing and the Epping Forest CAB to deliver the scheme.

Depending on their specific circumstances, homeowners eligible for help under the Scheme can be offered either a shared equity option (which enables the homeowner's monthly mortgage payments to be reduced), or a Government mortgage-to-rent option (which enables the homeowner to remain in the property as a housing association tenant on an assured shorthold tenancy, paying a rent at a level below market rents). The Scheme is being funded by the Government.

The Scheme will only apply to people at risk of homelessness. One of the Scheme's requirements is that, during the application process, all applicants must obtain money advice from the CAB.

CLG Consultation Document on New Council Housing

I have recently received the above-named consultation document from the Government's Communities and Local Government (CLG) Department.

In essence, it is proposing the removal of the current disincentives for local authorities to build new social housing themselves. They will be allowed to retain all of the rental income received from new properties built after the introduction of the changes (instead of paying a significant proportion to the Government) and also to retain all of the capital receipts from any subsequent sale of such properties. The relaxation would apply to both newly built properties and properties purchased or otherwise acquired.

The Council would first have to undertake a robust options appraisal and demonstrate the proposal for an individual scheme offers value for money.

The consultation period runs for 12 weeks, to the 17 April 2009, during which I intend to respond to the Consultation Paper. However, before I do, I will first be seeking the views of the Housing Scrutiny Panel (at its next meeting to be held on 23rd March 2009) and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

Tenant Participation Agreement

I am pleased to report that, at the last meeting of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, the Chairman of the Federation and I signed a new Tenant Participation Agreement for the next three years. This first Agreement was signed a number of years ago, and sets out the Council's commitment to support, assist and develop both the Federation and individual tenant and residents associations within the District.

Housing Information Evening - Monday 23rd March 2009

I would like to draw members' attention to the letter they will have recently received the Director of Housing, inviting them to attend a Housing Information Evening in Committee Rooms 1 and 2 at the Civic Offices at 7.30pm on 23rd March 2009. This will follow-on from the Housing Scrutiny Panel meeting earlier that evening. The event will provide members with a good opportunity to find out more about the work of the Housing Directorate and current housing issues, and to ask officers associated questions.