

Report to the Council

Date: 30 June 2009

Item: 7

Subject: Report of the Housing Portfolio Holder – Councillor D Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Assistance to Homeless Applicants

1. The Cabinet will be considering a report at its next meeting regarding the use of the Repossession Prevention Fund grant of £47,500 which is expected from the Government in the near future, to enable the Council to extend small interest free loans to families at risk of homelessness.

2. Under Government guidance, loans of between £1,000 and £3,000 with a cap of £5,000 would be granted to any household, regardless of tenure, who is faced with repossession of their home. It will only be provided where the Council would owe the household a full homeless duty if they were to lose their home. There are a number of conditions which apply and are set out in the guidance.

3. In addition to the Repossessions Prevention Fund, the Council has received a further £7,500 grant from the Government's "Recession Busting" fund. I will be recommending to the Cabinet that this money be passed to the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS) who work in partnership with the Council and already assist numerous homeless and other housing applicants who have difficulty accessing the private rented sector because of the requirement for them to provide a rent deposit in advance.

4. I am pleased to report that the Housing Directorate continues to assist those who are struggling to either retain their existing accommodation, or secure new accommodation, due to the current financial climate. These additional measures will compliment the work already being done under the Rental Loan and Mortgage Rescue Schemes.

Housing Tree Budget

5. An urgent programme of tree and shrub maintenance work has commenced on the Shernbroke Road side of the Ninefields Estate, Waltham Abbey. As the work has progressed well and proved popular with local residents. I will be submitting a report to the next Cabinet recommending that a Supplementary Estimate of £38,000 is recommended to Full Council, funded from HRA balances, in order for the project to be completed one year earlier than originally anticipated.

Springfields

6. The Council has received a formal request from the Principal Contractor working at Springfields for an extension of time amounting to 28 weeks, with a

revised completion date of 14 August 2009. The claim is as a result of a late instruction to replace the existing French doors and windows serving the top floor private balconies. It has been discovered that driving rain is capable of passing through beadings and gaskets, distributing around the inner cavities of the frames, and discharging within the buildings interior. The Contractor has yet to submit a financial claim to go along with the claim for an extension of time.

Decent Homes in the Private Sector

7. As Housing Portfolio Holder, one of my stated Key Priority Objectives is 'To significantly increase the number of people receiving financial support provided to private occupiers, to help meet the decent homes standard, improve thermal efficiency and install disabled adaptations through a new, properly resourced, Private Sector Housing Strategy.'

8. The 'Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy' outlining the mechanisms the Council uses to improve housing conditions in the private sector was implemented in April 2007. For a variety of reasons, however, the Private Sector Housing Team has not been fully staffed since the Strategy was brought in, and will only become so in July this year. I am pleased to confirm, however, that significant gains were made in bringing the homes of vulnerable people up to the Decent Homes Standard during 2008 and the Directorate seeks to build on this. I will be submitting a Report to Cabinet in the Autumn outlining how this is to be achieved.

Empty Properties

9. There are approximately 600 privately-owned properties in the District that have been empty for more than one year. Members may have personal experience of the problems that long-term empty properties can cause. Leaving properties empty also represents the loss of a potential source of housing.

10. The Council has a variety of initiatives to encourage owners to bring their empty properties back into use, but can also use enforcement powers in more severe cases where owners fail to co-operate. In July staff within the Private Sector Housing Technical Team will be writing to the owners of all the properties that have been empty for more than 1 year, to outline the ways in which the Council can assist them to bring their properties back into use. A systematic approach will be taken to following these letters up where owners fail to respond.

Consultation on Standards for Mobile Homes

11. There are 16 permanent mobile home sites in the District comprising approximately 735 units. Although the use of land for caravan sites is controlled by planning legislation, the layout, amenities and other standards are controlled by conditions attached to licences issued by the Housing Directorate.

12. In April 2008, the CLG issued new standards for mobile home sites providing a framework upon which councils can base the conditions they attach when re-licensing sites. Existing site licences have not been reviewed for many years and some conditions date back to the 1960's. Officers in the Private Sector Housing Team are currently in the process of updating all permanent residential site licences and in July will be consulting with site owners on other relevant parties on the conditions that should be attached to the new licences. At the conclusion of this period, the format of the new licences will be agreed and presented to Members before the new licences are issued.