

## ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 28 July 2009

**Subject:** Housing Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor David Stallan

**Item 6(f)**

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### **Recommending:**

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

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### **Rent Decrease**

The HRA subsidy determination includes a number of elements, one of which is the guideline rent. Originally for this financial year, the Government increased the guideline rent by 6.2% due to the high increase in the Retail Price Index at September 2008. In fact the determination did state that authorities could increase rents by up to 7%.

However, Members considered that 7% would have been excessive given the economic climate. Therefore, on 17 February, full Council set the average rent increase at 4%. This was possible as the HRA was in a good position.

In March this year, the Government announced that the guideline rent increase would be reduced from 6.2% to 3.1% which was designed to encourage authorities to reduce their rents accordingly.

The Council responded to the Government's consultation paper on the issue and asked that the Council be compensated for its additional costs in administering the decrease, but was unsuccessful.

On 20 April, the Cabinet agreed that the Council adjusts its rent increase for this year to achieve a reduced 3.1% increase. All tenants will be receiving a written notice between late July and early August, advising them of the lower increase to their rent for the current year.

### **Fire Safety following the Camberwell Fire**

On 3 July 2009 at Lakanal House in Camberwell, London, six people lost their lives as a result of a fire. Investigations into the cause of the fire and any lessons that need to be learnt are still being identified. However, whilst these investigations are being carried out, the Rt Hon John Healey, Minister for Housing and Planning at the Communities and Local Government has written to all local authority Chief Executives asking that some reassurance be offered to tenants.

Members should be aware that in 2006 the Council undertook a fire risk assessment in each of its blocks of flats, as well as in each of its Sheltered Accommodation Units. Any recommendations to reduce the risk of spread of fire that came out of those risk assessments have been actioned. These risk assessments are undertaken every five years in flat blocks, but annually in Sheltered Accommodation.

In the Private Sector, all licensed Homes in Multiple Occupation (HMO) also require the landlord to produce a fire risk assessment for their property. This is carried out in conjunction with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service and the Council's Environmental Health Officers.

In an attempt to give further reassurance to tenants, in conjunction with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, the Council is preparing an information leaflet, which lists a range of Do's and Don'ts. This leaflet will be delivered to every Council property with the rent decrease letter, which is due to be delivered from 30 July 2009. The leaflet will also be published on the Council's website.

Some of the advice on the leaflet includes:

- Fitting smoke alarms on every level of your home
- Testing the batteries in your alarm once a week, and never remove them.
- Avoid leaving children in the kitchen alone when cooking on the hob, and keep matches and saucepan handles out of their reach
- Take care when cooking with hot oil
- Don't overload electrical sockets – try to keep one plug per socket
- Stub cigarettes out properly and dispose of them carefully. Put them out, right out!
- Ensure candles are secured in a proper holder and kept away from curtains or fabrics
- Plan an escape route and make sure everyone knows how to escape
- Make a bedtime check of your home before you go to bed – you are more at risk from a fire when asleep. Close inside doors at night to prevent a fire from spreading
- Don't tackle fires yourself – get out and stay out and call 999

Essex Fire and Rescue Service offer a free home fire safety visit to people living within their fire station boundaries. This initiative has been highly successful in reducing accidental fires and deaths in the home. If tenants or residents want a free home fire safety visit, they can contact the Essex Fire and Rescue Service on 0845 6012495.