

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 29 September 2009

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stallan

Item 7(f)

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

“Repairs Refresh Programme” – New Approach to Repairs Delivery

Following the review of the delivery of the Housing Repairs Service, and the Cabinet's strategic decision to provide a more streamlined and efficient delivery (called the “Repairs Refresh Programme”, good progress has been made. In accordance with the strategy, the size of the Council's Direct Labour workforce is being reduced through natural wastage, and more repairs are being undertaken by small contractors through existing and new framework agreements. A consultant has been appointed to provide guidance on the appointment of a private repairs management contractor to become responsible for the Repairs Service, and to provide the new Housing Repairs Manager. The Consultant has produced a Project Initiation Document (PID), which has been endorsed by the Repairs Advisory Group. At its meeting on the 21st September 2009, the Repairs Advisory Group also agreed a proposed staffing structure for the Repairs Service, merging the existing Housing Repairs Section (“client”) with the Building Maintenance (DSO) Section “Contractor”. Staff and unions are shortly to be consulted on the proposals, following which a report on the proposed merged structure will be submitted to the Cabinet in November 2009.

It is very pleasing to report that, for the first time since records began, the Building Maintenance Section achieved and exceeded its three key targets for response times for repairs in the first Quarter of 2009/10.

Marden Close, Chigwell – Remodelling of Accommodation

At the Cabinet meeting held on 7 September 2009, it was agreed that the existing 20 difficult to let bedsits at the Council's sheltered housing scheme at Marden Close, Chigwell Row should be transferred to one of the Council's Preferred RSL (housing association) Partners to undertake an improvement scheme to convert the bedsits into ten flats for general needs couples on the Council's Housing Register. It is envisaged that a capital receipt will be received for the transfer, which will be used to provide Social Housing Grant for another (currently unidentified) affordable housing scheme within the District. As part of the proposals for the area, the District Council is also in discussions with Chigwell Parish Council about the possibility of the Parish Council having a lease for Faversham Hall (currently used by other residents) to let to community groups. Alternatively, the Hall could be converted into two new flats.

Local Housing Company

The Cabinet has agreed to investigate the legal implications of setting up a local housing company, which would operate at arms-length from the Council, to which the Council could provide capital loans for the Company to purchase new properties off the open market to let at market rents. Not only would this venture provide more income to the Council than its current investments, the properties could be let to homeless families and other applicants on the Council's Housing Register, with rents set at Housing Benefit Levels. A further report on the feasibility of this initiative will be considered by the Cabinet once we have received a detailed report on the legal and financial issues and implications.

Interim Shared Ownership Policy

The Cabinet has agreed to continue with its Interim Shared Ownership Policy, whereby the Council will allow RSLs that are having difficulty selling shared ownership properties, to operate a "Rent Now Buy Later" Scheme. Under the scheme, applicants would initially be able to fully rent a property at an intermediate rent (around 80% of market rents) and then be given the opportunity to purchase tranches of equity – up to full home ownership – over future years. The policy will be reviewed in six month's time.

New Homelessness Strategy

Following consultation and consideration by the Housing Scrutiny Panel, I have agreed the adoption of a new Homelessness Strategy, setting out the current needs, plans and initiatives relating to homelessness in the District. It is pleasing to report that good progress continues to be made with preventing homelessness, especially in these difficult economic times, which has been recognised by the Government with additional funding given to the Council for further homeless prevention initiatives.

Membership of the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH)

I have decided that it would be in the Council's interest to join the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH), which provides services and advice to local authorities that have retained their housing stock, and provides a united voice to lobby Government and other organisations to safe-guard the interests of such councils. With the Government's current consultation on a major reform of the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system, it is essential that local authorities work together to ensure the best deal and ARCH is at the forefront of these discussions.

Tour of Housing Sites for Members

It is disappointing to report that, since only three members expressed an interest, the planned Tour of Housing Sites for Members on the 15 September 2009 had to be cancelled. This is regrettable, since it was my view that Members would have found such a tour very interesting informative and enjoyable.

Zimbabwe Resettlement Programme

Council's in the South of England have been asked by the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) to assist with the Government's Zimbabwe Resettlement Programme. As the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe has declined, the Government has created a programme offering assistance in resettling in the U.K. those older British people who are unable to make their own arrangements. The scheme is open to those aged 70 years or over and younger people who are unable to look after themselves without support.

I have agreed to the initial provision of five difficult to let bedsits and flats in sheltered housing schemes for the Resettlement Programme.

The Council will receive £3,000 per property to provide furniture and to make the properties ready, plus £1,500 for our Scheme Managers to provide “resettlement support” and a further payment for our Scheme Managers to provide on-going housing related support for the first two years.