

The scheme is due for completion in early January 2011, from when residents will start moving in. Following an invitation from the Leader of Council, it is pleasing to announce that the Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and MP for Brentwood and Ongar, has agreed to officially open the scheme on 18th March 2011. Unfortunately, due to the number of guests to be invited from all partner organisations, the number of guests that can be invited from each organisation, including members from this Council, has had to be limited to a small number.

Proposed New Contract for Home Improvement Agencies

At present, each District in Essex has a Home Improvement Agency (HIA) to provide advice and practical assistance to older homeowners and private tenants on technical housing issues – e.g. providing assistance with grant applications; specifying, tendering and administering repair works; and providing Handyperson Services. These are currently run by a number of different organisations (mostly housing associations) experienced in the provision of HIAs. Epping Forest DC is the only district that provides its HIA in-house (Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest – C.A.R.E.).

However, the County Council's Supporting People Team has announced its intention to tender the provision of HIA services across Essex through just **two** contracts – one covering North Essex and one covering South Essex, with the objective of obtaining savings from economies of scale. A number of concerns have been raised about the proposal, by both existing HIA providers and district councils throughout the County, who can see a number of practical difficulties with the proposed operational arrangements and are sceptical about the scope for savings.

However, it is pleasing to report that it is not the Supporting People Team's intention to include the Epping Forest District, and the Council's HIA (C.A.R.E.), within the two new county-wide contracts, because it is successfully operated in-house by the Council – although C.A.R.E. will be required to work to the same (new) specification as the two proposed new contracts.

Funding for Handyperson Service's Internal Decorating Scheme for Older and Disabled Occupiers

The Council has secured £15,000 additional funding from the County Council's Supporting People Budget this year (2010/11) for the Council's Handyperson Service, run by C.A.R.E.

It is proposed that the additional funding will be used to introduce an Internal Decorating Scheme for Older and Disabled homeowners and private tenants, whereby the Council's decorating contractors (already appointed through framework agreements) decorate one room, up to a maximum cost (probably £300 – covering materials and labour).

Since the funding is only for one year, and will only fund the decoration of rooms in a relatively small number of properties (around 50), it is proposed that a referral process and associated criteria will be introduced to ensure that the service is targeted at those people and properties in most need.

This is separate from the successful Internal Decoration Scheme for Older and Disabled *Council tenants*, which has been in existence for many years, and will continue – funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Backlog of Assessments for Disabled Adaptations by County Occupational Therapy (OT) Service

The County Council's Occupational Therapy (OT) Service undertakes assessments for disabled adaptations in respect of both Council properties (funded by the HRA) and non-Council properties (funded by mandatory, means-tested Disabled Facilities Grants - DFGs). The need for, and expenditure on, disabled adaptations has increased over recent years.

Regrettably, due to a restructure of the County's Occupational Therapy Service, apparently resulting in a reduced number of OTs, backlogs of assessments for disabled adaptations for both Council properties and DFGs have lengthened. Clearly, this has resulted in increasing delays in tenants and DFG applicants having adaptations undertaken to their home.

It is also understood that the County OT Service is undertaking a review of its operations, which could result in a decision to not undertake any assessments for disabled adaptations on behalf of district councils in Essex. If such a decision is made, it will be necessary for all the district councils to make alternative arrangements for disabled adaptation assessments, funded from their own resources. I will keep members informed of progress with this important and sensitive area.

Review of Housing Allocations Scheme 2010

At the time of writing, the Cabinet is due to consider some proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme, following the Annual Review of the Allocations Scheme by the Housing Scrutiny Panel, and subsequent consultation with interested parties which, for the first time this year, included consultation with all of the Council's tenants and housing applicants through *Housing News*, in accordance with new Government Guidance on Housing Allocation Schemes.

By the time of this Council meeting, the Cabinet will have made its decisions on the proposed changes, which includes the proposed introduction of penalties for housing applicants who refuse two offers of suitable accommodation *for which they have expressed an interest* through the Choice Based Lettings Scheme within any three-month period. Such applicants will be ineligible to express an interest in any property for a period of six months. Following the expiry of the six-month period, the applicant will be able to participate again, retaining their former position on the Housing Register. This change is being proposed because, during the 2009, 184 offers of Council accommodation - made in response to expressions of interests from applicants - were subsequently refused by the applicant. This has an adverse effect on empty property re-let times and results in a loss in rental income and subsequent delays in offers to other interested applicants.

The other main proposed changes include:

- Giving applicants with mobility problems priority for bungalows and ground floor flats, above those in the same band - regardless of their waiting time; and
- Placing within Band 3, applicants (living within the District) wanting to move to be nearer to their place of work, or to take up an offer of permanent employment or a long term (full-time) training opportunity - in order to comply with the Government's latest Guidance on Allocation Schemes, to assist with mobility.