

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 29 March 2011

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stellan

Item: 5(e)

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Appointment of Repairs Management Contractor – Housing Repairs Refresh Programme

I have been keeping Council updated with information regarding the important appointment of a private repairs contractor to manage the Council's Housing Repairs Service, as part of our Housing Repairs Refresh Programme.

The approach we are taking is an innovative one, which we consider to be low risk, low cost and of high benefit. At the last meeting, I reported that tenders for the contract had been returned and that they were being assessed - having regard to both price and quality.

In addition to price, the quality aspects of the tender have been broken down to assess the quality of the companies, their back office support and, crucially, the calibre of the person nominated by each contractor to manage our Housing Repairs Service. This included a document review of the written submission and method statements supplied with contractors' Tender Submissions, and through an innovative all-day Assessment Centre, attended by all the contractors.

Three contractors submitted tenders, and were assessed by the Council's procurement consultants and validated by officers. After considering the detailed evaluations, I am pleased to report that the Repairs Advisory Group (comprising members, officers and tenants' representatives) is recommending to the Cabinet, at its next meeting, that Mears Ltd be appointed as our Repairs Management Contractor.

This is on the basis that Mears Ltd obtained the highest overall scores for all three aspects of the tender evaluation: price; quality of Tender Submission; and performance at the Assessment Centre. Indeed, Mears Ltd achieved an overall total score of 90.2% under the tender assessment, compared to 72.2% and 54.5% scored by the other two contractors.

The contract is due to commence in May 2011, and is initially for three years with an option to extend for two further three-year periods.

Supporting People Cuts – Sheltered Housing and Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest (CARE) Service

I have been keeping Council informed about the implications of Essex County Council reducing the amount of funding it provides to supported housing providers in the District, including our Council, through the Supporting People regime.

Despite the Government saying that it has only reduced funding to county councils for Supporting People by 12% from April 2011 (as part of the Government's reduction in local government grants), Essex County Council has announced that it intends to reduce its Supporting People budget by around 30% (approximately £10m per annum) from 2011/12. The effect on this Council as a supported housing provider is in respect of sheltered housing for older people and our CARE Service.

Sheltered Housing for Older People

All of the other local authority housing providers in Essex are reporting reductions in Supporting People funding for their sheltered housing schemes of 35% - 50% (e.g. Tendring – 51%; Castle Point – 51%; Colchester – 48%; Brentwood – 48%; Basildon – 38%). This is due to the hourly grant rate for sheltered housing being capped at £17 per hour and the maximum number of hours of support that is funded by Supporting People being reduced from 1 hour per week per property to 0.5 hours per week per property from April 2011.

Fortunately, due to our Council historically providing a cost-effective sheltered housing service - whereby most of our sheltered housing Scheme Managers have supported more residents than other local authority scheme managers in Essex - the Council's reduction in Supporting People funding from Essex County Council for sheltered housing will only be 6% (£14,000 per annum) from 2011/12.

CARE Service

I have previously reported that Essex County Council is inviting tenders from home improvement agency (HIA) providers to provide HIA services in a number of contract areas across Essex from June 2011. This process is now underway.

However, the Epping Forest District is not included in this process, since we are the only Council that runs our HIA in-house, through our CARE Service. Because of this, and the overall reduction of 30% in ECC's Supporting People Budget, negotiations have been held between EFDC and ECC regarding the level of reduction in funding the CARE Service will incur from 2011/12.

These negotiations have now been concluded and it has been agreed that our funding will only be reduced by 12% from 2011/12 (£6,900 p/a). Moreover, ECC has agreed to pay CARE an additional £11,100 p/a to extend to older people in the private sector the Mow and Grow Gardening Scheme that Voluntary Action Epping Forest undertakes for Council tenants.

Official Opening – Railway Meadow Young Parent Scheme, Ongar

At the time of writing, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is due to officially open Railway Meadow, on Friday 18th March 2011, to which a small number of members have been invited.

Railway Meadow is the new Young Parent Scheme in Ongar, provided by East Thames Housing Group, which provides supported housing in the form of 13 self-contained flats for young parents from the Epping Forest (8 flats), Uttlesford (4 flats) and Brentwood (1 flat) Districts, for around nine months each. The young parents are supported with parenting skills by one full-time and one part-time support worker, assisted by the Health Visitor Service. The building also provides a play room, office, communal garden and communal lounge/kitchen.