

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 26th July 2011

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Maggie McEwen

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

(a) Successful Outcome to EFDC Bid for Grant Funding – London- Stansted-Harlow Programme of Development Partnership

The London-Stansted-Harlow Programme of Development (POD) Partnership Board was established a number of years ago to oversee the use of Growth Area Fund (GAF) funding from the Government for the London-Stansted-Harlow area, and the subsequent implementation of projects funded from the GAF. The Board includes officer representatives from Harlow, Uttlesford, Epping Forest, East Herts, Broxbourne, Essex and Herts Councils; Lea Valley Park; British Waterways; and a number of not-for profit organisations.

The Director of Housing recently submitted a bid for £160,000 to the POD Partnership Board to assist with the funding of the development of two Council-owned sites to provide much-needed affordable housing.

I am pleased to report that the bid was successful. The funding will be used for the following two schemes, already agreed in principle by the Cabinet, but that still require planning permission:

- (a) The provision of required flood mitigation measures for the proposed 7 affordable homes at Roundhills, Waltham Abbey (£90,000); and
- (b) The construction of 4 affordable homes at Millfield, High Onger, from straw bales, which significantly reduces the fuel costs for the tenants and CO2 emissions (£70,000).

(b) Customer Service Excellence Award (Housing Directorate) – Outcome of External Annual Review of Award

The Housing Directorate was awarded the Government Standard for Customer Service Excellence in the public sector, in July 2010. The Award followed a three-day assessment by an external assessor, covering a detailed document review; interviews with officers, members, customers and partners; visits to housing offices and facilities; and an event attended by numerous partner agencies. The Assessor's overall conclusion was that *"The Housing Directorate was found to have a deep understanding and commitment to Customer Service Excellence. The commitment was found from Senior Management levels through to operational and front line staff."*

To obtain the Customer Service Excellence Award, organisations must meet 57 separate assessment criteria. They must demonstrate that they: engage and consult with their customers; measure customer satisfaction with the service; provide information and easy access to services; co-operate with other providers, partners and communities; have

service delivery standards; deal effectively with problems; achieve timely service delivery, and have a positive organisational culture.

Continuous compliance with the criteria is monitored through a 12-month interim assessment. The first interim assessment was undertaken on 12 & 13 July 2011, when the Assessor visited a number of Housing Directorate facilities, including:

- Norway House Homeless Persons' Hostel, North Weald
- The Broadway Area Housing Office, Loughton
- Limes Farm Housing Office, Chigwell
- Housing Repairs Service Depot, Epping
- Civic Offices, Epping

I am pleased to report that the Assessor concluded that, not only does the Housing Directorate continue to meet the required standard, it had reached "Compliance Plus" - which was particularly due to the high standard of the Annual Report to Tenants and the quality of the tenants' magazine "Housing News".

(c) Housing Information Evening for Members – 21st September 2011

I would like to advise members that a Housing Information Evening for Members will be held in Committee Room 1 at **7pm on Wednesday 21 September 2011**. The event is suitable for all members, but particularly new members and members of the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

The Evening will provide information on the work of the Housing Directorate, basic housing finance and current housing issues, in order to assist members with their ward constituency work and to help obtain an understanding of this large area of the Council's work.

It will be presented by the 4 officers of the Housing Management Team and a Principal Account from the Finance and ICT Directorate.

Interested members should contact Kim Partridge in Democratic Services.

(d) Kinetics (EFDC Gas Contractor) in Administration

On Friday 8 July 2011, Kinetics (T A Horn), one of the Council's two gas contractors that undertook gas servicing and gas breakdowns to the Council's housing stock (in the South of the District) went into Administration.

Gas servicing is one of the Council's biggest areas of risk in terms of health and safety to our tenants. For this reason, when the gas servicing and breakdown requirements for the whole district were originally tendered, tenderers were asked to submit three tenders: One for undertaking gas servicing and breakdowns for the whole District and two further tenders for just the North and just the South of the District. Although it would have been cheaper to appoint one contractor for the whole of the District, on the advice of officers, the Cabinet appointed two contractors – one for each area of the District. This was to avoid a situation in the future whereby a sole contractor went into Administration or provided a poor service, resulting in the determination of the contract without any contingency arrangements to undertake breakdowns and servicing - which has now proved to be a prudent decision.

Accordingly, arrangements have been put in place for Gracelands CMS Ltd, the contractor that undertakes gas servicing and breakdowns in the North of the District, to undertake the required work in the South of the District, on an interim basis, to comply with the Council's legal duties and to provide a continuous service to our tenants.

A letter has been sent to all of the tenants in the South of the District to notify them of the changes and the new contact details, and the Council's website has been updated.

Officers from Housing, Legal, Finance and Audit are working together to deal with the contractual arrangements of the Administration, and are also working on a new EU-compliant tender to appoint a new Contractor as soon as possible to undertake the gas servicing contract in the South of the District in the longer term.

There are no monies due to the Council from Kinetics.

(e) Affordable Housing Development - White Lodge, Sewardstone Road, Waltham Abbey

In my capacity as Housing Portfolio Holder I was invited, earlier in July - along with some fellow councillors - to attend a site visit to the new housing development currently under construction at White Lodge, Sewardstone Road in Waltham Abbey.

When completed, the development will provide 119 new homes, of which 95 (80%) will be affordable housing. 60% of the affordable housing will be in the form of social rented housing (provided by Hastoe Housing Association) and 40% will be shared ownership (provided by Genesis Housing Group) to assist first time buyers from the District. The remaining 24 properties will be for private sale. The development also includes a new community centre and a local shop.

The developer, Hill Partnerships, in conjunction with the Council and Logic Homes, secured HCA grant funding for the development, which is progressing well on site, with many homes nearing completion. We were shown around one of those homes, which features solar panels as a standard, to help keep down energy bills for the residents.

The site is located in the Metropolitan Green Belt, but the Council agreed to grant planning permission, since the site was previously-developed land (kennels for the former Walthamstow Greyhound Track) and members agreed that the provision of such a high proportion of affordable housing represented very special circumstances for departing from the usual policy of restraint in the Green Belt.

(f) Fire Safety in Communal Areas of Council Flats – Update

The former Housing Portfolio Holder previously advised the full Council of his intentions to require residents of Council blocks of flats to remove certain items from communal areas, in order to comply with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

However, following concerns raised by some residents, he subsequently advised members that he had instructed officers not to take any action for the time being, until he had written to the Housing Minister on the issue.

Accordingly, the former Housing Portfolio Holder wrote to the Housing Minister seeking clarity around the guidance that sits alongside the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and specifically requesting the issue of clearer guidance for registered providers of housing (housing associations and councils) so that they may be better placed to make decisions that affect their residents. A copy of the letter was reproduced in the Council Bulletin.

I thought it appropriate to give members an update on the position - which is that, regrettably, no response has yet been received from the Housing Minister. I have therefore

sent a follow-up letter, asking the Housing Minister to respond to the original letter as soon as possible. I will advise members of any response I receive.

In the meantime, as requested by the previous Housing Portfolio Holder, officers have undertaken a feasibility study into the cost of providing smoke alarms in the flat blocks, which will be incorporated within a report that will be submitted to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel for discussion. Until then, the decision to suspend action to remove carpets in common parts of the flat blocks remains in place.