

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-071-2011/12
Date of meeting: 23 April 2012



Committee: Housing Scrutiny Panel (Chairman – Cllr Stephen Murray)

**Subject: Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements – HRA
Financial Plan**

Responsible Officer: Alan Hall (01992 564004)

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations:

- (1) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel's proposed list of Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements set-out in Appendix 1 attached, funded from the £770,000 per annum budget included within the 30-Year HRA Financial Plan as a result of the HRA self-financing arrangements, be approved;**
- (2) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel be requested to consider the effectiveness of any new posts agreed after a period of twelve months;**
- (3) That the detailed recommendations in bold within Appendix 1 be recorded within the Cabinet minutes;**
- (4) That, at its meeting in January 2013, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considers and recommends to the Cabinet the use of both the remaining and any additional funding available within the HRA Financial Plan for housing improvements and service enhancements in 2013/14 and future years, after consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.**

Executive Summary:

When the Cabinet agreed the strategic approach for the Council's new 30-Year HRA Financial Plan, it asked us to consider and recommend to the Cabinet a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements, utilising the additional funding of £770,000 per annum made available as a result of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) self-financing, after taking account of the views of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

We have formulated a proposed list of 15 separate housing improvements and service enhancements, based on suggestions put forward by officers, which is attached at Appendix 1.

The Cabinet have subsequently requested, following completion of the Scrutiny Panel's report, that the Housing Scrutiny Panel review the effectiveness of any new posts agreed within the Scrutiny Panel's recommendations after a period of twelve months. This has been included as an additional recommendation above.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Additional resources of £770,000 have been identified within the new HRA Financial Plan, to spend on additional housing improvements and service enhancements.

Other Options for Action:

To agree a different list of improvements and service enhancements, or to allocate funding differently between the proposed schemes.

Report:

1. As requested by the Cabinet, at our meeting held on 5 March 2012, we considered a list of proposed housing improvements and service enhancements that could be funded from the additional resources made available to the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as a result of the introduction of HRA Self-financing from April 2012. This report sets out our considerations and recommendations to the Cabinet.

2. At its meeting on 5 December 2011, the Cabinet approved the strategic approach to the Council's new 30-Year HRA Financial Plan. The approach agreed was to plan the repayment of the required loan(s) to fund the Department of Communities & Local Government's (DCLG) debt settlement over a 30-year period. This enables the Council to not only:

- maintain the Council's housing stock to a full, modern standard;
- implement a new Council Housebuilding Programme; and
- allow a lower rent increase in April 2012 (6%) than assumed by the Government;

but to also fund an additional £770,000 per annum of housing improvements and service improvements. This level of budget provision has been included within the HRA Budget 2012/13.

3. The Cabinet asked us to consider and recommend to it a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements, utilising the additional funding, after taking account of the views of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

4. Following the Cabinet's decision in December 2011, the Housing Management Team formulated a proposed list of improvements and enhancements for our consideration. We were advised that the approach taken by officers to this exercise was to focus on proposals that would provide a direct and demonstrable benefit to the Council's tenants, rather than to "make officers' lives easier".

5. We considered each of the proposals in detail and made some relatively minor changes for our recommendations contained within this report to the Cabinet.

6. Our recommended list of 15 housing improvements and service enhancements is detailed at Appendix 1. For each proposal, a description is provided, together with details of the one-off and/or ongoing annual funding required, and whether the expenditure is capital and/or revenue. At the end of each proposal, our formal recommendation(s) relating to the proposal is provided in bold.

7. Our list comprises a mix of capital and revenue projects, requiring both one-off expenditure over 1-2 years and ongoing annual expenditure. Our inclusion of one-off projects enables the funding allocated to these projects to be utilised for other one-off or ongoing projects in future years, from the overall £770,000 annual budget.

8. Appendix 2 provides a spreadsheet with each of our proposals listed, showing the one-off and ongoing expenditure for each of the next three financial years. Where the full annual cost is not expected to be incurred within the first financial year (which will have already commenced by the time our proposals are considered by the Cabinet), we have shown the pro-rata cost for 2012/13.

9. As can be seen, although we have earmarked the full £770,000 budget for 2012/13 as requested by the Cabinet, we have not earmarked the full budget for the following two years, due to most of the one-off expenditure proposed for 2012/13 not being continued into the following two years. This will enable us, if allowed by the Cabinet (see below), to consider the use of the remaining budget in future years, prior to 2013/14, which the Cabinet can see from Appendix 2 will be around £0.5million per annum.

10. Prior to our meeting, as requested by the Cabinet, the Director of Housing consulted the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation on the officers' proposed list of improvements and enhancements in detail at their meeting on the 1st March 2012. They fully agreed with the officers' proposals and made no suggested changes, although they did ask officers to research and provide some additional information on one of the proposals prior to our meeting.

11. The Cabinet should note that, at our meeting, we were advised that the budget of £770,000 per annum had been approved by the Cabinet in November 2011 on the basis of the best assumptions available, and the financial situation, at that time. However, the Director of Housing advised us that, since that time, the CLG had announced the Council's final HRA debt settlement figure of £185.456million, which was around £750,000 less than the DCLG's draft settlement figure. Furthermore, and more significantly, the Council's treasury advisors, Arlingclose, had been advising the Director of Finance & ICT and the Finance & Economic Development Portfolio Holder on the options for funding the required loan(s), and the estimated PWLB interest rates for the loan(s) - most of which were likely to be fixed - which were less than those assumed when the Cabinet agreed the strategic approach to the HRA Financial Plan in December 2011.

12. As a result, even using a conservative estimate for PWLB interest rates, at the time of our meeting at the beginning of March 2012, it was estimated that the following **additional** funding could be made available within the Financial Plan for further housing improvements and service enhancements in future years:

- An additional £750,000 per annum from April 2013;
- A further £250,000 per annum from April 2017;
- The bringing forward of the previously-planned £4.7million increase by one year in April 2019; and
- An additional £250,000 per annum in April 2019.

13. By the time the Cabinet considers this report, the actual interest rates obtained from the PWLB on the day the Council takes out its loan (26th March 2012) will be known. If this is lower than the interest rates assumed by the Cabinet for the HRA Financial Plan (agreed at its meeting on 12th March 2012), the amount available for improvements and enhancements in future years will be greater; if higher, the amount available will be less.

14. We are therefore further recommending to the Cabinet that, at our meeting in January 2013, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considers and recommends to the Cabinet the use of both the remaining and any additional funding available within the HRA Financial Plan for housing improvements and service enhancements in 2013/14 and future years, after consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

Resource Implications:

£770,000 per annum, already included within the HRA Financial Plan and HRA Budget 2012/13.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Localism Act 2012
Local Government and Housing Act 1989
Housing Act 1985

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

A number of proposals provide a safe, cleaner and greener environment for the Council's tenants.

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has taken place with Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) on those proposed schemes involving VAEF. We have taken account of consultation that officers have undertaken with the Tenants and Leaseholders.

Background Papers:

Email correspondence with VAEF.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

The identified risks are:

Smoke detectors	No additional risks to current provision/programme
Handyperson Scheme	(a) Non/poor performance of VAEF (b) Damage to tenants' properties / possessions (c) Unable to meet tenants' expectations (d) EFDC's costs higher than expected
Disabled adaptations	No additional risks to current provision/programme
Toilet conversions / Jessopp Ct refurb.	(a) Contractual problems with appointed contractor (b) Poor health and safety arrangements on site (c) EFDC's costs higher than expected
Princesfield play area	(a) Unsafe equipment installed leading to accident(s) (b) Accidents occurring due to provision of play Equipment, despite correctly installed (c) Contractual problems with appointed contractor (d) Poor health and safety arrangements on site (e) EFDC's costs higher than expected
Change to Fraud Post	No additional risks to current arrangement
SHO (Fraud)	No additional risks to the current arrangement with one officer.

Key safes	(a) Key Safes poorly installed, resulting in insecurity (b) Correct Key Safe codes not given to the right people or to Careline by tenants (c) Key safes given to inappropriate people by tenants or Careline, leading to insecurity of tenants' homes (d) EFDC's costs higher than expected
Under-occupation Officer tenants	Actions by the employee cause a risk to vulnerable tenants
Estate improvements	No additional risks to current provision/programme
Garden Maintenance Scheme Dog waste bins	No additional risks to current provision/programme (a) Bins not emptied sufficiently regularly (b) Street furniture hazard
Furniture Recycling Scheme	(a) Grant provided but Scheme does not come to fruition and funding not returned (b) Grant not used in the most effective way (c) Poor/ineffective financial controls in place by the Organisation

Equality and Diversity

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

In fact, the initial assessment identified that many of the proposals enhanced services for vulnerable people – particularly, older people, disabled people and, in the case of the grant for the Furniture Exchange Project, families on low incomes.

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? N/A

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
N/A

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
N/A

**List of Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements
Proposed by the Housing Scrutiny Panel**

2012/13

(1) Acceleration of the Programme to install mains-powered smoke detectors in every Council property within 4/5 years

One-off cost(s): £325,000 (2012/13)

Annual cost: Nil

Form of expenditure: Capital

1. At its meeting in January 2012, the Scrutiny Panel supported in principle the installation of mains-powered smoke detectors in all Council-owned properties, subject to funding being available, and agreed to add this proposal to the list of housing improvements for consideration.

2. The IEE Wiring Regulations have recently been amended, such that it is now a requirement that when an electrical installation is upgraded or rewired, mains-powered smoke detectors must be installed. In the past, the supply and installation of smoke detectors (battery or mains-powered) has been the responsibility of tenants.

3. The Council, as part of adopting the full (modern) maintenance standard for all of its properties, is already planning to visit all properties that have not been surveyed since the Decent Homes Standard was introduced in 2001. As a result, mains-powered smoke detectors will be installed as part of any electrical testing and upgrade works to these properties over the next 4/5 years, which will now be funded from the additional resources made available for the full maintenance of the Council's housing stock. This will be much cheaper than attending a property just to install a smoke detector.

4. However, there remains some 2,400 properties which have already been surveyed and electrically-tested, where it is not planned or required to return in the foreseeable future. Therefore, if the Council wishes to install mains-powered smoke detectors in all of its properties within the next 4/5 years, it will be necessary for an electrician to visit each of these properties to undertake the installations and accelerate the Programme, funded from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget. It is proposed that all of these installations are undertaken in 2012/13.

5. The cost of installing a smoke detector at a property, connected to the electric mains without undertaking any other electrical work, is currently around £100 for a single storey building (i.e. flat or bungalow). As a minimum, there needs to be one detector installed on each level of a property. Therefore, two detectors would be required for houses and maisonettes, hard-wire inter-linked. The cost of installation over two floors is dependant on the construction of the property but, on average, it is estimated to cost around £175 per property, again, if no other electrical work is required.

6. If installations can be undertaken as part of other electrical works, the costs reduce to around £55 and around £130 for one and two stories respectively.

Recommendation:

That mains-powered smoke detectors be installed in 2012/13 in all Council properties that will not have other planned electrical work undertaken within the next 4/5 years, in order to accelerate the Installation Programme.

(2) Provision of a free Handyperson Scheme for older and disabled tenants living in sheltered and other Council accommodation

One-off cost(s):	£13,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost:	£77,500 p/a
Form of expenditure:	Capital (Van) / Revenue

1. Currently, the Council only operates a Handyperson Scheme for non-Council tenants over 60 years of age and in receipt of one or more of the following benefits: Council Tax Benefit, Pension Guaranteed Credit or Housing Benefit. The scheme is provided by the Council's Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest (CARE) Scheme, funded at a cost of a £10,000 per annum to the General Fund, with the administration costs funded by Essex County Council through the Supporting People regime and the works undertaken by private contractors.

2. It is proposed that a free Handyperson Scheme be introduced at the Council's eight sheltered housing schemes for all tenants (irrespective of their means), through the employment (externally if necessary) of a multi-skilled operative by the Council's Housing Repairs Service. The operative would be employed to attend each scheme on a scheduled rota basis for around half a day each week to undertake a number of small repairs and odd jobs for the older tenants, which would normally be their responsibility, some of which could lead to them injuring themselves if they undertook them themselves and fell. The jobs would be pre-booked through the Scheme Manager. This would include replacing light bulbs, WC chains and tap washers, fixing curtain rails, erecting shelving, connecting washing machines, and other eligible jobs that take less than a maximum attendance period per job. The Handyperson would also be able to undertake any small non-urgent responsive repairs and odd jobs while he/she is at the sheltered scheme that are the Council's responsibility, particularly in communal areas, which would avoid the need for a tradesman to make a special visit, providing a more cost effective Housing Repairs Service and saving money.

3. The estimated costs of employing such a Handyperson would be as follows:

Van purchase	- £13,000 (one off cost)
Van running costs	- £4,500 p/a
Staff costs	- £32,000 p/a
Materials	- £5,000 p/a
Total cost	- £13,000 + £41,500 p/a

4. However, this Handyperson Scheme would only cater for tenants in sheltered accommodation and could not be extended to older and disabled tenants in older people's grouped accommodation and other Council accommodation. Since it is considered that this would be inequitable, since such tenants face the same difficulties with undertaking odd jobs that are their responsibility, it is further proposed that arrangements should be made to provide a similar service to older Council tenants in both older-people's grouped housing schemes and in general needs housing (who have nobody of working-age living with them) and to Council tenants with defined physical disabilities, who have nobody without defined physical disabilities living with them.

5. The Council currently funds Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) to provide preventative advice and undertake minor works in the homes of older and disabled non-Council tenants, to avoid them falling and injuring themselves in their homes. The current funding supports around 5-hours a week in total.

6. Following discussions with VAEF, it is proposed that an annual grant of £36,000 per annum be made available to VAEF, initially for three years, funded from the HRA's Housing Improvement and Service Enhancements Budget, to fund one Handyperson to assist tenants with physical disabilities and non-sheltered older housing tenants for, effectively, around 4.6 days per week (making the existing part-time (5 hour) VAEF post full-time) - with appointments booked through VAEF - to undertake the same odd jobs for Council disabled and older tenants over 60 years of age, as proposed for sheltered housing tenants.

Recommendations:

(a) That a free Handyperson Scheme be introduced at the Council's sheltered housing schemes for all tenants (irrespective of their means), through the employment of a multi-skilled operative by the Council's Housing Repairs Service;

(b) That, if necessary, authority be given to recruit the post externally; and

(c) That an annual grant of £36,000 per annum be made available to Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF), initially for a three year period, to fund a Handyperson Scheme for an additional 4.6 days per week for:

(i) Council tenants with defined physical disabilities, who have nobody without any defined physical disabilities living with them; and

(ii) Council tenants over 60 years of age, who have nobody of working-age living with them;

to provide a similar free service as that proposed for sheltered housing schemes.

(3) Increasing the Disabled Adaptations Budget for one year

One-off cost(s): £75,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost: Nil
Form of expenditure: Capital

1. The Council currently spends around £400,000 per annum on major adaptations to the Council's own properties, to enable disabled tenants to remain in their home and improve their quality of life. Each adaptation is undertaken following an assessment of need and a recommendation by Essex County Council Social Care Occupational Therapists (OTs).

2. The majority of the recommendations received from OTs are for bathroom adaptations, stairlifts, ramps etc. However, the Council has received (or is awaiting) a number of recommendations that will require the Council to construct extensions to the properties, which will be quite expensive and cost an estimated £75,000 in total. This will have the effect of reducing the amount of budget available for other tenants in need of other adaptations.

Recommendation:

That the Disabled Adaptations Budget be increased by a one-off sum of £75,000 in 2012/13, to replenish the cost of undertaking large adaptations required in that year and to enable the same number of non-major adaptations to be undertaken as usual.

(4) Conversion of existing toilet facilities in communal areas of sheltered housing schemes and community halls into disabled toilets

One-off cost(s): £40,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost: Nil
Form of expenditure: Capital

1. Although most sheltered housing schemes and community halls have toilets in communal areas that are accessible for disabled people in wheelchairs, there are 8 sites where the communal toilet facilities do not cater for wheelchair users, and do not comply with current Building Regulations and, possibly, the Equalities Act.

Recommendation:

That the existing toilet facilities in the communal areas of the following sheltered housing schemes and community halls be converted to incorporate disabled toilets:

- (a) Frank Bretton House, Ongar;**
- (b) Jubilee Court, Waltham Abbey;**
- (c) Hedgers Close, Loughton;**
- (d) Barrington Hall, Loughton;**
- (e) Oakwood Hill Hall, Loughton;**
- (f) Pelly Court Hall, Epping;**
- (g) Brookways Hall, Waltham Abbey; and**
- (h) Grove Court, Waltham Abbey.**

(5) Refurbishment of the Common Room and Kitchen Area at Jessopp Court, Waltham Abbey

One-off cost(s): £35,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost: Nil
Form of expenditure: Capital

1. At its meeting on 12 September 2011, the Cabinet agreed that since the Council's "very sheltered housing scheme" at Jessopp Court, Waltham Abbey no longer met with Essex County Council's extra care standards, it be re-modelled to a conventional sheltered housing scheme. The Cabinet further agreed the appointment of a full-time Scheme Manager (since the scheme would no longer be staffed by Essex CC staff), and that the well-attended Day Centre - which operates at the scheme 5 days each week, managed by Essex County Council - be allowed to continue. It was agreed that the Council enters into an Agreement with Essex County Council for the use of the communal lounge at the front of the building, with the County Council being charged an annual fee. These arrangements were put in place from 12 December 2011 accordingly.

2. There is a second common room at Jessopp Court, which was previously used as a dining room, with an adjacent kitchen area that was used many years ago as a “meals on wheels” kitchen. The residents have requested that the common room and kitchen area be refurbished as a second lounge to provide a more homely environment where they can meet, enjoy some company and hold social activities - particularly at times when the Day Centre is in operation in the front lounge. The Council has two other sheltered housing schemes which have two communal lounges and adjacent kitchens.

3. Arrangements are already being made for the common room to be re-decorated and for new floor coverings and curtains to be provided from existing resources. The cost of the proposed further improvements would be £35,000.

Recommendation:

That the common room and kitchen area at Jessopp Court, Waltham Abbey be refurbished as a second lounge, following their return from Essex County Council’s use and the remodeling of Jessopp Court from a very sheltered housing scheme to a conventional sheltered housing scheme.

(6) Expansion and refurbishment of the Council’s Play Area on the Princesfield Estate, Waltham Abbey

One-off cost(s): £30,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost: £2,000 p/a
Form of expenditure: Capital and Revenue

1. The Council is responsible for maintaining seven play areas on Council housing estates, funded by the HRA, at the following locations across the District:

- Pancroft, Abridge
- Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell
- Hoe Lane, Nazeing
- Princesfield Estate, Waltham Abbey
- Poplar Shaw, Waltham Abbey
- Harold Crescent, Waltham Abbey
- Pynest Green, High Beech

2. The existing annual budget for replacing equipment and undertaking general improvements and enhancements to all seven play areas is £15,000 per annum. Although all of the play areas are regularly maintained by the Council’s Environment and Street Scene Directorate on behalf of the Housing Directorate, and considered to be in good order, the available budget does not allow for any substantial improvements to be undertaken in order to enable these important facilities for the local community to be improved. Indeed, improvements are only able to be undertaken to just one play area each year, due to the high cost of the equipment.

3. The Environment and Street Scene Directorate has advised that, if additional funding was to be made available, the Council’s play area at Princesfield, Waltham Abbey would benefit from much-needed improvements. Due to its current limited space, this play area is not considered to be well-equipped with facilities for a range of age groups (as other play areas generally are). It is therefore proposed to extend the footprint of the play area at Princesfield to enable more equipment to be installed. A consultation exercise will be undertaken with local residents in order to seek their views on the available options. The

one-off cost of the work would be around £30,000, and it would be necessary to increase the annual Play Area Maintenance Budget by £2,000 per annum to meet the additional cost of repairs and inspections.

Recommendation:

That the existing Council play area on the Princesfield Estate, Waltham Abbey be increased in size, with additional and improved play equipment provided.

(7) Making the existing temporary Part-Time Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) post permanent and full time (already recommended to the Cabinet)

One-off cost(s):	Nil
Annual cost:	£8,000 p/a
Form of expenditure:	Revenue

1. The Cabinet previously agreed that a new part-time post of Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) be appointed on a temporary part-time basis (22.5 hours per week) for a Social Housing Fraud Pilot Scheme for a 12-month period. The post has been partly-funded by the CLG as part of the Government's national initiative to tackle social housing fraud. The Cabinet asked that, after around 10 months of the commencement of the project, a formal evaluation be undertaken.

2. The Housing Scrutiny Panel received a presentation on the Pilot Scheme and undertook an evaluation at its meeting on 31 January 2012. The Scrutiny Panel considered the progress made, which included the potential recovery of 6 properties, the prevention of two fraudulent Right to Buy applications (avoiding the Council giving discounts of around £68,000) and a further property not being allocated to a housing applicant since they were found to be providing false information on their housing application form. This enabled the recovered properties to be let to legitimate applicants on the Council's Housing Register, and recovering overpaid housing benefit in a number of cases.

3. Two further cases were also close to being resolved, which were expected to result in two further properties being recovered due to non-occupation or sub-letting and, again, re-let to legitimate Housing Register applicants, with Housing Benefit Fraud Investigators also investigating associated housing benefit fraud.

4. The Scrutiny Panel considered that the amount of progress made with the Pilot Scheme, which had only been operating for around 8 months from a standing start, was a good achievement. In view of this success, the Scrutiny Panel recommended to the Cabinet that the existing part-time post of Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) be made both permanent and full-time, with an increase in hours from 22.5 hours to 36 hours per week.

5. The Cabinet will be considering the Scrutiny Panel's report and recommendation at its meeting on 12th March 2012. If agreed, the additional cost will need to be funded from this budget.

Recommendation:

That, if the previous recommendation of the Housing Scrutiny Panel is agreed by the Cabinet, the additional costs of making the existing Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) full-time and permanent be funded from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget.

(8) Creation of a Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) Post

One-off cost(s):	Nil
Annual cost:	£28,500 p/a
Form of expenditure:	Revenue

1. Background information on the Social Housing Fraud Pilot Scheme is given in (7) above. In view of the success of the Pilot Scheme, at its meeting on 31st January 2012, the Panel also agreed that the creation of a second permanent post of Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) be included in the list of possible housing improvements and service enhancements, for consideration at this meeting.

2. This additional post would enable a public awareness campaign (including the promotion of a Social Housing Fraud Hotline) and more “tenancy audits” on targeted housing estates to be undertaken. This is not currently possible, due to the one existing Housing Fraud Officer post being unable to respond to the anticipated number of leads and meet/manage informants’ expectations. It would also enable additional leads to be followed-up, which it is expected would result in further social housing and housing benefit fraud being uncovered, more properties being brought back into proper use, and further savings made to the Council. It would also enable the Council to be in a better position to respond to the Government’s proposals to criminalise social housing fraud, if/when they are introduced, which brings with it a higher test of evidence and associated workload, but with better results and a greater deterrence.

3. Since around 75% of all cases either investigated or under investigation involve housing benefit claimants, the appointment of a second post would enable the important links with the Housing Benefit Fraud Investigation Team to continue and for more housing benefit fraud to be detected.

4. The appointment of a second fraud post would enable one officer to be located in each of the two Area Housing Offices, reporting to the relevant Area Housing Manger. Having a Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud), with an appropriate investigative background, would enable the senior post to take lead on the technical aspects of social housing fraud and provide guidance and support to the more junior post.

5. The ongoing costs are based on an indicative Grade 6 post (including on-costs), which would need to be properly evaluated under the Council’s Job Evaluation Scheme. The costs in Appendix 2 for 2012/13 assume an appointment in July 2012.

Recommendations:

- (a) That a new post of Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) be created with immediate effect; and**
- (b) That, if necessary, authority be given to recruit the post externally.**

(9) Installation of Key Safes at sheltered housing schemes

One-off cost(s):	£25,000 (2012/13)
Annual cost:	Nil
Form of expenditure:	Revenue

1. All of the Council's sheltered and grouped housing schemes benefit from a suited key system. This system allows the relevant Scheme Manager to hold a master key, enabling access to any property in the event of an emergency.
2. At present, "nominated tenants" within the Scheme also hold a master key on a voluntary basis, so they can be called upon by Epping Forest Careline to open a tenant's flat for the emergency services if an emergency arises and the Scheme Manager is off-duty.
3. This procedure has generally worked well over the years, but there are some schemes where tenants are, understandably, unwilling to take on this responsibility. This is because they do not want to be called upon at unsociable hours, or to be accused of entering a resident's property without their consent. Moreover, it is known that some sheltered housing tenants are unhappy with another resident holding a key to their home, even if the majority of residents have no objections.
4. This matter was recently raised with the Sheltered Housing Forum (which has resident representatives from all of the sheltered and grouped housing schemes) and the majority agreed that older residents should not have the burden and responsibility of holding a master key. As an alternative, the Forum felt that all residents living in the 13 sheltered and grouped housing schemes should have a Key Safe supplied and installed by the Council outside their front door. The Key Safe would hold a duplicate key for the tenant's property, and could only be accessed using a code set by the resident, only known by those trusted by the tenant (e.g. a carer) and the Council's Careline Service on a confidential basis. The code would only be provided by Careline to the emergency services and doctors, after which the code could be changed by the resident for future use.
5. All of the Council's Scheme Managers were consulted, who also supported the proposal.
6. Following a consultation exercise with residents, a Pilot Scheme of installing Key Safes outside each property was undertaken at Parsonage Court Sheltered Housing Scheme, Loughton, which has been very successful. The Council's Housing Repairs Service supplied and installed the Key Safes and the Scheme Manager assisted residents to set their code,
7. Residents at Parsonage Court have already noticed the benefits of having their own Key Safe, which include them no longer being locked out of their property; neighbours no longer having to hold keys for each other; the peace of mind that no one else holds a key to their flat; the one duplicate key only being accessible by people trusted by them; and that emergency personnel can access their property quickly in the event of an emergency. Residents also no longer have to worry about being charged, or actually incurring a charge, for any damage caused as a result of a forced entry.
8. The cost to the Council of extending the scheme to the remaining 12 sheltered and grouped housing schemes would be £25,000, including the supply of the Key Safes and installation.

Recommendation

In light of the successful Pilot Scheme, the installation and use of Key Safes be extended free of charge for all residents living in the Council's remaining sheltered and grouped housing schemes.

(10) Creation of a new post of Housing Under-occupation Officer

One-off cost(s):	Nil
Annual cost:	£24,500 p/a
Form of expenditure:	Revenue

1. It is known that many Council properties are under-occupied, mainly following children moving out of their family home and leaving their parent(s) in occupation. Not only does this not make the best use of the Council's housing stock, with so many housing applicants and other tenants in need of family-sized accommodation, it often results in older and vulnerable tenants incurring greater household running costs than required.

2. Under the Welfare Reform Bill currently passing through Parliament, the Government also proposes that working-age tenants on low incomes and in receipt of housing benefit, who under-occupy their property by one or more bedrooms, will have their housing benefit reduced. This will mean that such tenants will have to either move to smaller accommodation or meet the shortfall between the rent and the lower housing benefit themselves (sometimes referred to as a "bedroom tax") from the remainder of their Universal Credit. The Government currently proposes that the more a property is under-occupied, the greater the housing benefit reduction will be.

3. Under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme, under-occupying tenants who agree to move to smaller Council accommodation receive financial support from the Council of £500 plus £500 for each room "released" (up to a maximum payment of £2,000), to assist with the costs of moving. In order to encourage such tenants to move to smaller accommodation and free up their family-sized accommodation for families on the Housing Register, they also receive priority under the Allocations Scheme - and therefore greater choice - by being placed in Band 1.

4. Although the Housing Options Team endeavours to assist and encourage under-occupying tenants to transfer to smaller accommodation, they do not have the time or resources to dedicate the time to publicise and promote the benefits of downsizing.

5. A particular problem is that it is known many older and vulnerable Council tenants would like to transfer to smaller accommodation, but do not have the confidence, knowledge or ability to co-ordinate and effect a move themselves - which is generally accepted to be a very stressful experience - and do not have any family or friends willing or able to assist.

6. Moreover, many such tenants would be happy to move to sheltered accommodation, for which there is generally not as high demand as for family-sized accommodation, and often has to be allocated to housing applicants from outside the District.

7. It is therefore proposed that a new post of Housing Under-occupation Officer be created within the Older People's Housing Team, externally appointed if necessary. The proposed attachment to this Team is because it is anticipated that most of the work will involve assisting vulnerable older people to transfer, which is the Team's area of expertise. The other main benefits are that the post can be "backed-up" if necessary by the two existing Housing Assistant (Older People) posts, and there is sufficient office space available at the Careline Centre to accommodate the new post. The ongoing costs are based on an indicative Grade 5 post (including on-costs), which would need to be properly evaluated under the Council's Job Evaluation Scheme. The costs for 2012/13 shown in Appendix 2 assume an appointment in July 2012.

Recommendations:

- (a) That a new post of Housing Under-occupation Officer be created with immediate effect, to provide practical assistance to vulnerable under-occupying Council tenants who have insufficient family support, to transfer to smaller Council accommodation, and to generally seek to reduce under-occupation in the Council's housing stock; and
- (b) That, if necessary, authority be given to recruit the post externally.

(11) Increasing the existing budget for Estate Improvements and Enhancements

One-off cost(s): Nil
Annual cost: £20,000 p/a
Form of expenditure: Revenue

1. The HRA currently has a small budget of £20,000 p/a for Estate Improvements and Enhancements across the District. These include:

- Enhancement of estate lighting (e.g in dark garage areas or outside flat blocks);
- Preventative parking measures around housing greens e.g. the installation of jockey rails/bollards;
- The creation of new bin compounds for flat blocks, including the ability to comply with EU recycling regulations and to allow tenants within flat blocks to recycle, for which there is great demand;
- New and/or enhanced landscaping (e.g shrub beds and other planting); and
- Anti-social behaviour preventative measures (e.g. fencing, railings, signage, lighting and the extension of power sources in certain locations to enable mobile CCTV cameras to be used to catch fly-tippers and record anti-social behaviour).

Recommendation:

That the Estate Improvements and Enhancements Budget be doubled to £40,000 per annum, to enable additional estate improvements and enhancements to be provided across the District.

(12) Expansion of the VAEF Garden Maintenance Scheme for Older and Disabled Tenants

One-off cost(s): £20,000 (2012/13) + £20,000 (2013/14)
Annual cost: Nil
Form of expenditure: Revenue

1. The existing Garden Maintenance Scheme provided by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) has delivered an important and much-appreciated service to older and disabled Council tenants over the last eight years, and is reviewed by the Housing Portfolio Holder every two years. The Housing Portfolio Holder has agreed that the current scheme continues until the end of 2013/2014, and that £20,000 per annum be provided to VAEF - funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

2. During 2009/10 and 2010/2011, around 410 visits were made to 116 Council tenants to undertake garden clearances at a cost of around £100 per visit. Bearing in mind that the

work is often undertaken by more than one volunteer, usually takes around 5 hours to clear one garden and is well received by tenants, the Scheme is considered to represent good value for money. However, the demand for the service is far greater than the Scheme can meet with the current resources, and there is a waiting list for the Scheme.

3. VAEF has confirmed that, if it was provided with an additional £20,000 per annum until the scheme is reviewed again in 2013/14, it would be able to undertake work for around an additional 60 older and disabled tenants each year, maintaining their gardens 3 or 4 times each year, which would effectively double the number of tenants receiving the service.

4. The Scrutiny Panel suggests that, over the next year, officers review the level and standard of service provided to tenants under the Scheme and assess the additional costs that would be involved if a higher level of service was provided (e.g. more frequent maintenance). The Scrutiny Panel further suggests that it considers whether the level/standard of service should be increased from 2013/14, funded from extra budget provision from the housing improvements and service enhancements budget.

Recommendations:

(a) That the funding provided to Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) for the Garden Maintenance Scheme for Older and Disabled Tenants be increased by £20,000 per annum for two years from 2012/13, in order to increase the number of vulnerable Council tenants benefitting from the Service;

(b) That the Housing Portfolio Holder reviews the success and future funding of the Scheme during 2013/14;

(c) That, over the next year, officers review the level and standard of service provided to tenants under the Scheme and assess the additional costs that would be involved if a higher level of service was provided;

(d) That the Scrutiny Panel considers the outcome of the officer review and whether the level/standard of service should be increased from 2013/14 - funded from extra budget provision from the housing improvements and service enhancements budget - and that the Scrutiny Panel's review and recommendations be considered by the Housing Portfolio Holder as part of his/her review referred to in (b) above.

(13) Provision of additional dog waste bins on housing estates

One-off cost(s): £7,500 (2012/13)
Annual cost: £7,000 p/a
Form of expenditure: Revenue

1. Currently, there are around 100 dog waste bins throughout the District, which are emptied at a cost of £27,000 - £30,000 per year to the General Fund. Bins are emptied 3 times a week.

2. Historically, the provision of the bins has been funded from the Animal Warden Budget. However, there is insufficient budget to fund the provision and emptying of additional bins on Council housing estates. The bins cost around £250-£350 each to supply and install. However, the main cost is the emptying; each bin costs around £315 per annum to empty.

3. The presence of dog waste on housing estates is not only a potential health hazard, but is also a source of complaints from local residents. A number of locations have been

identified, where there are particular problems and the provision of additional bins would enhance the local environment.

Recommendation:

That 21 additional dog waste bins be provided and regularly emptied on Council housing estates across the District.

(14) Grant to Epping Forest Recycling Scheme

One-off cost(s): £10,000
Annual cost: Nil
Form of expenditure: Revenue

1. This proposal was put forward by a member of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, which the Scrutiny Panel agreed to support include in its recommendations to the Cabinet.
2. A group of volunteers is trying to get a new furniture recycling project off the ground - called Home2Home. Under the scheme, Home2Home will collect good quality unwanted furniture from local residents for free. The furniture will then be re-sold, at a discounted price, for those in need (i.e. people on means-tested benefits referred by particular agencies).
3. Each year, on average, the Council's Housing Options Team within the Housing Directorate provides around 12 tenancies to people who have no furniture to put into the property. People like these applicants would be the sort of household that could benefit from such a local furniture recycling project, as would any other tenants who are unable to afford new furniture prices.
4. The project advises that it costs around £500 to provide a set of basic furniture for a property, excluding the overheads such as collection and storage. Some of the furniture collected by Home2Home would otherwise go to landfill, which is currently the case for all the bulky-goods collection of furniture at present. This will save the Council landfill tax.
5. Although the project intends to benefit both Council tenants and non-Council tenants, since most of the funding will come from other sources, the Housing Scrutiny Panel feels that it would be appropriate for the HRA to fund this one-off grant, to recognise the potential benefit to the Council's tenants.

Recommendations:

That a one-grant of £10,000 be made to the proposed Home2Home Furniture Recycling Scheme, subject to the grant not being provided until there is surety and sufficient evidence provided that the Scheme will become operational and sustainable.

(15) In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund

One-off cost(s): Nil
Annual cost: £40,000
Form of expenditure: Capital / Revenue

1. The Housing Directorate has endeavoured to come up with (in the short period of time between the Cabinet's decision on the 5th December 2011 and the dispatch of the Housing Scrutiny Panel agenda) a number of useful and effective housing improvements and enhancements from the additional resources made available through HRA self-financing, that would have a direct and demonstrable benefit to the Council's tenants and could be commenced near the beginning of the 2012/13.

2. However, it is likely that small additional improvements and enhancements to benefit tenants will be identified during the course of the year by members and officers, for which it would help if they could be undertaken quickly, rather than having to wait until the commencement of the following financial year, when further funding will become available.

Recommendations:

(a) That an In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund be set aside and used to undertake small additional housing improvements and enhancements identified during the course of the year by members and officers that benefit tenants; and

(b) That the Director of Housing be authorised to determine the use of the Fund for such housing improvements and enhancements, subject to any individual one-off projects above £10,000, or any additional schemes requiring ongoing annual funding, being authorised by Housing Portfolio Holder.

Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget Programme Costs (One-off and Ongoing)								
No.	Proposal	£000's						Capital or Revenue
		2012/13		2013/14		2014/15		
		One-off	Ongoing	One-off	Ongoing	One-off	Ongoing	
1	Acceleration of Mains-Powered Smoke Detector Installation Programme	325						C
2	Handyperson Scheme for older and disabled tenants	13	78		78		78	C / R
3	Increased Disabled Adaptations Budget	75						C
4	Conversion of communal toilets for disabled use	40						C
5	Refurbishment of Jessopp Court common room and kitchen	35						C
6	Expansion/refurbishment of Princesfield Estate play area	30	2		2		2	C / R
7	Making existing Housing Fraud Officer post permanent and full time		8		8		8	R
8	Creation of Senior Housing Officer (Social Housing Fraud) post		18		29		29	R
9	Installation of Key Safes at sheltered housing schemes	25						R
10	Creation of Housing Underoccupation Officer post		16		25		25	R
11	Increased Estate Improvements and Enhancements Budget		20		20		20	R
12	Expansion of the VAEF's Garden Maintenance Scheme for Older and Disabled Tenants	20		20				R
13	Provision of additional dog waste bins on housing estates	8	7		7		7	R
14	Grant for Furniture Recycling Scheme	10						R
15	In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund		40		40		40	C / R
	TOTALS	581	189	20	209	0	209	
		770		229		209		
	Inflation for future years (2% p/a)			5		9		
	Available to allocate to other improvements & enhancements in future years			536		552		