

## ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 31 July 2012

**Subject:** Housing Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor David Stellan

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### **Recommending:**

**That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.**

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### **Council Housebuilding Programme – Update**

Members will be aware that the Council is introducing a new Council Housebuilding Programme, initially based on the construction of around 20 new homes each year for at least 6 years. These will be the first new affordable homes built by the Council for over 25 years.

Following an advert being placed in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), in January 2012, inviting interested organisations to complete Pre-Qualification Questionnaires (PQQs), the PQQ process was completed at the end of June 2012. Thirteen completed PQQs were received and, following a detailed assessment/scoring of each PQQ using the Cabinet's agreed Selection Criteria, and a formal validation/moderation process involving senior housing officers and myself, six organisations have been shortlisted to provide detailed tender submissions, comprising five housing associations and one private organisation.

The formal Invitation to Tender is due to be issued at the end of July 2012 and, due to EU procurement requirements, it is currently planned that the Development Agent will be selected at the meeting of the Cabinet in December 2012, and that the contract with the appointed Development Agent will be signed around January 2013.

At its meeting to be held on 23 July 2012, the Cabinet will be considering my report and recommendations on the proposed initial list of potential development sites for the Housebuilding Programme, for which the Council's Development Agent, when appointed, will be asked to undertake detailed Development and Financial Appraisals.

It is envisaged that the development of the first sites will commence in Summer 2014, and be completed in Winter 2014/15.

### **Customer Service Excellence Award (Annual Assessment) – Housing Directorate**

Since 2004, the Housing Directorate has held the prestigious Government Standard for Customer Service Excellence in the Public Sector (formally known as Charter Mark). To obtain the Customer Service Excellence Award, organisations must meet 57 separate assessment criteria.

Continuous compliance with the criteria is monitored through an annual assessment by an Independent Assessor. This year's assessment was undertaken on 12 & 13 July, when the Assessor visited the Housing Repairs Service and the new Limes Centre

(incorporating the Housing Office) in Chigwell. The Assessor also met with the Housing Management Team and both the Housing Resources Manager and Housing Assets Manager. He also undertook a comprehensive Document Review.

I am pleased to report that the Assessor found that the Housing Directorate continues to meet the Standard. In addition, "Compliance +" accreditation was given for two initiatives. Firstly, for Housing's implementation of our unique "in-sourced" External Repairs Management Model with Mears and, secondly, for the way in which the Directorate has managed some recent changes in housing law relating to succession. A number of other good practices were also identified.

Having the Customer Service Excellence Award gives confidence to our tenants, applicants, leaseholders, private sector housing customers and other clients that the Housing Directorate provides a high quality, customer-focused service, which it strives to continuously improve.

### **Member Information Evening on the Housing Elements of the Localism Act 2011**

I would like to thank those 30 Members who attended an Information Evening given by senior housing officers on 14 June 2012 on the housing elements of the Localism Act 2011. Under the Act, housing providers such as the Council have been given additional powers to enable decisions to be taken locally about the management and allocation of social housing.

At the session, we heard about:

- The ability to offer new tenants fixed term flexible tenancies, instead of "lifetime" secure tenancies;
- Changes to succession rules for all new tenants;
- The possibility of having a new eligibility criteria for both new and current housing applicants joining/remaining on the Housing Register, perhaps excluding applicants who have not lived within the District for a specified number of years; and
- The ability to discharge the Council's homelessness duty by placing homeless households in the private rented sector, without the agreement of the applicant.

I will shortly be considering, and making two Portfolio Holder Decisions on, the key principles that I would like officers to concentrate on in respect of both the Council's Tenancy Policy (which will set out the Council's approach to the use or otherwise of fixed term tenancies) and a revised Housing Allocations Scheme.

Officers will then produce a Draft Tenancy Policy and a revised Housing Allocations Scheme, for detailed consideration by the Housing Scrutiny Panel later in the year, who will be invited to recommend the final version of the Tenancy Policy and revised Allocations Scheme to the Cabinet for adoption.

### **Presentation by Mears - "EFDC's Housing Repairs Service – One Year On"**

Following the introduction of the innovative "insourcing" partnership model between the Council's Housing Repairs Service and Mears, the Council is now using Mears' own Housing Repairs IT System to record and manage all responsive and empty property repairs. This includes offering tenants appointments for all repairs, irrespective of the priority.

Now that Mears has been responsible for delivering the Council's Housing Repairs Service for just over a year, which as well as providing much better customer service has also significantly reduced response repair times, **all Members** are invited to the first part of the Housing Scrutiny Panel meeting, **to be held in the Committee Room at the Civic Offices at 5.30pm on 7 August 2012**, to receive a presentation from officers and Mike Gammack, the Partnership Director from Mears who has day-to-day responsibility for the Council's Housing Repairs Service. The presentation will be on "EFDC's Housing Repairs Service – One Year On", and will include a short demonstration of Mears' Housing Repairs IT system.

### **Licensing of Park Homes Sites – Further Consideration of Issues by the Housing Scrutiny Panel and Cabinet**

Most members will be aware that, following detailed consultation with site owners and park home residents associations, the Cabinet agreed in June 2011 the recommendations of the Housing Scrutiny Panel to adopt new site licence conditions, based on the Model Standards for Caravan Sites in England 2008 - with some variations. It was also agreed to allow certain contraventions that are in existence on the date the new site licence is issued.

Following the meeting, officers began making inspections of all the sites to record the specific details of the individual sites prior to issuing licences. However, whilst this process was underway, it became apparent that before officers could issue the new site licences and enforce the conditions attached to them, Members would need to provide further clarity on how they wanted some of the definitions in the conditions to be interpreted.

Therefore, following further consultation with park home residents, I am grateful to the Housing Scrutiny Panel for considering in detail, at its meeting on 28 June 2012, the issues that have arisen.

The Scrutiny Panel has now made its recommendations, which are due to be considered by the Cabinet on 23 July 2012. The Scrutiny Panel's recommendations include the proposed interpretation of some of the conditions and also the allowance of specific additional contraventions to the site licence conditions - mainly concerning the size and location of porches and decking, provided that they are in existence at the time the new site licence is issued.

### **Fire at Copperfield, Chigwell**

At around 3.30am on 29 May 2012, the Essex Fire & Rescue Service was called to a fire at 499 Copperfield, a Council-owned flat within a block of 8 flats. The tenant was able to escape from the property and alert all of the other residents, who were able to escape safely. However, one resident required assistance from the firefighters that attended, since the fire had spread to the common parts.

The firefighters tackled the fire, but the intensity of the fire caused the roof over 499 Copperfield to collapse. The Fire Service was, however, able to prevent the fire from spreading to the other properties.

Other than 499 Copperfield, and 491 Copperfield below (which was extensively damaged due to extinguishing water), all the other flats were undamaged, although they were affected by smoke damage.

Council housing and building control officers attended early in the morning, and spent most of the day on site, and as a result were able to make the building safe and secure enough to allow the other six residents to remain in their homes. The two damaged flats need to be virtually re-built, which will be largely funded by the Council's insurance company.

I am grateful to both the Essex Fire and Rescue Service and our own officers for dealing with this serious incident in such a professional and effective way.

### **Housing Repairs Charter**

Following the launch of a new "Repairs Charter" by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) at this year's National Housing Conference in Manchester, the Council is amongst one of the first 25 organisations in the country to demonstrate a commitment to continue improving its repairs and maintenance services and sign up to the Repairs Charter.

The Repairs Charter is a flexible framework that helps organisations to identify what outcomes a good quality repairs service can deliver. It is not regulatory, but a commitment towards outcomes - which are agreed locally with tenants. It starts with a self-assessment process to assess where we are now, and where we aspire to be.

This is a public commitment to our housing customers to continue to deliver a high quality repairs service, which is focused on outcomes for tenants.

### **Government Consultation Paper – "High Income Social Tenants - Pay to Stay"**

The Government's Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has issued a Consultation Paper entitled "High Income Social Tenants - Pay to Stay"

An item has recently been placed in the Council Bulletin, along with a copy of the Consultation Paper itself. The proposals concern the Government's intention to change the law to introduce a "Pay to Stay Scheme", whereby social landlords (councils and housing associations) would be able to charge higher rents to tenants on higher incomes. The Government believes that it is right that landlords should be able to require higher income social households to pay a higher rent.

The main scope of the consultation is to invite views on:

- The income threshold, above which high income tenants might be asked to pay a higher rent – the Government is suggesting £60,000, £80,000 or £100,000;
- What the higher rent level should be;
- The arrangements for the disclosure of income by tenants; and
- Whether the policy should be voluntary or compulsory for social landlords.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel is due to consider the Council's response to the Consultation Paper, based on a recommended officer response, at its meeting on 24 July 2012. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be considering the Housing Scrutiny Panel's response at its meeting on 22 August 2012, and will decide whether it wishes to submit its own response to the CLG.

The closing date for the consultation is 12 September 2012.