

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 27th September 2012

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Cllr David Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

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, and that a Development Agent is being appointed to undertake the development function on behalf of the Council.

Six organisations were shortlisted to provide detailed tender submissions, comprising 5 housing associations and 1 private organisation. The Cabinet has agreed that the appointment assessment will be based on both the quality of the tender submissions (60% of the assessment) and price (40% of the assessment). The closing date for tenders was the 7th September 2012

The tenders are currently being evaluated. As part of the evaluation, the Cabinet-appointed Selection Panel (comprising members and officers) will receive a presentation from each of the tenderers on 8th November 2012. The Selection Panel will then consider its recommendation to the Cabinet on which organisation should be appointed as the Council's Development Agent, based on the Cabinet-agreed Selection Criteria. The contract period will be for 4 years, with the possibility of extension for three further years.

It is expected that the appointed Development Agent will commence its contract in January 2013 and it is envisaged that the development of the first sites will commence in Summer 2014 and completed in Winter 2014/15.

Members Briefing – Impact and Implications of the Government's Welfare Reforms in Epping Forest

All members should have received a personal invitation from the Director of Housing about an important Briefing Session for all members on the impact and implications of the Government's Welfare Reforms in Epping Forest, **to be held at 6pm on Wednesday 26th September 2012 in Committee Rooms 1 and 2 at the Civic Offices.** I would encourage as many members as possible to attend.

Through the Welfare Reform Act, the Government is introducing a raft of changes to the benefits system. In order to understand the effects of the reforms, and to prepare for the changes, we appointed the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) to undertake a major study - tailored to the situation in Epping Forest - into the impact and implications of the welfare reforms on the Council, our tenants, private tenants in the District and on

homelessness in Epping Forest, as well as to make recommendations on how we should respond to the changes, for both the Council and our residents.

The total estimated loss in housing benefit and other welfare benefits to both Council and private tenants in Epping Forest, as a result of the welfare reforms, is significant. The Briefing Session will explain the welfare reforms, the impact and implications, and the CIH's recommendations, and will also answer members' questions.

If members have not yet responded to the invitation, please can they let Margaret Brown in the Housing Directorate know whether or not they are able to attend. Contact details were provided in the invitation letter.

Tenure Reform and the Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme

Following the recent Members Information Evening on The Housing Elements of the Localism Act 2011 (covering tenure reform and the new Government Guidance on the allocation of accommodation) - and in order to give officers some guidance on the initial approach to take in drafting a Tenancy Policy and revising the Housing Allocations Scheme for discussion by the Housing Scrutiny Panel and, ultimately, adoption by the Cabinet - I have set out my provisional views on the key principles to be followed on these two issues, in a Portfolio Holder Decision.

Tenure Reform

I have asked officers to draft a Tenancy Policy setting out the following initial proposed approach to the use of flexible (fixed term) and secure tenancies.

I believe that the Council should introduce a Pilot Scheme for the use of flexible tenancies as soon as possible, and that they should be granted to all new tenants who sign-up to the tenancy of a Council property *comprising three bedrooms or more* for a fixed term of 9 years (plus an initial introductory tenancy term of 12 months, making a 10-year fixed term period in total). This would, if agreed, assist in tackling under occupation within the Council's housing stock.

I am further proposing that the financial incentives under the Housing Allocations Scheme for Council tenants to transfer to smaller accommodation continue to apply to flexible tenants, for the first five years of the term.

I am asking the Housing Scrutiny Panel to also consider the conditions to be included in the Assessment Criteria, for use at the end of the flexible tenancy term, to assess whether or not a further flexible or secure tenancy of the same or another property should be granted. I am proposing that a tenancy (flexible or secure) should not be granted, for example, if the tenant has committed serious acts of anti-social behaviour, if there have been any other serious breaches of tenancy conditions (including significant rent arrears), or if the tenant is under-occupying the accommodation. If the property is under-occupied, it is my view that a further flexible or secure tenancy should be offered of a suitable smaller property, provided all of the other requirements of the agreed Assessment Criteria are met.

I will also be asking the Housing Scrutiny Panel to review the success of the Pilot Scheme after 12 months and submit a report to the Cabinet on its review.

New Housing Allocations Scheme

The new Government Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation, following the new flexibilities provided by the Localism Act 2011, has now been published. Accordingly, I

have asked officers to draft a revised Housing Allocations Scheme in accordance with the new rules and powers, on the basis of the following proposed principles.

Firstly, I strongly believe that a new Local Eligibility Criteria should be introduced, on the basis that all *new* applicants for the Housing Register must have lived within the Epping Forest District for at least three years immediately prior to their date of registration and must also have a defined housing need (as determined by at least one criterion of a priority band within the new Scheme).

I am also proposing that new *and* existing applicants should be excluded from the Housing Register if they have sufficient income and/or savings/assets to enable them to purchase their own accommodation, and that the current criteria/assessment within the existing Housing Allocations Scheme (which demotes an applicant to the lowest band in such circumstance) should be used for this assessment.

I am concerned that we now have around 6,200 applicants on our Housing Register, many of whom have no chance of being accommodated and have false hope that we will be able to assist them. I therefore feel that we need to take steps to reduce the size of the Housing Register, as well as giving priority to applicants who live in Epping Forest. Therefore, it is also my initial view that all *existing* housing applicants who have lived within the District for less than 2½ years immediately prior to the date the new Housing Allocations Scheme is introduced should be removed from the Housing Register at that time. I also feel that existing applicants on the Housing Register who have no housing need should also be removed.

Because we continue to have difficulty letting some properties in sheltered housing schemes, I am suggesting that a separate Supplementary Waiting List be introduced, for which applicants over 60 years of age who do not meet the new Local Eligibility Criteria (e.g. who live outside the District) can register. Such applicants would then be offered tenancies - in registration date order on the Supplementary Waiting List - of any Council and housing association properties for which no successful expressions of interest from eligible Housing Register applicants have been received through the HomeOptions Scheme, for at least two bidding cycles.

I am also asking the Housing Scrutiny Panel to consider reducing the number of priority bands within the Housing Allocations Scheme, in the light of the reduced numbers of applicants, to make the Scheme more manageable and to give applicants more realistic expectations of where they stand.

Former Armed Forces Personnel

In accordance with recent Government Regulations, from 24 August 2012, local authorities must not disqualify from access to their Housing Registers members of the Armed Forces and former Service Personnel who do not have local connection with their District, where the application is made within 5 years of discharge. Also included within this legal requirement are bereaved spouses and civil partners of members of the Armed Forces leaving services' Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner.

I support the approach adopted by the Government for these new Regulations. Furthermore, I have agreed to use the *discretion* given to councils in the Regulations that any Armed Forces and former Service Personnel who join our Housing Register will be given priority above all other applicants within Band One, if they are assessed by the Council's Medical Advisor as having "Strong Medical Need" as a result of any serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service.

I will be asking the Housing Scrutiny Panel to review the Housing Allocations Scheme again after 12 months operation, in order to consider whether or not any further changes are required, and to submit a report to the Cabinet on the outcome of its review and any recommended changes.

Additional Funding for the Council's C.A.R.E. Service

I am pleased to report that the Council's Home Improvement Agency, C.A.R.E., has been successful in a bid for funding from the Electrical Safety Council - a UK charity that aims to keep people safe by reducing the risk of electrical accidents around the home and in the work place.

The funding of £2,500, which has to be used by 31 March 2013, will help older home owners who are on a low income and are either over 60 years of age or are disabled. The Scheme will cover minor electrical works costing up to £500 per household, where it is considered that there is an electrical safety issue. This could include, but is not limited to, upgrading earthing, bonding and consumer units and providing additional electrical sockets.

If Members are aware of anyone who they think may fulfill the criteria, please can they contact C.A.R.E. on 01992 564086 or at pshGrantsandCare@eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

'Safe and Well' - Home from Hospital Scheme

I am also pleased to report on another successful funding bid by C.A.R.E. In partnership with the Papworth Housing Trust and the WRVS, NHS West Essex is providing funding of £150,000 to set up a scheme to aid the timely discharge of older and disabled people from hospital and reduce admissions and readmissions. These outcomes will be achieved by providing minor adaptations and equipment to ensure homes are safe on return from hospital. Service users will also be provided with advice and support until they are well enough and have the confidence to cope.

The Scheme will operate across the whole of West Essex. The Papworth Housing Trust, which provides Home Improvement Agencies in Harlow and Uttlesford, will offer specialist information and support relating to housing options, home safety living arrangements and benefits. They will also provide and fit equipment as required. This may take place both pre and post-admission, in liaison with district nurses and GPs.

Fully-trained WRVS volunteers will provide practical support and befriending service users in hospital and/or on their return home. This support will be initially provided for up to 6 weeks, with options to extend if required. A transport scheme will be put into place to take people to and from hospital and appointments.

C.A.R.E.'s role will be to provide Handyperson-type services to the users of the scheme in our District who are owner occupiers and private tenants. VAEF, who already operate some of the services outlined above, will also be providing services under the Scheme.

The details of the Scheme, such as when it will begin and how it will operate, are still to be finalised and further information will be made available as soon as possible.

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

I would like to thank those members who attended the Presentation by the Housing Directorate and Mears (the Council's repairs management contractor) on 7th August 2012, which explained the significant progress made in achieving a step-change in the

Housing Repairs Service within the first year of Mears' appointment, following the transfer of responsibility to the Housing Directorate a few years ago.

Members heard about how our Mears' Housing Repairs IT System now records and manages all the Council's responsive and empty property repairs, including the provision of tenants' appointments for all repairs (irrespective of the priority), providing much better customer service, and how the partnership has significantly reduced response repair times.

The Government's "High Income Social Tenants: Pay to Stay" Consultation

In June of this year, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) issued a Consultation Paper entitled "High Income Social Tenants: Pay to Stay". Under the proposals, "high earners" living in social housing with incomes over a specified threshold (to be determined – but proposed at either £60,000, £80,000 or £100,000) may be required to pay higher rents – around 80% of market rents in an area.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and formulated the Council's response to the Consultation Paper, saying that the Council agreed with the principle - provided that income thresholds are set to ensure that residents have a reasonable expendable income and that the scheme is not bureaucratic. The Scrutiny Panel also suggested that the cost of administering the scheme should not be higher than the additional income received, and that any surplus income should firstly be spent on the additional staff required to administer the scheme and then to generally improve housing services.

The Scrutiny Panel had concerns that the proposal could give tenants a reduced incentive or ambition to increase their earnings, by either accepting workplace promotions or seeking higher paid jobs. By applying absolute thresholds, a person's expendable income could reduce dramatically following a small increase in earnings. Importantly, should the proposals be introduced, the Scrutiny Panel felt that income disclosure arrangements must be put in place in advance to enable officers to assess tenants income, ideally, with income data provided by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

The Tenants and Leaseholder's Federation agreed with the Council's response.

Celebrate "Older Peoples Day" at the Council's Sheltered Housing Scheme – 1st October 2012

UK Older People's Day will be held on 1st October 2012 to coincide with the UN International Day for Older Persons. The main aim of the Day is to be a national celebration of the achievements and contributions that older people make to our society. It's a great way to build new relationships between people of all ages and bring together the local community.

As part of the celebrations, events are being held at many of the Council's sheltered housing schemes on this day, to which all Members are invited. These include coffee mornings, bingo sessions, afternoon tea etc. A small charge will be made for refreshments, with all proceeds going to the residents' House Fund Accounts.

Details of the locations are being published in the Council Bulletin. I hope that some members will be able to attend and help celebrate the contribution that older people make to our communities.