

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 18 December 2012

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stellan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

New Tenure Policy and Housing Allocations Scheme – Extraordinary Meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel

I wanted to remind all members about the Extraordinary Meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel to be held in the Council Chamber at 5,30pm, on Monday 17th December 2012, which many non-members of the Housing Scrutiny Panel may want to attend. Members will be able to take part in the discussion on the Council's proposed new Tenancy Policy (proposing the introduction of fixed 10-year tenancies for re-lets of Council properties with three or more bedrooms) and a new Housing Allocations Scheme (proposing, amongst other aspects, a local eligibility criteria for applicants joining the Housing Register, less priority given to homeless households, a reduced number of priority bands and how existing applicants who do not meet the new eligibility criteria should be treated).

Council Housebuilding Programme – Appointment of Development Agent

At the last Cabinet Meeting, it was agreed that East Thames Group, one of the Council's Preferred Housing Association Partners, should be appointed as the Development Agent for our new Council Housebuilding Programme. The Programme will initially be based on the construction of around 20 new homes each year for at least 6 years.

The Development Agent is being appointed to undertake the whole development function on behalf of the Council. The contract period will be for 4 years, with the possibility of extension for three further years.

I was involved with the selection process in a number of ways. Firstly, I took part in the moderation process for the selection of short-listed applicants at the Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) stage. I then received, and helped score, the presentations from the tenderers and, finally, I was involved with the Selection Panel's decision on the recommended appointment (based on the scoring by the Officer Evaluation Panel). The Cabinet's agreed Selection Criteria had previously determined that the tender submissions should be based on both their quality (60% of the assessment) and the price (40% of the assessment). I am pleased to report that East Thames not only provided the most competitive price, but their approach was also assessed as providing the best quality.

As members will be aware, the Cabinet has previously agreed a list of 58 potential development sites across the District in the Council's ownership for the Council Housebuilding Programme – mainly difficult-to-let garage sites. The Development

Agent will undertake detailed development and financial appraisals for each of these sites, to determine whether or not they do have development potential and are financially viable.

At its last meeting, the Cabinet therefore also recommended that the Leader considers the establishment of a new Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee to oversee the Development Programme and to consider all of the development and financial appraisals that come forward, with delegated authority to sign them off on behalf of the Council and to determine the sites for which detailed planning applications should be submitted.

I am anxious that all members have an opportunity to express their views on potential Council developments in their ward, before decisions to submit planning applications are made. I therefore hope that all members agree that the formation of a Cabinet Committee for this purpose would provide a good forum at which ward members could express their views.

It is expected that the contract with East Thames will be signed in January 2013, once the required "standstill period" (under EU procurement regulations) between the tender award date and the contract date (during which unsuccessful tenderers can challenge) has expired. It is envisaged that the development of the first sites will commence in 2014 and be completed in Winter 2014/15.

Use of Government Grant to Prevent Homelessness

As part of this year's Local Government Grant settlement, the Council has been awarded £113,000 per annum for the next 2 years (which is the same amount received for the previous 2 years), specifically for the purpose of preventing homelessness. Although the Government has not specifically "ring-fenced" this grant for homelessness prevention, at its last meeting the Cabinet agreed that the grant should be used for this purpose in view of the importance it places on preventing homelessness within our community.

The Housing Directorate's Homelessness Prevention Service, introduced in January 2003, has proved to be a great success, bringing about a huge reduction in the level of homelessness acceptances and leading to significant numbers of people being able to remain in their own homes. Therefore, the Cabinet has agreed that part of the Government's funding should be used to create an additional temporary Homelessness Prevention Officer post, to help deal with the anticipated increased homelessness as a result of the Government's Welfare Reforms, recently identified by the Chartered Institute of Housing in their report to the Council.

The use of the grant over the next two years will mean that the Homelessness Prevention Service will continue to be funded mainly from Government grant funding, with only a small contribution having to be made from the General Fund. Indeed, the Service has brought significant savings to the General Fund over the years by, amongst other things, reducing the number of single homeless applicants who have had to be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Therefore, our approach is to "spend to save".

In accordance with the Council's recently-adopted Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, and to avoid the need for any contribution from the General Fund, the Cabinet also agreed that a small proportion of the grant should be set aside to meet the non-HRA financial contribution required to fund Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau to appoint two paid Debt Advisors for 18 months. These posts will provide independent advice on debts and benefits to local residents, should the Cabinet agree to this

proposal at its February meeting when it considers the use of the HRA's contribution through the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget.

Finally, in order to assist homeless applicants secure private rented accommodation, the Cabinet agreed that the remainder of the Government's grant should fund around a further 20 loans under the Council's successful Rental Loan Scheme.

Off-Street Parking Schemes

In April 2011, the Cabinet approved the construction of Phase 1 of the off-street parking schemes at Hillcroft and Colebrook Gardens, Loughton and School Lane, Abbess Roding. Then, in October 2012, the Cabinet approved the construction of schemes at Chester Close, Harvey Gardens and Audley Gardens, Loughton. However, before any further schemes were agreed for construction, the Cabinet wanted to review the success or otherwise of the first schemes constructed to make sure they had a positive impact on improving the parking conditions in the surrounding areas.

At its last meeting, the Cabinet was able to reflect on the success of the first schemes to be constructed and subsequently agreed the construction of the Phase 3 schemes at Barfields Gardens, Loughton and Avenue Road, Theydon Bois. The Cabinet also approved a revised ranking table, from which the top six sites were approved for design and build, subject to the average cost per bay being below £5,000. The six top sites on the list are at Centre Avenue/Green, Epping; Parndon House, Buckhurst Hill; Harveyfields, Waltham Abbey; Collard Green, Loughton; Grosvenor Close, Loughton, and Gravel Close, Chigwell Row.

Formation of Tenant Scrutiny Panel

With the support of myself and officers, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation is in the process of establishing a new Tenant Scrutiny Panel to look in-depth at the ongoing performance of the Housing Service. It will also carry out a detailed review of one housing service each year, making any recommendations to the Council for any further identified improvements.

The aim of tenant scrutiny is to give tenants more power in holding their landlords to account for their decisions, performance and conduct. Changes to social housing regulation in England from April 2012 require landlords to be more proactive in self-regulation and in involving tenants in the scrutiny process.

Following an advertisement in Housing News, and with the assistance of Housing Officers, a group of ten tenants has now been recruited by the Federation. All members of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel will be given sufficient training to enable them to carry out their duties. Initially, the Council is providing a one day training session in January 2013. To reduce costs, and to provide opportunities for tenants to network with other tenants, this training is being held, and funded, jointly with Uttlesford District Council.

The role of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel is to take an independent view of the performance of the Housing Service and to undertake all scrutiny activities on behalf of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. The Scrutiny Panel will also assess the performance of the Housing Service against expected standards through its published Housing Service Standards, Tenant-Selected Performance Indicators, and benchmarking reports. In addition, members will liaise with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation to agree the subject area for the annual Housing Service Review.