

Report to the Council

Subject: Housing

Date: 19 February 2013

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Site Licences for Permanent Residential Park Home Sites

I am pleased to report that, following approval last year of the conditions to be attached to site licences for the District's permanent residential park home sites, all the required site licences were successfully issued by mid-December 2012. Letters were also sent to all residents advising them of the new conditions.

Inspections have been carried out on all the sites to confirm any changes that have been made on site since the time of earlier inspections, carried out prior to the Cabinet meeting. It has been noted that, in some cases, hedges and fences have already been reduced in height to comply with the new conditions.

With the assistance of funding from the County Council, C.A.R.E. Caseworkers are helping older and other vulnerable residents to install smoke detectors that meet the standards required in the site licence conditions and to reduce the height of hedges where necessary. 31 applications for assistance were received from the 116 residents with closed porches requiring smoke detection works. Letters are also being sent out to 83 residents with hedges in excess of the permitted height, also inviting applications for assistance where they are eligible.

Consultation on the Draft new Tenancy Policy and the Draft Housing Allocations Scheme

The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered both the draft new Tenancy Policy and the revised Housing Allocations Scheme just before Christmas and, as a result, we are currently consulting on both documents. The consultation period closes on 15 March 2013. The Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel will be presenting both draft documents to the Cabinet in April 2013.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel is recommending to the Cabinet that (subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise) the Council should introduce a Pilot Scheme to provide new 10-year fixed-term flexible tenancies to all new tenants of properties with three or more bedrooms (including an Introductory Tenancy period). The Scrutiny Panel has recommended that the scheme be reviewed after 12 months' operation.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel is also recommending a revised Housing Allocations Scheme, which proposes the most comprehensive change to the way in which the Council allocates its social housing. In particular, under the proposed new Local Eligibility Criteria, applicants will have had to have lived in the Epping Forest District for more than three continuous years, immediately prior to their date of registration, to join the Housing Register. Under the current Scheme, the residency period is 12 months.

Members or former members of the Armed or Reserve Forces or their spouses or family members will generally be exempt from the residency criteria

Furthermore, in order to qualify under the new Scheme, an applicant must have a housing need - as defined by at least one banding criterion - must not have sufficient funds to enable them to meet their own housing costs, and must not have been guilty of serious unacceptable behaviour within the previous three years.

Existing applicants who do not meet the new eligibility criteria will be removed from the Housing Register (although existing residents who have lived in the District for more than 2½ years will be allowed to remain).

There are currently around 6,600 applicants on the Housing Register. If the Cabinet agrees the proposals, it is anticipated that this number will reduce by around 3,000 applicants when the new scheme comes into force, around July this year.

Locata Housing Services (LHS) Hosting System

The Council's very successful Choice Based Lettings (HomeOption) Scheme has been administered by Locata Housing Services (LHS) since the Scheme was first introduced in November 2007.

I recently agreed the purchase and use of an additional IT module from LHS, in order to streamline existing housing registration and allocations processes and to enable all housing applicants to register on-line – although those applicants who do not have access to a computer, or generally have difficulty in applying, will be given assistance by officers. This will enhance the service to our customers and remove the need for officers to upload each applicant's individual information manually onto the current system. The new module will be commissioned later this year.

Council Housebuilding Programme

I reported at the last Council meeting that East Thames had been appointed, subject to contract, as the Council's Development Agent for our new Housebuilding Programme. Discussions with East Thames over the contract for its appointment are on-going and it is hoped that the contract will be signed and in place by the end of February 2013.

In the meantime, initial meetings have taken place with East Thames, in which a number of proposals on the programme have been formulated, including the format for financial modelling, site appraisals and feasibility studies. East Thames is now arranging joint site visits to all 60 identified potential development sites and will be meeting planning officers in due course to discuss any general planning requirements relating to the Programme, prior to the commencement of detailed feasibility studies.

The first meeting of the new Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee is being arranged for mid-March 2013, where the general approach to many aspects of the Programme will be discussed and agreed.

Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan – Quarterly Progress Report

As members will be aware, in view of the significant effect that the welfare reforms will have on the Council and our residents, the Cabinet has adopted a Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, which identifies around 60 separate actions to mitigate these effects.

In addition to progress with the Action Plan being monitored at officer level by the Mitigation Project Team, the Cabinet also asked the Housing Scrutiny Panel to monitor progress with the delivery of the Action Plan at its quarterly meetings. The first Quarterly Progress Report on the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan was presented to the Housing Scrutiny Panel at its January meeting.

It was noted that very good progress has been made to date, with almost 40% of the identified actions having been either already achieved or being close to achievement. A further 40% of the remaining actions are either not yet, or no longer, required.

Funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau for Two Debt Advisor Posts

One of the actions within the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan is to fund the appointment of two temporary full-time Debt Advisors by the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) for 18 months from April 2013. The funding of £67,900 will be predominantly met from the HRA's Housing Improvements and Service Enhancement Fund, with the remainder being met from the Government's Homelessness Prevention Grant. No expenditure will fall to the General Fund.

The posts will provide independent debt advice to both Council and non-Council tenants, to help them mitigate and deal with the effects of the Government's welfare reforms. It is also anticipated that the service will assist the Council, by helping to keep rent arrears and homelessness levels to a minimum.

The CAB has also agreed that, as a condition of the funding, one of the Advisors will be based at the Limes Centre in Chigwell for one afternoon each week.

Marden Close Conversion Scheme and Lease of Faversham Hall, Chigwell Row

At its meeting on 4th February 2013, the Cabinet agreed, in principle, that the Council undertakes the conversion of the 20 vacant bedsits at Marden Close, Chigwell Row into 10 one-bedroomed flats, and that our new Development Agent, East Thames Housing Group, should design and project-manage the scheme.

The bedsits have been unpopular and difficult-to-let in recent years. The converted one-bedroom flats will be let to general-needs applicants on our Housing Register.

The Cabinet also agreed that the details and delivery of the scheme should be overseen and agreed by the new Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee which, in the first instance, will consider detailed Development and Financial Appraisals and approve the submission of a planning application. The scheme will be funded from the HRA's Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund (see below).

The Cabinet also agreed that, in principle, Chigwell Parish Council should be offered a 10-year lease for the ground floor of neighbouring Faversham Hall (which is in the District Council's ownership) at a peppercorn rent, to let to the local community on key terms agreed by the Cabinet, following consultation with the Parish Council. However, if the Parish Council decides not to accept the lease, the Cabinet agreed that the District Council should pursue the conversion of the ground floor of Faversham Hall into two self-contained flats.

Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements – 2013/14

At its meeting in January 2013, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered a report on progress and the latest forecast expenditure for the 17 separate housing improvements and service enhancements, previously agreed by the Cabinet, which are being

undertaken in the current year and funded from the HRA's Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund. It was noted that very good progress has been made, with most of the projects completed.

The Scrutiny Panel also considered further housing improvements and service enhancements to be undertaken in 2013/14, funded from the additional £570,000 HRA resources available next year, and have recommended four projects to the Cabinet. This includes the establishment of a Major Capital Housing Projects Reserve, to enable resources to be accumulated and available when required for major capital housing projects. The Scrutiny Panel is proposing that £330,000 be allocated to the Reserve next year, with further sums of £850,000 in each of the following years, with the proposed Marden Close Conversion Scheme (referred to above) having the first call on the Reserve.

Even then, there will still be around £450,000 per annum available to spend in future years on new housing improvements and service enhancements.

Rough Sleepers

A number of members have raised concerns with me during the recent cold weather about those who may be rough sleeping in the District. The Council is required to submit a statistical return on a "snapshot" of rough sleepers in the District during November of each year. In order to assess the numbers, our officers contact a range of partner agencies, including Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau, the Police, Community Mental Health Team and the Community Drug and Alcohol Team. Following this consultation process, we did not identify any rough sleepers in November 2012.

In addition, the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team works hard to prevent any rough sleeping occurring. Where a person presents themselves to the Council as homeless, if - whilst the Council undertakes its investigations - there is a risk of rough sleeping, applicants are referred to a night shelter in either Chelmsford or Colchester. In 2011/2012, I agreed that a £4,500 Grant awarded to the Council by the Government for rough sleeping initiatives should be passed on to both these night shelters equally, to enable them to continue to accept both referrals from the Council and self-referrals from people who are either rough sleeping, or threatened with rough sleeping within the District.

'Safe and Well' - Home from Hospital Scheme

Members will recall my report in September 2012 when I explained that Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest (C.A.R.E.) was partnering with the Papworth Trust and the WRVS in a scheme to aid the timely discharge of older and disabled people from hospital and to reduce admissions and re-admissions. The Scheme, called 'Safe and Well', is now operating across West Essex. Through the Scheme, minor adaptations and equipment can be installed in people's homes to ensure that they are safe on their return from hospital. Service users are also provided with advice and support until they are well enough and have the confidence to cope.

The Papworth Trust, which provides Home Improvement Agencies in Harlow and Uttlesford, is offering specialist information and support relating to housing options, home safety living arrangements and benefits. They are also providing and fitting equipment as required. This may take place both pre- and post-admission, in liaison with district nurses and GPs.

Fully-trained WRVS volunteers are providing practical support, and befriend service users in hospital, and/or on their return home. This support is initially provided for up to 6 weeks, with options to extend if required. A transport scheme is also being 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 that are owner occupiers and private tenants. Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF), who already operate some of the services outlined above, are also providing services under the scheme.

If any members would like further information on the Scheme, they can contact C.A.R.E. on 01992 564086 or at pshGrantsandCare@eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

Visit to Epping Depot

The Leader and I jointly visited the Housing Repairs Service recently for a tour of the Epping Depot and took the opportunity to witness for ourselves the new approach we are taking to provide a more customer-focussed, appointment-based approach to our Repairs Service for Council tenants.

Our tour started in the call centre where tenants first phone to report a repair, and continued to meet the Repairs Planners, who allocate all repairs jobs to tradesmen. We also had a live demonstration of calls being taken and jobs planned and appointed.

We were then given a demonstration of the Mears MCM IT system and were interested to see the level of detail now being held on each job, including photos taken before and after repair jobs are completed.

New supply-chain for materials

At its meeting on 4th February 2013, the Cabinet approved a new materials supply contract with Grafton Merchanting GB Ltd (Trading as Buildbase) as the sole supplier of materials for our Housing Repairs Service, for an initial period of 5-years (with an option to extend for up to a further 3 years). The appointment was based on an EU-compliant procurement exercise, taking account of both price and quality.

Buildbase submitted their tender on an "impressed van stock" approach, with each van regularly replenished with materials for the relevant trade as and when necessary. Buildbase will also link the control of materials to Mears' MCM IT system and the smartphones used by tradesmen. This will automate invoicing and stock level control, creating efficiency savings, particularly in the processing of orders and invoices.

The contract will also reduce significantly the risks associated with the stock control of materials, that has previously given concern to the Council's Audit and Governance Committee.

Training for Council staff in the event of flooding

Through the Council's Emergency Planning Team, officers have been in discussion with the Environment Agency over them undertaking an exercise-based training session on the deployment of sandbags in the event of a flood. The training was due to take place on 22 January 2012 in Loughton.

Although this had to be cancelled due to the snow, and will be rescheduled for later in the year, it is a good example of working in partnership with other organisations to mitigate the effects of natural emergencies on our residents.

Petition – Wildflower Meadow, Limes Farm, Chigwell

In accordance with the Council's Petitions Procedure, I am reporting to members here that the Council has received a petition, signed by 169 residents, requesting that the Council cultivates a "wildflower meadow" on an area of housing land on the outer edge of the Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell.

The Council's Principal Landscape Officer acknowledged the petition a few days after it was received and has already held two meetings with the lead petitioner to discuss the proposal.

In order to take the matter forward, myself and officers will be holding a meeting with ward members shortly, in order to seek their views on the request.

When I have considered all the issues, and taken into account the views of the ward members, I will make a formal Portfolio Decision on the Council's response to the petition.