

Report to the Council

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Date: 23 April 2013

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Stellan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Proposed County-wide Telecare Contract

At the last Council meeting, I made an oral statement on Essex County Council's proposal to procure an Essex-wide Telecare contract and the potential implications for the Council's own telecare service, Careline. I also undertook to keep members informed of any developments.

I asked the Director of Housing to provide an update in a recent issue of the Council Bulletin. Although there was little to update members on, formally - since the last official communication we have received is still that the County Council intends to procure a county-wide telecare contract - there are two developments in which members may be interested.

Firstly, at the recent Housing Scrutiny Panel meeting, Councillor Janet Whitehouse explained that one of the County Council's Scrutiny Committees had considered this issue and had agreed to raise its concerns with the County Council's Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care.

Secondly, this matter was discussed at a recent meeting of the West Essex Locality Board, which comprises EFDC Cabinet Members, County Council Division Members, the three local MPs and a nominated County Council Cabinet Member, Councillor John Aldridge, who co-incidentally is also Essex CC's Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and responsible for any decisions relating to the proposed Essex-wide telecare contract.

At the Locality Board meeting, Councillor Aldridge explained that he had not made any formal Portfolio Holder Decision on whether or not the County Council should procure an Essex-wide contract. Following the meeting, at my request, the Director of Housing asked Councillor Aldridge for some clarification on the County Council's position on this important issue. The Director re-iterated that all the existing Essex Telecare Providers (including EFDC) were prepared to discuss with the County Council ways that we could work together, in partnership, to streamline the existing service provision - with consistent charges, funding and service specification across Essex - to avoid the need for the County Council to procure a new, separate, County-wide contract.

In response, Councillor Aldridge said that he would be interested in exploring such a way forward and undertook to discuss this possibility further with his officers and to let us know the outcome of those discussions.

New Tenancy Policy and Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme

At the time of writing, the Cabinet is due to consider both the Council's new Tenancy Policy and new Housing Allocations Scheme. Both documents have been considered by the Housing Scrutiny Panel who will be reporting their findings to the Cabinet in April, with a view to them taking effect from 1 September 2013. We have also completed a consultation exercise on these documents with all of our relevant partners, including the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, with copies also being placed on the Council's Website inviting comments from the general public.

Members will recall that, under the Localism Act, all registered providers of housing (which includes stock-holding local authorities) are required to publish their own Tenancy Policy, which sets out the types of tenancies to be granted in particular circumstances. Importantly, the Government is enabling registered providers to use Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies for, generally, a minimum term of five years. The recommendation to Cabinet is that a pilot scheme be introduced, with Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies being granted for ten years to all new tenants of properties with three bedrooms or more - predominantly to help reduce under-occupation. At the end of the fixed-term, the tenant will be assessed against an agreed Assessment Criteria to determine whether or not a further tenancy will be granted. The Housing Scrutiny Panel will be asked to review the success of the scheme after 12 months' operation.

The new Housing Allocations Scheme follows a detailed review and meets the Government's new Code of Guidance. Under the Guidance, local authorities are given powers to decide locally how Council and housing association accommodation should be allocated, based upon local priorities. Under the proposed Scheme, in order to qualify to join the Council's Housing Register, applicants will have to meet a new Local Eligibility Criteria. This includes having to be resident in the District for three years (compared to the current period of one year), having an identified housing need, not having sufficient funds to secure their own accommodation, and not having previously caused acts of anti-social behaviour.

Summary of issues discussed at first Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee

As members will be aware, the Leader has established a Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee to oversee the delivery of the Council's own development Programme.

In March, the Cabinet Committee held its first meeting, at which East Thames (the Council's Development Agent) attended with Pellings (their designers and Employers Agent), firstly, to introduce themselves but also to provide an insight into their proposed strategic approach to delivering the Housebuilding Programme.

No decisions were made at the meeting, since it was only to discuss preliminary issues, but our discussions included:

- The formulation of the Development Programme and the proposed sites.
- The agreed conversion scheme at Marden Close, Chigwell Row
- Feedback from a meeting with the Council's planning officers
- The funding options available for the Programme
- Obtaining Homes and Communities Investment Partner Status, to potentially access grant in the future
- The format, content and assumptions for financial appraisals and feasibility studies for each site
- The proposed Design Standards; and

- The proposed approach to compiling and monitoring the Risk Register for both individual sites and the Programme as a whole.

At our next meeting, it is proposed that the development and financial appraisals for the first sites will be presented by East Thames, to which the local Ward Members will be invited. We will also be asked to agree formally the proposed approach to rents for the new developments and how the Development Programme will be funded.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan

Following detailed consideration by the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, to whom I am grateful, I have formally adopted the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for 2013-2014.

The HRA Business Plan not only sets out the Council's objectives and strategies as landlord to our 6,500 homes for the next year, it also provides some very useful information and facts on housing services. In particular, this year's Business Plan includes new Key Housing Priorities for 2013-14 to meet our Housing Objectives; a new Key Action Plan; an updated HRA Financial Plan; and an updated Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan.

The Business Plan also includes a useful Plain English Summary, which is provided to all Housing staff so that they are aware of what we want to achieve over the coming year and how we intend to do this.

If any members would like either an electronic or hard copy of the full Business Plan or the Plain English Summary, they are welcome to contact the Director of Housing for a copy.

Private Sector Housing Business Plan 2013-2015

I have also recently signed off the Private Sector Housing Business Plan 2013-15. This updates the previous Plan, which was published in 2011, and outlines the direction the Private Sector Housing Service will take over the next two years. A full copy of the Plan is available on the Council's website, but the key activities include:

- The future of our C.A.R.E. Service's contract with Essex County Council (C.A.R.E. is the Council's Home Improvement Agency. This two-year contract expires at the end of June 2013 with an option to extend for a further one or two years but, to date (and although expected), no firm commitment has yet been given by ECC on extending it.
- A trial of the use of one of the Council's framework contractors to carry out adaptations for disabled owner-occupiers and private tenants through Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), in order to reduce costs and provide a more streamlined service.
- Licensing the District's remaining park homes sites, which are those occupied by gypsies and travellers and holiday sites.
- Maximising the amount of New Homes Bonus the Council can receive by bringing as many long-term empty private sector homes back into use as possible
- Working towards implementing a County-wide Landlord Accreditation Scheme.

The Council's new "Modern Home Standard"

Having achieved the Government's Decent Home Standard for all of the Council's properties some years ago, officers have now developed what is to be called our "Modern Home Standard". We are defining this as a home that is modern, well maintained, in good condition, decent, warm and safe.

To achieve the Modern Home Standard, we are looking to replace the key building components within our Council homes, such as heating, wiring, windows, doors, kitchens, bathrooms and roofs, within industry standard expected life cycles, whilst also taking account of its condition. This will mean that we need to replace around 3,360 individual key components each year. However, in order to clear the backlog of repairs, we are planning to replace around 20% more key components than this each year.

More details on future planned maintenance programmes can be found in the recently updated Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan.

Commencement of Materials Supplies Contract

In the past, we have operated our own materials stores within the Housing Repairs Service, based on ad-hoc procurement arrangements with a range of different suppliers. However, to take advantage of economies of scale and to obtain value for money in terms of efficiencies, costs and quality, the Housing Directorate has undertaken an EU-compliant procurement exercise to appoint one sole supplier of building materials for use by the Housing Repairs Service (and other Directorates within the Council if required) over an initial 5-year period, with an option to extend for a further 3-years.

The most economically advantageous tender was submitted by Grafton Merchanting GB Ltd (trading as Buildbase). The new contract is due to commence in early May 2013, once the required IT interface has been installed between Mears' IT system, the smartphones used by the Council's tradesmen and Buildbase's own IT systems - which will link the control of the supply of materials with automated invoicing and stock control.

New Tenant Scrutiny Panel established

The Tenant and Leaseholders Federation's new 'Tenant Scrutiny Panel' has now been set up, with the help and support of the Council, and met for the first time in February to choose its Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary.

Tenant scrutiny aims to give tenants more power in holding their landlords to account for their decisions, performance and conduct. As a result of changes to social housing regulation from April 2012, landlords now have to be more proactive in self-regulation and involve tenants in shaping services.

Under the theme of 'Community Engagement', one of the Cabinet's Key Objectives for this year is to 'put communities at the centre of policy development and service design', with one of the 'key deliverables' being the facilitation of a new Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

The role of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel is to take an independent view of the Housing Directorate's performance and undertake all scrutiny activities on behalf of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. In addition to carrying out in-depth reviews of the Directorate's performance, it will also carry out a detailed service review of one housing service each year, making any recommendations for further improvements.

Following an advertisement in Housing News, eight tenants have been recruited to the Panel, who attended a training day held jointly with Uttlesford District Council. They have decided that their first service review will be on how the Housing Directorate deals with complaints. The Panel will look in depth at the way complaints are processed, monitored and analysed, but will not include consideration of the specific details of individual cases.

Official Opening of new affordable homes in Sewardstone Road, Waltham Abbey

On 1 March 2013, I was pleased to be able to say a few words on behalf of the Council at the Official Opening of 95 new affordable houses by the Chairman of Council in Sewardstone Road, Waltham Abbey, overlooking King George's Reservoir.

This former brownfield site previously accommodated the kennels for Walthamstow Greyhound Track. Although in the Metropolitan Green Belt, the Council agreed that there were very special circumstances for allowing the development to go ahead, including the fact that 80% of the new homes on the site would be provided as affordable housing (double the amount normally expected). The development also includes many environmental and ecological design features, and the donation of part of the site to the Corporation of London (as a woodland and an improvement to the existing bridleway), as well as a new community hall and community shop, managed by Waltham Abbey Town Council.

The 57 affordable rented homes have been provided by Hastoe Housing Association, one of the Council's Preferred Housing Association Partners, and the 38 shared ownership homes were provided by Genesis Housing Association. They were all built by the Hill Partnership, a major builder of affordable housing for housing associations, based in Waltham Abbey.