

# ***Report to the Council***

**Subject: Housing Portfolio**

**Date: 26 September 2013**

**Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stellan**

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**Recommending:**

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

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## **Straw bale houses – Official Opening**

Along with the Chairman and Leader of Council, and a number of other members, I was pleased to attend the Official Opening by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, The Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP, on 13 September 2013 of the four straw bale houses constructed by Hastoe Housing Association, in partnership with the Council, on former Council-owned land at Millfield, High Ongar:



As I explained in my report to the last Council Meeting, the development provides the first straw bale houses built by a housing association in the country.

It was also a pleasure to meet with the new tenants of one of the houses, who showed us around their new home and explained the benefits that they were already experiencing from the very high insulating properties of the straw bales construction.

**Implementation of the new Housing Allocations Scheme**

At its meeting on 15 April 2013, the Cabinet agreed a revised Housing Allocations Scheme, effective from 1 September 2013. I thought that members may appreciate an update on progress with the implementation of this major project.

As members will be aware, under the new Allocations Scheme, the number of priority bands has been reduced from six to three and, in order to remain on or join the Housing Register, applicants must meet the four main elements of the new Local Eligibility Criteria which are, in summary, as follows:

- To be resident in the District for three continuous years immediately prior to the date of registration, subject to special provisions made for members or former members of the Armed Forces;
- To have a defined housing need, as determined by at least one criterion of a priority band;
- Not to have sufficient funds to enable them to meet their own housing costs; and
- Not to have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour within the last three years, as determined by the Scheme.

Under the previous Allocations Scheme, there were around 6,800 homeseekers on the Housing Register, many of whom had no realistic expectation of being housed. As part of the implementation process for the new Scheme, officers started notifying the majority of homeseekers in the former Bands 5 and 6 (being around 3,600 homeseekers) that they would no longer be eligible to remain on the Housing Register, since they have either not lived in the District for the required three years, or have no defined housing need.

All remaining homeseekers in the former Bands 1 to 4 (around 3,200 - the vast majority of whom would qualify under the new Scheme) were then contacted and advised that they appeared to qualify to remain on the Housing Register, and were therefore invited to re-register on-line.

As at 9 September 2013, a total of 1,545 homeseekers have re-registered, which represents a reduction of around 77% from the previous number of applicants.

Following the Council's decision to amend the scope of the Housing Appeals and Review Panel - by removing the right of any homeseeker to appeal to the Panel against a decision that they be removed from the Housing Register (due to the high number of anticipated appeals as a result of the new Scheme) - as at 9 September 2013, officers had dealt with 103 written appeals regarding applicants' eligibility under the new Scheme. Of these, just two appeals were upheld. One appellant complained to the Housing Ombudsman, although the complaint was quickly dismissed by the Ombudsman.

One officer has been specifically assigned to provide assistance to both vulnerable homeseekers and those who do not have access to a computer, in order to help them register on-line. The work of this officer, together with assistance provided by other Housing staff, has resulted in around 240 applicants (15.5%) being assisted with their on-line application. This includes help with re-registration on the computer in the reception areas at both the Civic Offices, Epping and the Limes Centre, Chigwell, as well as help and advice on the telephone and through home visits.

The breakdown of the numbers of applicants on the Housing Register by band, under the new Scheme, is as follows:

Band A: 141  
Band B: 417  
Band C: 828

There are a further 264 applicants who have re-registered late (after 1 September), who appear to qualify but whose applications have not yet been verified. This makes a total of around 1,800 homeseekers who are likely to be registered on the Housing Register.

In addition to the above, 159 applicants who are over 60 years of age - and who either do not have the required local residency or a housing need - have registered on the new Supplementary Waiting List for sheltered accommodation.

Reminder letters have been sent out to all those applicants who were previously on the Housing Register, and who appear to qualify under the new Scheme, but have not re-registered to date. In addition, officers are undertaking a time-consuming exercise of telephoning all those applicants who have still not re-registered, with particular attention being given to both those homeseekers who are on the "vulnerable list" and those homeseekers who have regularly been "bidding" in the past, to ensure that all previous housing applicants who want to remain on the Housing Register are aware of what they have to do to re-register, with assistance provided if required.

Later in September, letters will be sent out to all Council tenants living in two or three bedroom flats explaining that, under the new Scheme, they can now join the Housing Register and "bid" on houses of the same size, even though they do not have a housing need, with their registration date being their tenancy commencement date of their existing property.

This provision has been included in the new Scheme to encourage tenants in flats to transfer to houses, in order to free-up flatted accommodation to enable the Council to achieve another objective of the new Scheme - which is to generally accommodate homeless applicants in flatted accommodation, to enable non-homeless housing applicants to have a chance to bid on vacant houses.

As required by the Cabinet, the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be reviewing the revised Housing Allocations Scheme twelve months after operation, and recommending any changes to the Cabinet in around November 2014, to take effect from 1 April 2015.

### **Council Housebuilding Programme**

Following consultation with the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee, the Cabinet adopted a Development Strategy for the Council Housebuilding Programme at its meeting earlier in September.

The Development Strategy was prepared on behalf of the Council by East Thames, the Development Agent appointed to deliver the Programme. The Strategy sets out the approach the Council will take to the Programme, including what financial assumptions will be made, the design standards to be adopted, the consultation methods that will be undertaken, the procurement methods to be used for construction works and the performance targets to be used to measure progress and, ultimately, the success of the Programme.

In July, the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee invited local Ward Members to attend its meeting to participate in discussions relating to feasibility studies prepared for six schemes at the former Red Cross Hall site and three further garage sites on Roundhills, Waltham Abbey; a garage site in Harveyfields, Waltham Abbey and the conversion of former sheltered accommodation at Marden Close, Chigwell Row.

Financial assessments have been undertaken for each site - both individually and collectively as a package. In total, across all six sites and subject to the receipt of planning permission, the package for the first year of the Programme will deliver 25 new affordable Council

properties for rent and the conversion of a further 20 bedsits at Marden Close into 10 x 1-bed flats, at a total estimated cost of around £4.4million.

The Cabinet Committee also agreed that the Council should benefit from a pre-existing EU-compliant procurement exercise undertaken by East Thames, to appoint building contractors through a Framework Agreement, which East Thames has offered the Council the opportunity to use in order to avoid the Council having to undertake its own EU procurement exercise.

### **Repairs Management Contract**

Since the time the Council entered into its three-year Repairs Management Contract with Mears Ltd in May 2011, the Council's Housing Repairs Service has seen a step change in performance and service delivery. The Council now offers all repairs to be undertaken by appointment, irrespective of priority, which are now undertaken, on average, within around six-seven days - with emergency repairs completed within an average time of four hours. For the first time ever, last year, the Council was able to report that it had achieved all of its KPIs for repairs.

The original contract award allows for the contract to be extended for two further three-year periods. Therefore, since the first three-year contract expires in April 2014, and in view of Mears' very good performance, at its meeting earlier in September, the Cabinet agreed to extend the contract for a further three years.

Progress, performance and any additional services to be provided through the contract will now be monitored by the Housing Scrutiny Panel, following the cessation of the former Repairs Advisory Group.

### **Information Evening on the Mobile Homes Act 2013**

Most members will already be aware of the new Mobile Homes Act 2013, which came into force on 26 May 2013.

In response to a number of requests for further information, the Council has arranged an Information Evening for park home residents to promote education and awareness of the new legislation. I will be chairing the event, which will be taking place here in the Council Chamber at the Civic Offices on Wednesday 2 October 2013. Two legal experts in this field from the Leasehold Advisory Service will be attending to give more details on the legislation and its implications for residents.

As it will not be possible to invite all 653 park home residents to the event, four representatives have been invited from each site. For those sites that have them, one of the representatives will be from the residents association, the others are being chosen by site residents to address any particular issues relating to the Mobile Homes Act on their behalf. For other residents who would like to come to the meeting but are unable to, the event is also being webcast.

The four District Councillors that have park home sites in their wards have also been invited, as have the District's three Members of Parliament. The Safer, Greener and Transport Portfolio Holder has been invited to attend. The event has also been opened up to the relevant portfolio holders from the neighbouring local authorities that have park homes sites.

All members have also been informed about the availability of a new leaflet produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) summarising the main changes brought about as a result of the Act. Officers have provided residents associations with a sufficient supply of these for all their park home residents to receive before the event.