

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 29 July 2014

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

The District Council's response to the introduction of the Government's Welfare Reforms and the effect on the Council's Housing Service in the first year (2013/14)

In October 2012, the Cabinet adopted a Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, which identified around 60 separate actions. The current situation is that 70% of all the identified actions have been achieved. The remaining tasks cannot be completed until the Government decides on the arrangements for the introduction of its Universal Credit proposals.

I have been keeping members informed of progress regularly, and I thought members may be interested in some of the main outcomes of the Welfare Reforms on the Council's Tenants last year (2013/14) - which was the first year that the main Welfare Reforms were introduced.

There were originally around 390 working-age Council tenants who had their housing benefit reduced at the beginning of 2013/14, as a result of the removal of the "spare room subsidy". By the end of the year, this number had reduced by 24% to 295 Council tenants.

This reduction was due to a number of reasons, including tenants "downsizing" to smaller accommodation; last year, 41 Council tenants moved to smaller accommodation, although it is not possible to know how many of these were due to the effects of the welfare reforms – but, as an indication, this compares with the position prior to their introduction, when a total of 17 tenants downsized in 2011/12 and 20 downsized in 2012/13. A further 18 tenants undertook mutual exchanges to smaller accommodation in 2013/14.

Problems have been experienced in other parts of the country, with Council tenants wanting to downsize to smaller accommodation but being unable to, due to an insufficient amount of smaller Council accommodation being available. However, this has not been the case in Epping Forest. Despite there being a number of Council tenants wanting to downsize, and being placed in (the highest) Band A of the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme accordingly, vacant one bedroom Council flats and two bedroom Council properties have regularly been able to be offered to applicants in Band B, and sometimes even Band C, throughout the year. This demonstrates that, although such properties may not have been in areas of the District where tenants wanting to downsize were prepared to move to, it has not been due to an insufficient number of properties becoming available.

At the end of the year, there were 69 cases affected by the Benefit Cap, which included 7 Council tenants.

With regard to rent arrears, most council landlords and housing associations across the country have reported experiencing significant increases in their rent arrears during the past year, due to the combined effect of the above. However, I am pleased to report that, despite the introduction of the Welfare Reforms, rent arrears reduced over the past 12 months by 27% (£175,000). Similarly, the Council's Rent Collection Rate increased - from 97.16% at the end of 2012/13 to 97.60% by the end of 2013/14.

Council House-building Programme

Tenders have recently been received for both the conversion of bedsits and the Community Hall into one bedrooms flats at Marden Close and Faversham Hall, Chigwell, and for Phase 1 of the Council's Housebuilding Programme in Waltham Abbey. It is too early to report on the outcome of the tenders at this time as they are currently being analysed by the Council's Development Agents.

Since meeting in April 2014, when the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee agreed, in principle, to develop the Council-owned land at Burton Road, as Phase 2 of the Housebuilding Programme to provide 56 new affordable rented homes, the outcome of pre-application discussions with the planning officers has resulted in a slightly reduced scheme, of 52 new homes. A detailed planning application is due to be submitted in August 2014.

Oakwood Hill Environmental Task Force

The first meeting of the Oakwood Hill Environmental Task Force will be meeting on 16 July 2014 to discuss how best to spend the £200,000 that has been agreed by the District Council as part of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund, and the £200,000 match funding agreed by Essex County Council.

The Task Force will comprise myself as Chairman, the Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, the two ward members, the County Council's divisional member, a representative from the Residents Association, Essex Police, Housing Officers and Essex County Highways officers.

ISO Quality Assurance Re-Accreditation

In April 2014, the Housing Service within the Communities Directorate was successful in again achieving ISO 9001:2008 accreditation by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance (LRQA) for a further three years.

The independent LRQA inspector reported that the Housing Service's Quality Management System has an excellent level of implementation, with well-established continual improvement and performance measures. He also noted that customer satisfaction and achievement in delivering against tenants' expectations is very positive and the extent of complaints at Steps 1, 2 and 3 remains low.

The Council's Housing Service was originally accredited in 2002, and was extended to include private sector housing after the 2007 restructure. It is currently planned that the accreditation will be extended to the whole of the Communities Directorate over a period of time, including Community Services and Community Safety.

Repair and Renew Grant

In April this year, the DEFRA announced its intention to make available 'Repair and Renew Grants' to assist the owners of premises (both commercial and residential) that had suffered the effects of flooding during the period 1st December 2013 to 31st March 2014. These grants are administered by local authorities, who were asked if they wished to participate and, if so, the number of applications expected. Since the Council was aware of a small number of property owners that might have a reasonable claim, we notified DEFRA that we wished to provide the scheme within the District.

The Repair and Renew Grant is for the installation of flood resilience measures - up to a maximum of £5,000 for each property affected – and is being administered by the Private Sector Housing Grants Team within the Communities Directorate.

The Council has also put in place Council Tax Exemptions and Business Rates Relief for those eligible.

EFDC Tenant Profile 2014

In 2013, the Housing Service carried out a census of all our Council tenants, in order to update the information we hold. In all we received an excellent 57% response rate, which has provided us with a better idea of the profile of our customers and information on how many have special requirements, such as assistance with communication. The survey has also provided us with other valuable information, such as whether tenants have internet access and have the use of a current account with a bank or building society (which, amongst other things, will be required to receive the new Universal Credit). Other background information was also requested on tenants' "protected characteristics", in order to help us meet our requirements under the Equality Act.

An external specialist consultant has produced a Tenant Profile Report, which provides an in-depth analysis of the survey findings and makes comparisons with data from the national Census. It also includes some useful mapping by ward. Once the report has been considered by the Housing Scrutiny Panel on 22nd July 2014, it will be made available on the Council's web-site.

Consultation with Gypsy Roma and Traveller Communities on Park Home Site Licences

Officers will be carrying out a consultation exercise with residents in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities living on privately-owned, authorised park home sites within the District, in order to agree the conditions that will be attached to their site licences.

In accordance with the views of Members, the conditions being consulted on are broadly based on the licence conditions already agreed for the permanent residential park homes sites in the District, with a few changes made to take account of the difference between the way in which the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites and those for the settled community are occupied and recent updates in guidance relating to drainage and flooding.

In addition to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, Officers have also consulted with Essex County Council's County-wide Traveller Unit, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and other interested parties on the proposed conditions.

The consultation is due to end in August 2014 and, following consideration of any comments made, I will be making a recommendation to the Cabinet in September on the site licence conditions to be adopted.

Petitions

The Housing Service has received two petitions since my last report.

Parsonage Court, Loughton

A Petition was received on 5 June 2014, signed by 34 residents at Parsonage Court sheltered housing scheme in Loughton. The residents are unhappy about the passenger lift at the Scheme often breaking down and being out of service. The Council's Facilities Management Team has reported that, during the last financial year, the lift in question never failed but, towards the end of May 2014, there were electrical failures which did cause the lift to fail.

On each occasion, the contractor attended within the contract deadlines and left the lift working. Facilities Management staff have also visited the site and undertaken an inspection and full load tests. At the time of writing, the final findings are expected shortly, at which point a full response will be provided to the lead petitioner.

Jubilee Court, Waltham Abbey

A Petition was received on 2 June 2014, with 52 signatories - 17 of whom were residents at Jubilee Court sheltered housing scheme in Waltham Abbey. The residents were unhappy about the Council's plan to remove a number of items of donated furniture in the communal lounge.

It was the intention to remove some of these old items along with other chairs and to replace them with new furniture. As a result of the Petition, a meeting of residents was held on 9 July 2014 to discuss the way forward and to try and meet with the residents' wishes. It was agreed that the donated furniture would remain but that, in the future, no further donated items will be allowed without the consent of the Council, which will prevent the communal lounge from becoming cluttered and possibly unsafe.

Members' Site Visit: 5th June 2014 – New affordable housing development at Manor Road, Chigwell

On 5th June 2014, Moat Housing (one of the Council's Preferred Housing Association Partners) invited all Members of Council, together with members of Chigwell Parish Council, to a Site Visit at Grange Manor, Grange Hill to see the construction works in progress and some of the completed rented and shared ownership properties.

Grange Manor comprises a total of 90 new homes, of which 77% (69 homes) are being provided as affordable housing. The affordable housing comprises 43 shared ownership and 26 affordable rented flats and houses. The reason for the development comprising such a significant amount of affordable housing is because the site was previously in the Green Belt (albeit previously developed land – i.e. brownfield).

Under the Nominations Agreement the Council has with Moat Housing, the Council is receiving 100% nomination rights to all of the affordable rented homes on initial letting (and at least 75% on subsequent re-lets) and residents living within the Epping Forest District are being given priority consideration to purchase the shared ownership homes.

The Site Visit was scheduled for around one week before the next phase of six 2 bedroom shared ownership flats was due to be occupied. This enabled us to view the shared ownership flats, as well as the show house of the private developer (Lakehouse), who are providing most of the market housing. Visitors were also able to walk around the site to see the general lay-out and works under construction, as well as

to look across the homes being provided by East Thames, another Preferred Housing Association Partner, on the adjacent site.

