

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 26 September 2006

**Subject:** Housing Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor D Stallan

**Item:** 5

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## **Recommendation:**

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

## **Promotion/Consultation on Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme**

I am anxious to look at ways that the private sector can assist the Council to meet the housing needs of the District. The Council currently supports and works with the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme to operate a Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme. This scheme provides a guarantee to landlords whereby, instead of the tenant having to provide a damage deposit of one month's rent at the start of the tenancy, the scheme re-imburses the landlord if the tenant vacates the property without paying for the damage.

However, I feel that use of the scheme would be increased if more private landlords were aware of the scheme. I would also welcome some feedback from landlords on what they consider to be any weaknesses with the scheme. I have therefore asked the Head of Housing Services to invite all estate agents and lettings agents operating in the District to a short lunchtime seminar on the 25 October 2006 to find out more information and to provide feedback on the scheme.

## **Wickfields Sheltered Housing Scheme, Chigwell – Stock Transfer**

The Cabinet has previously approved, in principle, the transfer of Wickfields sheltered housing scheme, Chigwell to Home Housing, to enable a major improvement scheme to be undertaken, in a similar manner to the recently completed scheme at Robert Daniels Court, Theydon Bois following a transfer. Following a decisively positive ballot of tenants, I recently confirmed that the transfer should take place, in accordance with the authority delegated to me by the Cabinet, and agreed the transfer price that should be paid to Home Housing, which was much less than previously expected.

The Head of Housing Services has made a detailed formal submission to the Secretary of State for consent for the transfer, and Government officials have recently advised that consent will be issued. The extensive legal documentation is currently being finalised, and I expect the transfer to take place at the beginning of October 2006, with the improvement scheme commencing shortly after.

## **Choice Based Letting Scheme**

The Cabinet has previously agreed to the introduction of a "choice based lettings scheme" for all of the Council's housing vacancies. Under the scheme, all vacant Council and housing association properties will be advertised on a website and in a fortnightly magazine, and applicants will be invited to express an interest in any vacancies. Tenancy offers will then be made to the applicants who have the earliest application dates in the highest bands,

for properties in which they have specifically expressed an interest. The Council is working with our five neighbouring local authorities in a consortium, and has successfully bid for funding of almost £100,000 to jointly introduce and operate the scheme.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel recently considered the draft specification for the scheme in detail and I will be formally approving the specification, taking account of the Scrutiny Panel's views, in the near future. The target date for implementation is July 2006; I will ensure that all Members of Council are fully briefed on the operation of this innovative scheme, prior to its launch.

### **Springfields Improvement Scheme, Waltham Abbey**

The Cabinet has previously agreed a list of improvements, and a budget of £4m, for a major improvement scheme at Springfields, Waltham Abbey. It also agreed to repurchase a number of properties on the estate leased under the Right to Buy. These repurchases and the detailed design is progressing, and I expect that tenders will be invited before the end of the financial year.

### **One Day Conference on Sub-Regional Working in the East of England**

I will be accompanying the Head of Housing Services to a one-day conference on the 4 October 2006, organised by the East of England Regional Assembly and targeted at housing portfolio holders, to find out more about the increasing and developing approach being undertaken towards all aspects of affordable housing at the sub-regional level. Epping Forest is within the London Commuter Belt Housing Sub-Region.