

Report to the Council

Subject: Housing

Date: 20 February 2007

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stallan

Item: 6 (h)

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Housing Response to Storms

Members will recall that, on 18 January 2007, the District was hit by a severe storm. Housing Services received around 80 calls from tenants relating to storm damage, and the Works Unit and the Council's contractors worked hard to repair properties as quickly as possible. The most common calls related to roof tiles/slates being dislodged and fences blown over - although it is the Council's responsibility to repair boundary fences, dividing fences between properties are tenants' responsibility. The most serious damage was the collapse of two bungalow chimneys. A Housing Inspector attended on the day of the storm, and a contractor attended the next day to rebuild the chimneys.

Additional Homelessness Prevention Funding

The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has previously awarded the Council a grant of £60,000 for both 2006/7 and 2007/8, to assist with the prevention of homelessness. The Council uses this funding to provide a Homelessness Prevention Service, mainly through the appointment of homelessness prevention officers. The service has proved very successful – in 2006, the Homelessness Prevention Team prevented 473 households becoming homeless and needing accommodation from the Council.

Detailed quarterly returns have to be made to the DCLG on homelessness prevention. It is pleasing to report that, due to the effectiveness of the Council's Homelessness Prevention Service, the DCLG's Specialist Adviser on Homelessness has unexpectedly informed the Head of Housing Services that the DCLG intends to reward the Council's performance by providing an additional grant of £10,000 this year, which can be used in 2007/8. Officers are currently considering the most effective use of this additional funding, and I will be considering a report on their proposals for its use in the near future.

House Mark

The Council's Housing Services is a member of Housemark, a national housing benchmarking organisation, which enables councils, housing associations and arms length management organisations (ALMOs) to compare their performance and costs with other each (either nationally or regionally). In Autumn 2006, with the assistance of the Finance Service, a mass of performance and cost data was provided to Housemark. Following verification of the data by House Mark, it has been possible to obtain 76 separate benchmark reports on different aspects of housing costs and performance, compared with 51 housing organisations in the Eastern and London Regions. The Head of Housing Services has produced a detailed report on the findings, which was considered by both the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. In particular, the report summarised in which quartile of organisations EFDC is placed for each benchmarked category.

One would reasonably expect the performance and costs of the "average council" for each indicator to be spread over the 2nd and 3rd quartile of housing organisations. However, around 50% of this Council's

indicators were in the top quartile (i.e. the top 25% of organisations). The remaining indicators were spread over the remaining three quartiles, with the least number appearing in the bottom quartile.

This report should give our tenants confidence that they are receiving good value for money from their housing service with, generally, good performance at a reasonable cost.

Choice Based Letting – Update

Members will recall that I reported to the Council in September 2006 that Uttlesford District Council had decided to withdraw from the Consortium set up to implement a choice based lettings scheme. The consortium originally comprised Epping Forest and our five neighbouring councils. I am pleased to report that, following discussions between Uttlesford DC and the DCLG, Uttlesford has decided to re-join the Council. Although welcomed (since it should reduce the overall unit costs), it has resulted in a delay to the implementation programme, which is now scheduled to be operational in October 2007.