

Report to the Council

Subject: Housing

Date: 24 April 2007

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stellan

Item: 6

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Changes to Housing Allocations Scheme – 2 April 2007

Following the Housing Scrutiny Panel's annual review of the Housing Allocations Scheme and the Cabinet's subsequent decision to implement some changes to the Scheme with effect from the 2 April 2007, the enormous task of re-assessing all 3,800 housing applicants has now been successfully completed. Every applicant (except those in Band 1 - non secure accommodation) will receive a letter within the next few weeks to advise them of their new band. Applicants are also being asked to return a review form, to ensure that the Housing Register is as up to date as possible. At the same time, Housing Services is also taking the opportunity to update the Mutual Exchange Register and to encourage applicants interested in low cost home ownership schemes that arise in the District and elsewhere in Essex to register with Moat, the Government's Homebuy Agent.

Choice Based Letting – Update

At its meeting on the 30th April 2007, the Housing Scrutiny Panel will be receiving a progress report on the implementation of choice based lettings (CBL) – which continues to progress well - including the detailed results of a consultation exercise on CBL undertaken with all the Council's tenants, leaseholders and housing applicants through Housing News. Around 11,000 survey forms were issued, resulting in 291 responses (2.9%). The response rate from housing applicants was higher - 5.5%. Generally, the vast majority of all those responding were in favour of the CBL Scheme. The new CBL scheme is still scheduled to be launched around October 2007.

Floating Support – Transfer of Housing Welfare Services to “In Touch Support”

Prior to April 2007, the Council and its partners provided a range of housing-related floating support services to older and vulnerable people, which was funded by Essex County Council under the Supporting People regime. In general terms, “floating support” means a short-term service for vulnerable people who may be threatened with homelessness, have difficulty sustaining their existing tenancy or need advice or support about housing related activities. The Council had a full-time officer providing support to vulnerable Council tenants and a part-time officer, based at the Council's homelessness person's hostel, providing floating support to vulnerable people living in bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation.

In addition, Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) employed a part-time Housing Relocation Officer, who assisted older people moving accommodation.

However, the Essex Supporting People Commissioning Body has assessed that the service would be delivered more effectively throughout the County by three providers, one covering each of the three housing sub-regions. Following a tendering exercise, In Touch Support, a subsidiary of the Hyde Housing Group, has been appointed to deliver floating support services across the five Essex districts of the London Commuter Belt Sub-Region. One member of the Council's staff transferred to In Touch Support on 2 April, under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) Regulations. The other post was vacant on the day of transfer.

From 2 April 2007, vulnerable people have been referred to the service through a “gateway” assessment process, which determines the level of service to be provided. The caseload capacity across the five local authorities in the sub-region will be 377 cases.

Low Cost Home Ownership Initiatives

With house prices continuing to rise within the District, more and more local people are becoming unable to get their first step on the home ownership ladder – people with reasonable household incomes who would have been able to secure a mortgage for their own home a few years ago. Although housing officers already negotiate shared ownership (“part rent, part buy”) as part of the affordable housing provision on most large Section 106 developments, such opportunities are limited, due to the current dearth of residential developments. It is therefore my intention to bring a report to the next meeting of the Cabinet on a couple of initiatives to assist Council tenants and housing applicants to enter home ownership, without having to rely on new developments.

Garden of the Year Award

Following the successful introduction of the Annual Housing Awards last year, I am pleased to announce a third category, to be launched in the forthcoming issue of Housing News – the Garden of the Year Award - for a Council tenant or leaseholder who is looking after their own, or someone else’s, garden. Applicants will be asked to provide photographs of their garden for the Judging Panel to consider. The winner will receive a plaque to display in their garden and will be invited to next year’s Civic Awards Ceremony.

Tenancy Deposit Protection Schemes

From the 6th April 2007, a new national legal scheme called “Tenancy Deposit Protection” has been introduced for all assured shorthold tenancies - which apply to nearly all private sector tenancies. Tenancy Deposit Protection has been introduced to ensure good practice in the handling of private tenants’ deposits, so that when a tenant pays a deposit, and is entitled to get it back, they can be assured that this will happen.

Landlords are able to choose between two types of scheme: a single “custodial scheme” and two “insurance-based schemes”. Under the custodial scheme, the tenant pays the deposit to the landlord, who pays it on to the scheme’s administrators. At the end of the tenancy, if the landlord and tenant agree how the deposit should be divided, they will notify the administrator, who returns the deposit, divided in the way agreed by both parties. If there is a dispute, the scheme will hold the amount until the dispute resolution service or courts decide what is fair.

Under the insurance-based schemes, the landlord retains the tenant’s deposit, but pays a premium to the scheme’s insurer. If, at the end of the tenancy, there is a dispute, the landlord must hand over the disputed amount to the scheme for safekeeping until the dispute is resolved. If the landlord fails to comply, the scheme will return the deposit to the tenant, if they are entitled to it.