

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 16th December 2014

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Council Housebuilding Programme – Ground Breaking Ceremony



A “ground breaking” ceremony was held on Friday 13 November to mark the start of the Council’s new Housebuilding Programme. The ceremony was held at Harveyfields in Waltham Abbey, which is one of four sites making up the first year (i.e. Phase 1) of the Programme.

Eleanor Laing MP marked the start of the Programme by demolishing part of the garage block that will make way for 9 new affordable homes. The Chairman of Council, as well as the Leader, local Ward Councillors and the Council’s partner organisations working on the project (East Thames, Pellings and Broadway Construction) also attended to

mark this occasion. A photographer was on hand to capture the event and a Media Release was issued.

The 23 new homes, forming Phase 1 of the Housebuilding Programme, are scheduled for completion in December 2015.

Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee

The Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee has been meeting regularly to monitor progress, and met recently in October and November - and will meet again on 18th December - to consider a number of individual feasibility studies for various sites across Loughton, Buckhurst Hill, Epping and North Weald.

The sites that are being considered are all from the original list of 65 sites approved by the Cabinet in July 2012, and at this stage are only being considered by the Cabinet Committee to determine whether or not they are viable schemes to proceed to the next stage - which is for the sites to be packaged and submitted for planning approval at some point in the future, in accordance with the Cabinet's agreed policy on the prioritisation of sites.

I would like to remind Members that all decisions relating to the Council Housebuilding Programme are reached in open public session, with all decisions and minutes publicly available to download. I would also like to remind Members that, when the feasibility study for each site is considered, the local Ward Councillors are invited to participate in the discussions associated with that site.

Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy

At its meeting on 21 October 2014, the Housing Scrutiny Panel reviewed the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy, which were introduced in September 2013.

The main issues reviewed were:

- The Residency Criteria for joining the Councils Housing Register, including whether or not the minimum period of residence should be increased to 5 years;
- Whether there should be any exceptions to the Residency Criteria, particularly for those in work in the District or seeking work or long-term training;
- Whether the financial thresholds for excluding applicants from the Housing Register due to their income and/or assets should be lowered and, if so, to what level;
- Whether the penalties for refusals of offers of accommodation should be strengthened;
- Increasing the incentives to encourage under-occupying Council tenants to downsize; and
- Whether Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies, currently granted for new lettings to Council properties comprising 3 bedrooms or more, should be extended to all sizes of property

The Housing Scrutiny will now be reporting the outcome of its review and its recommended changes to the Cabinet early next year.

In the meantime, a revised Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy based on the Housing Scrutiny Panel's recommendations has been reviewed by an external Legal Advisor, in order to confirm that the proposed changes meet legal requirements; this

process has identified some required changes, which officers are currently considering and will be reported to the Cabinet.

A consultation exercise is currently underway with all interested partner agencies, including local councils, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and other Registered Providers of Housing within the District. The outcome of the consultation exercise will also be considered by the Cabinet.

Revised Planning Policy Guidance – Provision of affordable housing on small sites

On 28th November 2014, the Government published its response to its consultation on “*Planning Contributions (Section 106 planning obligations)*” proposals. At the same time, the Government updated the relevant sections of the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG).

The changes to the PPG mean that, due to what the Government considers to be the disproportionate burden of developer contributions on small-scale developers, councils are no longer able to seek any affordable housing, or financial contributions in lieu of on-site affordable housing provision, on developments comprising 10 homes or less, and which have a maximum combined gross floor space of 1,000 square metres.

The exception is for designated rural areas, (as defined by Section 157 of the Housing Act 1985), where local authorities may choose to implement a lower threshold of 5 homes or less, beneath which affordable housing cannot be sought. However, in such cases, for developments of 6-10 homes, only a financial contribution for affordable housing elsewhere can be sought (once all the homes have been built), not the provision of affordable housing on-site.

A financial credit, equivalent to the existing gross floorspace of any vacant buildings brought back into any lawful use or demolished for re-development, must be deducted from the calculation of any affordable housing contributions sought from relevant development schemes. This will not however apply to vacant buildings which have been abandoned.

However, these changes in national planning policy do not apply to “Rural Exception Sites” which, subject to their being a demonstrable local need for affordable housing, remain available to support the delivery of affordable homes for local people.