

## **Report to the Cabinet**

**Report Reference: C-070-2014/15**

**Date of meeting: 9 March 2015**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Committee: Housing Scrutiny Panel  
(Chairman - Cllr S. Murray)**

**Subject: Report of the Housing Scrutiny Panel on the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund – 2015/16**

**Responsible Officer: Alan Hall (01992 564004).**

**Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).**

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### **Recommendations:**

- (1) That the latest out-turn forecasts for each of the projects funded by the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund in 2014/15, provided at Appendix 1, be noted;**
- (2) That the associated expenditure for any slippages on individual projects in 2014/15 be carried forward to complete the projects in 2015/16;**
- (3) That the following be noted:**
  - (a) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel has already recommended to the Cabinet that the cost of increasing the financial incentives for Council tenants downsizing their accommodation be met from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund; and**
  - (b) That the Cabinet has already agreed that the Fund should meet the costs relating to the Housing Revenue Account of increasing the size of the new Corporate Fraud Team from April 2015, subject to the required General Fund Continuing Services Budget (CSB) bid being agreed;**
- (4) That the proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements for 2015/16, and the associated recommendations for each project, set-out in Appendix 2, be approved;**
- (5) That the amount allocated from the Fund to the Major Capital Projects Reserve be increased in 2015/16 from £200,000 to £384,000 to fund future housing capital projects (either in 2015/16 or future years); and**
- (6) That, at its meeting in January 2016, the Scrutiny Panel / Select Committee responsible for scrutinising the Housing Service be asked to consider and recommend to the Cabinet the proposed use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2016/17.**

### **Executive Summary:**

When the Cabinet agreed the strategic approach for the Council's new 30-Year HRA Financial Plan, it asked the Housing Scrutiny Panel to consider and recommend to the Cabinet a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements each year, utilising the additional funding made available as a result of HRA self-financing.

For the past three years, we have formulated lists of housing improvements and service enhancements, which have been subsequently approved by the Cabinet. An out-turn report on the forecast expenditure and the progress made on the projects agreed for 2014/15 is provided at Appendix 1.

When the Cabinet considered and approved our list of projects for 2014/15, it also asked us to consider and recommend further housing improvements and service enhancements to be undertaken in 2015/16, funded from the additional HRA resources available next year. Our proposals for new projects to be undertaken next year, at an estimated cost of £216,000, are provided in Appendix 2 - with a summary of the costs provided at Appendix 3.

We are also recommending that the amount allocated from the Fund to the Major Capital Projects Reserve in 2014/15 be increased from £200,000 to £384,000, in order to fund future housing capital projects.

#### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

Anticipated additional resources of £216,000 are expected to be made available within the HRA Budget 2015/16, to spend on additional housing improvements and service enhancements in 2015/16, in addition to increasing the funding held within the Major Capital Projects Reserve to £384,000.

#### **Other Options for Action:**

- (a) To agree a different list of improvements and service enhancements;
- (b) To allocate funding differently between the proposed schemes; or
- (c) To allocate a different amount to the Major Capital Projects Reserve.

#### **Report:**

1. This report and our recommendations follow the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel held on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2015, and our consideration of a detailed report from the Director of Communities on:

- The latest anticipated out-turns of expenditure for housing improvements and service enhancements agreed for 2014/15 - for both individual projects and the programme as a whole; and
- The recommended use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2015/16.

2. At its meeting in December 2011, the Cabinet approved the strategic approach to the new 30-Year HRA Financial Plan, in readiness for the introduction of self-financing for the HRA from April 2012. The approach agreed was to plan the repayment of the required loans to the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb) - taken out to fund the CLG's required debt settlement - over a 30-year period. This was to enable the Council to not only maintain the Council's housing stock to a new Modern Home Standard and implement a new Council Housebuilding Programme, but to also fund additional housing improvements and service improvements over the 30-year life of the Plan.

3. For the past three years, the Cabinet has asked the Housing Scrutiny Panel to consider and recommend a proposed list of housing improvements and service enhancements to the Cabinet, utilising the additional funding, which we last did in March 2014.

4. Our lists of improvements have comprised a mix of capital and revenue projects, requiring both one-off expenditure over 1-3 years and ongoing annual expenditure, which have primarily focused on proposals that we feel would provide a direct and demonstrable benefit to the Council's tenants.

5. At the same time as agreeing our proposals for 2014/15, the Cabinet also asked us to consider and recommend to the Cabinet at this meeting the proposed use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2015/16.

6. The purpose of this report from the Scrutiny Panel to the Cabinet is therefore:

- To provide anticipated out-turns of expenditure for 2014/15, for both individual projects and the programme as a whole; and
- To provide our recommendations on the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2015/16.

#### Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund

7. The estimated amount available to the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund each year is, in effect, a balancing figure for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as a whole, over the 30-year period of the HRA Financial Plan. So, if net costs within the HRA over the 30 years are higher than previously forecast (or if income is lower), the amount available for new projects under the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Budget each year is reduced. Conversely, if net costs are lower (or if income is higher) the budget can be increased, in order to achieve the Council's prime strategic objectives for the HRA - which are to ensure that the PWLB loans can be repaid when they mature and that the HRA does not accrue balances (surpluses) that are higher than necessary, or falls into deficit.

8. Since housing-related income and expenditure is ring-fenced to the HRA, any annual HRA surpluses that are not required for any specific purpose therefore need to be spent, otherwise they simply result in increased HRA Balances – which is why the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund was introduced from 2012/13.

9. The Fund operates in a similar way to the HRA's Housing Repairs Fund and the General Fund's District Development Fund (DDF) in that, each year, the HRA contributes an agreed amount to the Fund (based on the estimated surplus available through the HRA Financial Plan) and the Cabinet agrees the amount to be spent from the Fund on housing improvements and service enhancement projects in the following year. If there are any underspends on the Fund at the end of the year, they are carried forward into the following year; if there are any overspends (which would need to be funded from HRA Balances), the contribution from the HRA is reduced the following year by the total amount overspent. This approach gives greater flexibility, whilst still ensuring budgetary control.

#### Progress with the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2014/15 and Anticipated Out-Turns

10. The Cabinet agreed our recommendations last year that 7 new housing improvements and service enhancements be undertaken in 2014/15, in addition to the completion of a further 7 projects extending / carried forward into 2014/15.

11. Appendix 1 provides a list of the agreed improvements/enhancements for 2014/15, together with the original budget and the latest forecast expenditure for each project. The following table summarises the budget position for the overall 2014/15 Programme:

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Projects:</b>                       |            |
| Original Budget                        | £1,017,000 |
| Latest expenditure forecast            | £755,000   |
| <b>Major Capital Projects Reserve:</b> |            |
| Original Budget                        | £200,000   |
| Latest expenditure forecast            | Nil        |

12. Having considered the progress report on projects, we were of the view that good progress has been made with the delivery of most of the projects during the year to date.

13. The Cabinet has previously agreed to establish a Major Capital Projects Reserve within the Fund, to enable resources to be accumulated and available when required for major capital housing projects, subject to the schemes having the approval of the Cabinet or Housing Portfolio Holder as appropriate. The Cabinet made this decision (based on our recommendation) because, although the HRA Financial Plan makes provision for increased capital expenditure on individual properties within the Council's housing stock - in order to ensure that they meet the full, modern standard (a higher standard than the Decent Homes Standard) - no provision is made for major capital housing schemes within the Plan. The need for major capital schemes has occurred from time-to-time, and has included the major improvement scheme at Springfields, Waltham Abbey, small scale stock transfers of sheltered housing schemes to housing associations to enable conversion and improvement works to be undertaken and the conversion scheme at Marden Close and Faversham Hall, Chigwell Row (which is currently on-site).

14. Having regard to the funding required for the proposed new improvements and service enhancements in 2015/16 (see next section), we are proposing that the amount allocated to the Major Capital Projects Reserve within the Fund be increased from £200,000 to £384,000 in 2015/16

#### Availability of Funding for New Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements – 2015/16

15. We were advised at our meeting by the Director of Communities that the most recent review of the HRA Financial Plan by the Council's HRA business planning consultants, CIH Consultancy, which was reported to our meeting in October 2014, identified that the HRA could afford to commit £700,000 per annum for new and committed improvements and service enhancements from April 2015.

16. The following table therefore summarises the position for the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2015/16:

|  |          |            |            |
|--|----------|------------|------------|
| Expected HRA contribution to Fund – 2015/16                                      | £700,000 |            |            |
| Savings from the Fund's 2013/14 Out-turn   | £387,000 |            |            |
| Anticipated savings/slippage from 2014/15  | £462,000 |            |            |
| <b>Total resources available to Fund in 2015/16</b>                              |          | 1,549,000  |            |
| Amount required due to committed costs of 2014/15 projects (ongoing and one-off) |          | (£949,000) |            |
| <b>Remaining resources available for 2015/16</b>                                 |          |            | £600,000   |
| Amount proposed to be allocated to the Major Capital Projects Reserve in 2015/16 |          |            | (£384,000) |
| <b>Available to fund new projects in 2015/16</b>                                 |          |            | £216,000   |

#### Proposals for the Use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund 2015/16

17. We would ask the Cabinet to note that we have already recommended to the Cabinet that the financial incentives available to Council tenants wishing to downsize their accommodation should be increased as part of the proposed new Housing Allocations Scheme. The cost of this increase (estimated at around £51,000 per annum) would need to be met from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund, if the Cabinet agrees our recommendation, when it considers our recommendations for the new Housing Allocations Scheme in March 2015 – which are the subject of a separate report from the Housing Scrutiny Panel to this meeting.

18. Furthermore, we were advised at our meeting that the Cabinet has already agreed that the Fund should meet the HRA's costs of increasing the size of the new Corporate Fraud

Team from April 2015 (estimated at around £42,000 per annum), subject to the required General Fund Continuing Services Budget (CSB) bid being agreed.

19. After accounting for these two commitments, we noted that £123,000 is available to fund further new improvements/enhancements. At our meeting, the Director of Communities put forward the proposed new projects for 2015/16 listed at Appendix 2. After due consideration, we agreed to endorse and support these proposals. We are therefore recommending to the Cabinet that the new projects listed at Appendix 2 be undertaken for 2015/16. For each proposal, a description is provided, together with details of the one-off and/or ongoing annual funding required, and whether the expenditure is capital and/or revenue. At the end of each proposal, our formal recommendation(s) are provided in bold.

20. We did make a minor change to one of the proposals put forward by the Director of Communities. In respect of Project No. 3, the Director of Communities suggested that the proposed Review referred to in Recommendation (b) be undertaken by the Housing Portfolio Holder, whereas we agreed to recommend to the Cabinet that this review should be undertaken by the Housing Scrutiny Panel (or our successor body).

21. Appendix 3 provides a spreadsheet with each of our proposals listed, summarising the one-off and ongoing expenditure for each of the next three financial years.

22. We were advised at our meeting, and would ask the Cabinet to note that, after utilising all of the resources available to the Fund in 2014/15, there will still be a further £445,000 and £574,000 available to spend on new projects in the following two years (2016/17 and 2017/18), based on current forecasts.

23. We are therefore also recommending that, at its meeting in January 2016, the Scrutiny Panel / Select Committee responsible for scrutinising the Housing Service be asked to consider and recommend to the Cabinet the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund for 2016/17.

#### **Resource Implications:**

£216,000 available for new projects in 2015/16, after allocating £384,000 to the Major Capital Projects Reserve, included within the HRA Budget 2015/16.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

Localism Act 2012; Local Government and Housing Act 1989; Housing Act 1985

#### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

None

#### **Consultation Undertaken:**

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation was due to be consulted on our proposals at its next meeting. We understand that the Director of Communities will be providing an oral report on their views at the Cabinet meeting.

#### **Background Papers:**

None.

#### **Risk Management:**

There are minimal risks identified for the proposed new projects for 2015/16.

# Due Regard Record

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

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The proposed enhancements to the rent and leaseholder payment systems will enable those groups of people experiencing financial hardship (often within the protected characteristic groups) to better budget for their rent payments, since their payment dates can be better aligned with their salary/benefit dates.

The introduction of direct debit facilities for leasehold payments will make it easier for leaseholders who have physical difficulty making their payments to meet their obligations.

The proposed all-day opening of the Limes Council Office will provide improved physical access to an increased range of Council services and officers.

The proposed extension of funding for the two CAB Debt Advisors will assist those groups of people experiencing financial hardship (again, often those within the protected characteristic groups) to deal with indebtedness.

**Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund - 2014-15  
Programme Costs (One-off and Ongoing) - as at December 2014**

| No.  | Proposal  | Responsible Officer | £000's   |         |         |         |         |         | Cap. or Rev. |       |
|--|---|---------------------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|-------|
|  |   |                     | 2014/15  |         | 2015/16 |         | 2016/17 |         |              |       |
|  |   |                     | One-off  | Ongoing | One-off | Ongoing | One-off | Ongoing |              |       |
| <b>Outstanding Projects from 2013/14</b>   |   |                     |          |         |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>A   | On-Line Rents System for Tenants  | D. Clifton          | Latest   | 0       |         | 15      |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 15      |         | 0       |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>B   | CAB Debt Advisors   | R. Wilson           | Latest   | 23      |         |         |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 23      |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>C   | Increase in furniture budget - sheltered housing                            | D. Pegler           | Latest   | 10      |         | 10      |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 0       |         | 0       |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>D   | Repairs Key Deliverable - Product Warranty Capture                          | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 10      |         |         |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 10      |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>E   | Repairs Key Deliverable - Smartphone Application                            | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 7       |         |         |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 7       |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>F   | Repairs Key Deliverable - Web-based Reporting Facility                      | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 14      |         |         |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 14      |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>G   | Repairs Key Deliverable - HQN Assessment                                    | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 10      |         |         |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 10      |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 13/14<br>H   | Marden Close & Faversham Hall   | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 351     |         | 484     |         | 21      |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 508     |         | 0       |         | 0       |              |       |
| <b>TOTALS (Outstanding Projects from 2013/14)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 425     |         | 509     |         | 21      |              |       |
|  |   |                     | Original | 587     |         | 0       |         | 0       |              |       |
| <b>New Projects for 2014/15</b>  |   |                     |          |         |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 1  | Front Door Fire Safety Replacement Programme for Leaseholders in Flat Block | H. Thorpe           | Latest   | 125     |         | 100     |         | 100     |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 125     |         | 100     |         | 100     |              |       |
| 2  | Oakwood Hill Estate Enhancement Scheme                                      | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 0       |         | 200     |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 100     |         | 100     |         |         |              |       |
| 3  | Refurbishment of Communal Kitchens - Sheltered Scheme                       | H. Thorpe           | Latest   | 70      |         | 70      |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 70      |         | 70      |         |         |              |       |
| 4  | Provision of Electric Mobility Scooter Stores                               | H. Thorpe           | Latest   | 50      |         | 50      |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 50      |         | 50      |         |         |              |       |
| 5  | Extension of Mow and Grow Scheme  | R. Wilson           | Latest   | 20      |         | 20      |         |         |              | R     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 20      |         | 20      |         |         |              |       |
| 6  | Provision of Wi-Fi at Norway House  | R. Wallace          | Latest   | 8       |         |         |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 8       |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 7  | Norway House Chalet Replacement Project - Feasibility Study                 | P. Pledger          | Latest   | 7       |         |         |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 7       |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| 8  | In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund                          | A. Hall             | Latest   | 50      |         |         |         |         |              | C / R |
|  |   |                     | Original | 50      |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| <b>TOTALS (Agreed Projects for 2013/14)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 330     |         | 440     |         | 100     |              |       |
|  |   |                     | Original | 430     |         | 340     |         | 100     |              |       |
| Major Capital Project Reserve  |   | A. Hall             | Latest   | 0       |         |         |         |         |              | C     |
|  |   |                     | Original | 200     |         |         |         |         |              |       |
| <b>GRAND TOTALS (Outstanding &amp; Agreed New Projects)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 755     |         | 949     |         | 121     |              |       |
|  |   |                     | Original | 1,217   |         | 340     |         | 100     |              |       |
| Savings from 2013/14 Out-Turn  |   |                     |          |         |         | 387     |         |         |              |       |
| Anticipated savings/slippage from 2014/15  |   |                     |          |         |         | 462     |         |         |              |       |
| Amount expected to be available for HRA Budget for new Enhancements in year  |   |                     |          |         |         | 700     |         | 700     |              |       |
| Total amount of budget available to spend in year  |   |                     |          |         |         | 1,549   |         | 700     |              |       |
| Available to allocate to new enhancements in year (after previous year's commitments - i.e. Original Grand Totals above) |   |                     |          |         |         | 600     |         | 579     |              |       |

**Proposed List of Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements**

**2015/16**

**(1) Provision of Daily Direct Debit Facility for Tenants and Leaseholders and Swipe Card Payment Facility for Leaseholders**

**One-off cost:** £3,000 (2015/16)  
**Annual cost:** £11,000 per annum

**Form of expenditure:** Capital

1. The Rent Payment Swipe Card Contract was due to expire in December 2014. To avoid a lengthy and costly procurement process, and to attract preferential group transaction rates, the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed that the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) Framework Agreement for Payment Systems should be utilised for a new contract which, in the event, is provided by the same organisation as previously (Allpay). The NHC framework consists of 250+ social housing providers and, by now being a member, allows the Council to take advantage of the entire Allpay portfolio of payment products, including daily direct debits, at preferential group rates.

2. At present, the Council only offers 4 direct debit dates for tenants (1<sup>st</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> of the month). This has deterred some tenants from signing up to the payment method, as the deductions do not coincide with the day that they are likely to have the funds available in their accounts. In addition to this, the Government is proposing that, when Universal Credit (UC) is introduced, the payment (which will include Housing Benefit) will be made monthly, paid directly to the recipient, on a date specified by them – and will replace the current arrangement whereby the housing benefit is paid directly into tenant's rent account, on a fortnightly basis, on a set date. Therefore, it will become more important for the Council to have a payment method that matches tenants' UC credit award dates. With the introduction of the Allpay paperless method, deductions could be made on any day of the calendar month and match the date that either salary or UC is credited. It also has the potential to increase the numbers subscribing by direct debit, which could reduce rent arrears further.

3. The Council's existing rents direct debit process also prevents collection of former tenant arrears, since the software only allows direct debits to be set up on current rent accounts. The Allpay solution allows direct debit to be set up for any type of rent account or sub account and introduces another level of payment option when collecting former arrears for other types of debt (e.g. Housing Benefit overpayments, Court Costs). The new functionality would also give the Council a variety of payment collection frequencies to choose from (weekly, fortnight, 4-weekly, monthly, quarterly and annually), as opposed to the current same-date monthly option.

4. Council leaseholders do not currently have a swipe card or direct debit payment facility for the repayment of the estimated bills and are required to use standing order or cash payments, which are manually calculated and are very resource intensive. The Allpay software is an internet-based product, which allows instant set-up and manipulation of direct debit instructions, without a paper and postage based interface.

5. The existing direct debit process is very manually intensive and requires input from four individual officers to produce a separate claim file. As this operation is currently carried out four times a month, there is a significant likelihood that mistakes, such as a failure to



authorise a direct debit claim file (usually in the region of £300,000 at any one time) could occur at some point. Failure to authorise or process a claim file could result in reputational damage to the Council, as well as a risk that the Council's direct debit licence could be revoked. With the Allpay solution, only one operation per customer is required. Once the direct debit is first set up, the direct debit is handled by Allpay. This would completely eliminate the present risk of staff error when creating, submitting and authorising a direct debit claim file.

**Recommendations:**

**(a) That the Allpay paperless daily direct debit facility be introduced from April 2015 for Council tenants, to replace the present 4 dates per month cycle.**

**(b) That the Allpay swipe card payment facility and daily direct debits are introduced from April 2015 for Council leaseholders.**

## **(2) Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau Debt Advisors**

**One-off cost(s):** £37,800 (2015/16)  
(Note: £4,200 (10%) non-HRA contribution to be funded from the Local Government Grant Settlement)

**Form of expenditure:** Revenue

1. At its meeting on 4 February 2013 the Cabinet approved, in accordance with the Welfare Mitigation Action Plan, that a revenue grant - funded from the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund - be provided to the Epping Forest Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) to fund the appointment of 2 temporary full-time Debt Advisors for a period of 18 months from 1 April 2013. The purpose of the posts is to provide debt advice through the three CAB offices in Epping, Loughton and Waltham Abbey to any Council tenants, private tenants and owner occupiers who fall into debt as a result of the Government's Welfare Reforms, particularly due to benefits and housing issues. From the Council's own point of view, the benefit is that the posts assist in keeping rent arrears under control and reduce the risk of homelessness despite the reforms.

2. As the service does not benefit solely Council tenants, a contribution of 10% has been made from the General Fund. It was agreed that, in order that no additional expenditure fell to the General Fund, this contribution should be funded from the Government Grant for preventing homelessness.

3. Although the funding would have ended in September 2014, as a result of breaks in service due to vacancies the service will continue, within the current budget, until 31 March 2015.

4. The Housing staff who make referrals to the service report that the two Debt Advisors have provided a good service to residents in the Epping Forest District. Indeed, it is noteworthy that although most council landlords and housing associations across the country have reported increases in their rent arrears during the first year of the welfare reform, this Council's rent arrears reduced over 2013/14 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. It is considered that part of this success was as a result of the work of the CAB debt advisers.

5. The CAB has also supplied the following information:

- 25% of all CAB clients are either disabled or have long-term health issues
- In the current year, the service provided at the Limes Centre, Chigwell has increased from one half day to two half days each week (including follow-up work, and supervision by senior CAB staff) to provide both a drop-in and appointments service
- The CAB Debt Advisors have dealt with 385 clients in person (during the 8 month period ending 30 November 2014)
- The CAB Debt Advisors have recorded 1,875 activities on behalf of both the 385 clients referred to above and other clients, these activities include phone calls, letters and emails
- 1,104 debt related issues have been addressed by the CAB Debt Advisors
- 73% of all cases dealt with by the CAB across the District concerned Debt, Benefits and housing

6. In view of the expected introduction of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit Direct, and the possibility of further cuts to welfare benefits, it appears that the Council's tenants will need further support in the future. It is therefore suggested that grant funding for the two CAB Debt Advisers continues for a further 12 months from 1 April 2015.

**Recommendations:**

- (a) That a revenue grant of £37,800 be provided to the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau to fund the continuation of the two temporary full-time Debt Advisors for a further 12 months from 1 April 2015; and
- (b) That the non-HRA contribution of grant, amounting to £4,200, be funded from the grant received as part of the Local Government Grant Settlement 2015/16 specifically for homelessness prevention measures.

**(3) Expansion of Services and Opening Hours at the Limes Centre, Chigwell**

**One-off cost(s):**            £14,800    (2015/16)  
    £7,400    (2016/17)

**Form of expenditure:**    Revenue

1. Following the re-development of the Limes Farm Hall, Chigwell, the new Limes Centre was opened in February 2012. The Limes Centre is an important community facility on the Limes Farm Estate and currently accommodates the following services:

- Housing Management Estate Office (to be re-designated as the Local EFDC Council Office), which opens each morning between 9am and 12.30pm, providing a housing management service to both the Limes Farm Estate, and other parts of Chigwell and Buckhurst Hill
- Benefits and Council Tax advisors are available to give advice during normal office hours each Wednesday
- Debt Advice Service is provided by the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau two mornings each week
- The "True Stars" Children's Centre operates from and within the facility, Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5pm
- An NHS Health Clinic, which provides a baby clinic and a range of other services for the community
- A Youth Club provided by Essex Youth Service
- A Job Centre Plus drop-in Centre on Thursdays between 11am to 2pm

2. In addition to the above services, which provide a “multi-agency hub” for local people, the Limes Centre has a large main hall and smaller activities hall which are available for hire, for both regular bookings and one-off events, including evenings and weekends. Currently, these bookings include sports clubs such as Judo and Karate, a range of fitness and wellbeing sessions such as Tai Chi and Yoga and many children’s parties and large faith gatherings at weekends.

3. In order to make the best use of the Local EFDC Office facilities, it is proposed that an additional part-time (18 hours) Housing Officer is appointed, initially on an 18 month temporary contract, in order extend the services offered on a 12 month pilot at the Centre:

- To work predominantly at the Local EFDC Council Office, enabling the office to extend its opening hours to normal office hours Monday-Friday (closing one hour for lunch). This will be supported by staff from Community Services and Finance
- To enable the Local EFDC Council Office, along with other Council staff based there, to facilitate other services
- To explore the opportunity to expand the services provided at the Centre, including making payments for Council services, drop-in sessions for Planning enquiries and the relocation of the Epping Forest Citizen Advice Bureau to the Centre to provide a service to the south of the District
- To assist in marketing the Centre across the District as a general Council service facility

3. Following the 12 month pilot, it is proposed that a report be submitted to the Housing Portfolio Holder to consider a review of the success or otherwise of the additional services, and whether the additional part-time Housing Officer post should be made permanent.

**Recommendation:**

- (a) That an additional temporary part-time (18 hours) Housing Officer post be created for a period of 18 months, to enable the expansion of services referred to in the report at the Limes Centre, Chigwell for a pilot period of 12 months; and**
- (b) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel (or successor body) undertakes a Review of the success of the Pilot following 12 months of operation, and considers whether the post should be made permanent.**

**(4) In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund**

**One-off cost(s):** Nil  
**Annual cost:** £50,000  
**Form of expenditure:** Capital / Revenue

1. For the last three years, a small part of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund has been set aside as an In-Year Fund for small additional projects of benefit to tenants that may be identified during the course of the year by members and officers. This has enabled the projects to be undertaken quickly, rather than having to wait until the commencement of the following financial year. Individual one-off projects costing in excess of £10,000 have to be formally authorised by Housing Portfolio Holder.

2. The Cabinet has previously agreed that an annual provision of £50,000 for the In-Year Fund should be included within the main Housing Improvement and Service Enhancements Fund – which has been included within the Fund Programme accordingly.

**Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements Fund - 2015-16  
Programme Costs (One-off and Ongoing)**

| No.  | Proposal  | Responsible Officer |          | £000's  |         |         |         |         |         | Cap. or Rev. |
|--|---|---------------------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|
|  |   |                     |          | 2015/16 |         | 2016/17 |         | 2017/18 |         |              |
|  |   |                     |          | One-off | Ongoing | One-off | Ongoing | One-off | Ongoing |              |
| <b>Outstanding Projects from 2014/15</b>   |   |                     |          |         |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 A  | On-Line Rents System for Tenants  | D. Clifton          | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 15      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 B  | Front Door Fire Safety Replacement Programme for Leaseholders in Flat Block | H. Thorpe           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 100     |         | 100     |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 C  | Oakwood Hill Estate Enhancement Scheme                                      | P. Pledger          | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 200     |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 D  | Refurbishment of Communal Kitchens - Sheltered Schem                        | H. Thorpe           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 70      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 E  | Provision of Electric Mbility Scooter Stores                                | H. Thorpe           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 50      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 F  | Extension of Mow and Grow Scheme  | R. Wilson           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 20      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 G  | Increase in furniture budget - sheltered housing                            | D. Pegler           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 10      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 14/15 H  | Marden Close & Faversham Hall   | P. Pledger          | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 484     |         | 21      |         |         |         |              |
| <b>TOTALS (Outstanding Projects from 2014/15)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 0       |         | 0       |         | 0       |         |              |
|  |   |                     | Original | 949     |         | 121     |         | 0       |         |              |
| <b>New Projects for 2015/16</b>  |   |                     |          |         |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 1  | Additional Financial Incentives for Downsizing                              | R. Wallace          | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original |         | 51      |         | 51      |         | 51      |              |
| 2  | Enhanced Corporate Fraud Team   | B. Bassington       | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original |         | 42      |         | 42      |         | 42      |              |
| 3  | Enhanced Rent and Leaseholder Payment Systems                               | D. Clifton          | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original |         | 16      |         | 16      |         | 16      |              |
| 4  | All Day Opening - Limes Farm Office, Chigwell                               | R. Wilson           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 15      |         | 8       |         |         |         |              |
| 6  | 1-Year Extension of CAB Debt Advisers                                       | R. Wilson           | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | R            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 42      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| 7  | In-Year Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund                          | A. Hall             | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C / R        |
|  |   |                     | Original | 50      |         |         |         |         |         |              |
| <b>TOTALS (Agreed Projects for 2015/16)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       |              |
|  |   |                     | Original | 107     | 109     | 8       | 109     | 0       | 109     |              |
| Use for Major Capital Project Reserve  |   | A. Hall             | Latest   |         |         |         |         |         |         | C            |
|  |   |                     | Original | 384     |         | 0       |         | 0       |         |              |
| <b>GRAND TOTALS (Outstanding &amp; Agreed New Projects)</b>  |   |                     | Latest   | 0       |         | 0       |         | 0       |         |              |
|  |   |                     | Original | 1,549   |         | 238     |         | 109     |         |              |
| Savings from 2014/15 Out-Turn  |   |                     |          |         |         | 0       |         |         |         |              |
| Anticipated savings/slippage from 2015/16  |   |                     |          |         |         | 0       |         |         |         |              |
| Amount expected to be available for HRA Budget for new Enhancements in year  |   |                     |          |         |         | 700     |         | 700     |         |              |
| Total amount of budget available to spend in year  |   |                     |          |         |         | 700     |         | 700     |         |              |
| Available to allocate to new enhancements in year (after previous year's commitments - i.e. Original Grand Totals above) |   |                     |          |         |         | 462     |         | 591     |         |              |