

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 26 July 2016

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor S Stavrou

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Familiarisation with the Housing Portfolio Brief

Since taking over the Housing Portfolio at the Annual Council Meeting, I have been familiarising myself with my new Brief.

I have had a number of briefings from the Director of Communities and his Assistant Directors on current local and national housing issues, and have toured the Civic Offices to meet all the managers and some of the staff within the Housing Service based there. I have also spent a day with the Director visiting other housing offices and other facilities around the District, meeting managers and staff, as well as visiting a number of housing sites of interest.

I attended the first meeting of the new Communities Select Committee, as well as my first meeting of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation – both of which I intend to attend as many meetings as possible over the coming year.

Enactment of the Housing and Planning Act 2016

Following a lengthy, and somewhat controversial, passage of the Housing and Planning Bill through Parliament, the resultant Housing and Planning Act received Royal Assent on 12th May 2016. The new Act comprises a number of provisions relating to both housing and planning and, at the last meeting of the Communities Select Committee, the Director of Communities provided a summary of the key housing provisions of the Act, that potentially have the most significant implications for the Council over the coming year, which are:

- The introduction of the mandatory provision of fixed term tenancies for new Council tenants
- The required sale of higher value void Council properties, to help fund the extension of the Voluntary Right to Buy to housing association tenants
- The required provision of starter homes on new private developments, to form a proportion (to be determined) of the overall affordable housing provision
- The introduction of the Government's "Pay to Stay" Scheme, to charge higher rents to Council tenants with incomes (outside London) in excess of £31,000, up to market or "near market" rents

The other main housing provisions within the Act cover:

- The encouragement of self-build and custom housebuilding
- Powers to deal with "rogue" landlords and property agents
- Powers to recover abandoned premises
- New arrangements for the4 licensing of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs)

It is proposed to hold a Housing Information Evening for Members in the Autumn to explain the provisions to all members in more detail, once the detailed provisions are known - through Government guidance and regulations, that are awaited.

Council Housebuilding Programme

Due to the contractor's delays to complete the 23 new Council affordable homes for rent in Waltham Abbey under Phase 1 of the Council Housebuilding Programme, the Council terminated its contract with the contractor, Broadway Construction Ltd, on 1 June 2016. The Council secured the site on the same day and has completed a schedule of works that needs to be undertaken for completion. In order to expedite the completion of the works, this schedule has been provided to another contractor, who has previously worked successfully for the Council, and their assessment of the cost to complete the works was received on 8 July 2016. Dependent on whether or not the Council's Employers Agent, Pellings LLP, assess the costs to be reasonable, I will consider whether or not the completion contract should be let to this second contractor.

The Council's appointed contractor, Mulalley & Co Ltd, have taken possession of the Burton Road, Loughton site, to construct 51 new affordable rented homes under Phase 2 of the Council Housebuilding Programme. They are actively progressing with the detailed design before they commence the build stage. In the meantime, the site has been hoarded and letters have been issued by Mulalley & Co Ltd to all local residents introducing themselves and providing contact details. Work on site is expected to start in August 2016.

The specifications, designs and contract documents have been prepared for all 7 contracts that will make up Phase 3 of the Housebuilding Programme. Tenders will be sought in July and August 2016, with works starting on-site around November 2016. The contract phase for each site will be around 18-months, so completion for all of the homes can be expected around April 2018.

For Phase 4 of the Housebuilding Programme, the Council has now received planning approval on 7 sites, which will deliver 20 homes. However, planning permission for 4 other sites in Pyrles Lane, Ladyfields and Whitehills Road, Loughton have all been refused planning permission. The Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee has already determined that revised planning applications should be submitted for Ladyfields and Whitehills Road, which are currently being prepared. The more recent refusal of planning permission for the Pyrles Lane site will be referred back to the Cabinet Committee for a decision on the future use of the site.

The Cabinet Committee has also agreed that another proposed development site, in Hillyfields, Loughton - for which a planning application was withdrawn due to concerns from planning officers about its suitability for development – should be sold on the open market, with the proceeds being utilised to help fund the Housebuilding Programme.

All sites making up Phase 5 of the Housebuilding Programme, which comprises sites in Buckhurst Hill and Ongar, have been submitted for planning permission. However, only two sites in Ongar have been granted planning permission to date, with all 3 sites in the Hornbeam Road area of Buckhurst Hill being referred to the District Development Management Committee for determination, with a recommendation for refusal from the Area Plans (South) Sub Committee.

The Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee has been monitoring the use of "one-for-one replacement capital receipts", which must be spent on the provision of new affordable housing within 3 years of receipt. This monitoring has previously identified the need to purchase a small number of existing properties from the open market, to avoid passing any Right to Buy receipts to the Government. Accordingly, 6 properties are being purchased in the Waltham Abbey area, on or near to existing Council estates. These are predominantly 2 and 3-bed houses.

The Council has also now entered into a Development Agreement with Linden Homes, who is the developer of a site at Barnfield, Roydon. This is a joint approach whereby, under the Development Agreement, the Council will purchase 8 affordable rented homes on completion (to utilise some of the Council's one-for-one replacement receipts) and B3 Living, one of the Council's Preferred Housing Association Partners, will purchase 3 shared ownership properties. Completion is due around April 2018.

Syrian Refugee Resettlement Programme

In response to the Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, the Council has agreed to make available 1 x 2 bedroom flat and 1 x 1 bedroom flat from its housing stock to house up to 6 Syrian Refugees in each year for a period of four years. This represents in total up to 8 properties housing up to 24 Syrian Refugees. Those housed will be non-secure tenants for up to a period of 5 years.

The Government's Syrian Joint Team have advised that, on 21 September 2016, a flight carrying around 120 Syrian Refugees will arrive at Stansted Airport. The arrivals will be housed across the Eastern Region and will mainly comprise between 4 or 6 family members.

Essex County Council, who are leading on the re-settlement programme for Essex, have requested that the Council puts forward the 2-bedroom flat that it has offered to potentially accommodate one household from the September arrivals. The rental loss whilst the property to be offered is kept vacant, ready for the arrival, will be met by the Government.

On 10 August 2016, the Home Office Team will be matching families to available properties from across the country, so we will not know until then whether or not we will be asked to take a family.

Essex County Council have appointed a delivery partner, "Migrant Help", who will make the preparations for the arrivals and will provide the Syrian Refugees with intensive resettlement support. Although the Council will assist with matters such as signposting, we will mainly provide just the landlord role.

Review of Epping Forest Careline Alarm Monitoring Service

The Council's Careline Service offers a twenty-four hour, 365 days per year, emergency alarm monitoring service to older and disabled people living within the District.

The Draft Work Programme for the Communities Select Committee includes the undertaking of a review of the Careline Service, to be considered at its meeting in November 2016, which will consider options for the future delivery of the service.

The review is being undertaken as a result of the Careline Monitoring Centre expanding, in terms of the number of private sector connections, and the advances in technology (enabling service users to benefit from a range of associated sensors), which has resulted in the management and operational aspects of the service becoming much more complex, which will soon require additional investment and increased staffing.

Since I do not think that continuing with the service under the current arrangements is a viable option in the long term, the review will consider options, costs and potential savings for the future delivery of the Monitoring Service, from retaining an enhanced Monitoring Service - with increased investment and staffing levels - to outsourcing the Monitoring Service to an external provider.

Review of Housing Service Standards and performance against the Standards

The Council has a range of around 100 separate Housing Service Standards that cover all of the Housing Service's main areas of activity, and are provided to our tenants as part of the

Tenants Handbook. Each year, we review performance against the Service Standards and consider whether any changes should be made.

I am grateful to the Communities Select Committee for reviewing, at its last meeting, the Housing Service's performance last year against the Service Standards and for considering whether any changes should be made for the future. As a result, between the Director of Communities and the Select Committee, 7 changes to the Service Standards have been proposed. Once I have received the views of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, which is being consulted at its meeting in August, the Service Standards will be revised accordingly.

Tenants Handbook – Online by default

The Council provides around 500 new Council tenancies a year. Until May 2016, each new tenant was issued with a copy of the Council's 'Tenants Handbook', comprising a binder containing important information to tenants.

In May 2016, we amended our tenancy agreements to include a tick box inviting tenants to access the Handbook via the Council's website, rather than being provided with a hard copy - to provide tenants with easier access to the latest information, at a lower cost to the Council. A hard copy of the Handbook will always be available to new tenants on request, for those that do not have access to the internet.

Due to changes in law or Council policies, information within the Tenants Handbook is updated frequently, so accessing the handbook electronically will ensure that the most current version is always available to be downloaded, which will also reduce wastage of surplus leaflet stock.

Prosecution of Landlord for Illegal Eviction

One of the responsibilities of the Council's Housing Service is to respond to the harassment of tenants by private landlords and to deal with landlords who illegally evict tenants.

In June, the Council successfully prosecuted a Loughton landlord for illegally evicting one of her tenants. The tenant, who is a student at East 15 Acting School, signed a 6 month tenancy agreement in October 2015. Although the rent of £475 a month included all utilities the landlord tried to charge an additional £50 towards electricity. When the tenant refused to pay the extra rent the landlord ordered her to leave that day and intimidated the tenant when she tried to remove her possessions from the premises.

There is no requirement under the law for a court order for the eviction of a lodger, but reasonable notice must be given which in this case would have been 28 days.

A fine of £275 was imposed on the landlord, with an order to pay the Council's costs of £447.50. The Magistrates also ordered that compensation of £100 be paid to the tenant for her distress. Although this may have been relatively low, the implications of a criminal record for guilty landlords offers a strong deterrent for this type of behaviour. In addition a tenant can pursue a civil case for damages which can be fairly substantial.

This landlord was not a member of the Student Accommodation Accreditation Scheme which the Council's Private Sector Housing Team operates in partnership with East 15 Acting School in Loughton.