

Report to the Council

Subject: Housing Portfolio

Date: 22nd April 2014

Portfolio Holder: Councillor D Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Straw Bales Housing Development, Millfield, High Ongar – Shortlisting for Development / Construction Awards

I am pleased to report that the innovative affordable housing development constructed with straw bales by Hastoe Housing Association in partnership with the Council, on former Council-owned land at Millfield, High Ongar has been shortlisted for two development / construction awards.

The first is in the “Small Development of the Year” category of the National Housing Awards. The Awards Ceremony is being held at the Lancaster Hotel, London on 29 April 2014.

The second is in the “Best Social or Affordable New Housing” category of the East Anglia LABC Building Excellence Awards. The Awards Ceremony is being held at St. Andrews Hall, Norwich on 13 June 2014.

I will, of course, let members know the outcome of these two events.

Council Housebuilding Programme

Planning permission received for Phase 1 – Waltham Abbey

I am pleased to report that planning permission has been granted for developments on four sites in Waltham Abbey, which will see 23 new affordable rented Council homes built as Phase 1 of the Council’s Housebuilding Programme. This will be at an estimated cost of around £3.9 million.

In order to achieve a 30 year pay-back, as required by the Council’s Development Strategy, this phase will require an estimated “subsidy” of £512,000 – which will be provided predominantly through the use of additional Right to Buy (RTB) receipts.

It is anticipated that, once tenders have been invited around Easter, the works will commence on site in mid-July 2014, with completion anticipated 14-months later. These new homes will be let at affordable rents, which are up to 80% of market rents (including service charges).

Marden Close & Faversham Hall, Chigwell Row

I am also pleased to report that planning permission has been granted for the conversion of Marden Close from 20 bedsits into 10 self-contained flats and the ground floor of Faversham Hall to be converted into 2 one bedroomed flats.

The cost of the works is estimated to be around £610,000. Tenders are due to be issued around Easter, with a start on site anticipated for July 2014 and completion within 12 months.

Options for Phase 2 – Burton Road, Loughton

The Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee has already agreed that Phase 2 of the Housebuilding programme will comprise the development of Council-owned land and garages at Burton Road, Loughton. The Cabinet Committee initially considered a feasibility study report based on the provision of 31-33 new affordable homes for the site. However, the Cabinet Committee asked officers to formulate alternative development proposals for the site, which increases the density of the proposed housing and takes advantage of the site's town centre location, good local shopping facilities and public transport infrastructure.

Therefore, two further feasibility studies for developments of 42 homes and 56 homes on the site are due to be considered at the forthcoming Cabinet Committee meeting on 17 April 2014, and the Committee has been asked to decide which proposal should be pursued to the planning application stage. As always, the ward members have been invited to the meeting to take part in the discussion.

If planning permission is subsequently granted, Phase 2 is expected to commence on site around March 2015.

Proposed acceleration and extension of Housebuilding Programme

At its forthcoming meeting, the Cabinet Committee will also be considering a report on the possibility of accelerating and extending the Housebuilding Programme, and the associated implications (mainly financial).

The Council's HRA Business Planning Consultant has produced a detailed report on the financial implications - providing a number of options for the Committee to consider and advice on the maximum amount for which funding should be sought from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), in order to ensure that all the RTB Receipts that can be spent on the Housebuilding Programme are spent within the required 3 years of receipt - ensuring that and none have to be passed to the Government, with interest.

The report concludes that, if desired, the Housebuilding Programme could be accelerated to provide up to an additional 65-79 homes over the 6-year period of the original Programme, with only a limited reduction required in expenditure on additional/new housing improvements and service enhancements. Furthermore, the report also concludes that the Housebuilding Programme could be extended by an additional 4 years – to comprise a 10-Year Programme, providing an additional 120 new affordable homes - without any undue effect on the Housing Revenue Account, although such an extension would require the Council to borrow some additional money from the Public Works Loans Board.

The final decision on this issue will need to be taken by the Cabinet.

Policy on future use of undevelopable sites

The Cabinet Committee will also be considering a policy on the approach that should be taken for any site that is considered either to be unsuitable for development, financially unviable or where it may not receiving planning permission. The proposed options include: the sale of the site, either to a housing association or developer for redevelopment; the sale of the site to the town or parish council; the division and sale of the land to neighbouring residents to extend their gardens; the demolition of the garages; the creation unallocated off-street parking; and the continuation of letting the garages.

Out of Hours Call Handling Service introduced from 1 April

I am pleased to report that, at 5.15pm on 31 March 2014, the Council successfully and smoothly transferred its Out of Hours Call Handling Service from an in-house service to Mears 24/7, a subsidiary of the Mears Group.

In advance of the switch-over, officers prepared “scripts” and call-out lists to enable Mears’ call-centre staff to deal with emergencies and other enquiries in the right way.

Not only should this new arrangement provide an improved service at a much lower cost, it will also provide an added benefit for Council tenants - who are now able to report their repairs and book appointments 24 hours a day.

Social Housing Fraud

At its meeting on 23 April 2014, the Housing Scrutiny Panel, as part of its Work Programme, will be undertaking a formal evaluation of progress made on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

In addition, the Panel will also be considering a new Draft Housing Service Strategy on the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud. The Communities Directorate has a number of Housing Service Strategies which are reviewed by the Panel on a three-yearly basis. They give more detail than the Council’s main Housing Strategy on the various services provided.

Following the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act 2013 recently coming into force, local authorities now have the power to take criminal action against offenders. The purpose of submitting the new Service Strategy to the Panel, and subsequently seeking Portfolio Holder approval, is for Members to agree the approach to be taken on the different types of cases.

Consideration of this Service Strategy will be dealt with in confidential session as exempt business since, if the Strategy was to be available as a public document, the information could assist a person who is committing, or may in the future be considering, such offences.

Mobile Homes Act 2013 – Charging for Licensing Functions Park Home Sites

In March 2014, the Cabinet agreed to introduce a policy on charging for the Council’s costs associated with licencing park homes sites. In the policy, which was implemented on 1 April 2014, fees are arranged in bands according to the number of properties on the site. As well as an annual fee, the Policy also includes fees for new licences, transfers and amendments to existing licences.

The Fees Policy for Licensing Residential Park Home Sites is available on the Council’s web-site. In line with other fees, they will be reviewed annually by the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee.

The Cabinet also agreed in March 2014 that the consultation on the conditions to be attached to site licences for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites in the District should be delayed for further interpretation of some recent guidance on separation distances between park homes. Having now reviewed this guidance, officers should be able to proceed with the consultation during the next few weeks.

Information Evenings for Site Owners and Residents Associations

Last year, we held an event in the Council Chamber for park home site owners and residents to provide them with information on the Mobile Homes Act 2013, which had come into force

in May 2013. In March 2014, we held two further information evenings on new regulations relating to site rules which came into force in February 2014.

The regulations concern the arrangements for setting site rules and the rules governing the management and conduct of park home sites. There is no requirement for site owners to have site rules but most do, not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of site residents. The new regulations include strict timescales and prescribed forms which must be used to consult with, and notify, residents on the site rules being applied. If site owners fail to meet these requirements before February 2015, any existing site rules will cease to have effect - so it is in the best interests of site owners and residents to understand the effect of the new requirements.

One of the information evenings was for site owners and the other was for park home residents and other interested parties. The second information evening was also web-cast for the benefit of those that were unable to attend. As before, legal experts from the Leasehold Advisory Service (LEASE) gave detailed information on the procedures, and answered questions from residents and members.

Officers asked for feedback on the effectiveness of the events and those attending were generally appreciative that the Council had made the effort to provide information and guidance on this complex subject area, which most other councils have not.

The Council is also able to charge site owners for the administration of its duties concerning site rules and it is therefore my intention to bring a report to a future meeting of the Cabinet on this issue.

Petition – Owl Park, Waltham Abbey

A petition signed by 20 residents of the park home site at The Owl, Waltham Abbey was received on 24 February 2014. The petition was effectively a complaint that officers of the Council had been carrying out an inspection of the site without giving prior notice to residents. I am including receipt of this petition within my report, in accordance with the Council's new Petitions Procedure.

Our officers responded by explaining that the inspection of the site was being carried out in order to exercise the Council's duties under The Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 and that, in order to do so, they needed to carry out programmed inspections of the whole site from time to time and also to visit as a result of complaints as may arise. The Act gives authorised officers the power to enter any land included in the site licence, at all reasonable hours, provided that notice has been given to the site owner - as had been the case on the occasion referred to in the petitioners' complaint.

Officers went on to explain that, while there is no legal requirement for the Council to notify residents of their intention to enter the land, every effort is made to keep residents informed of steps they are taking in respect of matters that affect them. However, it is not always possible to inform every resident as was the case in this instance.

Following receipt of the Council's response, the lead petitioner contacted the Director of Communities to notify him that, as a result of the Council's response to the petition, residents on the site had formed a residents association in order to make it easier for Council Officers to provide site residents with information in future. This is a development that I very much welcome.