

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet **Date:** 30 September 2014
Subject: Housing
Portfolio Holder: Cllr David Stallan

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Essex Landlord Accreditation Scheme

The Council's Private Sector Housing (Technical) Team has been working with six other Essex local authorities to develop a private sector landlord scheme, the Essex Landlord Accreditation Scheme, or 'ELAS'. Landlords whose homes are properly maintained and managed will be able to join the Scheme, from the date of its launch this month. By identifying these landlords, tenants will be less likely to fall foul of poor property conditions and unscrupulous practices.

Following a procurement process carried out by Essex County Council, the Chief Fire Officers Association, 'Blue Watch', was appointed to manage the Scheme. There will be no cost to the participating councils, since ELAS will be funded by an annual membership fee of £80 paid by the landlords that join the Scheme.

Landlords will be able to use the ELAS 'red house' logo and, as well as providing an advantage in terms of marketing, there will be a number of other benefits for landlords, such as discounted property insurance.

The Scheme is to be launched at Essex County Fire and Rescue Service's headquarters on 25th September 2014.

Progress with new arrangements for Site Rules on Permanent Residential Park Home Sites

I have chaired three separate information events hosted by the Council for park home site owners and residents in the District, to provide information on the provisions of the Mobile Homes Act 2013. The last of these, in March 2014, related specifically to the new arrangements for site rules. Each of the events was attended by legal experts from the Leasehold Advisory Service (LEASE), who gave detailed information on the procedures and answered questions from residents and members. LEASE is funded by the Government to provide free legal advice on the law affecting residential leasehold properties, including park home sites.

The new regulations concerning site rules require site owners to deposit new site rules by February 2015 as, if they do not, their existing site rules will cease to exist. Site owners within the District are making progress with this, although no site rules have been formally submitted yet. While the Council had offered to host another Information Evening in October to address any further issues and queries on site rules, the owners of only one site have said that they would be interested in this. The Council has

therefore agreed with LEASE that any ongoing concerns will be addressed better by LEASE individually with the site owners. In addition to this, officers from LEASE have continued to answer queries from site owners and residents on all the sites about the new arrangements.

Consultation with gypsy roma and traveller communities on new Park Home Site Licences

Following a consultation exercise with residents in the gypsy, roma and traveller communities living on privately-owned, authorised sites within the District, site licence conditions were agreed by the Cabinet in September 2014.

In accordance with the request of Members, the conditions consulted on and agreed are broadly based on the licence conditions already agreed for the permanent residential park homes sites in the District.

The work of issuing the new site licences will begin in October 2014. It has been agreed that the Essex County Traveller Unit (ECTU) will assist with the enforcement of the standards, by identifying any contraventions during their routine visits to the sites.

Customer Service Excellence Award Re-accreditation – Housing Service

The Housing Service within the Communities Directorate was awarded the prestigious Government Standard for Customer Service Excellence in the public sector (formally known as Charter Mark) in 2004.

To obtain the Customer Service Excellence Award, organisations must meet 57 separate assessment criteria. They must demonstrate that they: engage and consult with their customers; measure customer satisfaction with the service; provide information and easy access to services; co-operate with other providers, partners and communities; have service delivery standards; deal effectively with problems; achieve timely service delivery, and have a positive organisational culture.

Continuous compliance with the criteria is monitored through a major assessment every 3 years and interim 12-monthly assessments. The major 3-year assessment of the Housing Service was undertaken last year, when the Customer Service Excellence Standard was re-confirmed. The Assessor found that not only was the Housing Service fully complying with the Standard; “Compliance Plus” was awarded for certain aspects of the service.

In July of this year, the 12-monthly assessment was undertaken, and I am pleased to report that no non-compliances, nor any partial non-compliances, were found and a number of good practices were identified by the independent external assessor.

Having the Customer Service Excellence Award gives confidence to the Council’s tenants, applicants, leaseholders, private sector housing customers and other clients that the Housing Service provides a high quality, customer-focused service, which it strives to continuously improve.

Presentation by Family Mosaic Support Services

Essex County Council’s Floating Support Provider, Family Mosaic, provides assistance to vulnerable people on a range of housing-related matters, including participating in the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, dealing with rent arrears and other debts and generally sustaining their tenancies.

Family Mosaic will be making a presentation on its work to the Housing Scrutiny Panel at its meeting on 16 October 2014. I am therefore making all members aware of this presentation, since I know that the Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel would like to welcome any interested members to attend, hear the presentation and ask any questions.

Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme and Tenancy Policy

Housing Allocations Scheme

The revised Housing Allocations Scheme came into force on 1 September 2013, following the most comprehensive review of the Scheme ever undertaken. Under the revised Scheme, a Local Eligibility Criteria was introduced. All applicants wishing to join the Housing Register must now meet with the new Criteria which, in summary, are that applicants must:

- Be resident in the District for 3 continuous years up to the date of application;
- Have a housing need;
- Not have sufficient funds to enable the applicant to purchase their own property;
- Not have caused any unacceptable behaviour within the last 3 years.

The Cabinet agreed that the Scheme should be reviewed following 12 months of operation. At its meeting on 21 October 2014, the Housing Scrutiny Panel will therefore be undertaking the 12 month review of the Housing Allocations Scheme. The main issues for consideration are whether there should be:

- A change to the Residency Criteria;
- Further exceptions to the Residency Criteria;
- A review of the Financial Criteria;
- Stronger penalties for refusals of offers of accommodation; and
- A review of payments to those downsizing accommodation.

Tenancy Policy

Under the Tenancy Policy, also agreed with effect from 1st September 2013, Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies of a fixed-term of 10 years (including the 12 month Introductory Tenancy period) are now granted to homeseekers for properties of 3 bedrooms or more. At its meeting on 21 October 2014, the Housing Scrutiny Panel will also be undertaking the 12 month review of the Tenancy Policy as well. In particular, it will be considering whether Flexible (fixed-term) Tenancies should:

- Continue to be for 10 years' duration; and
- Be extended to include 2 bedroom properties.

I am advising all members of this important Review, should they wish to attend the second October meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, to be held on 21 October 2014.

Progress with Council House-building Programme

Following a tender exercise, at its last meeting the Cabinet decided to award the Design and Build Contract for Phase 1 of the Council's Housebuilding Programme, which will see the first Council homes to be built for over 30-years, to Broadway Construction Ltd. Phase 1 consists of 23 homes across 3-sites on Roundhills, Waltham Abbey and a fourth site at Harveyfields, also in Waltham Abbey. The works are expected to start on site in late October 2014, with a view to being completed by the end of 2015.

To mark this flagship District-wide Programme, invitations has been sent out to all three MP's that represent the Epping Forest District to attend a ground-breaking ceremony at Harveyfields, Waltham Abbey, where Eleanor Laing MP has been invited to say a few words to mark the occasion.

I am also pleased to announce that the Council has successfully applied for, and been granted, £500,000 by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), from its 2015-2018 Affordable Homes Programme, to subsidise the development of 40 one and two bed properties at Burton Road, Loughton as part of Phase 2 of the Council's Housebuilding Programme, for which a planning application has now been submitted.

At its meeting in August 2014, the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee agreed an approach to the future naming of streets and flat blocks as part of the Housebuilding Programme. For each development that requires a new street or block name, the relevant Town or Parish Council will be invited to submit a list of 5 street/property names, in a preference order, on which the ward members will be consulted for their views. Having regard to any suggestions made by local councils and ward members, the Cabinet Committee will then select a name.

I am very pleased to report that, having given 29 years' loyal service to the Council and the tenants and other residents of the Epping Forest District, the Cabinet Committee, in consultation with the local ward members have agreed to name the new Council housing development comprising 9 flats at Harveyfields, Waltham Abbey, "John Scott Court", after the Council's former Chief Housing Officer and District Health and Housing Officer - who retired in 2007.

Work has now commenced on the conversion of the former sheltered accommodation and former community hall at Marden Close and Faversham Hall. P A Finley Ltd, who was the Design and Build Contractor appointed to undertake the works, took possession of the site on 15 September 2014. It is anticipated that the 12 new 1-bed flats will be completed in the autumn of 2015.