

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 21 December 2017

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor S Stavrou

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

Maximum Council rent increases from April 2020

Members will be aware that the Government is requiring local authorities and housing associations to reduce their social and affordable rents by 1% per annum for the 4-year period from April 2016 to April 2020. Previously, the Government had allowed rent increases up to a maximum of the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) + 1%, which was the assumption used by the Council for our HRA Financial Plan from 2012, when self-financing for the HRA was first introduced. As a result of the 4-year required rent reduction, it was necessary for us to review the options for the HRA in light of the reduced rental income.

However, there has been uncertainty over the approach that the Government would take to social and affordable rent increases from April 2020. It is therefore helpful to note that, just prior to the Budget, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced that they would allow rent increases of up to CPI + 1% again from April 2020.

Although this announcement is welcome, in that it removes the uncertainty for the foreseeable future, it should have no effect on our HRA Financial Plan since we had already assumed a return to rent increases of CPI + 1% from 2020 in any event.

Homelessness Reduction Act Grant Funding

The Cabinet has already agreed, at its meetings in June and October this year, the use of the Government's much welcomed Flexible Homelessness Support Grant.

Due to the additional burdens under the Homelessness Reduction Act, the Council has been informed it will be receiving a further £134,000 in Government grant over a three year period.

At its December meeting, the Cabinet agreed the use of the additional funding. It was agreed that a new post of a full-time Homelessness Strategy Officer should be created for a period of 2 years and 8 months, funded from the total amount of the Grant.

The main additional duties placed on local authorities by the Act are (in summary) as follows:

- The period that a person can be considered to be threatened with homelessness, or that it is likely that they will become homeless, is extended from 28 days to 56 days;
- An applicant is threatened with homelessness at the point the Section 21 Notice (which is the standard notice period provided by private landlords to tenants and is recognised as the single biggest cause of homelessness) has been served, as opposed to the end of the

notice period. It also prevents councils advising applicants to remain in occupation beyond the expiry date of the Notice;

- An emphasis is placed on services preventing homelessness from occurring - strengthening the duties on local authorities to provide advice, securing accommodation and other help available;
- Ensuring that services meet the needs of groups at particular risk to reflect their complex needs and vulnerabilities;
- A duty to carry out an assessment of an applicant's case, notifying the applicant of the assessment in writing; and the provision of a (new) Personalised Housing Plan in order to provide effective support;
- Giving applicant's the Right to a Review of their assessment
- The ending of the homelessness duty if the applicant "is unreasonably refusing to co-operate"
- The requirement to secure accommodation (under the new "Relief Duty") for at least 6 months for all applicants who the authority is satisfied are eligible for assistance

Outsourcing of the Careline Alarm Monitoring Service

Members will be aware that the Cabinet has previously agreed that the Council's Careline Alarm Monitoring Service should be outsourced to an external provider. Following an extensive procurement process, I recently to the appointment of Tunstall Healthcare (UK) Limited as the new provider for the Monitoring Service.

A great deal of preparational work has been undertaken over the last few months, including the transfer of data, the re-programming of alarms to the new Centre, notifying all services users etc.

I am pleased to report that the service was successfully transferred on Monday 20 November 2017. Since the transfer, officers have undertaken a range of checks to ensure that the service meets with the Council's high standards which, to date, it has. The Council's Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) will now undertake the role of the client officer for the contract and will continue to manage the provider's performance in the longer term.

Behavioural insights bid

The general principle behind "behavioural insights" is that low-cost interventions can be used to encourage people to make better choices for themselves and society, with the overarching aim being to manage service demand and achieve efficiencies. A small number of local authorities are now looking at ways to adopt this innovative approach to improve their services, including for income collection.

Behavioural insights are already employed in the Council to a limited degree, including with debt collection. However, the Cabinet has now agreed to undertake a Behavioural Insights Project for the Council to build upon this work and to introduce this approach more broadly across all council functions. However the resources and specialist knowledge required to do this do not currently exist within the Council. Therefore, in order to help deliver this project, a bid has been submitted to the Local Government Association for funding of £25,000.

If the LGA bid is successful, the bid requires the sum to be match-funded by the Council. The Cabinet has therefore agreed to match-fund with a further £25,000.

Corporate Enforcement Policy

Amongst other matters, regulators (such as the Council) must ensure that their approach to their regulatory activities is both consistent and transparent. This includes publishing service standards with clear information on their enforcement policy and explaining how they respond to non-compliance.

Presently, each service area in the Council publishes their own Enforcement Policy, which leads to a duplication of effort and potential inconsistencies from one service to another. In addition, the Council's existing Corporate Enforcement Policy requires updating in any event, to take into account the content of the Regulators Code.

Therefore, a new Corporate Enforcement Policy has been drafted by a corporate team of officers, which will shortly be consulted upon internally before seeking member approval undertaking external consultation.

Report to Communities Select Committee on the Council's approach to Fire Safety

A report is to be presented to the Communities Select Committee on 11th December, which seeks to reassure Members of the fire safety measures that the Council has in place to protect its tenants. This report follows the fire at Grenfell Tower in which many social tenants tragically lost their lives, the circumstances of which are still under investigation.

The report explains that whilst the Council does not have any high rise buildings in the district, fire safety is still taken seriously and many measures have been put in place over many years, starting with comprehensive Fire Risk Assessments (FRA's) being conducted, in some instances independently assessed by experts, which are based on site inspections to identify risks and put in place measures to minimise risks. The report explains that written assurance has also been received from the Essex Fire and Rescue Service confirming the results of the FRAs for blocks that are 5-stories high at the Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell and Hornbeam House, Buckhurst Hill.

Other measures in place include smoke alarms in all Council properties, fire doors to the majority of properties in Council flat blocks, with leaseholders being offered substantial discounts to replace their doors. Fire alarms are also installed and monitored in the Council's higher risk blocks, including all sheltered housing schemes and at Norway House, North Weald and Hemnall House, Epping.

The report goes on to confirm that the Council has not installed any cladding made up of Aluminium Containing Materials (used at Grenfell Tower), but explains the use of other external wall insulation, some of which is flammable. However, the cladding system used does not incorporate a cavity and, as such, is sealed behind render.

There are, however, two matters that are to be discussed at the Select Committee around the possible installation of sprinklers in sheltered accommodation and at Norway House and Hemnall Houses.

The report also explains to Members the Council's responsibilities in relation to cladding used on Park Homes, which is a measure controlled by the Council's site licences. Lastly, the report explains the responsibilities of commercial leases in relation to fire safety, which is important as many of these commercial leases relate to blocks where residential flats are above.

For more information, Members are encouraged to read the report to the Communities Select Committee and/or to attend the meeting.

Selection process for consultant to advise on the future options for the Housing Repairs Service

Members will remember that I requested officers to seek tenders to from specialist consultants to independently advise on the options for the future delivery of the Council's Housing Repairs Service, as the current "insourcing" contract with Mears ends in 2020. The selection process was based on a price and quality assessment, with three consultants invited to tender. Each tender has been assessed, all demonstrating good and relevant experience in such reviews and a decision made to appoint Cameron Consulting to undertake the review, which was also the lowest tender received. Cameron Consulting were also the consultants that originally procured the current contract on behalf of the contract, the experience from which they can draw on when undertaking this review.

Council Housebuilding Programme - Extension of time at Burton Road (Phase 2)

Members will be aware from my previous reports to Council that the Contractor appointed to undertake Phase 2 of the Council Housebuilding Programme at Burton Road, Loughton experienced unforeseen ground contamination issues early on in the contract. As a consequence, the Contractor, Mullalley & Co Ltd, has submitted a claim for an extension of time, which has been evaluated and agreed by the Council's Employers Agents. The revised contact completion date has now changed from 25th June 2018 to 28th September 2018, with loss and expense payable to the contractor.