

## **Report to the Cabinet**

**Report reference:** C-035-2020/21  
**Date of meeting:** 16 November  
2020



**Portfolio:** Housing & Community Services – Cllr H Whitbread

**Subject:** The More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme ~ EFDC creating great places where people want to live’.

**Responsible Officer:** Rachel Smith (01992 564168 Ext 2710).

**Democratic Services:** Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

---

### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**(1) That Cabinet agree the principles of the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme ~ Creating Great Places where People want to Live.***

**(2) That in the first instance, Cabinet agrees to pilot the scheme on Council Housing Revenue Account (HRA) housing estates who enjoy fully constituted residents’ groups.**

### **Executive Summary:**

At its meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020, Cabinet approved a full review of service charges across the District, after analysis showed an under recovery of service charges in 2019/20. Cabinet agreed that a further paper be presented to Cabinet in September 2020 to agree proposals for introducing a fair and consistent approach to service charging for tenants living in flat blocks. Cabinet were also asked to consider ring fencing the revenue generated from its new charging regime, for investment upon the Council’s HRA housing estates. This process is now nearing completion with the estimated amount of under recovery at £600K, year on year. Subject to Cabinet agreement this will be used to improve our Housing Revenue Account (HRA) housing estates. To this end, Cabinet agreed the development of the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme ~ Creating Great Places where People want to Live.*

The *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme*, signals a new way of thinking about, talking about and making decisions about the Council’s HRA housing estates.

The aim of the scheme is to work with residents on a range of estate projects aimed at improving their look, feel and lived experience, with focus on the communal living environment.

At the heart of the scheme is a clear statement of intent about the Council’s commitment to affirm our estates as integral to the Council’s long term vision for the District, where our estates are viewed as privileged parts of the District and to celebrate our estates as great places where people want to live. This is particularly key at a time when due to the

Coronavirus pandemic residents are spending larger amounts of their time at home.

The report explains how the Council might work with residents to better understand specific estate needs and aspirations, thereafter, creating resident centred “wish lists” of estate improvements from which tailored estate improvement plans may be agreed. Where funding is required to realise specific projects, the report sets out the proposed mechanism for approval.

It is proposed that a *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Enhancement Scheme* guidebook be produced to detail the wealth of inspiring initiatives that our residents and Estate Officers bring to fruition through the scheme. Primarily this will serve to demonstrate to residents from other estates what might be possible and to ignite imaginations, but will also help the Council better realise a variety of ad hoc funding and partnership opportunities that may be accessed, to help make our estates great places where people want to live.

Whilst this scheme is about giving choice to residents, enabling them to shape their own communities, the Council has a duty to protect its assets and safeguard the health and safety of our residents, as such residents will be given guiding principles to work within when proposing any upgrades to their estates.

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

To develop a scheme that delivers a programme of estate enhancements on HRA housing estates, in partnership with residents, and which supports the Council’s ambition to create great estates where people want to live.

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

- (1) To agree a different set of principles.
- (2) Not to restrict the pilot to only HRA housing estates with fully constituted residents’ groups.

#### **Report:**

1. The *Social Housing Green Paper: A “new deal” for social housing*, published on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 2018, aims to rebalance the relationship between landlords and residents, tackle stigma and ensure social housing can act as a stable base and support social mobility. The Green Paper states that “*the homes we live in are so much more than bricks and mortar. They’re where we raise our families, put down roots and build communities. Everyone in this country deserves not just a roof over their head, but a safe, secure and affordable place to call their own – and social housing has a vital role to play in making sure they do*”, furthermore “*the design and quality of homes and their surrounding area is important to wellbeing, integration and tackling stigma*”.
2. Whilst the design, quality of homes and their surrounding area is certainly at the heart of decision making for new Council estates built through the Council’s housebuilding programme, some of the Council’s older housing estates have not enjoyed the same level of consideration, nor significant investment of time nor funds aimed at improving their look, feel and living experience. Consequently, a number of our estates now appear tired and outdated, stigmatising those who live there and undermining the propensity to achieve sustainable communities. These estates are not viewed as great estates where people want to live and do not support the Council’s ambitions.

3. At its meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020, Cabinet approved a full review of service charges across the District, after analysis showed an under recovery of service charges in 2019/20. Cabinet agreed that a further paper be presented to Cabinet in September 2020 to agree proposals for introducing a fair and consistent approach to service charging for tenants living in flat blocks. Cabinet were also asked to consider ring fencing the revenue generated from its new charging regime, for investment upon the Council's HRA housing estates. To this end, Cabinet agreed the development of the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme ~ Creating Great Places where People want to Live*.
4. The *More Than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme* signals a new way of thinking about, talking about and making decisions about our council estates, affirming a clear statement of intent about the Council's approach and commitment towards its estates and towards the diverse communities who reside there.
5. It is proposed that the scheme be piloted initially upon HRA housing estates with fully constituted residents' groups, rewarding those who have shown a continued commitment and desire to work with the Council for the betterment of their estates. There are presently six fully constituted residents' groups across the District; Limes Farm Residents Association, Ninefields Residents Association, Oakwood Hill Estate Residents Association, Romelands Residents Association, Roundhills Residents Association and Shelly Residents Association. Once the scheme has been tested and refined, the scheme could be offered to other Council HRA housing estates.

### **Estate Improvement Plans**

6. Under the scheme, the Council would work with residents to better understand specific estate needs and aspirations, thereafter, creating resident centred "wish lists" of estate improvements from which tailored estate improvement plans may be agreed. These plans might include more obvious inclusions such as new landscaping, bin stores, pram sheds, cycle stores, mobility scooter stores, lighting, painting and new signage, however, our vision for the "*More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement scheme*" is more innovative, pushing boundaries and not just settling for the obvious. Examples might include art installations, community farms, wildlife meadows, green gyms, food growing initiatives and community gardens.
7. Whilst this scheme is about giving choice to residents and enabling them to shape their own communities, the Council has a duty to protect its assets and safeguard the health and safety of our residents, as such residents will be given guiding principles to work within when proposing any upgrades to their estates.
8. Estate Improvement Plans would be drawn up based on the following key principles:
  - Residents as equal or principal partners,
  - Transparency of costings, so that the immediate and long-term costing is well understood,
  - Maximising resident involvement,
  - Concepts with a safer, greener, cleaner focus will be particularly encouraged,
  - Proposals must be sensitive to the appearance of the area,
  - Initiatives must not present a risk in terms of health & safety, must not conflict with other programmed / cyclical works, with Council policy or the Council's medium to longer-term plans for an area.

## **Estate Improvement Plan selection, funding and pilots.**

9. It is proposed that each year, the Council would support each Residents' Group to prioritise and agree its top three projects for progression, which would be fully costed and presented to decision makers. To ensure that funding is allocated fairly, projects requiring funding would be considered annually by the Property & Housing Portfolio Holder in conjunction with the Service Manager (Housing Management & Homeownership) and the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel, who would decide as a collective which projects should be progressed within that financial year.
10. As funding for this scheme is linked to the Council's review on Service Charges, the level of funding available for the pilot is currently undetermined. It is therefore not possible at this juncture to estimate how many estate improvement projects may be progressed under the Scheme during the pilot. However, the intention would be to test additional sources of funding as a means of realising projects, in conjunction with the funding provided through the proposed ring fence.
11. Consideration has been given whether some form of selection criteria / priority rating should be imposed, which aligns with Council priorities. However, mindful of the aim of the scheme, which is to create estates where people want to live, it is felt that residents should have the freedom to set their own priorities. Further, it would be particularly advantageous to Officers involved in the pilot projects to experience an array of different project types, which might otherwise be prevented from progressing should selection criteria / priorities be imposed. Consequently, the adoption of a defined selection criteria / priority rating has been discounted during the pilot.
12. There will be close coordination across the Council to ensure that any proposals for Estate Improvement plans are mindful of plans for major works and new homes. This will help to avoid issues where estate improvements could potentially be damaged by later works.
13. Subject to funding, the intention would be to commence the pilots during the financial year 2021/22. The first stage of which will be to consult with residents from the six estates with fully constituted residents' groups. The Council will work closely with residents on those estates to guide them through the Estate Improvement Plan process.
14. Each pilot will be reviewed after one year to evaluate their success.

## **The More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Enhancement Guide**

15. It is proposed that a *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Enhancement Scheme* guidebook be produced to detail the wealth of inspiring initiatives that our residents and Estate Officers bring to fruition through the scheme. Primarily this will serve to demonstrate to residents from other Council HRA housing estates what might be possible and ignite imaginations, but will also help the Council better realise a variety of ad hoc funding and partnership opportunities that may be accessed, to help make our estates great places where people want to live.
16. Through the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement scheme* we will work collaboratively with residents, celebrate our estates and be ambitious about their future, in order to improve the appearance of our estates and how it feels to live there.

### **Resource Implications:**

The budget available for the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement scheme* is dependent upon Cabinets decision following the options / recommendations presented to it following the Service Charge Review, and will be allocated to individual proposals once the sites and nature of the works have been fully determined and approved by the decision-making panel.

The *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme* will be supported by the Council's Resident Involvement Officer, who will provide consistent support to residents with the process, however a significant amount of work is likely to be generated to facilitate projects and bring them to fruition. Officers have identified the need for a dedicated Project Manager, who would be appointed on a 12 month contract, to support this project, which will be funded from the income ring-fenced to support the Scheme

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

Cabinet is asked to agree the principles of the *More than Bricks and Mortar Estate Improvement Scheme* and to agree to a pilot to test its approach. There are no legal implications at this stage.

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

The purpose of the Estate Improvement Plans are to improve the local area for the whole community who live there. These plans will contribute to the Council's ambitions.

### **Consultation Undertaken:**

The Portfolio Holder – Property & Housing, and the Tenant & Leaseholder Association have been consulted and have responded positively to the proposals.

### **Background Papers:**

Report to Cabinet dated 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020: "*Review of Service Charges*".

### **Risk Management:**

The purpose of the Estate Improvement Plans are to improve the local area for the whole community who live there. There will be need for some monitoring of membership of any forums which discuss the Estate Improvement Plans to ensure these genuinely represent the full range of diverse communities that make up that estate area. Any planned estate improvement should be to the benefit of all communities rather than for any particular group.