

Committee: COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: June 18, 2009

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Title: LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

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Item for information

Summary

- 1 This report updates Members on matters that are not otherwise on this Agenda and provides information items.

Recommendations

- 2 That the report is noted.

Situation/Update

3 Local Amenities

Environment Committee is to consider agreement in principle on 16 June the transfer to Saffron Walden Town Council of the following amenities: Saffron Walden Cemetery, Dorset House Gardens, Jubilee Gardens, Battle Ditches and flower beds around the town. If agreed a press advertisement will be placed for two weeks and responses will be considered at the September meeting of that Committee.

4 CAB – Response from East Herts

EHC decided over 18 months ago to rationalise the level of support we gave to the CAB in East Herts. At that time the estimate for 2008/09 was £229k. We announced that as a Council we would procure services in terms of housing advice, housing debt advice and benefits advice, for which we would pay £129k. Recognising that this was a significant change in our level of funding we determined that the adjustment in funding would not take effect until the start of the financial year 2009/10, whereupon we would instigate the first reduction of £50k, followed by a further reduction at the start of the financial year 2010/11 of £50k.

Immediately after the announcement, back in the latter part of 2007, we worked with the CAB to help them reconfigure their service within East Herts. During the following months we were approached to assist in financing one-off restructuring costs of £50k, which we were pleased to assist with.

The service has reconfigured where and how it does business – less is being spent on infrastructure costs. I am also pleased that the service is working with other agencies and partners to find occasional locations nearer to where

some of their clients live, rather than expecting clients to travel into one of the towns – this is much more client-focused and I am sure is appreciated.

The CAB has had greater success of late in securing funding streams from other partners – Hertfordshire County Council's LSP has recently agreed to release up to £500k to fund 5 specialist debt advisors (one advisor for two councils – East Herts will share with Broxbourne).

5 Housing Rents

The Council has now received the revised final subsidy determination for the revised rents. Calculations have confirmed that this has the same impact as the draft version and the negative subsidy will be reduced by £0.334m to £5.135m.

Final rent setting calculations suggest that the average rent increase for tenants will be 2.98%. This will result in a reduction in rent of approximately £0.344m which means that the net annual cost to the HRA is c. £10,000.

Including officer time, the estimated cost to the General Fund for implementing the reduction in rents (and amending benefits software) will be £10,000 to £20,000, depending on software costs for which a final quotation is awaited. The Government has not yet indicated whether these costs will be reimbursed. The costs falling upon the HRA cannot be claimed. Including staff time, these costs are estimated to be £12,000, within the £20,000 figure set by committee.

The Council will therefore be re-calculating the rents in line with the new subsidy determination and has commissioned Northgate, the company that provide the housing computer system, to write a bespoke software programme to re-calculate all the rents from the beginning of April. It is estimated that this work will be completed by the beginning of July.

6 Day Centres

Scrutiny Committee has reviewed its programme of work and included on the list is Day Centres which falls within the Terms of Delegation to this Committee. It is anticipated that this will be their first task from the program to be undertaken after the current areas are complete. Officers from the Housing team will be contributing to this review.

7 Recession Impact – Housing Options/Homelessness

The actual homelessness figures for 2009/10 are currently similar to those for this time in 2008/09. The figures for year ending 2008/09 were also similar to the previous year. This has been achieved by putting the emphasis on homelessness prevention as far as possible.

We are however experiencing an increase in housing applications and increased numbers seeking housing advice.

The housing advice figures have increased by 30% for the first two months of this financial year, compared to the first two months of 2008/09. This may well see an increase in homelessness figures later in the year if it becomes harder to prevent homelessness.

The Government has however launched several initiatives to try to help local authorities prevent homelessness these include:-

Mortgage Rescue Scheme – to date, although we have had enquiries regarding the scheme and given advice on it, we have to date not had any eligible candidates who meet the scheme criteria. The criteria has recently been relaxed so this may mean that some people who would not have previously been eligible will be eligible in the future.

Recession Impact Funding – this is a one off grant of £30,000 to be shared between Uttlesford and four other local authorities, Colchester, Malden, Braintree and Tendring. Uttlesford have been asked to lead on this and discussions are taking place and an Action Plan being prepared for the CLG on how the money will be used. Initial discussions with partners have resulted in a consensus that the money will be given to local CABs for them to increase their capacity for debt advice.

Repossessions Prevention Fund – we have just been notified that we are to receive at the end of June, £28,500. This again is a one off grant that is to be used to extend small loans to families at risk of homelessness through repossession or eviction. Guidance is being provided to set out in detail the uses of the Fund and how it can be administered. The intention is that loans would range from £1,000 to £3,000 per household. Any loan being capped to a maximum of £5,000 and to be available at 0% interest. This would be something completely new in Uttlesford and cross departmental discussions will need to take place on how such a scheme would be set up.

The impact of the above measures is something that has yet to be seen. The Government will also be monitoring their impact by the collection of monthly statistics.

8 Update on the work of the Sheltered Housing/Lifeline Task Group

A further meeting of the Sheltered Housing/Lifeline Task Group took place on 28 April 2009 at one of the Council's Sheltered Housing Schemes in Newport. This proved invaluable in gaining more feedback from elderly tenants regarding what they felt about the current service that is provided and how they think it could be improved.

The recent Supporting People review of elderly services and resulting recommendations was also discussed in depth by the Task Group at this meeting. Recommendations from the review are currently out for consultation and Officers have responded to the consultation document positively.

The Supporting People review links inextricably with the review of Supported Housing services currently being carried out by the Council. As a consequence the Task Group is working very closely with Supporting People and other relevant agencies to ultimately ensure that an improved service and housing support is targeted to those most in need in the community.

Minutes and other related documents of the sheltered task group can be viewed on the Council's website, by using the link:
<http://ggpweb.uttlesford.gov.uk/CMISWebPublic/CommitteeSelection.aspx>
or alternatively from the lead officer.

9 **Multi Use Games Area (MUGA)**

This Stansted facility has now been completed and officers are working to an official opening date of July 18. It is hoped that a sporting personality will undertake the official opening.

Both the Ashdon and Chrishall Play Areas have also been completed and official opening for those are scheduled for the 16 July.

The Felsted MUGA is soon to be installed and an official opening will also be arranged for that site.

10 **Update on Heritage Quest Centre Project**

Since Cowper Griffith Architects were appointed in January, there has been considerable work undertaken on working up detailed design and specifications for the Heritage Quest Centre building. Originally, the intention was to go out to tender in May but this is now likely to be end of June due to unexpected issues with access to the site, now resolved with Essex County Council and the landowner of the adjacent site. A haulage road is being constructed to the site to link it with the access road for the new recycling centre. Temporary public access will be from Thaxted Road, utilising the former entrance road for the old Civic Amenity site until the permanent road can be built. Costs of both the haulage and public access roads will be borne by the landowner. Maintenance of the haulage road is down to our developer, construction and maintenance of the temporary public access road is down to the landowner.

Museum officers are meeting with the architects and quantity surveyor on 15 June to review the cost plan, before presenting designs and estimates to the Resource Centre Project Team (which meets on 25 June) and senior Council officers, to seek permission to go to tender. In current market conditions, it is hoped that tenders for the design and build will be competitive.

Meanwhile, the three project staff posts – Outreach Officer, Collections Officer and Documentation Assistant – were advertised in April, and attracted over 100 applicants between them, mostly for the Documentation

Assistant post. Interviews will be held in mid-June and it is anticipated that project staff will start in post in September. By that stage, contractors should have been appointed and construction work on the Heritage Quest Centre should be imminent. Opening is anticipated in the summer of 2010.

Reactions and support from the local community continue to be very encouraging, and small-scale fund-raising continues to top-up funding. A local collector recently gave an evening talk as a fund-raising event and the Curator has given several short presentations on the project to local organisations recently. BAA has contributed the £32,000 previously promised under the STAL agreement.