

Committee: COMMUNITY AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: March 17, 2010

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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 the Agenda and provides information items.

Recommendations

- 2 That the report is noted.

Situation/Update

3 CIEH Conference

The annual Chartered Institute of Housing Conference in Harrogate takes place this year on 22 to 24 June 2010, this has proved to be a useful event to learn about how others manage their housing stock and work with tenants. It also provides an opportunity hear about innovations, best practice and what is coming up in the area of social housing. There are workshops for specialist areas including separate events for Tenant Representatives and Members. Each year a senior officer from the housing team attends; the Chair of the Tenant Forum is always invited and a place has been booked for an Elected Member involved in Housing matters. The attendance of a Member at the conference has always been vitally important to the service and this has never been more crucial than it is currently with significant changes coming up in the way government funds housing. We would like a Member representative to attend this year's conference and seek the Committee's nomination.

4 Scores on the Doors

We were successful in obtaining a grant of £5,655 from the FSA to introduce the National Scores on the Doors Scheme for food hygiene rating of premises. Work is now underway to prepare for the launch of the scheme probably in the autumn.

5 PLACE Scheme

Empty Homes: The numbers of properties empty for longer than 6 months varies on a day to day basis but the last figure obtained from the Council Tax records was in the region of 320 and there are currently 3 long term empty properties that

are causing particular concern to Members, neighbours and officers; they are in Widdington, Saffron Walden and Stansted.

In each case there has been recent correspondence with the owners or their relatives advising them of the specific concerns we have and seeking factual information such as the current owner's whereabouts and the circumstances that have brought about the apparent abandonment of the property and, where appropriate, drawing their attention to defects in the property which are adversely affecting neighbours or the wider neighbourhood. In one case the Council's legal section have also been involved, and in each case a file is being prepared with all the information that we have so that a legal opinion can be sought on the options available to the Council.

A series of proposed amendments to the PLACE scheme have been submitted to GO-East for approval, the main points are to enable the use of the interest accrued on the capital grant to fund a comprehensive shared empty homes service with the other local authority partners (Harlow, Chelmsford, East Herts, Epping Forest), and the use of capital funding to renovate long term empty property when the owner refuses to cooperate voluntarily and an EDMO has been obtained or other similar enforcement activity taken.

6 Vacant Council Homes (VOIDS)

An update on this subject was provided to the last meeting of this Committee and a further update was promised upon completion of the Business Improvement and Performance Team (BI&PT) review to minimise the loss of rent whilst a property is empty and reduce the time taken to re-let an empty property.

The BI&PT have tracked the path of the necessary processes and captured the "as is" arrangements, they have analysed the number of interventions and agreed an implementation plan to deliver a streamlined process. The new process anticipates a net gain in processing time of 15 minutes but there is a greater potential time saving to be had by the introduction of a "viewing form". This would need to be completed at the time that a prospective tenant took their internal viewing of the property. The tenant would be asked to decide if they are to accept or reject the property at this point. This would permit a rejected property to be reoffered to another prospective tenant without delay if they rejected or tenancy arrangements progressed if they were accepting. Previously this process could take up to seven days to determine.

As set out in the previous report, additional arrangements have been implemented to bring down the void turnaround time. A dedicated void surveyor was appointed and a letting standard adopted and the turnaround times had greatly reduced.

There are some properties that are hard to let that are impacting on this performance indicator (SI20) these are typically sheltered blocks such as

Reynolds Court, Mead Court and The Close all of which have between 6-8 properties void (the majority of these being bed sits) which do not suit the current needs of those on the housing list. This results in no bids on those properties.

In order to re-let these properties and thereby reduce both the total number of void properties and loss of rental, officers are seeking partners and external funding opportunities to make these properties suitable to a wider range of tenants.

The implementation plan arising from the BI&PT review has been assigned to responsible officers; there are a number of new performance indicators to track the most significant of those being those that will provide separate out those properties that will require major works so that we will get a true picture of void turnaround times.

7 Recession Impact – Housing Options/Homelessness Update

The homelessness figures for 2009/10 continue to remain similar to those for 2008/09, due to the prevention work being carried out by the housing options/homelessness team.

Housing Advice continues to be busy having seen 189 clients in the first two months of 2010 compared to 124 in 2009 a percentage increase a 52% increase. The Housing Options Team have also received for assessment 70 new housing applications in February alone.

The rent deposit scheme has had its most successful year to date and the extra funding for the scheme from the LAA has enabled us to keep funding the scheme past its original budget allocation.

The Housing Options Team and Housing Benefit Department had a useful meeting with local lettings agents to talk through the difficulties that stop private landlords wanting to take on tenants claiming housing benefit. The Agents also expressed a willingness to work with the Housing Options Team on trying to re-house tenants whose landlords require their properties back. It was agreed to meet again to carry on forging these promising new links. The Housing Options Team has also been direct mailing private landlords to try to encourage them to consider contacting the Council when they are looking for tenants.

Uttlesford have now referred two cases to Moat Housing Association for the Government Mortgage Rescue Scheme and another three cases are currently being worked on prior to the referral stage.

8 Housing Finance Review

Members will recall that the Government has been proposing to abolish the housing subsidy system and replace it with a redistribution of historic local authority housing debt. The Council responded to the consultation in October 2009. Detailed Government proposals, including the specific implications for each local authority, are expected some time in March (not yet published as at 4 March). If proposals are published, careful financial analysis will be required and a detailed report will be brought to the next meeting of this committee. In the event that a response to the detailed proposals is required before the next committee, the Chief Finance Officer will prepare this in consultation with the Head of Housing and the Chairmen of Community & Housing and Finance & Administration Committees.