

CABINET MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL – 12th April 2010

Agenda Item 10i

CABINET MEMBER: Cllr Lady Patricia Newton

CABINET PORTFOLIO: Housing & Well-Being

Portfolio covers:-

- Housing and Homelessness Strategy
- Health and Well-Being
- Leisure
- Affordable Housing
- Older People

REPORT COVERS ACTIVITY DURING PERIOD COMMENCING 16th FEBRUARY 2010 AND ENDING 31st March 2010

Housing

1. The Council is on course this year to complete 171 new affordable homes, against a target of 127 homes at the start of 2009. This is a very good result. However, a recent report by Shelter criticised many Councils for failing to meet local housing need. Research commissioned by the Council (together with Colchester and Chelmsford) in 2007 found that 697 new affordable homes need to be built each year. This figure exceeds the total number of homes built in the District each year. This inevitably means that we will be unable to meet all need, but we shall continue to work closely with developers and partners to make sure that as much affordable housing as is viable for each site is provided. The Council has also facilitated schemes on its own land with the extra care sheltered housing scheme in Witham, and with the planned development at Riverside in Braintree which will provide 55 units of affordable housing.

The housing development at Bailey Bridge Road, Braintree is nominated in two categories, Regeneration and Community Benefit as part of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors Awards. The outcome will be announced in May. One of the tenants who became involved in the development team for the scheme, Ester Curtis, has been short-listed for the Tenant of the Year award in a scheme run by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service. The result will be announced in August.

2. Show flats at the extra care sheltered scheme at Helen Court, Witham, are now available for viewing. Any Member wishing to view should contact Tim Lucas or David Steel in the Housing Service.

Delivering for Gypsies and Travellers – Seminar attended by Cllr Gabrielle Spray

3. On 24th February I attended a Seminar at County Hall, Chelmsford, designed to show how local authorities, housing associations and other organisations can work together to deliver much needed accommodation for Gypsies & Travellers while at the same time addressing the concerns of other members of the community.

The seminar, part of a national programme, was developed by the Improvement & Development Agency and the principal speakers at the Essex event were Cllr Richard Bennett, former Chair of the Gypsy & Traveller Task Group and Cllr Ric Pallister, Deputy Leader South Somerset District Council. Both gave excellent presentations highlighting the problems that face Gypsies & Travellers, the prejudices they face, the challenges for the younger generation in obtaining education and the importance of access to health care for the whole community.

A few facts:

One in four Gypsy & Traveller caravans are on unauthorised sites
Gypsies & Travellers are the most socially excluded group in the country
Average life expectancy is 20 years less than for the settled population
42% have long term illnesses compared to 18% of the settled population

The list is extensive, but the speakers wanted to offer possible solutions rather than just highlight the problems. These solutions lie in identifying suitable sites for caravan pitches and ensuring that the provision is both appropriate and adequate. There is funding available through the Gypsy & Traveller Site Grant (GTSG). As the region with the largest population of Gypsies & Travellers, the East of England has received the highest allocation of funding; £9 million is available and it offers LAs 100% funding for new pitches however, no bids were received from Essex LAs in either 08/09 or 09/10.

A common problem is that of identifying suitable sites and obtaining planning permission; one solution is to start small e.g. offering 2 or 3 pitches rather than going for much larger sites which are more likely to meet with opposition locally and where it can be hard to obtain planning permission.

Another speaker at the seminar was Sally Woodbury, Chair of the Romany Gypsy Advisory Group. Sally is a passionate speaker for her community and had some thought provoking points to make concerning the prejudices they face.

Everyone agreed that 'doing nothing' is not an option; what is required is the introduction of a network of small sites; community buy-in and, finally, toleration and understanding.

Homelessness – Housing Advisory Service

4. The Council has had significant success over the last few years in increasing the number of households who are prevented from becoming homeless.

Since April 2009, over 350 households within the Braintree District have been provided with support and assistance from the Housing Advisory team which has either enabled them to remain in their existing home, or to secure an alternative. During the same period, 96 households have been assessed as eligible for assistance under the terms of the homelessness legislation.

Central Government has been encouraging local authorities to increase their prevention work – households who are able to retain their home or arrange a planned move to an alternative will be subjected to far less upheaval than those who lose their home. Support networks can be maintained, children's schooling is not disrupted and the emotional trauma of losing a home is avoided.

The Housing Advisory team have a range of options available to them to help prevent homelessness – this includes advising on tenant rights, negotiating with landlords, providing advice and assistance in accessing a range of benefits, liaising with letting

agents and private landlords to secure accommodation in the private sector and assessing eligibility for the mortgage rescue scheme. The team will also ensure that people understand the Gateway to Homechoice scheme, through which all housing association vacancies in the District (and sub-regionally) are let. However, as vacancies are limited, efforts in securing accommodation are also focused on the private sector.

The majority of single people who approach the Council for housing advice are not eligible for housing assistance under the homelessness legislation. If the Housing Advisory team is unable to prevent homelessness in these circumstances, a number of possible solutions will be offered. A referral to the Braintree District Joint Referral Panel can be made if the individual has support needs – all the projects which are represented at the JRP are supported housing providers and are only able to consider people who have both support and accommodation needs.

Since April 2009, 198 people have been referred to the JRP – the majority of those referred are 'sofa-surfers' rather than street homeless (ball park figure 60-70% accepted). Representatives from the projects consider each application and, if appropriate, the person will be offered an interview with the most suitable scheme.

If a person does not have support needs and is therefore not suitable for the JRP process, efforts will be concentrated on helping to identify a space in a night shelter or hostel if immediately homeless and/or in finding accommodation in the private rented sector and claiming benefits as appropriate to be able to secure this.

Leisure

1. Progress on the proposed facilities for the Witham Leisure Centre is reported in Cabinet minutes
2. The specification for the replacement of the synthetic pitch and the refurbishment of the netball courts at Braintree Leisure Centre has been agreed. The work will be undertaken during the 2010/11 financial year. Total cost of the project is £346,000.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE CONTENTS OF THIS REPORT CAN BE OBTAINED BY CONTACTING:

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