

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: April 2021
Subject: Housing and Community Services Portfolio
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Holly Whitbread

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing and Community Services Portfolio Holder be noted.

Executive Summary

The following report provides an update on progress in the following areas:

Housing Information, Strategy and Policy

A review of this function has taken place with an options report having been submitted. The Director of Communities and Wellbeing together with the Director of HRA Functions are now considering how we move forward to ensure the services have a joined-up housing and communities policy and strategy function that capitalises on partnerships and pays due regard to the Social Housing White paper.

Housing Needs

Norway House (Temporary Accommodation)

All of the children at Norway House received multiple Easter eggs, books and activity packs, thanks to kind donations from the public. The hostel staff also arranged a treasure hunt for the children to take part in over the Bank Holiday weekend.

The After-School Club will be resuming at Norway House on Tuesday 13th April 2021, with the appropriate safety measures in place. We have some great activities lined up, such as planting seeds and making a wall mural for our garden area.

Rehousing Team

We will shortly begin work on reviewing the Housing Allocations Scheme and the Tenancy Policy, which are both due to be published in April 2022. We hope to make some improvements based on our learnings over the last few years, which will allow us to deliver a fairer and more transparent service to our applicants.

Homelessness Team

We have successfully recruited 2 Triage and Support Officers within the Homelessness Team, who will be joining us on Tuesday 13th April 2021. They will act as the front door to the Homelessness service, as well as supporting Homelessness Officers with answering telephone calls, processing referrals from other agencies, monitoring and managing the homelessness inbox and booking appointments where it is appropriate to do so. This will allow the Homelessness Officers to focus on their case work, making the best use of their time and increasing their prevention outcomes.

Community, Culture & Wellbeing

Waltham Abbey Community & Cultural Hub

A business case for the creation of a Community & Cultural Hub, combining Epping Forest District Museum with Waltham Abbey library, continues to be developed. Architects, build and design consultants are currently working on design plans for the scheme to RIBA stage 2. Discussions continue with Essex County Council regarding their capital contribution and Service Level Agreement with them. Cultural Consultancy Barker Langham are undertaking a full income report for the scheme along with an assessment on its wider economic impact on Waltham Abbey. Various discussions with stakeholders and user groups are ongoing to help develop the programming for the scheme.

Funding success for Disability Inclusion Programme

The Council's Disability Inclusion Programme has provided support to children and young people with disabilities and their families throughout the Covid pandemic. Staff have engaged with a total of 187 local families over the year and provided a range of virtual and socially distanced activities. The Easter school holiday period saw the delivery of SEND specific "Food in the School Holidays" (FISH) provision for families struggling financially. The success of the Council's inclusion work has been recognised by Essex County Council and the team has subsequently been commissioned to continue all services for a further 18-month period through the award of funding totally £43k.

Epping Forest District Festival of Culture 2021

The first Epping Forest District Festival of Culture has been a resounding success despite being delivered virtually as a result of Covid restrictions. The Festival, which ran from 28th January through to the end of April secured 4,787 recorded online views and the proactive involvement of over 20 partner organisations.

Falls Prevention Project Re-commissioned

The Social, Active, Strong falls prevention project facilitated by the Community, Culture & Wellbeing Team continues to go from strength to strength. In recognition of the excellent outcomes over the past year, the West Essex Clinical Commissioning has re-commissioned the CCW Team to deliver the service for a further 12 months through an additional funding award of £91,560 for West Essex. This initiative has been recognised as a model of best practice by the One Health & Care Partnership and is likely to be replicated across Hertfordshire.

Epping Forest Youth Council

The Youth Council is delighted to be working with Essex Police to explore ideas to support positive messaging around the personal safety of young people in the district. Building on the success of the Youth Council's previous "We R Safe" project, refreshed films and information resources will be developed and shared with the district's local young people over the coming months.

Epping Forest District Museum scheduled to reopen

In line with government guidelines, Epping Forest District Museum will reopen to the public on 17th May. The first exhibition, which will mark the 250th exhibition ever staged at the Museum, is "The Boys" which tells the story of Holocaust survivors who came to stay in Loughton.

Throughout the pandemic, the Museum's heritage education offer continued with virtual schools' sessions delivered, socially distanced session facilitated, and numerous loan and reminiscence boxes provided to a range of settings.