

Portfolio Holder Report to Full Council

Date: 11 October 2022

Subject: Housing Services Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H Whitbread

To: Holly Whitbread, Jennifer Gould, Deborah Fenton

From: Janice Nuth

Cost of living crisis and advice and support for residents

The next Housing Newsletter shall include a booklet on the help that is available both from the Council and other organisations in response to the rapidly increasing cost of living. It will also be published on the Council's website and regularly updated.

New customer focused style for policies

We have created a standard customer focussed template for publishing Council policies as they are updated or introduced to:

- improve efficiency when writing or reviewing policies
- offer ease of reference throughout the democratic approval process
- provide consistency and transparency for customers seeking information
- ensure our associated general duties are always highlighted.

The Housing Allocation Scheme for 2022-2027 incorporates all elements of the new standard customer focussed policy template.

The Housing Allocations Scheme for 2022-2027 goes live

Our new Housing Allocations Scheme takes effect from Monday 26 September. We have already begun the process of communicating key changes to residents and staff. The Scheme was approved by cabinet on 7 March 2022 and will help us to deliver on our commitment to ensure that all eligible applicants in our District have fair access to social housing.

Homelessness demand

The Homelessness Team have had an extremely busy summer and took a total of 91 homelessness applications in the month of August. With winter fast approaching, we expect to see a rise in numbers and are trying to prepare for the inevitable increase in demand by filling vacancies within the establishment currently. This includes advertising for a Senior Homelessness Officer and two Triage & Support Officers who are responsible for operating the front doors to the homelessness service.

Norway House contributes to Homelessness Exhibition

Staff from the Community, Culture and Wellbeing Team have begun collaborating with staff and residents at Norway House, to produce an art installation for the Homelessness exhibition at Waltham Abbey in Museum, which is due to be displayed in January 2023. The artwork will relate to the lived experiences of people who are, or have been, homeless, as well as reflecting on what the notion of home means to the wider community. We want to capture authentic experiences of Homelessness from the residents at Norway House, through the use of photographic imagery and miniature cardboard houses.

The local population and the National Census Data 2021

The confidential local residents profiling information that the Council gathers for application forms, surveys and equalities impact assessments across housing services has been updated to replicate the questions that were asked in the 2021 National Census. This will enable the service to make direct comparisons between the profile of people accessing our services and the most up to date national statistics.

Council tenant census

Our new Epping Forest District Council tenant census is being distributed to our tenants and leaseholders in September 2022. Residents will be able to complete a paper census or online. Once collated, this information will be fed into the Council's new Housing Management System, allowing the Service to deliver tailored services to its customers.

A number of notable resident involvement activities have taken place during the period. Members may wish to refer to the Resident Involvement Facebook page www.facebook.com/efdcgetinvolved, which showcases some of those activities.

Neighbourhood tenancy audits

We are about to embark on our tenancy audits program across the district which will be on a yearly rolling basis, this will allow us the ability to access every Council owned home for a property check and to gain up to date details on those in our homes.

Upgrade of emergency alarm system for older peoples housing

Presentations of the new alarm systems are in progress. Everon who are providing the system are giving demonstrations to residents and the opportunity for residents to ask questions. The actual installations started on 12 September at Grove Court and Rochford Avenue grouped sheltered schemes In Waltham Abbey. From there we will move onto Hedgers Close, Pelly Court and Chapel Road with work commencing at the Sheltered Schemes the beginning of October. The alarm upgrade programme is due to be completed by end of November 2022.

Estate improvements receive a boost from Safer Streets fund

We continue to work hard to deliver the projects agreed under our four year "More than Bricks and Mortar estate enhancement project", which includes playgrounds, lighting, landscaping, signage, and also under its "Homes Fit For Human Habitation Act Project", that seeks to improve bin storage and provision to our multi-occupancy buildings.

We are greatly excited to be leading on several projects being delivered under the new two-year Home Office Safer Streets fund. More information about the Safer Streets Project can be found at <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing/council-housing/ninefields-estate-safer-streets-project/>

Anti-social behaviour apps for residents' mobile devices

Our Neighbourhood team is now in its second trial period with the ASB app that gives residents more mobile ways to report and record anti-social behaviour, allowing for a better flow of information to and from the customer. The trial period ends in November 2022 at which point we will be looking to roll it out in all our cases.

Income recovery

Our incomes team will shortly be undertaking some training for the next financial year to see how we can best balance the cost of living and rent increase with maintaining a steady reduction in rent arrears which has happened year on year despite Covid.

Rent Sense programme

We continue to reap the benefits from the use of the Rent Sense program which has seen arrears reduce across the borough at the most difficult time with the cost-of-living crisis and the possible rise of the rent cap next year.

Restructure and changes to Building Regulations

Our restructure of the Housing and Property Asset and Operations team is almost complete. We have aligned it with Pennington Choices recommendations (our independent consultant) to help facilitate the requirements of the Building Safety Bill, changes to the Fire Safety Order 2015 with the introduction of the Fire Safety Act 2021; and the Housing White Paper.

Our Surveyors area-based patches have been synchronised with the Neighbourhoods and Estate and Land patches so that there is a consistent approach to works across the teams. Surveyors will be expected to spend more time out and about on their patches, surveying property's and building relationships with tenants in the area.

Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF)

We have teamed up with E:On energy to prepare a strong partnership bid for funding from the SHDF, including where possible using local contractors that meet the requirements of the retrofit scheme PAS2035. If successful, our bid will require match funding from the Council and should provide some financial relief to some resident's fuel bills given that 130 properties do not have a gas supply. We are extremely optimistic about our chances and will use this as an opportunity to build our decarbonisation strategy moving forward. Successful bids will be notified around February next year.

EFDC and Qualis

We hope to include Qualis in the Council's decarbonisation strategy and have begun discussions with them about what is needed to retrofit our properties in the future. Qualis are generally meeting the agreed key performance indicators that the Council set and the relationship is continuing to evolve.

Service and major works for leaseholders

We are providing ongoing services and major works to ensure blocks are kept in a good state of repair and redecoration and are compliant in respect of safety.

The final accounts in respect of major works were raised in August 2022. The recharge totalled £542,446.55, for the 461 leasehold properties which benefited from various programmes including:

- PVCu Window and Rear Door Replacements where the current units had reached the end of their life cycle.
- Communal Block Electrics to ensure compliance with current Electrical Regulations.

Ongoing service charge accounts for leaseholders

The ongoing service charge accounts were raised in September 2022. The recharge totalled £504,180.01. All 1088 leaseholders received some element of ongoing services such as grounds maintenance, caretaking, and cleaning etc.

Any leaseholder who is having difficulty in finalising payment will be signposted to our Corporate Debt Team who will endeavour to arrange reasonable and affordable payment terms. Any refunds of over-payments are being dealt with promptly.

New Council housing developments

September saw the scheme opening of our Pick Hill development site named Spinks House (in honour of Councillor Don Spinks of Waltham Abbey), following handover of two 3-bedroom 5-person family homes earlier in the month. We also took handover of a further two 2-bedroom 4 person homes at our Bushfields site. This now completes all of the units across Phases 4.1 and 4.2 of our programme which has delivered a total of 38 units - a mix of 1, 2 and 3 bed homes.

We now look forward to delivering two further schemes early next year at our Woollard Street and Pentlow Way sites, delivering 15 units across both sites. We are also working hard on schemes further into our programme within Phase 5 and beyond.

Opportunities for grant funding new developments

Over the next month we will be considering potential Homes England Grant funding across our schemes and where this may be able to be applied.

We are also very much aware of the cost-of-living crisis, BCiS inflation costs, energy costs and the implications this may have on our construction programme. We are closely monitoring our budgets to ensure that we manage our programme to the best of our ability through these uncertain times.

If you have any questions or would like further information please contact Janice Nuth Housing Strategy Manager (Interim) Jnuth@eppingforestdc.gov.uk