

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 13 December 2022  
**Subject:** Housing and Community Portfolio  
**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor H Whitbread

---

**Recommending:**

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

---

**Welcome Pam Wharfe Interim Housing Director**

Pam Wharfe joined us on 7 November 22 as the Interim Housing Director. Pam's remit includes Housing Strategy and Housing Needs (following Jennifer Gould's successful appointment to Interim Strategic Director) and Housing and Property Services (following Deborah Fenton's farewell to accept a new position).

This is an extremely busy time for Housing as we continue to prepare for the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill. The bill is anticipated to receive royal assent at the end of this parliamentary session which means it is an ideal time to welcome Pam and the experience she brings with her.

**Housing News Autumn Edition**

The latest edition of the six-monthly newsletter for Council tenants has been published online along with a supplementary booklet on help during the cost-of-living crisis. Paper copies of the newsletter have been sent to those tenants on our register who require a more accessible format. Hard copies are also available in the Members room.

**Homelessness prevention and relief**

A total of 99 applications for assistance with homelessness prevention or relief were received during October 2022 and the demand is expected to increase over the winter months.

We have appointed a Homelessness Triage and Support Officer and a Homelessness Officer following a recent recruitment campaign.

The team successfully arranged for five households to access suitable homes in the private rented sector during this reporting period. A notable achievement given the rapid decline in affordable private rented accommodation that is available locally and nationally.

**Norway House temporary accommodation Christmas fun festivities and donations**

Staff are preparing to host a Christmas party for all residents on 15 December which will include plenty of party food, a DJ, a children's entertainer and even a visit from Santa.

All children will receive a Christmas present, thanks to the kind donations from the Upper Clacton Rugby Club who provide for us every year. We have also been donated a Christmas Food Parcel for each family, from Epping Food Bank. The team has relayed how moving it

is to receive so many donations, particularly as the generosity comes at a time when so many people face challenges with the cost-of-living crisis.

### **Supporting survivors of domestic abuse**

Our Domestic Abuse Support Specialist is busy working with residents who are experiencing domestic abuse; to ensure they have the support they require, are engaging with relevant services and charities and feel empowered and confident to take the next steps in their journeys.

We are preparing for the '16 Days of Action' campaign to raise awareness of domestic abuse and are planning a number of events with partners.

### **The allocation of social housing in 2021-22 and applicants on the Housing register**

The Annual Lettings Report, published on 28 November 2022 reports that 404 properties were allocated to applicants in housing need between 2021-22, slightly lower than the 413 allocations in 2020-21. In total, 30 properties sold under the Right to Buy more than double the 14 sold the previous year. There were 1,308 households on the waiting list as of 31 March 2022 compared to 1,355 as of 31 March 2021. The annual reports are available on the Housing pages of the EFDC website.

### **Building more energy efficient homes**

The Development team is in discussion with Homes England for funding to build 8 flats to passivhaus standards which will provide maximum energy efficiency. The team is optimistic about receiving funding and is aiming to enter into contract in early 2023. Planning applications are also being prepared to redevelop more garage sites for affordable housing.

A mixed tenure development with a registered provider is due for completion in January 2023. The scheme will deliver an additional 18 homes for affordable rent or shared ownership. These are currently being advertised to identify qualifying applicants.

The Portfolio holder and officers are considering the Council's future Development Strategy in light of the current economic climate. Initial discussions will be followed by a formal review, detailed proposals, consultation in the new year.

### **Continuation of Sheltered Housing Refurbishments**

Following the successful refurbishment of Frank Bretton House, the sheltered housing scheme in Ongar, approval has been given to continue this work undertaking one or two refurbishments a year until all schemes are complete. Work will commence at Hyde Mead House, Nazeing in the New Year.

### **New "Needs Led" Support Model for residents in sheltered housing**

We are planning to change the way we deliver support to residents in sheltered housing. We have drafted a new model of support that replaces the outdated daily welfare checks with a more flexible needs led service. The intention is to provide peace of mind that support is available if and when it is needed. This approach will allow us to spend more quality time with those residents who need support.

### **Re-branding "sheltered housing" as "Independent Living"**

As part of the modernisation of our housing services for older people we are replacing the term "Sheltered Housing" with "Independent Living" and staff titles have changed to "Independent Living Officers."

### **New ways of working for Caretakers**

From 1 December Caretakers will work in teams of three over a wider geographical area, so they can rotate and provide cover when necessary. Their new vans will be equipped with

hot water to improve cleaning and a smart tablet to report issues like fly-tipping straight away when out and about.

### **Improving the management of damp and mould growth**

More tenants have been reporting damp and mould following news of the tragic death of a toddler in Rochdale. We had anticipated a increasing problem this winter due to fuel costs and have put the following measures in place:

- Methodical diagnosis incorporating Housing Ombudsman (H.O.) guidance not to jump to 'lifestyle excuses'
- Dedicated surveyors to oversee all repair referrals and damp surveys
- A damp and health training course with one of the Country's leading authorities
- A new damp factsheet for tenants and an article in Housing News that follow the principles laid out by the H.O.
- A new Damp Repair Tracker with Qualis that EFDC surveyors have access to
- Additional training for surveyors in December in building ventilation
- Encouraging reasonable building and insulation improvements

### **Consultation on the proposed transfer of Grounds Maintenance to Qualis**

The formal consultation period for Council tenants and leaseholders runs from 21 November-21 December 2022. Methods of consultation include; electronic and paper flyers, a survey and on-line question and answer sessions for people living in sheltered housing, general needs housing and members of the tenant and leaseholder panel.

Residents have been informed that all responses received during the consultation period will be considered before a formal decision is made on the proposed transfer of grounds maintenance service to Qualis Group Ltd.

### **Income Recovery has a new manager and rent arrears are reducing**

Romana Lawson has been with EFDC and managing the Income Recovery team since 7 November 22. Arrears have reduced by 0.3% from October 22. More flexible ways to pay rent are being introduced including Direct Debit and the option to make weekly, fortnightly, and monthly payments.

### **Housing closure orders for drug crimes**

The Tenancy Management team secured two property closure orders for 'cuckooing.' Working with the Safer Communities team they disrupted criminals responsible for taking over the homes of vulnerable people to establish a base for illegal drug dealing. The Tenancy Management team supported and rehoused the victims of the cuckooing.

### **Single point of contact for anti-social behaviour and tenancy management**

Tenants and leaseholders have a single point of contact for both anti-social behaviour and tenancy management issues. This provides greater capacity for office-based staff to answer telephone enquiries, thereby improving customer care. The decision follows a trial period separating tenancy management and anti-social behaviour services which was not considered to be as efficient.

### **Safer streets and courts in Ninefields**

Estates and Land Management and Community Culture and Wellbeing have jointly identified 25 residents living in courts and blocks in Ninefields who want to be court champions. These local volunteers become the eyes and ears of the estate. They are committed to working with the Council to sense check initiatives for the benefit of the local community, including but not limited to safer streets funded proposals.

### **Refreshing our Resident Involvement Strategy for Council owned social housing**

Following a successful Member Workshop in November we are about to consult residents on the final draft Resident Involvement Strategy. This will help to ensure we have effective mechanisms in place to listen and respond to residents' views when delivering landlord services, a key requirement of the new pro-active regulatory framework for social housing.

### **The Housing Strategy for 2023-2027**

The proposed Housing strategy for 2023-2027 is being presented to Cabinet on 12 December for approval. It includes five strategic cross cutting housing priorities, the golden thread to the corporate plan and delegated authority for the Portfolio holder to agree and review the partnership delivery plan on an annual basis.