

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 19 September 2019

Subject: Housing and Property Services Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H Whitbread

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing and Property Portfolio Holder be noted

Executive Summary

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

- The Council Housebuilding Programme
- Property Maintenance
- Housing

Council House Building Programme

I am pleased to be able to report that the new affordable flats at Davies Court in Burton Road were handed over and let to applicants on the Council's waiting list on 4th September. This now leaves the remaining flats at Churchill Court to be handed over, which are due for completion at the end of September 2019. An opening ceremony is being planned for 8th November where Dame Eleanor Laing MP will be formally opening the Phase 2 development, which is made up of 51 homes in total. All Members will receive an invite in due course.

Phase 4 - 6 – Tenders have been issued to the Framework of Contractors for the first four sites making the next phase of the Development Programme. Once received, evaluated and approved by the Council House-building Cabinet Committee, it is hoped work will commence on site in January 2020 after detailed designs have been completed as part of the Design and Build process.

Property Maintenance

Following the decision of the Cabinet to approve the Fire Safety Policy for Council owned properties, an application was submitted to the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECF&RS) for financial support towards installing sprinklers at Norway House and Hemnall House. I am pleased to be able to report that a positive response has been received and £65,000 has been committed by ECF&RS. The overall costs of retrofitting sprinkler systems at both sites has been estimated to be around £145,000, so this is a sizable contribution.

Due to the listing of Norway House, this is still subject to planning permission.

Construction works are now underway at Oakwood Hill Depot. The building is being altered and refurbished to accommodate the relocation of the Housing Repairs team from

Epping depot and the Housing Assets team from the Civic Offices. These teams will be working alongside Grounds Maintenance and Fleet Operations who are already based there.

A mezzanine structure is being built in MOT bay 4 to provide a new materials store as well as additional offices and welfare facilities. In the existing two storey areas, offices, meeting rooms and locker rooms are all being enlarged and a new reception office is being created. Externally, new fencing, gates and a rising security "blocker" will be installed together with 4 new equipment store buildings overlaid with a sedum "green" roof.

The construction project timetable is 27 weeks long with the works planned for completion in February next year. The programme is split into five phases so that existing teams can continue to operate safely whilst building work goes on around them. As soon as the contractor has finished on site, fitting out works will begin with ICT equipment and furniture being installed.

At some of our commercial assets, which include shopping parades and industrial estates, a number of small works projects are currently being planned. They include some new flat roof coverings, rainwater drainage, external lighting replacements and redecoration. Wherever possible, our Housing Repairs team are being engaged to undertake works "in house".

Housing

The Council, in partnership with the East Of England Local Government Association(EELGA) and Essex County Council have been working on the Syrian resettlement programme since 2015. During this period the Council have housed 4 Syrian families across the District and committed to a final 2 placements in the scheme.

With the Councils support, designated families have been provided with accommodation under 5-year fixed term tenancies whilst their stay in the UK has been determined by the Home Office. All the current placements have been successful, and by the Council's close partnership working with both the EELGA and Essex County Council have assisted these vulnerable families sustain their existing accommodation. The Council will shortly be allocating our 2 final properties under the current scheme.

Recently the Council have been contacted by the EELGA on whether we wish to continue supporting this scheme under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme (VPRS) starting in 2020. A further report will be prepared for consideration by the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

An Officer from the MHCLG attended the Council on 30th of July to examine the work being done by the Council to address homelessness in the district, which is funded by grants from the MHCLG.

A report on the findings stated he was pleased the Council was successful in its regional rough sleeping bid and have had success in preventing more customers from becoming homeless. He was also pleased to see evidence to support active work around performance management and officers able to focus more on preventing homelessness.

The MHCLG Officer reported that he was really impressed with the Council's commitment to the delivery of excellent customer services and a focus on assisting customers at the earliest opportunity.

Recommendations were made, asking for changes to the information on the homelessness pages of the Council's website giving customers more information around the Homelessness Reduction Act, which are in the process of being updated.

On Wednesday 11th September it was a privilege to sit on the 'trail blazers' panel at the RESI Convention 2019 in Newport in Wales, talking about approaches to homelessness. The convention is the the leading residential conference for residential property developers, investors, landlords, house builders, housing associations and local authorities. I spoke about our homeless pods in Epping Forest and why this is an innovative and effective approach to tackling homelessness, preferable to Bed and Breakfast, both in terms of cost and encouraging independence.