

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Subject: Housing and Property Services Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H Whitbread

Recommending:

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

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

Housing Needs

Changes to structure

What was the Housing Options Service has been successfully restructured comprising three teams; Homelessness, Rehousing and the Temporary Accommodation Team, to make up the newly named **Housing Needs Service**.

A new Temporary Accommodation Team Manager joined EFDC on 16th December last year. The remaining two Team Manager positions have been recruited with the Rehousing Manager joining on 17th February 2020 and the Homelessness Team Manager joining in early April.

Rough Sleeping Initiative Grant Award

EFDC in partnership with Chelmsford City, Braintree, Maldon and Rochford District Councils coordinated by Essex CC have been commended on our latest bid for further Rough Sleeper Intervention Grant and received an award of £370K which will fund a number of interventions including rapid response, Navigators, specific mental health support for rough sleepers and focus on those with multiple and complex needs.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

A revision to EFDC's Homelessness Strategy was agreed and published at the end of December 2019 to become the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in line with MHCLG requirements and to reflect EFDC's commitment to tackling rough sleeping through proactive early intervention.

Older People's Services (OPS)

Review of sheltered accommodation

Ark have been commissioned to review EFDC's Older People's housing provision and work on this review commenced at the beginning of December 2019. The scope of the review goes far beyond the traditional 'bricks and mortar' view recognising that the sustainability of the asset is about the sustainability of:

- People and place
- Supply and demand and fit in the local housing market
- Ongoing financial performance

The resulting report, due in April 2020, will set out the viable future options enabling EFDC to plan strategically to provide the right amount and type of homes that:

- Meet the future needs of the area;
- Reflect the preferences of the diverse local population and meet the quality standards expected by residents and their families;
- Are cost effective to manage and maintain in the long term; and
- Make the most appropriate use of existing assets/sites.

Telecare

For around 10 years EFDC have worked in partnership with Essex County Council to provide Careline services. This includes the provision of alarms and sensors in residents' homes to help them live independently and safely.

In addition to a basic alarm and pendant, EFDC install various telecare sensors which monitor the home environment. On activation of an alarm or sensor, staff at Tunstall Response Call Centre, who are contracted by EFDC, will respond. EFDC currently provide telecare to around 1,350 private sector homes.

However, Essex County Council have now made a decision to procure a county-wide care technology service for telecare and assistive technology delivery which has significant implications for EFDC. ECC will award contracts in April with mobilisations scheduled for July 2020.

Ark have produced an options paper which we are currently considering.

Gardens in Bloom

The OPS is launching its first Gardens in Bloom competition for sheltered housing residents. There are four categories and winners and runners up in each category will receive a prize (garden centre vouchers):

- Best Communal Garden
- Best Individual Garden
- Best Individual Balcony
- Best Vegetable Garden

Judging will take place in June and we will be organising a presentation to include a buffet lunch in July.

Property Maintenance

Oakwood Hill depot

Building works at Oakwood Hill depot are highly advanced. The new Housing Repairs storage area and the Fleet Services offices above are all now complete. This bespoke structure was built inside the main hangar, within Mot bay 4, and the fleet team are now in occupation.

The enlarged ground floor welfare and locker room areas and the new public reception are nearing completion. The first-floor offices, that will be home to Housing Repairs, Housing Assets and Grounds Maintenance teams are midway through refurbishment and are due to be handed over during week commencing 24th February.

The new external storage building, with a sedum green roof, should be ready for occupation the week after. All office areas will then be furnished and equipped to facilitate new and more flexible ways of working.

Civic Offices decant

At the Civic Offices, the programme to decant the main building is underway. Several teams have already moved to their new “temporary” locations in the Conder building and rear extension. This is a major 5-month programme of ongoing moves being managed by the Operational Assets team and it will result in the main building being freed up ready for when refurbishment works begin.

The Mechanical and Electrical team have also started separating all the services that join the main Civic Offices building to the rest of the site so that we can keep all the temporary areas in day to day use whilst refurbishment works are underway. This is complex process involving multiple services including, electrics, fire alarm, data, security, CCTV and water. The previously decommissioned computer suite in the Conder building has also been temporarily brought back into operational use for resilience purposes.

Housing Repairs Team

The Housing Repairs Team are working closely with the Interim Managing Director of Qualis Management to set up the structures, policies, procedures and everything necessary to run our new repairs company in time for the exit of Mears at the end of September.

The Team have also been piloting a work experience programme with Oak View School in Loughton. Oak View is an all age (3-19), specialist provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs. This includes those with moderate, severe and complex needs and pupils within the autistic spectrum. The pilot has been receiving some excellent feedback from all concerned and the Repairs Team aim to continue offering placements in the future.

Housing Management

Rationale for changes to Housing Management

By allowing Officers to focus on a narrower range of functions, splitting the housing management function into three teams (plus the Cleaning and Caretaking Team), with one Manager managing each function, we create a more consistent decision-making environment for our customers and create capacity for Officers who can then deliver our services more proactively.

The key areas within housing management include rental collection and recovery, tenancy management, anti-social behaviour, resident engagement and estate & land management. It was decided that we would create three strands comprising Income Recovery, Tenancy Management and Estate & Land Management:

1. Income Recovery

The priority in any housing service must be to maximise rental income. Due to the way Housing is funded, poor rates of rental collection will naturally jeopardise the ability of the Property & Housing Service to provide essential services to our customers and will affect our ability to repair and maintain our homes.

Creating a specialist income recovery team will allow us to focus on maximising rental income without interruption from other competing priorities. It will enable Officers to

become skilled in debt management, money advice, welfare benefits and tenancy sustainment, ensuring a holistic approach to debt management. Officers will have capacity to make their own online court applications, thus turning court applications around quicker and more cost effectively where necessary.

2. Estate & Land Management

The Council owns large expanses of property and land within the District. Much of this land was acquired under Housing Act provision and therefore is the responsibility of the Property & Housing Service area to manage.

Land is an asset and as such it needs to be looked after and protected. We must prevent people from misusing it, from taking it, from using it without our consent. We must ensure that it is well maintained, that any defects which could cause a slip, trip, fall or hazard are identified and remediated. We must also ensure that we make best use of our land and that any disposal attracts best consideration. All of this is important and aligns with our corporate objectives.

The other element of the estate and land management function will be to conduct a programme of tenancy audits. These tenancy audits will support the work undertaken by the wider service area with a focus on (but not exclusively); tenancy sustainment, reviewing tenant support plans, property condition and repair, identifying hoarding, and safeguarding.

3. Tenancy Management

This is where the remaining functions sit, which includes tenancy management and tenancy enforcement and anti-social behaviour. Officers in this strand will also be taking on tenancy sign ups from Housing Options.

Tenancy sign-ups will take place on site. Tenants will enjoy a sign-up experience akin to the private sector, with Officers showing customers around their new home, before fully explaining the terms and conditions of their new tenancy, ensuring our Tenants understand their obligations. As part of the process, our Tenants will discuss their support needs with their Housing Officer, which will form an evolving document that is reviewed over the duration of their tenancy.

Tenants with greatest support needs will receive additional support to sustain their tenancies, whereas those with fewer support needs will be encouraged to be more self-supportive, rather than seeing the Council as someone who “fixes” all their problems.

Council Housebuilding

Update

Our Council House-building Programme is progressing as per the plan. We have five sites which are currently at the pre-contract stage (package 4.1). The next package of sites is ready to go out to tender. We expect the tender selection to take place in May with the final sign off from CHBCC in July.