

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 29 October 2020

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 Needs and Older People's Services

Rehousing Team – Full Service Resumed

The Rehousing Team have now been able to resume mutual exchanges and the letting of garages, following a pause in this activity during the lockdown period. The Rehousing Team have been extremely busy during the lockdown period, with an increase in housing register applications of 38%.

Apprenticeship Recruitment

Recruitment is underway for our Housing Career Pathway Apprentices. 7 candidates were interviewed on the 5th and 6th October and 4 will shortly be offered positions. The standard of applications we received was extremely high. The apprenticeship programme will last for 2 years and is a great pathway into a career in housing.

Norway House (homeless hostel)

Works have now been completed on the playground area at Norway House, which provides play equipment for both infants and older children. The feedback from residents has been extremely positive and the children can often be found playing in this area. There are a range of festive activities coming up for the children at Norway House over the next few months, such as pumpkin carving at Halloween and a socially distanced visit from Santa in December.

Homelessness Team (Rough Sleeping)

EFDC as part of a consortium of 5 LAs, bid for and have been awarded £300,000 funding to provide accommodation to rough sleepers and prevent anyone from having to return to the streets. The funding will also secure additional accommodation provision for anyone who finds themselves rough sleeping over the coming winter months.

This funding has enabled us to secure affordable housing options by way of procuring a 6 bed HMO within the private sector which, as of Monday 5th October, is now fully occupied with tenants formerly rough sleeping. They've each been issued with a 12-month AST and had a support plan put in place to address their needs and provide them with a long-term housing solution.

We're also in the process of renovating a 3-bedroom property within our own stock which will be leased to Chess - one of our partners - to manage. This property will be for the higher needs cohort and will support the residents into more independent accommodation.

Sheltered Housing

From the 1st of September all Sheltered Housing Officers returned to work full time across the 12 schemes. For those residents that want it, daily door knocks are now being made and ongoing support with food deliveries, medication etc. remains in place.

There are posters and signage around the schemes reminding residents to sanitise, wash their hands and keep two metres apart and notices have also been put on the doors requesting that any visitors entering the schemes wear a mask. The feedback from residents is very positive; they feel safe.

We have taken the decision to keep the communal areas closed for the time being due to increasing infection rates but review this on a regular basis. Although this means residents are unable to have any social activities some have found other ways to socialise by meeting with neighbours in the communal gardens for a chat.

Housing News tenant newsletter

The Housing, Information and Policy Team have recently published the latest Housing News newsletter for council tenants. Each issue features news and helpful information for tenants regarding their tenancies. This edition features a special annual report four-page centre spread which includes information on our performance during 2019-20; this ensures we are meeting the requirements of section 2.2c of the Government's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.

Annual Lettings Report

The Team have recently published an EFDC Annual Report of Lettings, detailing our social housing lettings during 2019-20. The report gives information about the number and types of properties that have been let, who they have been let to (for example, the priority band the successful applicant was in when offered a property) as well as the types of tenancies offered.

Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS)

Last month the Team submitted our mandatory annual LAHS Government data return. The purpose of this return is to provide information on a range of housing information in our local authority, including council owned stock and changes to it through the year, lettings, waiting lists, vacant properties, condition, expenditure and new supply. This collection is considered essential for central and local governments to have an understanding of its housing situation and how policies affect it.

Community, Culture and Wellbeing Services

External Funding Success

The Community, Culture & Wellbeing service has successfully secured £35K from Art Fund to support its "Bringing the Museum to You" project which will provide new ways for schools and care homes to access museum services. Reminiscence boxes, interactive sessions and an App for families will also form part of the project.

Please note that although we have permission to update this news for this report public announcements are embargoed until November by the funder.

Museum

The Museum reopened on 1st August with Covid safety measures in place including; distance markers, screens, cleaning and sanitising stations and careful limits on capacity. Activity sessions have successfully been re-established on site including fitness and movement classes in The Space. The "Response and Rescue Exhibition" launched on 19 September. The exhibition focuses on the work of the emergency services with a special thank you to key workers.

Around 1000 families and children have engaged in the 2020 Creativity Challenge – a district-wide partnership project led by the Museum in partnership with Epping Forest Creative Network. Following close liaison with schools, museum staff have developed a revised schools programme ensuring that our chargeable educational workshops can be safely delivered in accordance with Covid guidelines.

The Limes Centre

The Limes Centre has safely reopened enabling our partners from the Essex Child & Family Wellbeing Service to re-establish vital children services. The venue is now open again to private hirers with careful social distancing, hygiene and protocols in place to ensure it is Covid safe.

Social Active Strong Programme

Fully funded by the NHS, the Council's rolling 12-week falls prevention programme launched in September. Led by Epping Forest District Council, the project is also being rolled out across Harlow and Uttlesford. There are currently 4 weekly programmes being delivered in the district with participant numbers increasing steadily week on week.

Disability Inclusion Programme

Face to face services for the Disability Inclusion Project were reintroduced this summer and a COVID compliant programme is also scheduled for October half term. Term time sessions currently include boxing, trampolining, tennis and yoga.

Active Living Programme and Associated Class Provisions

Face to face classes recommenced in September with additional sessions planned for October. Participation continues to grow steadily, primarily through recommendations.

Workplace Health

Led by staff from the Community, Culture & Wellbeing Team, the Council's Workplace Health Programme has now registered ten new staff Workplace Health Champions who will undertake induction training in October. These champions will be promoting opportunities within their teams with the aim of improving physical and mental health. They will also be establishing special interest groups across the organisation to support colleagues as we continue to work from home.

A multi-agency proposal for an External Workplace Health Programme for wider businesses across the district has been shared in the Be Well Action Group with an expectation of registering 50 local businesses by Spring 2021.

Health and Wellbeing Community Grants Scheme

The Council's Health and Wellbeing Community Grants Scheme has been relaunched. The Scheme is being shared across social media platforms and the Council's website. Additional work has been undertaken with partners and previous applicants to promote the scheme more widely to ensure maximum take up in order that local third sector groups are supported to deliver projects and initiatives to benefit residents.

Walking and Cycling programmes

During lock-down many group activities had to be suspended but new ways to engage with participants were identified, for example, older residents involved in programmes such as Lifewalks, Cycling For Health and Forever Active Day Trips sent in photos of the world around them when they were out on their daily exercise. This led to some fantastic images being submitted, many of which will be displayed as part of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition commencing January 2021 at Epping Forest District Museum.

The Lifewalks programme restarted on 1st September for pre-paid members under Covid safe conditions. September saw 319 attend return, all of who reported that they were delighted the scheme was up and running again.

Epping Forest Youth Council

The Youth Council has designed a 'Keep your Granny Safe' poster which has been distributed to all local schools, Members, Town and Parish Councils, youth groups and more widely across Essex for use by other local authorities.

Youth Councillors recently met with Broxbourne Youth Council and are planning a cross county "socially distancing" litter pick event.

Two Youth Councillors attended the Qualis commercial consultation event and wider Youth Councillors have completed the online survey.

13 Youth Councillors have become accredited Dementia Friends.

Following an extensive consultation exercise the Youth Council, supported by officers, produced a report on the health & wellbeing of young people in the district during the coronavirus pandemic. The report, along with key recommendations, will be presented to Cabinet on 19 Oct.

Play in the Park

Over the summer the Community, Culture and Wellbeing team worked together to deliver Play in the Park “take-away” sessions, providing fun activity packs to children across the district in line with government restrictions. Over five weeks 48 sessions across 18 locations were delivered with 829 children engaging in fantastic outdoor activity sessions.

Better Health Festival in Waltham Abbey and Ongar

As part of the Paternoster and Shelley Health & Wellbeing Project, a ‘Better Health’ Festival was organised in September. Drawing on key findings from the doorstep consultation undertaken in July, the week-long event offered, physical, cultural and community activities to residents on Ninefields and Shelley estates. Despite last minute changes to the programme due to the introduction of revised government guidelines, staff engaged with over 300 residents. Future community-led events including; environmental clean-up days are planned over the coming months.

Epping Forest Dementia Action Alliance

The Epping Forest Dementia Action Alliance now has 20 official members and 50 organisations/partners actively involved and the Council’s Dementia Action Officer has launched an EFDA Facebook page.

Community Allotment

The Community, Culture & Wellbeing Team has secured an allotment in Longfields Waltham Abbey which has attracted families and individuals to come and learn about growing techniques, taking inspiration from the Council’s expert Community Development Officer. This forms part of the ongoing community project in Waltham Abbey and is contributing to the positive health and wellbeing of residents.

Culture Programme

The team are currently programming some exciting events and workshops in conjunction with the upcoming Museum exhibitions for 2021; Wildlife Photographer of the Year and The Boys Holocaust exhibitions. Between January and April 2021, the team will be organising a Cultural Festival bringing cultural organisations together from around the district. This will be through both virtual methods and ‘in person’ engagement.

Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Board

The district’s multi-agency Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Board has undertaken a review of its key objectives in order to deliver the district’s Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2018-28 in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Board agreed to consolidate its priority objectives into three overarching themes:

- Improving mental health and wellbeing
- Improving lifestyles
- Improving community reliance and cohesion

Strategic partners have committed to developing and delivering a long-term programme of work using a ‘whole systems approach’ to tackling health inequalities in the district, with an initial focus on the wards of Shelley in Ongar and Paternoster in Waltham Abbey.

Projects and initiatives to deliver on the Board’s objectives will be developed via its three thematic multi-agency action groups; Start Well, Be Well and Age Well.