

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: 17 December 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 Career Pathway Apprentices

Our four new Housing Career Pathway Apprentices started with the Council on 2nd November. Alex, Lexie, Charlotte and Sean have thoroughly enjoyed their first few weeks, although they have had a lot to learn. The Apprentices will be with us for two years and will get to experience four different placements within the Housing Service. They will also gain a Level 2 qualification from the Chartered Institute of Housing. This is a great opportunity for us to grow our own talent.

Temporary Accommodation

Norway House

The Halloween Party for the children at Norway House was a great success thanks to the fantastic entertainment provided by the Culture and Community Team. We are now planning for Christmas and are extremely grateful for the various donations we have been offered this year, including Christmas food hampers, Christmas presents for the children, vouchers and selection boxes.

Funding

We have also been successful in securing just over £5,000 in funding from the Travis Perkins Community Benefit Scheme, which will be used to improve our small garden area at Norway House. We want to turn this garden into a chill out area where people can relax and eat outdoors in the summer. This project is being supported by the Culture and Community Team.

Homelessness

Although face to face service is still suspended due to the pandemic, the Team are making continuous improvements in how our customers and professionals are now accessing our service. This has been achieved by updating the functionality of our cases management system and our client facing website presence.

We are currently looking at further service improvements across the team which will streamline processes, improve service delivery and ensure legal compliance.

Private sector lettings

Since its inception (September 2020), our Private Sector Lettings Team have successfully rehoused 17 households so far and have developed a number of relationships with external agencies.

Rough sleepers

We currently have six rough sleepers housed in emergency accommodation.

Older People's Services

Sheltered Housing

Our Sheltered Housing Officers had been working at their scheme since September and this has continued to be the case through the second lockdown. All residents are being accounted for and those that need support are being helped accordingly. Given the impact COVID has had on people's mental health, especially with regard to social isolation, we are working with Essex County Council and staff within Community and Wellbeing on the following projects:

- Installation of alcove devices which allow residents to connect with family and friends and have visual conversations (one resident was overjoyed at being able to see her new great granddaughter).
- Allotments – Hyde Mead House and Jubilee Court will have raised beds installed in the communal garden to allow residents to plant vegetables. If successful, this will be rolled out to other sheltered schemes.

In addition to this we have updated our 'Services for Older People' booklet and our Sheltered Housing Officers now undertake new tenant sign-ups at their scheme.

Re-Housing Support Officer

This role has been moved into the Rehousing Team but will retain a close working relationship with Older Peoples Services.

Telecare

Although our Telecare service will cease next year, we continue to ensure our clients receive a quality service and will do so until Essex County Council have procured a new provider to deliver care technology.

Housing Strategy

Local Authority Data Return – Rents (LADR)

Last month the Team submitted the new mandatory annual government data return (LADR). From 1 April 2020, the Regulator became responsible for regulating local authority rents. All registered local authority providers of social housing in England are now required to complete the LADR. The purpose of this return is to provide the regulator with data on council stock and rent levels.

Repairs move to Qualis – Comms to tenants

The Team wrote to all council tenants to communicate the Housing Repairs Service move to Qualis Management and to inform them of the new contact details. An article was also placed in the autumn edition of the Housing News tenant newsletter.

Allocations Paper

The Team produced an Allocations Paper for the Members' Workshop. The paper gives information about our current Housing Allocations Scheme and highlights areas for discussion around potential changes to the Scheme ahead of a full review next year and policy update in June 2022.

Housing White Paper – Charter for Social Housing Residents

The long-awaited White Paper – Charter for Social Housing Tenants has now been published. The aim of which is for tenants to feel protected and empowered by a stronger regulatory regime and a culture of transparency/accountability. Fundamentally, the Government is going to strengthen the Regulator of Social Housing to create new consumer standards for landlords to be measured against. When the new standards are published, the Team will work to ensure the requirements are met.

Community, Culture & Wellbeing

Locality based community engagement

Staff from across the three teams have been actively engaging with residents living on Ninefields and Shelley estates in Waltham Abbey and Ongar as part of a focus place-based approach to supporting positive health and wellbeing. Observing social distancing, staff have delivered 1,000 Stay Well This Winter resource packs to older residents and 180 activity packs to families and children. Follow-up doorstep challenges including; "Dance on your Doorstep" and "Stretch & Relax" physical activity sessions, along with creative "Brighten up your Street" chalk art initiatives have been a huge success.

Litter Pick Pod events have also proved popular. Members of the Youth Council joined community teams of six, along with support from VAEF and residents' associations, and managing to fill 17 bags of litter across both locations.

In partnership with Estates Management and Housing, several horticultural projects are currently being established; new sensory planted areas will become focal points of natural interest in Waltham Abbey. Volunteers from the Longfields Community Allotment will help maintain these areas. A 'new' meadow is being created for and by the residents of Shelley at Cripsey Brook with residents growing a selection of wildflower seeds at home and

transferring these to the plot. A 'grow your own zone' will also be set up for the residents of Shelley close to the shops.

Data is being captured to demonstrate the impact of each initiative on residents' physical and mental health including reductions in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

This work forms part of a multi-faceted, strategic project endorsed by the Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Board and is being heralded as a model of good practice by Essex Director of Public Health, Mike Goherty.

Epping Forest Youth Council – MiLife C19 Mental Health Project

Once again, the Youth Council has worked alongside officers to co-design a bespoke project to benefit local Epping Forest teenagers. Having surveyed their peers to identify their key concerns about living in a Covid world, by far the most prevalent need identified related to deteriorating mental health. In direct response to these findings, and with the backing of Cabinet, the MiLife C19 Project has been developed. Youth Councillors have made a promotional film to launch this innovative project which can be found via the following link: <https://youtu.be/qUaGz3HWIZY>

MiLife C19 will include a website featuring a plethora of positive youth mental health resources and signposting to wider support services. Alongside this, workshops and activity sessions will be rolled out in each of the district's secondary schools from February 2021. The project will be delivered by the Community, Culture & Wellbeing service in partnership with the Red Balloon Foundation.

Life Walks

The Council's Life Walks programme continues to be a great success with participants becoming accustomed to booking online. In October we had 377 people take part in organised walks. Life Walks will start again for the second time in December if restrictions allow.

Older People's Officer, Karen Murray, was nominated by her Life Walkers and received the Essex Activity Heroes Award for her outstanding contributions to her community throughout 2020.

Social Active Strong – Strength & Balance Programme

The Social Active Strong, strength and balance programme commissioned by the West Essex CCG and lead by the Team across West Essex is being presented as a model of best practice by the Hertfordshire and West Essex STP, with the aim that our model will be replicated across a Hertfordshire.

The programme continues to support residents despite lockdown. All participants have been given an activity pack with simple exercises to do at home, are being supported to access virtual classes and have regular one to one telephone calls to in order to sustain their progress.

Community Collage

The community art mural celebrating the NHS will be installed at Princess Alexander Hospital before Christmas in the Paediatric A&E department. A launch will follow when agreed by the hospital.

Museum Rationalisation Project and Education & Outreach

In line with Government guidelines, Epping Forest District Museum was required to close for a second time in early November, however, staff have used this time productively to move forwards at pace with the collections rationalisation project. This project will ultimately lead to savings for the Council through a reduction in the number of external storage sites required, whilst enhancing the accessibility of the collections for all to enjoy.

Over the two weeks from 9 to 20 November a total of 17 virtual heritage schools workshops took place reaching over 400 individual pupils. The Education Officer delivered topic boxes to schools in the two days before lockdown to ensure pupils didn't miss out on the opportunity to handle original historical objects as part of their learning experience. Existing teaching sessions were quickly adapted for delivery in a virtual format via Zoom or Teams. Sessions were delivered to all age groups from Year 1 to Year 6, covering a wide variety of topics.

Support for the district's Covid 19 Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) residents

Whilst universal shielding is not in place, residents who have been categorised as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable by their GPs or hospital clinicians have been invited to register on the Government's website if they require support with shopping or wider services. The majority of requests are being met at source via the government's priority supermarket delivery slot scheme, however, requests not serviced in this way continue to be devolved to the districts. The team receives weekly lists from Essex County Council and continues to undertake doorstep welfare checks where necessary to ensure our most vulnerable residents are safe and well and receiving the support they need.

Social Recovery Map

An interactive Social Recovery Map has been developed which illustrates how work led by the Team and the wider multi-agency Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Action Groups is contributing to Covid-19 recovery in key wards and more widely across the district as a whole.

The map captures how initiatives to improve residents' mental health and wellbeing and increase their engagement in physical and cultural activities can serve to reduce health inequalities and build cohesive, resilient communities.