

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Subject: Housing and Property Services

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

As an introduction to my new role, as Housing and Property Service Portfolio Holder, I went on a 'tour of the district' looking at council's housing stock and properties. As part of this tour I saw a number of properties recently built as part of the council house building programme. This included a tour one of the blocks on Burton Road, Debden, prior to occupation. The quality of these properties is outstanding. It is great to see that this council is providing such high quality affordable housing for local people. In addition, to being an attractive development, the properties are also energy efficient, with smart meters in each properties, to measure energy consumption per household, and solar panels on the roof to assist with electricity generation.

Phase 2 - I am pleased to report that in July the Council took handover of Davies Court, which is made up of 11 x 1-bed flats and 4 x 2-bed flats. This now leaves the final block of flats, Churchill Court, to complete, which is due to be handed over later in September. Members will remember that this was delayed due to the fire last year.

Phase 3 - The development at Cyril Hawkins Close in Queens Road, North Weald, made up of 10 x 3-bed houses and 2 x 2-bed houses continues to progress according to the programme and is forecast to handover in August 2020. This will be the last site in Phase 3 to be completed.

Norway House Pods - The single person homeless accommodation pods are now completed and the first residents have moved in and are fully occupied. This has added a much welcomed new type of accommodation to the Council's portfolio, which is helping to reduce the number of single homeless people being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. I had the pleasure of recently visiting the pods and I was most impressed with the quality of the accommodation. The use of pods is an innovative and effective method of providing accommodation for homeless people within our district.

Phase 4 - 6 – The remaining 24 sites with planning permission that have yet to commence have been re-packaged and a programme developed with the new Framework Alliance. Tenders are due to go out this month for the first package in Loughton, with start on site due later in the year. Other packages will follow and overlap to try and match the cash flow required to make full use of the 1-4-1 receipts.

Expenditure against the 1-4-1 receipts accumulated from Right to Buy sales, which is ringfenced for new affordable housing, is being closely monitored by the Council House-building Cabinet Committee. At its last meeting in June, the Cabinet Committee reiterated its decision that if it becomes likely the Council might under-utilise its 1-4-1 receipts, then open market street properties should once again be purchased to avoid returning the unspent capital back to the Government.

Property Maintenance

The fire risk assessments on our high-risk housing properties have now been completed and the process of reviewing their findings and prioritising actions will now commence. Our Housing Assets Officers put a great deal of work into the risk assessment process together with our specialist consultant, all recognising the critical importance of fire safety.

The refurbishment of building 21 at Town Mead Depot in Waltham Abbey has now been completed and is ready for occupation by the nursery service. A workshop together with welfare facilities, toilets and a shower are now all in place as well as secure storage compounds for plants, flowers and water storage. The premises and facilities are fully accessible with a ramped approach to the building. This has been a real “in house” team effort with our own surveyor and electrician designing the scheme and supervising the works on site and our Housing Repairs team carrying out most of the construction. Whilst undertaking the project, opportunities were taken to grow the skills of two construction apprentices and to also upskill two other members of our trades team, all under the supervision of more experienced and qualified colleagues. Final landscaping was completed by Grounds Maintenance. The scheme has successfully brought back into use a building asset that had been unoccupied and underused for many years.

Our Housing Repairs team decorators have been very busy this year carrying out a lot of extra work for our tenants that are eligible for help under our internal decorating service. As well as providing a high-quality service, by using our in-house team we ensure that monies remain within the Council.

The lift refurbishment project on the Limes Farm estate is now complete. 9 passenger lifts were refurbished and upgraded on time and within budget. CCTV has just been installed within the lift cars and is now live. Hopefully this will deter potential vandalism.

The new electrical substation has been installed on the “live side” of the airfield at North Weald. It is now powered up and is supplying the new NPAS (National Police Air Service) building. This new installation was required to facilitate the continued expansion of operational and commercial activities at the airfield. Also at the airfield, fire detection and alarm systems in the control tower and gatehouse have been replaced. The existing installations had reached the end of their design life.

Although most works at the civic offices are on hold as part of the accommodation review, the electrical team are currently working on a couple of key areas. The last few remaining ICT switches located around the complex are being moved on to “essential” power circuits. This makes us much more resilient, helping to ensure that our computers and phones continue to work in the event of power failure. Additionally, 2 electric vehicle charging points are to be installed in car park 1. This is in addition to 2 units already in place within

the basement. The team is working closely with colleagues that are delivering the Council's travel plan.

Housing

On the 2nd July 2019, the Select Committee agreed that the Council should enter into an agreement with all Essex Local Housing Authorities, Essex Community Rehabilitation Company, National Probation Service, NACRO, Essex County Council and Chelmsford Prison and adopt the Essex Prisoner Protocol. Under this agreement, those signed up to the protocol agree to work together to reduce the number of Essex adult offenders who leave custody without access to accommodation, and to reduce the number of offenders obliged to sleep rough or move into accommodation which might be unsafe. On average the Council's Homeless Team deal with six such cases a year.

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Council is required to provide an open approach to all referrals into the Council's Homelessness Service under the Duty to Refer provision. Adopting the Essex Prisoner Protocol will improve referrals and ensure that all identified prisoners leaving custody without accommodation can receive support with their rehousing. Additionally, offenders sleeping rough or occupying unsuitable accommodation will also receive the same level of service.

On Monday 15th July, I, along with representatives from other Essex Councils attended a meeting with London Council's on 'Housing Migration – Out of London placements into Essex.' This meeting was an opportunity to re-ignite dialogue with representatives of London council's in relation to their placement of homeless people from their boroughs into Essex. London is managing its homeless problem by placing large numbers of homeless families in Essex and away from their families, friends and support networks. Families are left isolated and feeling forgotten while at the same time increasing pressure is being put on local services such as: GPs, schools and social services. London Authorities are placing individuals in out of borough accommodation due to lack of supply and cost.

In Epping Forest, we believe that we have 235 families placed within our boundaries. However, there are concerns about a lack of notification from London Boroughs when individuals or families are placed in the district. Research carried out by ECC showed that of the S208 notifications Essex districts, boroughs and cities should have received from London only 42% were received.

There is also an issue with people being placed in inappropriate accommodation for their housing need. For example, in Harlow, London authorities have been buying accommodation which has been changed to residential from offices, under permitted development rights. These are based in the middle of industrial estates, and mean that people do not have access to good public transport links, shops, play areas...etc. In Epping Forest, we have a particular issue with London authorities buying up cheap hotels, which can be in isolated location and inappropriate for the housing need of the individual placed within them. One family placed with us contained a disabled child whose wheelchair wasn't even able to get through the door.

The meeting was productive. London Council's acknowledged that there was a problem. Whilst, there doesn't seem to be an appetite to stop these placements, there was an acknowledgment that communications need to be improved and that they need to look at how the most vulnerable are being placed.