

Lead Officer's Report

Community and Housing Committee, 15 March 2011, item 5

**Committee: Community and Housing**

**Agenda Item**

**Date: 15 March 2011**

**5**

**Title: Lead Officer Report**

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Item for information

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## Summary

1. This report advises Members of any updates from the previous meetings and provides information put forward by officers regarding the services that report to this committee.

## Recommendations

2. That the report be noted.

## Situation

### 3. Empty Homes Update

At the last full Council Meeting there was a request to provide more information on long term empty homes around the District and on the enforcement action being taken to bring some of them back into use. Appendix 1 provides a Parish by Parish total of property numbers based on Council Tax records that have been empty for 6 months and those that have been empty for more than 9 months along with some comments on the types of property involved.

At the full Council meeting Members gave approval for officers to start the process of obtaining a Compulsory Purchase Order for a property in South Road, Saffron Walden that has been empty for over 10 years. A further three properties in Thaxted, Wicken Bonhunt and Henham have been accepted onto the PLACE scheme to be renovated and let to nominees on the Council's waiting list. If Members have a particular property in their wards that is of concern to them could they contact Mr Cockerell who will endeavour to provide more details on the individual circumstances surrounding the case.

### 4. Recession Impact – Housing Options/Homelessness Update

The first Uttlesford homeless young parents have moved into the new Uttlesford, Epping Forest and Brentwood young parents' scheme, Railway Meadow in Ongar, at the end of February. Officers have already made nominations to all four of Uttlesford's places at the scheme. The official opening by The Rt Hon Eric Pickles, MP for Ongar and Brentwood takes place on Friday 18 March.

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The service remains very busy and in the first two months of this year there has been a 20% increase in the numbers of clients receiving face to face housing advice compared to the same period last year – 222 up from 185, an average of 6 clients a day.

The numbers on the housing register at the end of February stood at 1237, up from 1170 at the same time in 2010.

Officers recently completed another mortgage rescue case, meaning a family in Saffron Walden have been able to remain in their previously owned home and now rent it from a housing association.

36 rent deposit guarantees have been completed as at the end of February some of which have been funded using money recycled through the scheme.

### **5. Holloway Crescent Update**

The Council's new build development of 5 bungalows at Holloway Crescent, Leaden Roding is very nearly complete. The scheme is on time, within budget and has scored in the top 10% of schemes nationally in the Considerate Constructors Assessments and as such will be automatically entered into the Considerate Constructors Annual National Awards.

In order to celebrate this achievement, an opening event has been arranged for the 25 March 2011 at 11:00 am. The Chairman of the Council will give a short speech and cut a ribbon to officially open the new development.

The potential development of the sheltered site appears as a separate report under agenda item 9.

### **6. Supporting People Update**

The amount of funding from Essex County Council available for Supporting People (SP) services across Essex is less than anticipated as the grant from Government, which is no longer ring fenced, has been re-directed to other public services which are considered to be of higher priority. The County is working with its partners to reduce the costs of the current Supporting People Programme accordingly.

County sent out a 'Recommendations Report' in October 2010 which detailed their approach to realising efficiency savings in the Supporting People programme over the next 2 years.

Since then they have held a provider focus group, a wider provider forum and have offered to meet with all Providers individually to discuss this further. In December 2010 the Council received a notice letter detailing the County's intention to renegotiate costs which would be implemented with effect from 28 March 2011.

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The supporting people funding cuts have now been announced and are higher than the figure that County consulted on, originally in the region of 20%, and will undoubtedly have an impact on the delivery of supporting people services in the district.

The level of cuts to the Council's support services for older persons in sheltered accommodation was initially expected to be in the region of 11% but has now been confirmed at 24% which will result in an annual loss of approx £52,000. As the Council has reviewed provision on a regular basis this compares favourably with other providers who are facing cuts of up to 51% in Essex and in the case of Nottingham, 65%. A further cut of 5% has been proposed for 2012/12.

The Council only recently reviewed provision of the sheltered housing services and had already implemented changes to target the service at those in the most need. In addition it has been working towards the implementation of a hub and spoke system as recommended by SP so that the service could be offered to those in the wider community. In light of the cuts it seems unlikely that there will be any available resources to extend the service offered to beyond those currently receiving support in the Council's sheltered schemes.

This reduction in funding could potentially have an impact on the level of service provided to sheltered housing tenants and Lifeline users and this issue is currently being considered by the Sheltered Housing Task Group (SHTG). Members of that group are keen to see that services to the vulnerable do not suffer. Officers will be working with the Change Management Team to review the service and investigate the potential for any savings and will report back to the SHTG. The proposals that emerge from this review of the service will be reported back to members accordingly. The minutes of the most recent sheltered housing task group are appended.

### **7. Day Centres Update**

Following the proposals that stemmed from the recent scrutiny review and the recommendation from November's Community and Housing Committee officers have met with the day centre management committees to discuss their thoughts on a way forward.

The potential of developing support and collaboration across the whole district using the financial model adopted at Stansted Day Centre has been discussed. If this model were to be adopted then day centres would retain the income that is currently handed to UDC, and pool it to pay for a shared co-ordinator resource for all day centres.

It was explained that the shared resource would only be viable if all day centres agreed to use their retained income for this purpose. Under this model the appointment of and payment for the co-ordinator would be made by the day centres and not UDC.

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It is fair to say that some day centre committees were uncertain of the benefits of a co-ordinator. The problem stems from the fact some day centres will be contributing more than others toward this shared resource. However the intention is that the co-ordinator will identify ways of increasing income for all day centres whether this be through grants, increased usage or sourcing of supplies. Under the proposed model the new income generated and retention of all receipts should cover the cost of the resource. Following much discussion at the last forum (minutes attached) the proposal for a shared resource to cover all day centres was agreed in principle. Officers will now work with the management committees to identify the costs involved, potential income and explore in detail how the model can be implemented.

With regard to other recommendations made by Members regarding the issue of ownership of the Stansted day centre this is under discussion with the Parish Council. Officers have agreed to look at the average annual cost of the maintenance for the day centre over the last 5 years with a view to matching this cost with an annual revenue stream for the Parish Council and handing over the maintenance responsibility to them.

### **8. Housing re-inspection by the Audit Commission - progress on action plan**

In September 2010 members approved an Action Plan as the means of monitoring progress towards implementing the recommendations made by the Audit Commission following the inspection of Strategic Housing Services in March 2010.

Progressing the Action Plan has been a priority over the past 6 months and many of the recommendations made by the Housing Inspectorate have now been successfully implemented.

A copy of the action plan showing progress is appended.

### **9. Uttlesford Home Improvement Agency**

The Uttlesford HIA has been provided by the Springboard Housing Association since 1994 and has been financed by grants from central government (now Supporting People), Essex Adult Social Care and the District Council. The HIA has been successful in assisting a wide range of elderly and disabled home owners to repair, improve and adapt their homes so that they can remain living in their own communities for as long as they wish.

The current contract between Springboard, Essex County Council and UDC is coming up for renewal and as the major funder Essex has drawn up a countywide specification for the service and in an attempt to reduce back office costs, ensure consistency of service and obtain economies of scale has parcelled up the county into 4 areas including Essex West which will comprise Uttlesford and Harlow. The specification broadly covers the current activities of our HIA but also includes a gardening service for those aged over 75 or particularly vulnerable. The District Council will not be a formal party to the

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contract but will be able to procure additional or enhanced services from the successful bidder and it is envisaged that the Council's current contribution of £15k pa will be continued and used to ensure that there remains a local presence and focus to the service.

### 10. Scores on the Doors

The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme was successfully launched in the Uttlesford district on 7 February with the presentation by the Leader of the Council, Cllr Ketteridge of hygiene rating certificates to two premises in the district – the Crown House Hotel, Great Chesterford and the Angel and Harp, Great Dunmow. Several of the local newspapers carried photographs of the presentations and an article describing the rating scheme. 450 premises were included in the launch with the details of their individual ratings available to the public on the [food.gov.uk/ratings](http://food.gov.uk/ratings) website. Each premises also received a certificate and window sticker to display for the public to see.

The scheme has been well received by the public and food business proprietors with many positive comments. Business proprietors that have been able to demonstrate that their standards of hygiene have been improved since their last inspection have been revisited and where appropriate re-rated accordingly. Our website contains full details of the scheme and the options available to proprietors to appeal or request a re-inspection if appropriate.