

Councillor Petrina Lees,

Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health

Full Council, 20 July 2021

Housing Management

The pandemic continues to have an impact on the way we are able to deliver our key services to our tenants. Initially we were only able to deliver our key statutory duties and services whilst we adapted the way we worked to consider the ever-changing environment. This has posed some real challenges to the service however, we have adapted our ways of working to ensure we have been able to support our tenants the best way we can.

The impacts of Covid-19 have been felt across the whole of the service. Rent arrears have increased as some tenants have been impacted financially. We have continued to support any tenant financially struggling by engaging with them and setting up support and payment plans. The level of rent arrears impacts significantly on the HRA business plan as we predominantly rely on this income to provide our council housing services.

Whilst many face to face services had to stop during lockdowns Officers have continued to support tenants by actively engaging with them through phone calls and other means, to ensure they are supported, especially our more vulnerable tenants. Our Housing teams have been working closely with the Community Response Team to ensure tenants were not isolated and were able to receive any support they have needed.

Supported Housing

We have continued to provide support services for our 400 sheltered residents and 800 Lifeline users since the beginning of the pandemic. The Sheltered Housing Team have been reassuring tenants, providing ongoing support and on-site help to address any concerns from tenants feeling isolated or lonely and to ensure they were safe during this time. As well as continuing to provide welfare calls and emergency responses officers have also helped by doing shopping and collecting prescriptions for those tenants who were self isolating.

The communal lounges have now been opened for the first time in nearly a year following the most recent easing of lockdown restrictions. The re-opening of the sheltered lounges followed the completion of detailed risk assessments to ensure residents were able to keep themselves safe and to comply with the prevailing government Covid-19 restrictions.

Housing Property Services

The housing repairs and maintenance service has been delivered through a new partnership Uttlesford Norse Ltd (UNL) since April 2020.

Setting up a new partnership during a period of lockdown proved to be a challenging experience. There were delays in installing the new housing software to be used by UNL which had a knock on effect with tracking outstanding repairs and invoicing. A manual system was adopted in those first few weeks and UNL staff were given extended access to UDC housing and finance systems to ensure service delivery did not suffer.

UNL have retained front line essential services throughout the outbreak and have ensured that communal areas in our flats, maisonette and sheltered schemes have had increased cleaning and maintenance provision.

Many of the planned programmes of work were delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions and shortage of materials. UNL have been able to resume investment works following the lifting of national restrictions and are now continuing to deliver planned works as part of the overall programme. It is expected that most of the planned works delayed during lockdowns will be completed over the next year

UNL response repairs service has been impacted as they were only able to complete emergency repairs and gas safety servicing during the first and second lockdown. This has led to a backlog in repairs that the service needs to complete, and they are continuing to work through this, whilst managing tenant expectations.

Housing Development Programme

Impacts to the construction industry, due to the pandemic, has meant there were some delays to the Council's Development Programme. Our new build sites have continued to operate throughout the pandemic but at a reduced pace.

Work on the redevelopment of Hatherley Court progressed throughout lockdown and the final phase was completed for handover in January 2022, delivering 28 properties, and has been fully occupied since April.

Planning permission to build 13 new council houses in Great Chesterford was granted at the Council's first Planning Zoom meeting. Contractors have been procured and are now on site and works are progressing well.

Contractors also started on sites at The Moors in Little Dunmow, Gold Close in Elsenham and Thaxted Road in Saffron Walden. These sites will deliver a further 31 properties.

Development provides good value for money if it takes place on Council owned land. As such it is important to explore the potential of the Council's land holdings to contribute towards improving the supply of new Council housing.

As well as sites that are already being progressed, further sites that have been identified as development opportunities are being progressed. Planning applications for Walden Place and Auton Croft in Saffron Walden have been drawn up and submitted. Officers are also investigating 3 new sites for development and pre-planning application advice is being sought. These sites will deliver a further 74 new build Council homes if planning is approved.

The Housing Team are also currently working with their strategic planning colleagues to identify land already earmarked for potential housing development or stalled sites, that could provide further development opportunities for the HRA. The intention is to identify 2/3 sites that would bring the number of new council rented homes identified for development by the HRA over the next 3 years, to approximately 200 properties. Further detail of these sites will be brought before members as they are identified

The mechanisms for delivering new Council owned housing will continue to be reviewed and funding opportunities through borrowing, commuted sums, Right to Buy receipts, grant funding and funds from the HRA will be maximised to support the delivery of much needed Council housing.

Homelessness

A dramatic increase in homelessness applications has been seen in the last 2 years. In particular there has been a large increase in the number of approaches for homelessness advice since the start of the pandemic. This has resulted in the Housing Options Team having to prioritise those in greatest need and in many cases only being able to offer short term solutions, with advice only to a large number of people contacting us.

The pressures of an increased workload during the pandemic and a reduction in available options for applicants, has seen a reduction in successful homelessness prevention and relief work.

The Housing Options Team have also throughout the pandemic been responding to cases of verified and unverified rough sleeping and working to the Government guidelines on providing accommodation for public health reasons.

The decrease in supply of affordable housing in 2020/21 being delivered through S106 sites has reduced the through flow from temporary accommodation resulting in more people requiring Bed and Breakfast with the use of this type of accommodation doubling this year. There has also been a 20% increase in numbers on the housing register.

The number of clients with complex needs continues to increase, particularly those with serious offending history, mental health problems and alcohol and drug addictions.

The situation remains difficult with further increases in homelessness predicted following the pandemic. The private rented sector continues to be unaffordable or not accessible for many of those approaching the Council. It is therefore essential that the supply of affordable housing is maintained, including the continued delivery of Council new build homes.

Health and Wellbeing

The Uttlesford Community Response Hub was introduced as a direct response to residents needs in March 2020 at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council has received additional funds from Essex County Council (ECC) to continue the operation of the hub and expand the current levels of support to address the anticipated rise in residents requiring assistance. This will be achieved with the recruitment of two Community Responders who will support residents impacted by Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns. They will work closely with partner organisations and social prescribers to provide information, guidance

and support to those most in need as well as be a focal point for future immunisation programmes and any new and emerging initiatives and programmes related to Covid-19 recovery. The posts are fully funded for 1 year.

In May 2020 Hertfordshire and West Essex became one of the 18 Integrated Care Systems (ICS) across the country. The Council are a partner in the ICS. The partnership is working to deliver improvements to the health and care of residents tackling everything from anti-natal care and end of life planning to making the best use of technology and reducing health inequalities so that everyone has the opportunity to live a healthier life.

The Uttlesford Falls prevention programmes are now back to delivering face-to-face classes for residents that may be experiencing balance issues, mobility issues or are at risk of falling. The free 12 week programme is available at venues throughout the district and currently deliver weekly sessions in Stansted, Newport, Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow and plan to widen the number of venues throughout the year. Residents can self-refer or be referred by a health professional.

Health Protection

Despite low case numbers, there has been little let up with the Environmental Health Service as it continues to juggle its day to day duties with the additional responsibilities imposed by Central Government restrictions.

To outline some of the arrangements in place, two Senior Environmental health Officers are currently dedicated to lead on enforcement, advice, reported outbreaks and issues arising from the Managed Quarantine Hotels.

Members are reminded that Stansted hosts two managed quarantine hotels and whilst standard operation procedures are in place to prevent spread, officers are devoting a lot of time to monitor compliance and address some snagging issues. In addition we have also temporarily employed some additional staff tasked with visiting businesses throughout the district to provide additional advice and support whilst at the same time monitor compliance levels. These officers work in parallel with our authorised Enforcement Officers.

Thankfully, there are very high levels of compliance within the district. Where there are issues, the Council is taking a graduated approach to enforcement with education and advice provided in the first instance, followed by warnings and formal action as the last resort. This approach is working well and to date, no Fixed Penalties have needed to be issued. It should be noted that external funding from central government and ECC has been provided to the Council for this work.

The service continues to provide the work of the Essex Test & Trace service in the form of assisting with outbreak investigations in workplace settings and to follow up non-contactable positive cases. Arrangements are in place for this to continue 7 days a week for the foreseeable future.

The work delivered by the service crosses both the Environmental Health Protection and Environmental Commercial teams as well as the Licensing, Economic Development, Community and Housing teams.

Whilst we all are looking forward to 19th July, there is unlikely to be any let up in work. Cases will continue to increase, as will work to curb outbreaks. Furthermore, The Health and Safety at Work Act still requires businesses to have robust risk assessments and measures in place to keep employees and visiting members of the public safe. There is also the work to ensure that organised events planned for the summer are also safe. All event organisers and local authorities are waiting on further guidance following the release of the pending Events Research Programme report. However, unfortunately this report and associated guidance has been delayed and this is causing some uncertainty.

White Paper

On 17 November 2020 the Government published its Social Housing White Paper 'A New Charter for Social Housing Residents'. The White Paper sets out a number of new requirements for social housing landlords, one of the most significant is the strengthening of the Regulator of Social Housing, moving them from a reactive to a proactive consumer regulatory regime. This will require the proactive oversight of the Consumer Standards; regulation which aims to ensure tenants are safe in their homes, given appropriate degree of choice and protections, and can hold landlords to account.

In future the Council as a social landlord will be subject to four yearly inspections as well as an annual review of newly introduced key performance indicators (KPIs). The White Paper also sets out that

Government will review the Decent Homes Standard to consider if it should be updated, including how it can better support the decarbonisation and energy efficiency of social homes, and improve communal and green spaces.