

Councillor Petrina Lees, Leader of the Council and lead member for Housing and Health
Report to Full Council: 20 April 2022

Housing Management

The service has been able to return to much more normal working over the past year and hopefully this will continue. Some routine work is still being left so that the team can catch up on more important work that had had to be put on hold. Rent arrears have stabilised although we are conscious that going forward the recent rent increase and the general rise in the cost of living is going to put pressure on our tenants, as it will many others, so we will be monitoring closely how tenants are being impacted financially and ensure that they are signposted to those that can help them to manage their finances and maximise their income.

Housing Officers have also welcomed 2 Afghan families into the district, the second family arriving in Dunmow at the beginning of this month. These 2 homes have been provided under the governments Afghan Resettlement Programme and is working in a similar way to the earlier Syrian programme where we helped 5 families re-settle in Uttlesford. The main support for refugees is still being provided by the Essex Integration Service.

Supported Housing

With the gradual lifting of Covid restrictions we have been able to return our sheltered service to something that looks more like normal, however Covid still requires a cautious approach for both staff and residents as cases are still occurring. However our tenants have appreciated the more face to face contact they have been able to have with officers, and hopefully the more social side of sheltered sites will be able to increase further as the year progresses.

The Lifeline service has now been fully transferred to Provide NHS and a smooth transition was successfully completed on the 1st April. By transferring the service to a larger organisation we have ensured that with the digital revolution ongoing in the telecare industry, our previous customers will have access to the best technology going forward. As NHS Provide were already providing our response service for Lifeline customers with this transfer we have been able to ensure continuity in the service.

Housing Property Services

The housing repairs and maintenance service has been delivered through a new company Uttlesford Norse Ltd (UNSL) since April 2020, a joint venture partnership with Norse.

Services delivered through the partnership include repairs, maintenance, voids, planned works, disabled adaptations, sewerage works, cyclical works, facilities management and other associated activities.

Repairs and maintenance is the largest single item of expenditure in the Housing Revenue Account accounting for 38% of all HRA spending and so controlling these costs is vital.

UNSL have agreed performance targets set by the Council to allow the service to be measured and benchmarked both internally and against similar sized stock retaining authorities across the UK.

There are regular joint contracts management meetings with UNSL and Council officers and management team to address performance and contract performance. These meeting address:

- Operational performance against the Operational Plans and through measures contained within agreed performance measures
- Financial Reports - setting out the projected financial performance during the year and on-going financial monitoring
- Risk Register - setting out the risks facing the company and the way they are managed
- Business growth in line with budgeted expectation

Many of the planned programmes of work that were delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions and shortage of materials have now re-commenced. It is expected that most of the planned works delayed during lockdowns will be completed over the next year

Housing Strategy and Development Programme

The council's new Housing Strategy was adopted in December and an Action Plan produced. This looks at how we can maximise opportunities to deliver the right housing to meet the needs of the District over the coming years. The last year has seen another decrease in the number of affordable homes delivered via our Housing Association partners on Section 106 sites, being only 28. It is hoped over the coming year this number will be back to target and over 130.

The impacts to the construction industry, due to the pandemic, has continued throughout the past year with disruption to supply chains and availability of labour. The Housing development programme has, however, completed 17 new properties this year, 16 at The Moors in Little Dunmow - 8 affordable rented houses and 8 social rented flats. The new tenants moved in during December and January and are very pleased with their new homes. We have also built a purpose built 3 bedroom adapted bungalow in Elsenham which has made an enormous difference to the lives of our disabled tenant and her two young children.

This coming year we will be delivering 27 new homes across two sites, one in Great Chesterford and one on Thaxted Road in Saffron Walden. Both projects are progressing well.

Construction will also start shortly on the sheltered scheme at Walden Place in Saffron Walden to develop the new communal facilities that will enable us to dispose of the Grade 2 listed building that the scheme is currently attached to. A report will be brought to Members on the disposal of the listed building in due course.



New Council homes delivered in Little Dunmow in 2022

As well as sites that are already being progressed, there is currently one further site in Saffron Walden that will be considered by the Planning Committee shortly for 14 new homes and applications are being completed for submission on two redundant sheltered sites, one in Saffron Walden and one in Great Dunmow, that will deliver, if approved, 48 new modern flats for those over 60 in two fantastic close to town centre locations. A further site in Takeley has been identified and architects have been appointed for this scheme which is looking to deliver up to 8 properties. Officers are exploring with our architects the potential to deliver this scheme using Modern Methods of Construction. This would be with the intention of delivering low carbon homes. A pre planning application has been submitted to the Planning Department.

Other ongoing plans are reviewing all garden reduction sites and progressing any of these that give potential for development. These are mostly single plots and to date two have received outline planning approval. The Housing Board has decided that these should be built for affordable housing, rather than being sold as private building plots.

The Housing Team are also looking for opportunities to bid on Section 106 developments and currently have a bid in for consideration on 18 flats on a site in the south of the District.

As discussed at the most recent Housing Board, a Council wide investment strategy will need to be agreed to increase council housing supply going forward. This needs to be done in conjunction with the Local Plan process, as landowners will want to receive a market value for their sites. The investment strategy will need to consider the setting up of a joint venture partnership so that both market housing and social housing can be provided, which will enable the appropriate market land value to be achieved. Funds to purchase sites will need to be made available as part of the joint venture agreement.

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

Homelessness has continued to increase over the past year with 185 homelessness presentations being made. This is only the tip of the iceberg of the work that the homelessness team is doing, as they are also trying to prevent homelessness. A third of the homelessness presentations have come about because of loss of private sector accommodation and mainly because of affordability issues. The other main reasons for homelessness remain breakdown of family or partner relationships and then fleeing violence.

There continues to be a lack of options for homelessness applicants, other than an offer of affordable housing. The decrease in supply of affordable housing being delivered through S106 sites in the past year, has reduced the through flow from temporary accommodation resulting in more people requiring longer stays in temporary housing or Bed and Breakfast than we would like. There has also been a further increase in numbers on the housing register. In response to these pressures the team have created a specialist post of an accommodation officer to try to maximise the availability of housing options across all sectors.

The current and distressing Ukrainian refugee situation is putting further pressure on the homelessness team, whether this is covering the council's out of hours homelessness calls or having to find accommodation for those arriving with no accommodation plans. This is likely to place ongoing pressure on the team, as the backstop for many refugees, whether they arrive without accommodation or their planned accommodation breaks down, is to apply to their local council for homelessness assistance and housing.

Health and Wellbeing

The Uttlesford Community Response Hub, introduced as a direct response to residents needs at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, remains busy. Over 1,300 residents have now been supported by the hub and 11,675 jobs have been carried

out including shopping and picking up prescriptions. The Community Response Hub is now also the main conduit for refugees from Ukraine needing help and support. Community responders are also supporting the triage process at the airport and in the hotels where refugees are placed.

UDC has been commissioned from West Essex CCG to continue to develop and deliver a Falls Prevention Programme in the District. The programme is managed by UDC and delivered by sessional workers. Total annual grant funding of £29,600 for the programme has now been guaranteed for 22/23. The free 12 week programme is available at venues throughout the district and 191 participants have attended and benefitted from the programme since May 2021. Residents can self-refer or be referred by a health professional.

The Uttlesford Health and Wellbeing Strategy will be updated this year and work has started to collect data and information. Partners of the Health and Wellbeing Board are being encouraged to provide supporting information in order to prioritise work streams for the next year.

Health Protection

Members are reminded that throughout the pandemic the Environmental Health Service carried out a range of measures. These include:

- Following up difficult non contactable positive cases on behalf of Essex Test & Trace
- Participation in Incident Management Teams to control outbreaks
- Provision of a 24hr 7 day week response to assist ECC
- Lead on enforcement and advisory services to facilitate business compliance
- Inspection of managed quarantine hotels, then later hotels for asylum seekers and Afghan refugees

The above continued throughout 2021 and this work gradually dropped off as restrictions were lifted and the Omicron Variant took over towards the end of the year.

Throughout the pandemic it was necessary to reprioritise services and it has only been in recent months that business is returning to some normality. For 2021, the number of requests for service from the Environmental Health (Protection) service increased from 1227 to 1584 from the previous year.

While we commenced the year seeing a continuation of Covid related requests for advice from both business operators and members of the public, as we moved through to year end this began to tail off and is now minimal. Covid enquiries then focused on locally held events with the team, via safety advisory groups (SAG) or general advice, facilitating organisers operating both in a Covid safe manner and with regard to more traditional Health and safety considerations. While no longer linked to formal legislative control this engagement will continue but will focus on the revised Government guidance rather than a legal compliance.

2021 illustrated that local business has undoubtedly felt the impact of Covid and will continue to do so for some time. Officers were aware of this and supported compliance with legislation as appropriate. Enforcement action did not require escalation to prosecution and no significant breaches leading to imminent risk to health were found.

Private Sector Housing

Due to the pandemic, the private sector housing team defaulted to a reactive service, prioritising complaints work, tackling empty homes and delivering essential disabled facility grants. The service also partnered with the National Residential Landlord Association (NRLA) to host a virtual landlord forum where a range of experts were present focusing on electrical safety and proposed changes in legislation.

2022/23 is looking different with the service currently diverting all its resources to inspecting accommodation for Ukrainian refugees.

There are also plans to put forward a number of items to Cabinet. These include a policy on returning empty homes into use and amendments to the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy. We are also in the process of revising the Councils Home Assistance Policy to provide a greater emphasis on climate change, fuel poverty and best practice for the delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants.