

## **Councillor Arthur Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing** **Report to Full Council: 6 December 2022**

Following on from my last report in July, in which I highlighted those areas which we are working towards improving, I am pleased to report that real progress is being made.

We are now beginning to see improvements in the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service delivered by Uttlesford Norse. At an operational and senior management level there has been a refresh of our partnership relationship. The Council facilitated a successful 'Fresh Start' team building event, which was attended by Council officers, UNSL staff and senior management from both organisations. The focus of the day was to reinforce the shared aims of the partnership and have open discussions on what improvements are required to the way the service is delivered. Staff worked together to generate recommendations on the actions which need to be taken to drive service improvements for our tenants, and these are in the process of being delivered.

These actions include a clearer process for managing repairs complaints and dealing with Member enquiries about repairs, increasing the level of staff resources in the UNSL depot, having a clearer set of service standards, so that everyone is clear what services will be delivered and to what standard, and making sure that there is always a member of the UNSL team available to take calls from UDC housing staff, so that queries can be dealt with immediately.

In early November, a new interim Partnership Client Manager joined the Council, for the purpose of providing expert technical advice to the Council and a 'hands on' approach to managing the contract. The new Partnership Client Manager is based at the Newport Depot and works closely alongside UNSL colleagues, and well as being the 'eyes and ears' of the Council on a day-to-day basis. The Council has set up new weekly in-person 'touchpoint' meetings with UNSL management, to ensure that the contract is robustly managed, and this has opened the door for an effective, joined-up approach to delivering outcomes for council tenants. Complaints are discussed at the meetings and any issues or blockages can be quickly ironed out, with staff being held to account where agreed actions have not been taken.

In this way, new issues can also be addressed quickly. For example, in response to the latest issue of damp and mould highlighted in the media, a new approach has been immediately agreed, whereby all repairs requests which involve damp and mould are immediately escalated as high priority and extra resources are being brought in by UNSL to deal specifically with these issues. The Council has five ongoing complaints about damp and mould, and these are being addressed speedily and robustly.

There has been a special focus on improving performance in health and safety compliance following the Council's self-referral to the Regulator. The position reported by UNSL is improved since the position it reported at the time of the self-referral in August 2022. To seek assurance on the accuracy of performance reported by UNSL to the Council, the Council has employed a specialist compliance company to carry out a full validation of all reported performance, which will include

making sure that every property is on the right compliance programme and then checking all the certification for properties, to make sure this is in order. In this way, the Council will be assured of its true position, and this will be shared with the Regulator once the project completes in a few weeks' time. Health and Safety compliance performance as reported to the Council by UNSL is monitored weekly and there have been notable improvements in reported gas and electrical safety testing. We have seen gas performance for individual homes achieve 100% in November and where a check goes out of compliance, legal action is now being taken straight away. The number of homes reported by UNSL as being out of a 10-year electrical safety testing programme has reduced from 59 at the time of self-referral – there are now only 15 cases where the tenant is still refusing access and the Council is seeking injunctions to enter the properties and carry out the checks. The use of injunctions, rather than starting repossession proceedings to gain access, will achieve results more quickly and is a more proportionate response. Council teams have been really supportive of this effort and the corporate Customer Service Team has also been making calls to tenants for this purpose. The Council's aim is to achieve the best practice standard of electrical safety checks at least every five years. The number of expired five-yearly checks to individual homes has dropped from 720 at its peak in August/September, to under 480 and these checks have been carried out alongside the current programme, so that more homes do not fall out of compliance.

At a more strategic level, we are working closely with the senior management from UNSL and Norse, to make sure that their contractual obligations are being met. Of high priority is the stock condition survey of all council homes, so that we have an up-to-date record of all our homes and the works which need to be carried out to them to ensure they meet all current requirements, and are of a modern standard, including efficient heating systems. Norse have provided an assurance that the surveys will all be carried out within the agreed timescale of five years from the start of the partnership. This will be closely monitored by the Council, to make sure it happens.

The repairs and maintenance services are not the only housing service under review. A new Complaints process is in development for all housing complaints and Member enquiries. This will ensure that when an issue is raised, it is managed efficiently and within a clearly defined timescale. The timescales for responding to and managing complaints are set out by the Housing Ombudsman Service and the Council must comply with these timescales. All complaints must be acknowledged in writing within five working days of the complaint being received by the Council. All responses to complaints must be provided within 10 working days of the complaint being logged, unless the complaint is particularly complex, in which case there can be one extension of a further 10 working days. If any further extension is needed, this must be agreed with the complainant and if no agreement can be reached, this must be referred to the Housing Ombudsman for a decision. Where the complainant is unhappy with the Council's response to their complaint, the complaint can be escalated to the second stage and the same rules as above will apply. To make sure officers meet these standards, all complaints will be monitored by the Council and CMT will soon be making a decision on how this will be managed.

The Housing Team is also preparing for the new regulatory standards, which will come into force from April 2023. All services are being reviewed, to make sure they meet the new standards, and a new legally required tenant satisfaction survey will be carried out from next year.

I am sure that all my fellow Councillors agree that providing more good quality, affordable housing is of key importance. I am pleased to say that our housing development programme is making progress. However, we are mindful of the strains on the HRA this year, due to the additional spending arising from the various projects as I have described earlier and the additional cost of service delivery which all businesses face, arising from macro-economic challenges. Examples include the increased costs of staffing, fuel and building materials and other components used for carrying out repairs.

I am pleased to confirm that work is progressing well on site at Thaxted Road, Saffron Walden, with handover anticipated March/April 2023. This site will deliver 14 homes.

Our new development at Rookery Close, Great Chesterford is progressing well, with handover anticipated 7<sup>th</sup> December 2022. The site will deliver 13 new homes including a 3-bedroom bungalow specifically adapted to meet an identified family's needs.

We also started on site at Walden Place early in November 2022. We will be creating two additional flats and new communal facilities.

The council is in contract with Barratt David Wilson Homes for 18 one bedroom and one 2-bedroom apartment on their site in Great Dunmow. These dwellings will be delivered in April/May 2023 and March 2024.

The sheltered housing site at Parkside, Saffron Walden, is now empty, and a planning application has been submitted with a committee date set for January 2023. The Architects for this project have developed a scheme of 24 flats for the over 60s with a mixture of 1 and 2 bedrooms, including 2 wheelchair standard flats. Funding options for the new developments are under discussion at the current time and we are hoping to attract a financial contribution from Homes England – although this has yet to be agreed.

Other developments in the future pipeline include Alexia House, Great Dunmow, Takeley Day Centre and garage site, and a number of garden reduction sites, whereby we have taken a creative approach to building more homes on existing HRA land.

The housing team is proactively looking for new opportunities to build more homes in the future and in the coming months, a fresh appraisal of all HRA land will be carried out, so that we can take every able opportunity to utilise our own land. We also recognise that we need to push for more partnership working and in the New Year, we will be inviting local stakeholders, including developers and housing association to become part of a refreshed Strategic Housing Forum led by the Council, so that we can explore more ways to work together to deliver more affordable homes for local people in housing need.

I am also pleased to report that our housing team continues to work really hard to support our existing tenants who, like many people, are really starting to struggle in these difficult economic times. So far, our rent collection remains strong and through

continuing to help tenants address their financial worries early on, either directly, or by referring them to other organisations, we hope that tenants will be able to maintain regular rent payments.

Ending on a really positive note, I am delighted that the Council recently won at the Essex Housing Awards as part of the Mid Essex Rough Sleeper Initiative Partnership. This partnership was set up to solve rough sleeping and single homelessness, through providing interventions which helped to bring people off the streets and help them settle into accommodation with the right type of support, training and employment.