

Councillor Arthur Coote,
Portfolio Holder for Housing and Equalities
Report to Council, 23 April 2024:
General Summary Repairs and Maintenance

Following the agreement not to extend the joint venture arrangements with Norse Group, we have been busy exploring the service delivery options for the future of the maintenance service.

The joint venture with Uttlesford Norse Services Limited will cease delivering services for the council on 31st March 2025 and the joint venture will be wound up.

The options for a new operating model were fully explored by Members in a cross-party working group and the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel were fully consulted in their own workshop. During these sessions the preferred option for future delivery were agreed and this was approved by Cabinet on 18th April. The preferred option is a mixed economy solution, where one contractor is procured to cover responsive repairs, void works, most capital works and asbestos works. Specialist contractors for mechanical and electrical services (including gas, electrical, fire, water and lift safety) will be selected through separate procurement processes. Following a decision from Cabinet, officers will begin the procurement process, in consultation with Members and the Tenants and Residents Panel. A communications strategy is being developed so that all stakeholders including tenants, Members and staff are kept informed. Officers are preparing the specifications for the new contract and engaging with UNSL to produce a joint demobilisation plan.

Repairs

To ensure robust monitoring of UNSL, the current repairs provider, while seeking alternatives, the council has taken several key actions:

- Employed an interim Director of Property Services with prior experience of managing Norse and maintenance contractors. This director is embedded at the UNSL depot weekly for hands-on oversight.
- Holding weekly operations meetings to promptly address any service delivery challenges.
- Implemented a structured governance framework with weekly director meetings between the council's Property Services lead and UNSL's Operations Director.
- Conducting monthly KPI meetings focused specifically on reviewing Norse's repairs performance against targets.
- Created a new weekly compliance dashboard to track adherence to regulations, complemented by monthly compliance management meetings.

These robust monitoring processes aim to maintain high accountability and service levels from Norse during this transition period, while informing the selection of a new provider meeting our rigorous standards.

A repairs and compliance budget has been agreed with a value of £3,291,013, made up of £1,339,491 for repairs, £1,257,772 for compliance and £683,750 for voids.

Capital Programme (property improvements) 2024/25

A capital works programme has been agreed with a value of £5.26m incorporating works identified from the stock condition surveys to ensure that we achieve the Decent Homes standard which includes replacement kitchens, bathrooms, windows, roofs, heating upgrades etc.

Capital Programme and Asset Management Strategy

Further to this we are working on producing a 5-, 10- and 30-year investment programme as well as a new asset management strategy to ensure that the future stock investment requirement is known and planned for. This will be of upmost importance as we go out to procure contract in the future.

SHDF Funding – Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund

We have been successful in our application to central government for £3.2M of government funding to improve energy efficiency within 276 properties and save residents money on their bills as the government. Within year one we will carry out work to 90 properties with 186 properties to follow in year two.

We are now busy, with the aid of Savills procuring a contractor to deliver the year one with a proposed start date of July 2024.

From attendance at various training and briefing session that SDHF have arranged for successful bidder, it would appear that we are ahead of the process compared to over organisations.

Moving forward and within the stock investment planning process we will be looking to include decarbonisation as business as usual adopting a” fabric first” idiom tied into a “whole house approach”.

Compliance

We continue to manage UNSL on the delivery of all areas of compliance achieving 99.85% on our gas servicing, our 5-year electrical programme is at 96.79% a slight increase in performance from last month and our 10-year electrical testing programme is at 99.89%. Asbestos, Legionella and LOLER all remain at 100%.

Housing Support Offer to Ukrainians leaving their host arrangements, and resettlement support

Cabinet has approved a new package of support to enable Ukrainian refugees to settle in their own rented home. Without the Council’s assistance these households

would find it very difficult to access the private rented sector and they do not meet the local connection criteria to qualify for a social rented home in the District.

The new package includes a rent assist offer, comprising the required rental deposit, 6 weeks' rent in advance and a council guarantee, to last for the first 12 month of the tenancy, should the tenant default on their payments.

Assistance will also be given where needed to bridge the gap between local housing allowance and market value rent.

All of the required funds will be drawn from the Homes for Ukraine Grant administered by Essex County Council.

In addition, Cabinet approved a new Strategic Grants package to support both Ukrainian households and refugees. This will provide support in areas identified through extensive research by the Council, including

- Emotional wellbeing and mental health
- Information, Advice and Guidance
- Organised activities for children, young people and families

Cabinet agreed that the Council will commission specialist agencies already operating locally to deliver these services, with funding from the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and Asylum Dispersal Grant.