

Housing Directorate – Briefing from Councillor Richard Kerry – March 2021

Housing Maintenance – We continued to operate a reduced service during the Covid lockdown period, ensuring our tenants remain safe and secure in their homes by attending emergency repairs and essential servicing. This will ease on Monday 8 March when more routine repair and maintenance work will start once more, albeit with staff and tenant safety remaining as a priority.

Our staff continue to undertake works in void properties adhering to strict social distancing measures and restricted working numbers in each property. Essential welfare adaptations necessary to prevent hospital admission and expedite hospital discharges continue to be undertaken for all residents both Council tenants and in the private sector.

ESC has purchased a property in north Lowestoft to house rough sleepers, this project has been identified as a Council priority, and work is underway (including weekend working) to convert this to a 7-unit managed property for use at the earliest opportunity.

Housing Development

Whilst some of the construction industry has slowed down as a result of social distancing and material supply shortages, the Housing Development Team has taken this time to move forward previously stalled projects and prepare them for delivery in 2021 and beyond. January saw Planning Approval granted for the redevelopment of the former Post Office site to provide 9 new affordable homes. The Housing team also obtained planning permission for a new Council owned Supported Housing Unit in Lowestoft to house rough sleepers, this is being delivered by our own Housing Maintenance Team. Planning submission for a 61-unit PassiveHaus scheme in Felixstowe has recently been submitted and we anticipate this being determined by the Planning Committee in April / May. In addition to the new build programme, we have actively been seeking s106 opportunities to purchase more affordable housing where these align with the Council's development aspirations. We continue to work towards the ambition of carbon neutrality by 2030 through improvements to our existing housing stock and are concluding the initial investigations into an adaptable Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES) for ESC. The Team are looking to run a pilot retro fit refurbishment to test the proposed MEES and then evaluate other potential properties within the HRA stock for improvement.

Digital Transformation

On 1st February Housing launched a new online service for Housing Tenants. The service, called 'MyHome East Suffolk', will allow Tenants to view their Rent account, create statements, set up Direct Debits, update their tenancy information and exchange Messages with Officers in a secure environment. The service is fully mobile, allowing Tenants to access the service on their phone, 24 hours a day. It is also embedded into their

MyEastSuffolk account, where they have a single point of access for all their Council services. This new service allows Tenants to 'self-serve' transactions with the Housing Service and will assist greatly during the ongoing pandemic. This is also a significant investment to enhance our service for our tenants in the longer-term.

For vulnerable tenants, and tenants without access to technology, we will continue to deliver services via our traditional channels (our telephone contact centres and using paper-based forms).

MyHome builds on the earlier implementation of innovative analytics software RentSense to better manage tenants' rent arrears and maximise rental income. In addition, Housing has established a new system of digital tenancy files, replacing the legacy system of paper files.

In combination, these changes achieve significant digital transformation of our tenancy services, delivering customer benefits, operational efficiencies and financial benefits to East Suffolk Council.

During 2021, further content will be added to MyHome, so that tenants can diagnose faults and schedule repairs appointments with the Housing Maintenance team.

Housing Needs

Next Steps Accommodation Programme

In July 2020, The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government invited local authorities, Registered Providers, and their local partners to engage with the next stage of their COVID-19 Rough Sleeping response- the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP). This programme has made funding available to support local authorities and their partners and it includes capital funding for the provision of accommodation and associated long-term revenue stream to ensure people are supported in their new tenancies.

ESC received confirmation from Homes England on 19th November 2020 that our bid had been successful, and our proposal is to deliver a seven-bed unit of supported housing in Lowestoft in partnership with Orwell Housing, who will lease the accommodation from ESC and provide management, care, and support.

This provision will be directed at former rough sleepers who need a higher level of support before they are able to live independently and sustain a tenancy. The NSAP funding will enable us to deliver supported housing which rough sleepers and single homeless people can access and live in for up to two years, ensuring they have a roof over their heads and access all support required to ensure they do not need to return to the streets.

Planning Committee granted approval for the change of use application on 12th January 2021, and on 26th January 2021 Homes England confirmed our qualification as an Investment Partners for the Next Steps Accommodation Programme. Works on site are underway and completion will be by the end of June 2021.

This project will allow some of the most vulnerable members of our community to access and sustain accommodation, which is suited to their needs, and offer housing solutions which are in line with the person's support and care needs and aspirations to live a relatively independent and 'normal' life.

Funding and future Bids

A further £15 million has been allocated to support the ongoing efforts to provide accommodation for rough sleepers during the pandemic. This scheme – called the 'Protect Programme' – will help areas that need additional support most during the restrictions and throughout winter. East Suffolk Council has submitted a bid, and this is currently being considered by MHCLG. If successful we will have to spend this funding within year and no later than the end of March 2021.

We are also in the process of co-producing the Rough Sleeping Initiative Bid for 2021/22 (RSI4) and this is due for submission on 12th March 2021. It is reassuring to know that Government is committed to continue to support this initiative and there will be no reduction in our overall RSI 2021/22 budget from 2020/21 (£698,447.93).

Housing Strategy and Enabling

In collaboration with planning policy colleagues, a process and policy for the spending of commuted sums has been produced. This is for internal guidance only.

Housing Market Data Report has been completed to provide Members, Parish Councils and communities with an overview of the housing pressures in their areas.

Work is underway to produce an 'Older Persons Housing Strategy' with consultation (virtual) beginning in the Spring 2021. Publication is expected Summer 2022

There will be a presentation to Parish Councils at the next PC forum with planning colleagues on the benefits and delivery models of affordable housing, including community led housing models. Further, more detailed seminars are planned for the Spring for wider community engagement.

Tenant Services

We continue to have a front-line service for Tenant Services officers, but home visits are only being conducted for essential purposes such as sign-up of new homes. All other queries are being handled by phone, email and letter.

'myHome East Suffolk' launched on 1st February and the roll out of this with tenants is progressing with 18 tenants signing up in the first week with only our corporate social media campaign. The tenants' magazine promotion will be landing on doorsteps in mid-February and leaflets will be in the tenants rent letter arriving early March to continue promotion of the portal.

Social Housing White Paper came out in November titled 'The Charter for Social Housing Tenants'. The Charter is in 7 Chapters each focussing on a different theme, such as safety or tenants voice. There is still an element of detail missing from the Charter but we will be working over the coming months to ensure we are working in line with it.

2020 has been a challenging year for social landlords and collection of rent. As a result of the pandemic more of our tenants have faced financial hardship, loss of their jobs and increased Universal Credit claims. Any court action was suspended for a significant part of the year and many landlords have faced increased rent arrears. Due to the implementation of predictive analytics we have been able to continue to reduce our arrears profile and had our best quarter 3 performance for 4 years.