

<b>14 March 2016</b>		<b>ITEM: 6</b>
<b>Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>		
<b>Update on Housing and Homelessness Prevention Strategies</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Yes	
<b>Report of:</b> Councillor Lyn Worrall, Portfolio Holder for Housing		
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Dermot Moloney, Strategic Lead, Housing		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing & Health		
<b>This report is Public</b>		

## **Executive Summary**

Thurrock Council adopted two key strategies in 2015:

- The Housing Strategy
- The Homelessness Prevention Strategy

Action plans were developed for both strategies in order to drive through the identified actions within the strategies.

This report provides an update on those action plans.

### **1. Recommendation(s)**

**That Housing Overview and Scrutiny committee note and comment on the updates in this report.**

### **2. Introduction and Background**

In March 2015 Cabinet approved the Council's strategic vision for housing 2015-20. The new housing strategy set out an ambitious programme through its action plan.

Subsequently, in October 2015 Cabinet approved a five year homeless prevention strategy which dovetailed with the Housing Strategy. This met the statutory requirement to produce detailed actions for how the local authority

would prevent homelessness in the borough and how it would provide accommodation for those who became or were likely to become homeless.

It is anticipated that both actions plans will develop and change throughout their life as identified needs and available resources change.

To ensure that the action plans continue to meet their objectives, Housing Overview and Scrutiny members will be invited to review and comment on the updated action plans at regular intervals.

This report highlights ongoing projects and what has been achieved to date.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of options**

#### **3.1 The Housing Strategy**

Implemented in March 2015, the Housing Strategy 2015-2020 is nearing the end of its first year. During this time progress has been made towards completing many actions, and a number have already been achieved. The Housing Strategy has been split into three core priorities – Raising the Bar, In on the Ground Floor, and Looking Ahead. Each core priority is subsequently split into further objectives.

##### **3.1.1 Raising the Bar - Deliver tailored and needs led services to all residents**

A Resident Involvement register has now been developed and introduced to the Council's website, allowing tenants to register and interest to engage with the Council. There are also seven community days which have been arranged for the summer of 2016 where members of the Excellence Panel will be present to inform people and encourage them to join.

A 'mystery shopping' approach has also been implemented which will allow tenants the opportunity to test services within Housing and provide feedback to ensure that necessary improvements can be identified. It is hoped that two areas will be tested in the coming quarter.

SMART meters have been installed at all three travellers' sites in Thurrock which has resulted in a large increase in the payment of rent. The installation of the meters has been well received and residents have been shown how to operate the SMART meter functions. Additional monies are also being collected to recover arrears on a weekly basis. It should also be noted that Q3 marks the first time that no callouts were received regarding electrical payment or supply issues over a Christmas period.

##### **3.1.2 Raising the Bar – Provide high quality council housing**

Over 5400 properties have now benefitted from Transforming Homes improvement works and at the end of Q3 the programme had achieved an 81% good to excellent customer satisfaction rating.

In December 2015, Cabinet reviewed the financial implications of the Housing and Planning Bill and Welfare Reform Bill and as such approved the extension of the Transforming Homes programme by up to one year for internal improvements and up to three years for external improvements.

A new Repairs Policy has been implemented which encourages shared responsibility for the maintenance of let properties and includes provision for enhanced support for vulnerable residents. The void fit to let standard has also been revised and to support the introduction of the new policy. In partnership with Mears, a new repairs reporting app for smartphones is being introduced which provides a quick and easy way for residents to report required repairs at their property and will ensure that more repairs can be completed during the first visit.

Performance monitoring of the caretaking service is ongoing, and has benefitted from the introduction of a number of new resources such as a smartphone app and customer contact slips to monitor the standard of work carried out. This is in order to increase customer satisfaction of Estate Management services by 5%. Preparation is also underway to launch a consultation for areas currently without caretaking services.

Housing Enforcement has adopted a robust approach to anti-social behaviour and has developed a prevention, intervention and enforcement (PIE) model. Within Q3, this approach has led to 30 joint visits and estate patrols with Essex Police. Communication with victims and perpetrators include 313 telephone conversations, 361 emails and letters sent, and 160 visits. By utilising these key approaches of prevention and intervention throughout Q3, it was only necessary for the team to take enforcement action on one occasion during this period through the issue of a notice of seeking possession (NOSP) or demotion notice.

### 3.1.3 Raising the Bar – Enhance the quality of housing in the private sector

A new Landlord Forum is currently under development with the new financial year as a targeted implementation date. Further to this, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in the number of accredited landlords, which currently stands at 189.

Feedback from a survey completed by residents during Q3 who had experienced improvements to their home as part of the Well Homes initiative indicated that 100% of residents now felt that their home was a healthier and safer place to live. During Q3, 72 of the improved dwellings were occupied by a vulnerable household, 80 housing hazards were removed and 61 homes received security improvement installations.

### 3.1.4 Raising the Bar – Deliver value for money with high levels of customer satisfaction

A number of contracts have been reviewed and re-procured which have led to a number of savings, for water mains replacement (50% reduction) and lift servicing, maintenance and refurbishment (50% reduction). A final year savings figure will be calculated at the end of Q4.

New planned maintenance programmes and batch repair programmes have been identified and integrated in order to drive down the number of responsive repairs, leading to reduced repair costs and greater value for money.

Customer satisfaction monitoring is underway, including tenancy management, housing options and complaints. Analysis of this information will ensure that services are responsive to customer needs.

### 3.1.5 In on the Ground Floor – Empower residents to make informed choices with access to advice and support

All Housing frontline workers are equipped to work mobile with smartphones and/or mobiles and the upcoming introduction of the new housing management system Northgate will allow staff to access information remotely via a web app.

Housing advice training is being delivered to volunteers at the Community Hubs including information regarding Thurrock Choice Homes, Housing Benefit & Council Tax Support claims and Universal Credit. The Community Hubs will also have hot desk capabilities, providing areas in the community for staff to drop in and work flexibly.

### 3.1.6 In on the Ground Floor – Support our residents through prevention and early intervention to sustain their homes and avoid crisis

A new incentive scheme has been developed for landlords in order to secure properties in the private rental sector for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness. This is currently being advertised and includes cash payments as well as financial support towards landlord rental insurance and the fees for landlord accreditation.

The Housing Options service continues to work with the national Gold Standard challenge and has been awarded the Bronze Standard by the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS). There have been delays experienced in progression towards the Silver Standard due to changes in the way NPSS assess applications. Work is ongoing towards achieving the Silver Standard.

### 3.1.7 In on the Ground Floor – Support residents to maintain and improve their independence

Where residents require adaptations to their properties as part of the Transforming Homes programme, these are generally being completed within

60 days. Referrals made from Adult Social Care are also being completed in a timely fashion, however further improvements are achievable. This is to ensure that residents live in suitable accommodation which supports independent living.

Housing staff are being trained on safeguarding and the vulnerable people protocol. Bespoke training is being introduced to caretaking staff and additional support is being provided to those who are not computer literate to ensure that they receive the same level of knowledge.

All sheltered housing officers have also received dementia friends training, ensuring that the service has a good level of knowledge in order to assist residents to maintain their independence.

### 3.1.8 In on the Ground Floor – Create employment pathways and support residents to access these

Significant investment in Housing has seen 27 apprenticeships created across the Housing Investment programmes. In addition to this, figures show that 32% of the delivery workforce is based locally, 20% of supply chain partners are registered in Thurrock and over 30% of programme spend is within the local economy.

In addition to the above, 68 residents have been supported through pathway programmes and 127 young people have benefitted from support from the Prince's Trust with 78% moving into employment, education, training or volunteering.

### 3.1.9 Looking Ahead – Boost the housing market delivering new affordable homes to meet local need

One new development (Bruyns Court, South Ockendon) has been completed and has 25 new units of sheltered accommodation. There are three new developments currently on site and a further four in development.

A review of extra care provisions within the Council's housing stock has been carried out, with changes to be introduced from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016. A new onsite concierge service and dedicated sheltered housing officer for Piggs Corner complex will allow care staff more time to provide care and support to residents. Kynoch Court will no longer be designated as an extra care complex but current residents will have the choice to either remain at Kynoch Court with appropriate care delivered via a domiciliary service, or the option to move to Piggs Corner or Elizabeth Gardens.

### 3.1.10 Looking Ahead – Increase housing supply, working collaboratively with the private sector

64 units of affordable accommodation with registered providers are currently on site, with ongoing work with developers and registered providers to

continue to deliver affordable housing across the borough. Discussions are currently underway for several potential sites, however there is a risk to future developments due to the 1% rent cuts and potential change in the definition of affordable housing with regards to starter homes.

Housing Zone status has been awarded and funding has been secured to progress estate regeneration. Discussions to secure partners for the progression and delivery of projects are continuing.

### 3.1.11 Looking Ahead – Ensure the sustainability of our homes to meet residents' needs now and in the future

All properties within new developments are designed and built to London Space Standards and meet Lifetime Homes criteria, with each scheme reviewed for sustainability of the construction and materials used. The Bruyns Court development at Derry Avenue, South Ockendon consists of 25 units which have been built to HAPPI Standards. The first Gloriana site at St Chads, Tilbury won the Project Award at the Housing Design Awards 2015.

342 homes have benefitted from external wall insulation and as part of the Transforming Homes programme over 1300 homes have improved energy efficiency through the installation of A grade boilers.

A review of the Council's housing stock has also identified three sheltered housing schemes for decommissioning which are no longer deemed to be fit for purpose for reasons such as accessibility. These schemes are Nottage Close, St Cedds Court and Chichester Close. The decommissioning of these schemes is currently underway and a timetable has been agreed.

## 3.2 Homelessness Prevention Strategy

Although only implemented in October 2015, a number of actions have been achieved, or are well on their way to being so.

### 3.2.1 Quarterly Homelessness forum

The homelessness forum has been set up with over 60 identified members. It will be the driving force behind the action plan and the first group meeting was on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2016 – with over 30 people attending representing 13 different agencies.

A number of work programmes have subsequently been identified for task and finish projects with cross agency working.

### 3.2.2 Development of a schools programme

Parental eviction is one of the highest reasons for homelessness in Thurrock. In order to ensure young people understand the implications of homelessness, and those working with them can sign post and contact the

appropriate services for assistance, an educational programme has been implemented.

In September 2015 a conference was held for representatives from all of the secondary schools in the borough. A variety of speakers helped representatives to understand some of the first signs of breakdown within the home and who to contact for assistance.

Teaching materials were provided including on line classroom materials and lesson plans; an educational version of You Tube ("True Tube") which provides films on a variety of topics affecting young people has been promoted; training on loan sharks and money management and what happens when young people are evicted from the family home.

The first conference proved very successful and the next is planned for September 2016. This will provide further training and information on other relevant subjects and will be extended to include primary school staff.

### 3.2.3 Extending the use of mediation for young people being evicted

A programme of mediation between evictors and young people under 18 being asked to leave the family home, has been running for some time and is managed by Family Mosaic. Commissioning of the service has been extended to include young people up to the age of 21 and is proving successful in preventing homeless cases with 16 cases of prevention since the service started in November 2015.

### 3.2.4 A dedicated housing & welfare advice officer

The strategy identified the need for a dedicated welfare advice officer within the homeless team, especially in light of the impending welfare reforms and subsequent changes to Housing Benefit rules.

An officer was recruited and works alongside the team to provide financial and benefit advice.

### 3.2.5 Tenants accreditation scheme

A new Thurrock Tenancy Essentials programme has been set up to assist Council tenants in understanding their rights and responsibilities as tenants. In a bid to encourage more private landlords to let to Thurrock residents, the new Tenancy Essentials programme will eventually be offered to private tenants enabling them to understand their rights and responsibilities as tenants and to know where they can get assistance should they need it.

This will provide a tenants accreditation scheme which landlords should recognise as an advantage, encouraging them to give priority to tenants who have undertaken the programme. Work will be undertaken through the landlords forum to encourage private landlords to sign up to the scheme.

### 3.2.6 Housing First programme

Officers are investigating a Housing first programme which seeks to address the housing issues of people with very complex needs including drug and alcohol dependence and enduring mental and physical health problems. The programme will provide supported accommodation to alleviate the initial housing need and then provide intensive support to deal with the longer term complex needs.

A number of agencies have already indicated their support for the programme resulting in a cross party project group who will be working with the charity St Mungo's to develop suitable offers of accommodation and support across the borough. A visit to a working programme in Camden is being arranged.

A nationwide campaign "Housing First England" is being launched by the charity Homeless Link. Officers will link in with the charity to obtain training and peer support.

### 3.2.7 Training resource programmes on Homelessness

A homelessness training session for Local area co-ordinators and social workers has been held and more are planned.

An online resource is being developed which will allow Members and staff to access information around what to do when someone comes to them with a homeless related issues.

### 3.2.8 Right size programme

The strategy identified that under occupation is a big problem within the borough, across all tenures. A project to assist older owner occupiers into sheltered housing appropriate to their needs, in return for leasing their larger property to the Council was identified within the strategy.

A project team is being established, to include housing and social care colleague in order to set up a one year pilot programme.

## 4. **Reasons for Recommendations**

This report makes no recommendations – it is an update regarding ongoing work and is for noting and comments.

## 5. **Consultation**

Not applicable – this is an update only.

## 6. **Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**



Not applicable – this is an update only.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Julie Curtis**  
**HRA and Development Accountant**

There are a number of financial implications especially around the repairs programmes but these were all considered when the initial strategies were implemented. This report only provides an update on the progress made to date and has not identified any changes to the initial assessments.

### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Martin Hall**  
**Housing Solicitor/Housing Team Leader**

There are a number of legal implications especially around the downsize project and the work with private landlords but these were all considered when the initial strategies were implemented. This report only provides an update on the progress made to date and has not identified any changes to the initial assessments

### **7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**  
**Community Development Officer**

Equality impact assessments were carried out when both these strategies were first implemented. This report only provides an update on the progress made to date and has not identified any areas where the impacts may have changed.

## **8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):**

None

## **9. Appendices to the report**

None

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