

25 February 2015	ITEM: 13 (ii)
Council	
Cabinet Member Report - Housing	
Report of: Councillor Lynn Worrall, Cabinet Member for Housing	
This report is Public	

Introduction

I am pleased to introduce to Council my portfolio holder report.

This report reflects the volume of activity and progress that has occurred over the past 12 months. We have continued with our strategic approach to doing business and in particular have increased our work with colleagues across the council to ensure that Housing is playing its full part in the difficult financial environment we currently face.

Housing is now explicitly referenced as part of the local authorities' new duty under the Care Act and for the first time the suitability of someone's living accommodation is listed as part of the definition of well-being. Recognition of the inherent relationship between health, wellbeing and housing is a positive step forward and has underpinned the department's work for the preceding 12 months. Services are being reviewed to ensure that the best use possible is being made of all available resources in the department.

At the same time we have levered-in significant external funds to enable us to extend our programmes of work. Over seventeen million pounds of additional funding has been brought into Thurrock for use in Housing.

Whilst we work against a backdrop of regulatory changes to Welfare benefits and significant economic challenges which have produced real threats to our ability to maintain and deliver services, I am proud to say that we have not only faced-down the challenges but found a route to altering the delivery of our services to provide an improved 'offer' to our tenants. Resident satisfaction surveys reflect growing levels of satisfaction with the housing services which we offer.

We are not however complacent, we are well aware of the challenges that still lie ahead of us. As we work to gain an improved understanding of our service needs so this places us in a position to act deftly to re-shape our services to address those changing needs.

The report below outlines the significant programmes of work that have been undertaken in the Housing Directorate

Improving contact and responsiveness – Customer Slip

The most common complaint received about our housing service is that housing officers do not get back to people. This is the same complaint whether it is by phone, letter or email. We have done a huge amount of work to tackle this issue and during this year the Housing Department rolled out a new customer contact tool called the customer slip. This tool records all contact made through the Customer Contact Centre and tracks queries sent to the various housing team. The slips allow managers to track incoming queries, manage resources appropriately and ensure that tenants receive a response to their query within 48 hours. Since April 2014:

- Over 7000 Customer Slips logged to the Housing Team.
- Satisfaction with Estate Officers increased from 65% in Quarter 1 2013/14 to 74% for same quarter this year.
- Initial role out to Tenancy Management Team, now being used for Capital Works, Homelessness and Rents.

Maintaining and Transforming our existing homes

In maintaining our existing housing stock, there has been significant progress in the development of improved repairs management, substantial capital investment and improvements through Transforming Homes and support for our growth agenda by the creation of pathways into employment, training and wider investment in community projects through social value commitments achieved by strategic commissioning.

Using the £68m Transforming Homes programme, the £5m annual Repairs & Maintenance programme, and the forthcoming investment through new builds and estate regeneration, Thurrock is committed to both achieving the best for housing stock maintenance and development, but also for the maximising the positive impact of this investment in the wider community. Delivering Social Value is a key component of housing strategy now and going forward, focusing on delivery of employment, education and training, as well as further benefits for the wider community.

Repairs and Maintenance

The period has seen continued improvements in Repairs & Maintenance provision through the interim contract, as well as completion of procurement for the new 5 Year Repairs & Maintenance contract.

- Over 97% of the repairs undertaken in the past year have been completed within their required timeframes,

- 83% residents provided a Good or Excellent rating for delivery of repairs service
- Increasing number of residents happy with the quality of repair carried out – an increase from 76% in April 2014 to 81% in October 2014, whilst remaining at over 80% in each of the past five months.
- Award of the new Repairs & Maintenance service contract – approved by Cabinet in December

The new service focuses on further improving the delivery of a quality service while maintaining competitive and efficient performance – the contract documents draw on implementing resident-focused provision, learning from previous service provision, and establishing effective procedures and performance management.

A number of benefits will be seen with the launch of the new Repairs & Maintenance service:

- Using outcomes from resident consultation, tenders were required to include commitments to improved access to the service – with the recommended bidder offering increased appointment slots, as well as evening and weekend repairs service
- Further requirements were improved communications with residents – with the recommended bidder offering development of online & mobile repairs reporting
- Tenders were required to provide a resident-focused service – with the recommended bidder offering tailored provision for vulnerable residents, additional security measures, and improved identification of needs

Transforming Homes

Improvements to the housing stock are continuing through the Transforming Homes programme, which has now delivered:

- Works to over 3,600 homes since the programme commenced, 1,500 of which have taken place in 2014/15 financial year.
- 2,400 bathrooms and in excess of 2,300 kitchens.
- 78% residents have rated this service Good or Excellent.
- Over 160 homes have also benefited from works, including loft and external wall insulation, delivered through the thermal efficiency programme
- Thurrock is working with EON Energy for delivery and funding of thermal efficiency works
- It is anticipated that a further 2000 homes will have internal improvement works in the 2015/16 financial year, and with the initiation of the external improvements programme in March 2015, all properties will be assessed for these works.

Tackling Damp and Mould

In the context of these substantial programmes, it is recognised that there are ongoing issues with Damp & Mould in some properties – and this may need specific action to address and resolve. A new initiative seeks to provide improved recognition, management and resolution of Damp & Mould issues.

This addresses the key elements of Damp & Mould management:

- Improved guidance: recognising issues caused by damp in the property, or alternately by condensation and behavioural factors contributing to this;
- Establishing repairs management procedures: coordinating capital and responsive repairs so that resolution is found through the most appropriate route.

So far the Council has undertaken

- Over 1500 damp and mould surveys
- Over 700 homes receiving remedial actions to prevent reoccurrence
- 28 properties with extensive works (greater than £10k in value)
- 160 homes with improvements in thermal Efficiency
- Tackling Damp, Condensation and Mould - Guidance leaflets developed and sent to all 10,000+ residents with their October rent statement,
- Improved guidance in a new section on the Thurrock Council website.

It is anticipated that through the improvements being put in place, residents will experience a reduction in the instances of damp and mould issues, either through their improved management of condensation, or through the appropriate repairs and maintenance being put in place. Correspondingly, a reduced number of responsive repairs relating to damp and mould is anticipated to positively impact 'repairs per property' performance for Thurrock housing.

Garages

For the previous two years Housing have had a huge focus on improving the standard of its current housing stock, through its Transforming Homes Programme and it has also had a focus on restarting construction of high quality new build homes within the borough. This led to refurbishment of garages, being delayed.. This has now changed and from 2014/15 £150k worth of investment has been put aside to bring garages back into use and let them to tenant and residents. Since July 2014 we have:

- Let 80+ garages bringing in additional revenue of over £35,000 per year.
- Identified all garages that need minor works and are fit to let instantly.
- Advertised garages to let to gather interest.
- Created a new GIS layer on Thurrock Systems with the intention of allowing residents to view void garages online and apply to rent them.
- Create a capital programme of works to refurbish, repair or demolish garages that are currently unusable.

Delivering new homes:

A substantial programme has been built up, with start on site achieved for the first three schemes and successful bids to two major funding streams plus further bids made that are awaiting approval.

The National Affordable House building Programme awarded £5,954,000 to deliver 212 new homes for affordable rent by March 2018 and the Local Growth Fund has secured £11,580,000 in additional borrowing capacity for the HRA, to develop a further 193 new homes for affordable rent and shared ownership. As well as this the Council has submitted an expression of interest for "Housing Zone" status for a variety of Thurrock's key housing growth areas as included in the Council's submission to the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and the private sector has submitted a bid for loan finance in conjunction with the housing department, to deliver estate regeneration at the Garrison Estate in Purfleet.

Building council houses:

- Seabrooke Rise; 53 dwellings plus the Community House facility is on-site and due to complete in autumn 2015.
- Derry Avenue; 25 dwellings, is on-site and due to complete in November 2015. These homes for older persons are all designed in accordance with HAPPI principles.
- Bracelet Close; 12 dwellings due to start on site in November 14 and due to complete in January 2016.

Estate Regeneration

Consultation has taken place on Seabrooke Rise and the High Rise Blocks (the Seabrooke Rise Estate) to involve residents in deciding how further improvements and regeneration can be achieved.

- Residents and officers have started the process of setting up a steering group to work with officers to take forward proposals across three main areas:
 - New housing development – where, how and priorities including a conversation about the role of tower blocks in the area.
 - Improvement of the estate, its environment and amenities, including improved access to the river.
 - Development of further strategies for training and employment

Gloriana

Gloriana, the Council's Wholly Owned Company has been set up offering a viable development option to complement the HRA. There are two sites in development with Gloriana at present; St Chads Road in Tilbury which has received planning approval, and Belmont Road in Grays.

- St Chads will feature 128 new homes and associated parking. Projected start on site, , is spring 2015.
- Belmont Road in Grays will accommodate around 85 new homes and associated parking. The projected Start on Site is October 2015.

Delivering Social Value through commissioning

Delivering tangible social value outcomes is an integral part of the planning, commissioning and delivery cycle – this has led to job creation and investment in our local communities.

A key focus has been the delivery of real benefits to residents and the community beyond those having works to their home. The programmes have helped to develop skills and establish direct routes for local people to access local employment opportunities through large value commissioning and partnerships such as the Transforming Homes contract.

Delivering opportunities for training and employment, with substantial outcomes already achieved in Transforming Homes, and significant commitments made by the recommended Repairs & Maintenance contractor.

Achievement in 14/15

- 25 apprenticeships,
- 100 Jobs created or retained.
- Over 50 long term unemployed or young people not in Education or Training – provided with job training and work experience through different pathways programmes created through our investments programmes and over 65% of them now either in work or training including 8 with apprenticeships.
- Further benefits to the wider community are seen in refurbishment of war memorials, through refurbishment of community centres and other community commitments.
- Commitment to delivering social value through comprehensive & structured approach, from identifying need, through procurement and engagement with broad base of local partners, to delivery using effective contract & performance management
- Development and expansion of partnerships with delivery specialists, providing tailored programmes for Thurrock residents – including Prince's Trust and Wates' Building Futures, and emerging partnerships with John Laing Training, Construction Youth Trust and others.

We are taking forward approach this approach to forthcoming investment programmes including our new build and estate regeneration programme – it is estimated 200-300 jobs will be created or retained, and a further 100 apprenticeships established including a number of craft apprenticeships .

Well Homes

Thurrock Housing launched its Well Homes scheme in June 2014 with the aim of improving Private Sector Housing in three wards within the borough. The aim of the scheme is to drive up housing standards and through that, improve wellbeing of those living in the properties. Since June 2014 the Well Homes advisor has contacted 2432 residents with 128 agreeing to a Well Homes visit. The outcome of these visits is

- 293 referrals to other agencies such as Health and Lifestyle Services – 81% surveyed saying that the agencies had contacted them.
- 33 Category 1 hazards identified in Private Sector Homes.
- 42% uptake of NHS Health Checks
- 9% looking to give up smoking.
- 5 households to receive financial assistance to improve properties.
- 11 long term vacant properties identified and 2 Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) identified.

Housing Enforcement

As part of the housing restructure in 2013/14 a new Housing Enforcement Team was created to help ensure that Thurrock Tenancies were maintained correctly. The Team consist of CCTV, Private Sector Housing, Anti-Social Behaviour and Housing Fraud. This team has had great success over the last year since forming, some of the highlights since April 2014 being:

- 35 Properties returned to Housing Stock by Housing Fraud Team and 3 Right to Buys stopped from progressing due to fraud.
- Three properties recovered for tenancy breaches due to ASB
- Brought the Sanctuary (Domestic Abuse) scheme back in house allowing a renewed focus on tackling Domestic Abuse
- Officer directly placed within Thurrock MASH to support Safeguarding of children
- Housing Enforcement “Eyes and Ears” Conference held, pulling together over 15 agencies to network and showcase partnerships.
- CCTV working closely with Essex Police and Tenancy Management. Average of 6 evidence packs per month going to the

Police to help tackle crime and over 50 referrals to tenancy management per month regarding Anti-Social Behaviour

- Housing Enforcement now a key part of the Community Safety Partnership and helping to achieve the 4 priorities for the CSP.

Welfare Reform

You are not able to talk about Housing without referring to Welfare Reform. Due to the hard work of the Housing Team in 2013/14 Welfare Reform did not affect as many tenants that year as originally expected. Many tenants were given advice, guidance and financial support to help them sustain their tenancies whilst potentially looking for more suitable accommodation. The evidence of this being that only 26 tenants were evicted last year due to rent arrears. Similar numbers to the previous 2 years.

For 2014/15 so far we have however, seen an increase in evictions as cost of living increases and some of the benefit adjustments have built to a level where more tenants are struggling to pay their rent. In 2014/15 we have already evicted over 20 tenants for rent arrears, this will be after months of intense work from our Rents and Welfare Team and always used as a last resort.

Thurrock Housing still has their own Financial Inclusion Officer, who visited over 600 tenants last year and a partnership with Family Mosaic for financial crisis intervention. The Housing team will continue to work with all tenants to sustain their tenancies and working with Housing Benefit, the Essential Living Fund and other agencies to support tenants in need. We are now working with DWP and looking at ways of strengthening the benefit advice service and making welfare benefit advice a key part of our Housing Solutions service.

Financial Information:

(A Motion agreed by the Council on 23 January 2013 requires the Cabinet Member to cover all finance and budget issues of their portfolio that they consider relevant, including (but not limited to): fiscal management; budget responsibility of the cabinet member; receipts and actual spend vs. predicted spend; the levels of virements and value for money.)

Table 1: Weekly cost of operational service delivery

Average Number of Properties	10,183	
	Total Budget	Budgeted Unit cost per week
	£'000	£
Housing and Management Costs	£10,431	£19.70
<i>Including:</i>		
Caretaking / CCTV / Concierge	£2,739	£5.17
Sheltered Housing	£1,416	£2.67
Housing Operations	£1,332	£2.52
Grounds Maintenance	£1,179	£2.23
Management and Strategy	£1,035	£1.95
Business Improvement	£965	£1.82
Letting and Allocations	£659	£1.24
Housing Enforcement	£453	£0.86
Neighbourhood Action Plan	£394	£0.74
Rent Collection	£259	£0.49
Repairs and Maintenance	£11,600	£21.91
<i>Including:</i>		
Responsive Repairs - Mears	£6,355	£12.00
Planned Programmed Work	£3,755	£7.09
Repairs & Maintenance Management	£1,490	£2.81
Financing	£24,179	£45.66
<i>Including:</i>		
Interest and other costs	£6,814	£12.87
Transforming homes	£13,756	£25.98
Central support and overheads	£3,609	£6.82
Transformation	£233	£0.44
Development and Regeneration	£2,603	£4.92

Weekly cost of operational service delivery

Table 2: HRA – Operational Summary for 2014/15

Service	Revised Budget	Forecast Pressures	Forecast Underspends	Total Variance
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Rent and Income	(49,046)	630	(391)	239
<i>Dwelling rent and water rates</i>		320	(47)	273
<i>Void loss on dwellings</i>			(240)	(240)
<i>Void loss on garages</i>		303		303
<i>Non dwelling rent income</i>		7	(104)	(97)
Financing	24,179	0	(550)	(550)
<i>Prudential borrowing interest</i>			(550)	(550)
Repair and Maintenance	11,600	80		80
<i>Responsive repairs demands</i>		80		80
Housing Management	10,431	41	(339)	(298)
<i>Landlord services management</i>			(39)	(39)
<i>Business management & IT</i>			(143)	(143)
<i>Grounds maintenance</i>			(23)	(23)
<i>Rent collection</i>			(54)	(54)
<i>Sheltered housing</i>			(80)	(80)
<i>Housing operations</i>		41		41
Transformation	233	0	(88)	(88)
Grand Total	2,603	751	(1,368)	(617)

Table 4: Forecast level of financial reserves held within the HRA 31/3/15

Unallocated Balance	£m
Balance as at 1 April 2014	(2.654)
Projected Balance as at 31 March 2015	(2.654)

Development Reserve	£m
Balance as at 1 April 2014	0
Budgeted contribution	(1.815)
Net operating surplus	(0.617)
Use of balances – transforming homes	1.000
Projected Balance as at 31 March 2015	(1.432)