

Colchester's Housing Strategy 2015 – 2020

Progress Report 2019/2020

Background

Colchester's Housing Strategy 2015-20 was adopted in March 2015. The 5 year Strategy and Delivery Plan was developed by the Housing Strategy Partnership which includes Colchester Borough Council (CBC) and its Partner Organisations.

The Housing Strategy sets out the Council's ambitions for housing in Colchester over 5 years and puts in place objectives, targets and policies that explain how it will play a leading role to:

- Assess and plan for current and future housing needs of the local population.
- Make the best use of existing housing stock.
- Plan and facilitate new supply.
- Plan and commission housing support services which link homes to support and other services that people need to live in them.
- Help create working partnerships that secure effective housing and neighbourhood management.

The aims and objectives of the strategy will be achieved through the implementation of a Delivery Plan, working closely with a wide range of partners to achieve the vision for housing in Colchester.

The following **key priorities** were identified for the Housing Strategy:

- Maximise the supply of housing to meet local needs.
- Work with partners and residents to create mixed communities which are economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient.
- Prevent homelessness and rough sleeping
- Improve the life chances of Colchester's residents including their Health and Wellbeing.
- Work with customers to help them make informed choices about their housing options.
- Make the best use of existing homes.
- Work to ensure that existing and new homes are healthy, safe and energy efficient.
- Ensure that housing and related services meet a range of specialist needs.

Progress in 2019/2020

This Housing Strategy Progress Report contains some highlights of the actions in the Strategy that have been achieved or progressed in the fourth year of the strategy.

The Delivery Plan, which sets out the actions to deliver the priorities, has also been updated (*see separate document*).

Priority 1: Maximise the supply of housing to meet local needs

Priority 1 Action: *Maximise the supply of affordable housing on new developments.*

Progress:

- Affordable housing was secured on all qualifying sites.
- 202 newbuild affordable homes were completed in 2019/20, In addition 35 homes were acquired by the Council. Therefore, the total affordable homes delivered in 19/20 was 237.

Priority 1 Action: *Ensure that Neighborhood Plans which are making housing site allocations are delivered in a timely manner consistent with National and Local Policy*

Progress:

- Three Neighbourhood Plans were adopted in 2019: Wivenhoe (May), West Bergholt (October) and Eight Ash Green (December).
- The plans have provided a mix of housing types and tenures and contribute to meeting local housing need as well as affordable housing.

Priority 1 Action: *Maximise the use of the Council's land and assets to deliver new housing.*

Progress:

- Colchester Amphora Homes Limited (CAHL) purchased their first site from Colchester Borough Council and obtained permission to commence construction in Summer/Autumn 2020.
- The Colchester Borough Council owned site at Military Road is now 100% affordable housing and along with 3 other garage sites gained planning permission. Construction is due to begin on all 4 sites in Autumn 2020.

Priority 1 Action: *Increase the role of the private rented sector in meeting housing need.*

Progress:

- The Private Sector Housing team continue to inspect properties secured by CBH for the Homestep and Private Sector Leasing Schemes to ensure minimum standards are met.
- There were 113 requests for property inspections from CBH in 2019/20.

Priority 2: Work with partners and residents to create mixed communities which are economically, environmentally and socially healthy and resilient

Priority 2 Action: *Deliver quality neighbourhoods with adequate infrastructure*

Progress:

During 2019/2020, CBC received s106 contributions of £864,053.32 for projects which included: -

- Public Open Space - £369,119.78 received for projects including Stanway Country Park, improvements to access the open space and recreational facilities in the Colchester borough
- Community Facilities- £60,546.21 towards improvements to the hall on Western Approach Road, Stanway
- Leisure Maintenance -£149,695.33
- Recreational disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (The Essex coast RAMS - aims to deliver the mitigation necessary to avoid significant adverse effects from impacts of residential development that is anticipated across Essex) - £35,076.66
- Highways Transportation - £116,158.07 for projects including the provision of a foot/cycle bridge across the river Colne, creating, improving, or maintaining cycle routes in Layer Road and Boudicea Way and Travel Plan Club Membership
- Health - £133,457.27 towards the provision and improvements of health facilities

Priority 2 Action: *Improve the external environment on the Council's housing estates*

Progress:

During 2019-20 CBH has:

- developed a local tenant panel for Greenstead Estate, the group make recommendations and decisions on estate improvement requests and monitor performance
- carried out 8 estate tours with tenants and Councillors to identify estate improvements
- developed an Estate management standard and strategy
- celebrated CBC tenants who take pride in their gardens and communal spaces with an award ceremony at Beth Chatto Gardens

Priority 2 Action: *Reduce and tackle anti-social behaviour in partnership with other agencies*

Progress:

- The Town Centre multi agency partnership team continue to meet regularly to agree approach with support and enforcement in place to resolve crime and ASB issues arising in the town centre. The overarching Town Centre Action Plan is in place to deliver a multi-agency approach to tackling ASB.

- CBC funded 4 PCSO's for a period of 2 years (from January 2019) to tackle incidents of crime and ASB. 3 PCSP's dedicated within the Town Centre PSPO area. 1 PCSO dedicated to covering rural community hotspots
- A Multi-Agency Coordination Panel has been initiated (in partnership with Police) to address / tackle issues of serious, violent crime and ASB, especially those incidents relating to gang activity, drugs and hate crime.
- CBC and CBH Community Safety Teams lead and deliver the Anti-Social Behaviour Case Review process – a multi-agency response to multiple incidents of ASB

Priority 3: Prevent homelessness and rough sleeping

Priority 3 Action: *The actions set out in the Homelessness Strategy Delivery plan monitored and updated annually.*

Progress:

Colchester's new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and Delivery Plan was developed in partnership with organisations that work with people that are homeless in the borough. The new Strategy and Delivery Plan was agreed by Cabinet in November 2019.

The Housing and Homelessness Strategy Evidence base was also updated and all documents are available on the CBC website.

Priority 3 Action *Ensure we are best placed to respond to the new duties placed on local authorities due to the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.*

Progress:

The Homeless Reduction Act has been fully implemented and the Housing Options service reconfigured to meet the requirements.

During the year 2019-20:

- 1493 households approached the Housing Solutions Team as homeless or threatened with homelessness
- 791 Personal Housing Plans were completed. These plans set out actions that the household or individual will take and actions that the Council and other organisations will take to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- 230 households were accepted as homeless and in priority need with the Council accepting a duty to provide permanent accommodation.
- Action was taken to prevent homelessness for another 285 households.

Priority 4: Work in partnership to improve the life chances of Colchester's residents, including their health and wellbeing.

Priority 4 Action: *Improve health & wellbeing of Colchester residents through greater integration of housing, health and social care services.*

Progress:

- Following the success of the CBH Mental Health Project, funding was secured from the North East Essex Clinical Commissioning Group in partnership with Essex Partnership University Trust (EPUT), CBC and Tendring District Council to add additional resources to expand the provision to cover North East Essex, for all tenure types.
- The Health and Housing Partnership commenced in February 2020 with 2 years funding, now consisting of 4 mental health professionals on secondment.

Priority 4 Action: *Undertake targeted activity to support the most vulnerable members of the community who live in the poorest quality housing***Progress:**

- 167 dwellings have been improved by the Private Sector Housing team through the removal of 406 serious Category 1 and Category 2 housing hazards through a combination of informal and formal enforcement action.
- 5 dwellings have been improved by the Healthy Homes team through the removal of serious housing hazards through discretionary loans to home owners.
- A Senior Occupational Therapist has been seconded to the Healthy Homes Team from ECC to support greater integration between CBC and ECC and has proven to be very positive in terms of partnership working and improving speed of discharge.

Priority 4 Action: *Reduce fuel poverty in the borough.***Progress:** Several actions were progressed in 2019/2020 including:

- Working with ECC and other districts/boroughs, around supporting the UK Power Networks recently launched Heat Decarbonisation Strategy to support communities that are heavily dependent on oil, to use greener fuels.
- Ongoing promotion by ECO Flex providers to improve the energy efficiency of properties across the borough has led to 45 properties being improved through cavity wall insulation, heating, and loft insulation. Awareness of this scheme continues to grow.
- 83 homes in the private rented sector had Category 1 and 2 hazards of Excess Cold removed through a combination of informal and formal enforcement action.
- 5 owner occupied homes had Category 1 and Category 2 hazards of Excess Cold removed through the provision of discretionary housing assistance

Priority 4 Action: *Lower the rates of unemployment in the Borough by supporting and encouraging residents to take up work.*

Due to the value added to the local community network, CBC extended the Community Support Employment Officer (CSEO) role throughout 2019-2020. The CSEO continues to deliver employment, volunteering and wellbeing outcomes to those furthest from the employment market with over 400 customer engagements.

Key elements of the role include:

- Tenancy sustainment: engagements with the CSEO regularly lead to successful applications for DHP payments which prevent homelessness, and access to Welfare Benefit Specialists in the Customer Support Team for those who are unwell or disabled provides additional financial support.
- Financial inclusion: the CSEO supports customers transitioning from Welfare benefits into employment by completing benefit and budgeting calculations, and supports them to access bank accounts.
- Partnership with the DWP: enables the CSEO to resolve Universal Credit enquiries to ensure prompt resolution, and together with the Job Centre Plus work coaches enables long term joined up support for the most vulnerable customers in the borough.

Priority 5: Work with customers to help them make informed choices about their housing options

Priority 5 Action: *Support residents affected by Welfare Reform*

Progress:

- The Customer Support Team continues to provide professional support to vulnerable residents by assisting them to access online services, support with complex enquiries and providing specialist benefit advice.
- Two Welfare Benefits Specialists have joined the team, providing dedicated one to one support to residents across the wider Welfare Benefits system from application through to tribunal.
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were used to support residents who are affected by Welfare Reforms and financial hardship, to remove the risk of homelessness. The DHP fund of £374,348 which includes £50,000 from CBC, was fully spent in 2019/20 across 681 households.
- Exceptional Hardship Payments of £15,668 have been allocated to support customers in receipt of Local Council Tax Support, to alleviate financial pressure in managing their Council Tax accounts. In total 109 households were supported.
- The Community Support Employment Officer (CSEO) continues to work closely with the DWP to resolve complex UC enquiries to ensure that the correct housing element is paid promptly to claimants.

Priority 5 Action: *Increase housing options in the private rented sector encouraging, supporting, and incentivising private landlords*

Progress:

- The Home Step scheme continues to work well with added incentives including insurances, and bonds provided where guarantors are needed. In 2019-20 there were 120 new tenancies completed.
- Two Landlords' Forums were held in March and October 2019 in partnership with the National Landlords Association. The Forum provides landlords with up to date and relevant information

Priority 6: Make the best use of existing homes

Priority 6 Action: *Maximise the use of council homes and reduce under-occupation*

Progress:

During 2019-20:

- 31 households moved to smaller accommodation, with the support of the Tenant Incentive Scheme. This released 10 x 2 bed, 20 x 3 bed, and 1 x 4 bed homes for households in housing need.
- 77 Mutual exchanges were completed.
- 5-year investment programme for Sheltered Housing is in place and the first years' work completed.

At year end:

- 95% of Colchester Borough Council's sheltered housing was occupied. Most of the homes that were vacant were at Elfreda House where tenants have been moved out in preparation for the demolition and rebuilding project.
- there were 32 vacancies (22 were at Elfreda House and 2 were at the Cannons – extra care)
- turnover of sheltered housing was 7% of the stock.

Priority Action: *Help people whose independence may be at risk to remain in or return to their home in both the private and public sector properties.*

Progress: Several actions have been completed which contribute to meeting this priority including:

- The amount of money available for adaptations to CBC homes for 2019-20 was £600,000 and was spent as follows: £53.4k on minor adaptations such as grab rails, access aids and ramps. £461k on planned adaptations such as level access showers, stairlifts etc. £93k on two major adaptation projects (property extensions).
- 74 Disabled Facilities Grants for private sector homes processed in 2019/20 to enable people with disabilities to remain living independently in their own homes for longer.
- A Senior Occupational Therapist has been seconded to the Healthy Homes Team from ECC and in the first 12 months received 240 referrals. All received support including 63 cases for home adaptations to support their hospital discharge plan.
- In February 2020, the Portfolio Holder agreed for 'Discretionary Fast Track' applications to exclude a financial means test. This has benefitted 4 high need cases who were unlikely to proceed otherwise.
- A further year secondment has been approved for the Senior Occupational Therapist following this success of the first year.

Priority 7: Work to ensure that existing and new homes are healthy, safe and energy efficient

Priority 7 Action: *Encourage private landlords & managing agents to provide good quality and well managed properties*

Progress:

A full review/re-write of the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy was completed including the introduction of Civil Penalty Notices issued by the Private Sector Housing (PSH) Team of up to £30K for certain Housing Act offences. The Policy was approved by the Portfolio Holder and published on the website.

During 2019-2020 The PSH Team:

- issued 2 Notices of Intent to issue Civil Penalties.
- completed nearly 500 property inspections/ visits/ assessments of properties in the private sector.
- Removed 406 serious housing hazards from 167 homes in the private sector through a combination of informal and formal enforcement action.
- served 4 Housing Act Improvement Notices against non-compliant landlords to ensure serious housing hazards were removed.
- served 2 Housing Act Prohibition Orders relating to two properties that had such serious housing hazards they were too unsafe to be lived in.
- took Emergency Remedial Action to undertake works to remove serious and imminent Category 1 hazards from a rented property.
- served 5 other notices requiring works under other legal powers.
- referred 6 offences for prosecution proceedings to Legal Services.
- 7 Prosecution cases were heard and sentenced

Priority 7 Action: *Improve the energy efficiency of the Council's housing stock*

Progress:

- Average SAP rating increased slightly to just under 74, even though the calculation method was modified by the Government. Energy efficiency works in 2019/20 included loft and cavity wall insulation, Air Source Heat Pump installations and works within capital programmes, such as water saving measures and LED lighting.
- No new PV installations but current portfolio performed better than expected with a revenue return to the Council of over £100k and individual savings for Tenants. Information is given to all new tenants at sign-up on how to maximise the free generated electricity.

Priority 8: Ensure that housing and related services meet a range of specialist needs

Priority 8 Action: *Work in partnership with other providers to ensure a sufficient supply of housing for older people including extra care.*

Progress:

- The Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouse Charity scheme in Military Road was successfully completed in 2019/2020. 9 affordable homes for older people were delivered with grant support from Colchester Borough Council.
- In 2019/2020 the Council continued to work with Essex County Council to develop an extra-care scheme for Colchester. A site was identified, and work is ongoing to test the viability of this site.

Priority 8 Action: Ensure a co-ordinated approach to supported housing across the council, social care and health

Progress:

The Housing Strategy Team continue to attend ECC meetings to influence the commissioning of supported housing services.

- The Homeless temporary accommodation-based service contract has been awarded to Peabody for North Essex. A new SLA is being drawn up between CBC and Peabody for the temporary accommodation units at Hargood Close, Sagewood Place and Friars Court.
- The recommissioning of the Mental Health services contract is completed. The services for mental health are delivered by spot purchase and CBC are working with ECC to try to streamline access to accommodation.
- The Directory of Supported Housing Services has been updated
- A review of the Supported Housing Joint Referral Panel was carried out by CBC. Meetings were held with the supported housing providers and issues were identified and resolved. The terms of reference were also updated.
- Nominations to supported housing providers were reviewed in line with the Principles document and agreed by the Portfolio Holder. Supported housing providers were notified.