

Colchester's Housing Strategy 2015 - 2020

Progress Report 2018

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 the next 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 the Delivery Plan, by 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

Changes to Legislation

Housing and Planning Act 2016

Since the Housing Strategy was produced there has been a fundamental change to Housing and Planning with the introduction of the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

The key changes in the Housing and Planning Act which impact on Housing are:

- A new legal duty on Local Authorities (LA) to guarantee the delivery of Starter Homes on new development sites for first-time buyers (Provision made in the latest CIL consultation and draft regulations on Starter Homes expected soon).

- Requirements for L.A.s to set up a self- build and custom build register by 1 April 2016 (CBC has completed this).
- A change to the definition of affordable housing to include a range of affordable products for rent and home ownership, for households whose needs are not met by the market.
- A new duty for councils to allocate land to people who want to build their own home (being implemented as part of the new Local Plan).
- The introduction of banning orders against rogue landlords and property agents which came into force in April 2018 following a public consultation.
- A duty for local housing authorities to maintain the content of a database of rogue landlords and letting agents, introduced by the MHCLG in April 2018.
- Implementation of the Right to Buy for housing association tenants on a voluntary basis (this is in a pilot phase before it is rolled out nationally).

The Welfare and Work Act - March 2016.

The key changes in the Welfare Reform and Work Act which impact on housing are:

- Welfare benefits changes; lowering of the Benefit cap, freeze on certain social security benefits, freeze on tax credits, changes to the child element of universal credit, Universal credit: work-related requirements.
- Reduction in social housing rents.

For Colchester Borough Council the changes in government legislation challenged the viability of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. The reduction in rental income over the life of the 30 year business plan had a significant impact on the capacity to deliver on the plan's objectives.

In response to this a Housing Futures programme was set up to review the HRA Business Plan. The principles, aims and objectives of the programme were agreed by Cabinet. Colchester Borough Council and Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) worked in partnership to consider ways to reduce the financial gap within the plan to increase income or reduce expenditure.

The Homelessness Reduction Act – April 2018

The Act became law in April 2017 and came into force in April 2018. The government has published a new code of guidance that sets out in more detail how the changes should be implemented.

The new Homelessness Reduction Act includes two main duties:

The Prevention duty – requires councils to intervene to prevent homelessness at an earlier stage, when a household is at risk of losing their home in the next 56 days. This includes private sector tenants who are served with an eviction notice.

The Relief duty - requires councils to offer more advice and support to anyone who is already homeless, regardless of whether they are in priority need and may involve offering accommodation.

Councils must also draw up personalised housing plans for people that are homeless and anyone who is at risk of becoming homeless.

In addition to these two main duties, public authorities that have contact with clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness will be required to refer them to local authorities with the person's consent.

Although the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act will be more relevant to actions in Colchester's Homelessness Strategy, an action to reflect this change in legislation was incorporated into the Housing Strategy Delivery Plan in 2017.

A new deal for Social Housing – Green Paper - 2018

In August 2018 the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government published the Green Paper 'A new deal for Social Housing', which proposed a fresh approach to the social housing regulatory framework by offering a fairer deal for social housing residents.

The Green Paper, published following the Hackett Report in May 2018 reasserted a commitment to bring in new legislation to reflect the Report.

The paper focussed on five key principles aimed at ensuring a better deal for people living in social housing:

- Ensuring homes are safe and decent.
- Effective resolution of complaints.
- Empowering residents and strengthening the Regulator.
- Tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities.
- Expanding supply and supporting home Ownership.

The Green Paper confirmed a number of financial and policy announcements for Councils which included:

- up to £1bn increased borrowing for new Council homes;
- a revised rent settlement (CPI+1% to 2025);
and
- more flexibility for Councils in using Right to Buy receipts for additional housing supply.

The government also repealed the provisions around higher value voids from the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

The Green Paper also confirmed that restrictions on the LA's ability to grant lifetime tenancies would not be implemented.

The Voluntary Right to Buy remains in the pilot phase and government are looking to remove barriers to shared ownership, including a lower stair casing requirement (potentially 1% per year).

The Housing Strategy continues to be a working document, therefore actions to reflect the ongoing changes to legislation are incorporated into the delivery plan.

The Housing Strategy Progress Report 2018 contains some highlights of the actions in the Strategy that have been achieved or progressed in the third year (2017/2018) of the strategy.

The Delivery Plan which sets out the actions to deliver the priorities has also been updated.

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

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

Progress: A total of 132 new affordable homes were delivered in 2017/2018.

Of these the affordable tenure was as follows:

70 affordable rent

19 shared ownership

43 intermediate rent.

Cabinet agreed in January 2018 to purchase up to 10 properties in 2018/2019 under the RTB back covenant using a combination of RTB 1-4-1 receipts and commuted sums. One property was purchased in 2017/2018

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

Progress: Cabinet agreed sale and development of four sites (by Colchester Amphora Homes Ltd) that will deliver over 300 new homes, over 100 of these are to be affordable.

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

Progress: The Private sector leasing scheme has increased to 11 properties. High rental values limit the viability to expand the scheme.

Priority 2: Work with partners and residents to create mixed communities which are economically, environmentally and socially healthy and resilient
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Action: *Deliver quality neighbourhoods with adequate infrastructure*

Progress: During 2017 -18 CBC received s106 contributions for projects which included: –

- *Public Open Space* - £613,845 received for site specific projects and/or projects within the Borough.
- *Community Facilities* - £697,051 received for projects including the delivery of new Community Building at Wyvern Farm, Stanway
- *Affordable Housing* - £317,848
- *Footbridge Contribution* - £259,993 received towards provision or enhancement of pedestrian and cycle routes between the University of Essex and the site of "The Maltings King Edward Quay" and Hythe Station.

- *Community Development* - £88,397 received towards events and activities to be held within the Open Space and vicinity of the Site “The Maltings King Edward Quay”.
- *Student Travel* - £311,991.96 received for Student Travel Projects

Action: *Encourage Community Engagement with housing providers and other organisations*

Progress: Local Community Action Panels (LCAP’s) continue to operate throughout the Borough, engaging with local communities to help reduce the fear of crime, increase public reassurance and encourage/promote community resilience. 7 LCAP’S were held in 2017-18.

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

Progress: The Homelessness Strategy delivery plan was updated in conjunction with the project group, for 2017-18 and a progress report was produced and published.

Action *Ensure we are best placed to respond to the new duties placed on local authorities as a result of the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.*

Progress: The Homelessness Reduction Act is being implemented including:

- Staff training and IT systems are in place.
- Customer self-service to access advice through Gateway to Homechoice has been set up.
- Training has been delivered to partner organisations on how the Act will be applied.
- The Colchester Borough Homes website has been updated to reflect the changes in the frontline service.

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

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

Progress: CBH have worked in partnership with CBC/One Colchester and Community 360 to promote health and wellbeing across all CBH sites including make a difference days.

North East Essex Alliance has introduced new strands of work within their strategy to include prevention of the wider detriments of health, inactivity and social isolation.

A winter resilience project has been set up via the One Colchester Partnership to support vulnerable residents in the winter period. Winter packs have been provided to vulnerable residents and a community project has been set up to encourage neighbours to check on each other.

Action: *Reduce fuel poverty in the borough.*

Progress: CBH Financial Inclusion Team supported vulnerable CBC tenants to access ECO funding for fuel poverty. The team also access funding support for ex-service personnel through British legion and SSAFA.

New Action for 2018: *Promote the ECO Flex scheme which will allow CBC, through its partners, to provide affordable warmth assistance to fuel poor and low-income households that are vulnerable to the effects of the cold.*

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

Progress: CBC has secured funding from the Department of Work and Pensions to launch a project supporting those furthest from the employment market, including non-dependants not in work, single parents, Universal Credit claimants and more.

A Community Support Employment Officer was recruited in April 2017 and co-locates between the Hub and local Job Centre Plus office to support residents back into employment and to maintain strong links within local community partnerships.

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

Action: *Support residents affected by Welfare Reform*

Progress: Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were further utilised to support residents affected by the Welfare Reforms and to remove the risk of homelessness. The DHP fund of £464,000 (including £50,000 from CBC) was used in 2017/18.

£125,873 was used to support residents affected by the Benefit Cap.

£115,743 was used to support residents affected by the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy.

Action: *Improve tenancy sustainment and work proactively with residents to provide advice and assistance around budgeting, work and debts*

Progress: Tenancy Sustainment Officers (TSO) continue to deliver new tenant training and support visits for all new tenants under 25. TSO's completed 5 new tenancy workshops in the period. 40 people aged under 25 attended.

Catch 22 deliver family intervention support to the most complex families to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness. CBC provided funding to support the extension of Catch 22 work to include tenants in the private rented sector under the Startwell scheme.

Priority 6: Make the best use of existing homes

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

Progress: The programme of tenancy audits concluded with 6,208 tenancy audits complete. The programme helped to reduce the risk of fraud and increased information on occupancy of homes.

30 tenants moved through the transfer incentive scheme in 2017-18. This freed up 16 x 2-beds, 12 x 3-beds & 2 x 4-bed properties which have been relet to families.

Under occupation was at 21% of all council homes at the end of March 2018.

During 2017/18 the Financial Inclusion Team supported 273 tenants affected by the under occupation charge and contacted all new cases.

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: Two extensions were completed in CBC properties along with £325k worth of level access showers, ramps and stair lifts. £45k of minor works were completed such as grab rails. A waiting list of works valued at £200k existed at the end of the financial year, this was funded and completed in Apr/May 2018.

80 Disabled Facilities Grants were completed to enable households with disabilities to remain living in their own homes in 2017-18.

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

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

Progress: Through the work of the Private Sector Housing Team the number of housing hazards removed in 2017-18 was 326 and the number of dwellings made safer was 112.

Action: Understand the viability of implementing new energy efficiency measures for the Council's housing

Progress: 1200 Energy Performance Certificate's (EPC's) are conducted every year and the entire CBC stock will have an EPC by December 2019. The average stock rating is 73.6 (energy rating C) which has exceeded the target for 2018.

Priority 8: Ensure that housing and related services meet a range of specialist needs
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Action: *Work in partnership with other providers to ensure a sufficient supply of housing for older people including extra care.*

Progress: CBC Housing Strategy Team worked with the Planning Team, Essex County Council (ECC) and a private developer to develop plans for an ECC site, including detailed architectural drawings. However, this scheme has stalled following a re-organisation at ECC.

Action: *Work in partnership with ECC, CBH and supported housing providers to ensure that the support and housing needs of Colchester's residents are still met and are not compromised following procurement activities undertaken by ECC*

Review the nominations CBC gives to supported housing providers to ensure that they still meet the strategic priorities of CBC

Progress: CBC and CBH continue to work with ECC and Supported Housing providers to ensure that the recommissioning of support services does not compromise the needs of Colchester's residents.

Nominations for priority on the Gateway to Homechoice Housing Register awarded to supported housing providers was reviewed in line with the Principles document and agreed by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities