

Colchester's Housing Strategy 2015 - 2020 Progress Report 2017

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

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 which was given Royal Assent in May 2016 and the Welfare and Work Act which became law in March 2016.

The key changes in the Housing and Planning Act which will 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 (this has not been fully implemented).

- Requirements for L.A.s to set up a self- build and custom build register by 1 April 2016.
- 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.
- The introduction of banning orders against rogue landlords and property agents (this is due to come into force in October 2017 following a public consultation).
- A duty for local housing authorities to maintain the content of a database of rogue landlords and letting agents (this is due to be launched by the DCLG in October 2017).
- Implementation of the Right to Buy for housing association tenants on a voluntary basis (this has now been delayed until at least 2018 and is now going through a pilot before it is rolled out nationally).
- Local housing authorities in England that keep a Housing Revenue Account will be under a duty to consider selling its interest in any “high value housing” that becomes vacant (the introduction of this has now been delayed until 2018/19).
- To introduce a mandatory “Pay to Stay Scheme”- Introducing different levels of rent for higher-income tenants in local authority social housing (this policy has now been abandoned).
- Ending lifetime secure tenancies in local authority housing and succession to a lifetime secure tenancy other than for spouses and civil partners (this has been delayed until Autumn 2017 and will be implemented by way of regulations which have still not been released).

The key changes in the Welfare Reform and Work Act which will 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) have worked in partnership to consider ways to reduce the financial gap within the plan to increase income or reduce expenditure and priorities for the programme have been agreed. A review of the investment plan is currently underway.

The Homelessness Reduction Act

The Act became law in April 2017 but will not come into force until 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 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 persons 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 has been incorporated into the Housing Strategy Delivery Plan.

The Housing Strategy Progress Report 2017 contains some highlights of the actions in the Strategy that have been achieved or progressed in the second year of the strategy.

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

Priority 1: Maximise the supply of housing to meet local needs
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Action: *Maximise the supply of affordable housing on new developments.*

Progress: North Essex Garden Communities Ltd was set up in 2017 to take forward proposals for three new garden communities across North Essex. The company is jointly owned by Braintree and Tendring District, Colchester Borough and Essex County Councils

Progress: A total of 100 new affordable homes were delivered in 2016/2017. This brings the two year total to 48% of our five year target.

The need to spend RTB 1-4-1 receipts has meant that CBC have used these as a priority to fund new affordable homes which include:

- Approved grant applications for additional affordable housing. Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouse Charity - £285k for 10 affordable homes.
- Family Mosaic - Up to £1.26m for 19 affordable homes
- Colne Housing - Up to £155k for 1 three bed home as Right to Buy Back

Action: *Carry out major refurbishment of the Sheltered Housing Stock identified in the 2010 Review.*

Progress: Colchester Borough Council and Colchester Borough Homes have completed the 2nd sheltered scheme Enoch House, which was opened in July 2017. The work involved replacing 45 flats (including 28 bedsits) with 35 self-contained flats and 2 x 2 bed flats

New actions for 2017/2018:

Ensure that Neighborhood Plans which are making housing site allocations are delivered in timely manner consistent with National and Local Policy and provide the policy framework to contribute to meeting local housing need.

Create a new commercial company to take forward Colchester's housing development ambitions

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

Action: *Deliver quality neighbourhoods with adequate infrastructure*

Progress: During 2016 -17 CBC received s106 contributions for projects which included:–

- A contribution for Public Open Space of £325,782.33 which was used for the refurbishment of play areas in Wivenhoe and West Mersea, the delivery of the Memorial Garden in Tiptree and will include the delivery of the Northern Colchester Sports project.
- Community Facilities received £33,128.16 for projects including the delivery of the refurbished facility at Stanway.
- Healthcare received £73,141.81 for projects including the expansion of facilities in Stanway and North Colchester.

Action: *Create neighbourhoods and communities which are sustainable*

Progress: CBH have successfully completed two “Make a Difference Days” in 2016/2017 to carry out various activities to improve areas across the borough.

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

Progress: Estate Management Strategy Action Plan in progress.
A new estates standard has been agreed and is being monitored monthly by local Quality Assurance Advisors (QAA's). QAA's are tenant or leaseholder volunteers who monitor the communal areas of 3 and 2 storey blocks of flats. A number of new QAAs have been recruited.

Priority 3: Prevent homelessness and rough sleeping

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 2016 and a progress report was produced and published.

New action for 2017/2018: *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.*

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: Health and Housing Project Officers have been appointed and links have been made with a wide range of health and social care partners to raise awareness of the work of the Private Sector Housing team. Referrals pathways with the PSH Team agreed and in place with a wide range of services including: referral processes set up with the Patient Transport Service/Ambulance teams and the Hospital Discharge Team.

Action: *Undertake targeted activity to support the most vulnerable members of the community who live in the poorest quality housing containing Category 1 and significant Category 2 hazards.*

Progress: The number of dwellings made safer in 2016-17 was 148. In addition, 50 Houses in Multiple Occupation were brought up to standard.

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

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

Progress: A Landlords' forum was held in February 2017.
A Private Sector Leasing (PSL) Scheme, managed by CBH is now in place.

CBC Private Sector Housing team is working with CBH to ensure accommodation that is included in the PSL and Homefinder Schemes is of suitable quality.

Action: *Support residents affected by Welfare Reform*

Progress: Colchester Borough Council's specialist team is continuing to proactively support residents affected by welfare reform and has supported 553 households so far. A further officer was recruited in the second year of the project.

The provision of the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Fund was used to support residents affected by welfare reform and prevent homelessness. The DHP fund of £342,170 (including £50,000 CBC funding) was spent in 2016/2017.

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

Progress: CBH has awarded funding of £30k to Catch 22 for one year to provide intensive support for families who are at risk of eviction or who are presenting as homeless, including supporting families in emergency or temporary accommodation with needs wider than the direct housing pressure.

Priority 6: Make the best use of existing homes

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

Progress: During 2016/17 the Financial Inclusion Team (FIT) supported 145 tenants affected by the under occupation charge and contacted all new cases

A Mutual Exchange event was held with local partners at the Greenstead Community Centre. The event was well attended and helped to promote the scheme.

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: 118 Disabled Facilities Grants were completed to enable households with disabilities to remain living in their own homes in 2016-17

A further 4 households with disabilities were assisted with a discretionary loan to assist them with adaptations or to move to more suitable accommodation.

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 2016-17 was 324 and the number of dwellings made safer was 148.

Action: *Ensure that houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) are safe and well managed*

Progress: During 2016-17

- 50 Houses in Multiple Occupation were brought up to standard
- 53 HMO licences were issued under the mandatory licensing scheme

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

Progress: 47% of housing stock now has Solar PV installed (2895 homes). 3,600 homes have been made more energy efficient through loft and cavity wall insulation and heating improvements.

In CBC refurbished sheltered housing schemes, 2 Gas Absorption Heat Pumps (GAHP) were installed and will provide heat and hot water. The use of mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, low energy lighting, solar PV and solar thermal panels, triple glazed windows and doors and an energy meter all work together to cut energy use.

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

Action: *Continue to work with Essex County Council (ECC) to influence commissioning of supported housing and support services where possible.*

Progress: CBC has continued to work in partnership with ECC, Registered Providers and other Essex local authorities to ensure a co-ordinated approach to supported housing. CBC presented a joint paper with Tendring to the A&E Board to raise awareness of funding reductions to floating support and withdrawal of housing related support service in sheltered housing, home improvement agencies, vulnerable young people and community alarms.

Action: *Increase the use of assistive technologies for Council tenants.*

Progress: CBH have provided IT classes for tenants and installed WI FI in communal lounges. CBH supply pendants and remote door entry systems for tenants who require the service

New action 2017/2018

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