

CABINET STATEMENT

CABINET MEMBER FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND REGENERATION (NORTH) – COUNCILLOR BICKNELL

Council, please find below my Cabinet statement. At the bottom you will find detailed information on what the various teams have been doing. I think it is safe to say this is probably the most difficult time many of our staff have worked in due to the cost-of-living crisis which is biting even harder and increasing the workload for the housing team, benefits team and Citizens Advice. This is only likely to get worse and be compounded by potential cuts proposed by Hampshire County Council.

Homelessness and temporary accommodation are becoming a critical issue, both financially and even worse from the human perspective, and it is not unique to Eastleigh. Sadly, across the country, Councils estimate that temporary accommodation is costing £1.7 billion- up 9% on the previous year! There are more than 3,500 families in temporary accommodation since 2022- an increase of 29%. As a result of this Eastleigh Borough Council has joined 158 councils as part of the District Council Network in signing an open letter, ahead of the autumn statement, to the Chancellor of the Exchequer requesting urgent assistance to address this crisis.

The Council looked at how it could proactively help prevent homelessness and as previously reported it purchased Bampton house, a former vacant office building, in June 2022. It has since been refurbished into 13 self-contained 1 and 2 bedroom flats with the sole use of specialised short-term accommodation for individuals and families at risk of homelessness. I am pleased to report that Bampton House has now been handed over to the Council with accommodation being available to be let this side of Christmas to our residents who are currently housed in B&Bs, hostels or waiting on the homeless register. The site will be held and managed by the Borough Council. It has the benefit of parking and cycle storage along with an excellent location close to Chandlers ford train station, bus stops and is within walking distance to local amenities including schools, shops, and GP surgery.

Crucially residents of Bampton House will also have access to a tenancy support officer employed by the Council who will provide advice, support and signpost residents to charities and groups who can help them move onto long term, secure and more suitable accommodation.

As you will be aware the Council purchased, and has been redeveloping, the old post office. The site, named Postmark Place, will provide ground floor retail and affordable housing that will be held by the council in its housing revenue account. This project is progressing to plan with no reported issues.

Councillor Tonia Craig has detailed in her statement the work done helping Afghans and we are all aware of Ukrainian refugees. The Government announced a project to assist both groups with permeant housing and the following details the way the Council has proactively participated in this scheme.

Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) Round 1 is a live project to provide housing to those families with housing needs who have arrived in the UK via Ukrainian and Afghan resettlement and relocation schemes. We have agreed sales on 10 properties and completed on 4. The 6 others are all due to be legally completed by 30 November 2023. All properties have been purchased from the open market using the allocated budget to provide these homes and secured tenancy to the eligible families. Without this grant from the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the match funding from the Council these properties wouldn't be available.

One property is now complete and furnished with the new family due to move in imminently. Two other properties are very close to having all their extensive refurbishment works completed and will be offered for occupation by 30 November 2023.

LAHF Round 2 is also a live project that continues on the above initial allocation by providing an additional 4 properties for secured tenancy and temporary accommodation. We have agreed sales on all 4 properties, two have legally completed with families to move in shortly. As with Round 1, we expect there to be a surplus amount which will allow us to purchase an extra property. Both rounds of LAHF will provide a lasting affordable housing asset for the future and provide a new and permanent supply of accommodation for local communities, increasing the number of homes in the wider social and affordable housing system.

Lastly, I'm pleased to report on two successful community projects now being fully enjoyed by residents in Eastleigh and Chandlers Ford.

The first is the Flexford nature reserve in Chandlers Ford, a small nature reserve highly valued by local residents. A new path and other enhancements have made the nature reserve more accessible and increased its desirability for everyone that uses it.

The second is Freespace, which has now been rebuilt after the mindless vandalism, and is a massive hit with all the users. The "official" opening skate jam was a massive success and since then usage has grown exponentially.

Housing and Homelessness

- The Council has sourced and implemented a new unit of emergency accommodation for single homeless households. The 4-bedroom House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) in Totton is managed by Vie Space and will be available for use solely by the Council. The Housing and Homelessness Service will monitor the progress of this unit with a view to bringing on board a further unit in the Borough if successful. Vie Space have also offered to source an emergency accommodation unit for families, but costs are very high and therefore this will be considered at a later date (if required after the introduction of Bampton House).
- The Project Co-ordinator from the Afghan Bridging Hotel will be joining the service until March 2024 (using Homelessness Prevention Grant funding)

undertaking a project to increase our privately rented sector resource. The aim of the project is to build positive relationships with landlords and develop a robust offer of tenancy start-up/tenancy sustainment support and incentives.

Disables Facilities Grants and Housing Enforcement

- The Housing Enforcement team received 210 service requests in 2022/23 and the numbers in quarter 1 and 2 of 2023/24 are 30% higher than this time last year (this in part seeing the start in Q2 of the expected spike in HMO as a large number come up for licence renewal this year). The Renters Reform Bill (which is currently working its way through parliament) has potential to increase work for the team as it includes additional statutory duties which currently look set to fall to housing enforcement teams to incorporate and cover.
- The Disabled Facility Grant (DFG) service was required in the last financial year (FY) to issue a total of 22 approvals with a deferred date into the next financial year. This equated to 13.5% of the budget for 2023/24 being already committed. The average cost of DFG awarded in 2022/23 was £11,100, an increase of £2,500 (29%) from the average for 2021/22. In the current FY, 86 approvals have so far been given (a 48% increase on same point last year). We have received for 2023/24 the same allocation under the Better Care Fund (BCF) as well as an additional top-up confirmed in September from central government of £115k. However, with continuing increases in material costs and a continued high demand for the service, even with the additional BCF top-up the budget remains extremely tight and is likely to require similar if not slightly more approvals to be deferred again into next FY.

Housing benefits and Council Tax Support

- Discretionary Housing Payment allocation on track for 100% spend.
- Performance in terms of processing days has meant we are currently running at 8 days (national average 20 days) for new claims which puts us in the top quartile in the country.
- Changes in Circumstances turnaround is under 5 days, which is again in the top quartile.

Eastleigh Citizens Advice

- In Q2 1,064 Eastleigh clients were helped, many of whom will have accessed the service on more than one occasion. This is up on previous quarters as we are now also able to report on 'simple' queries, where effective self-support has been provided.
- The 1,064 clients in Q2 were helped with 3,204 issues – an average of 3 each. Issue trends are changing too with us seeing many more enquiries about benefits such as Universal Credit to boost incomes and the disability benefit Personal Independent Payments (PIP), which is seen as useful as it is not means tested. We are currently trying to work with local partners around PIP in particular as the large increase in enquiries is becoming difficult to

manage. This is driven by a misconception about the process behind how an award can be made, as it is a points-based system. We are getting many more requests for help to complete the complicated forms, which can take up to 2 hours, but often clients will not score enough points to get an award – their health, which is poor, does not necessarily segue into a successful application.

- In terms of the income gained through our work with clients, we have improved our client's pockets by £609,753 in Q2 (up over £100,000 on last quarter) and wrote off £120,238 worth of debt.