

Council Meeting – 2 October 2018

Report of Councillor Terry Beale – Housing Services

Deane Housing Development

The Housing Enabling and Development Team continue to work hard to deliver a range of affordable housing, including new Council housing, in summary:-

North Taunton

- 1.1 The North Taunton Woolaway project continues to progress well aided by the robust resident consultation. The scheme options have been developed and continue to be discussed with residents actively involved in the design and development.
- 1.2 The project was presented to a Members' Briefing in June and will be taken through the formal Council Approval Process during November 2018.
- 1.3 We are planning a fourth Public Consultation to be held on Friday, 5 October 2018 where the outline options will be available.
- 1.4 A planning application submission is anticipated in Winter 2018.

Weavers Arms, Rockwell Green, Wellington

- 1.5 Despite media reports to the contrary and a lack of support in some quarters excellent work continues on site to deliver the 26 affordable homes planned. As always with big developments there have been some delays mostly due to technical issues with the site which only became apparent when work was underway.
- 1.6 As stated before it is difficult to definitely give completion dates but we hope to have news in the very near future. I fully support the Development Team who continue to work closely with the contractor to complete the new homes.

12 Moorland Close, Taunton

- 1.7 The 3 x 1 bed flats (2 x general needs and 1 x Temporary Accommodation) and the Community Centre provision at 12 Moorland Close was completed in July 2018.

Completions

- 1.8 I reported to the last Council that our target of 200 affordable homes this year would be challenging however I am delighted to report that there have been 149 Affordable Homes completed so far this year and the Council is on target to complete over 200 new affordable homes during 2018/2019.

2. Deane Housing Repairs and Maintenance

- 2.1 The Staff and Management have been working extremely hard within the Service to improve both their satisfaction ratings and their quality of service. I am delighted to report that their efforts have led to a marked increase in both.
- 2.2 This service is part of the front line of Council Services working directly with our customers and as such we will not always get it right. However, an acknowledgement of that and the speed and desire to put matters right is what matters to most people.

3. Welfare Reform

Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP)

- 3.1 There are many reasons why DHP's have been awarded to Council tenants, some of these include rent shortfall due to the 'Bedroom Tax', low income families and help with arrears.
- 3.2 We will continue to provide help and support to those tenants who need it to claim DHP and also any other Benefits they may be entitled to.

Universal Credit (UC)

- 3.3 I have been asked on number of occasions to update on the process for UC and therefore I thought it appropriate to go back in time and explain the initial process and outline the progress thus far.
- 3.4 On 20 April 2015 the "live" Universal Credit service was launched in Taunton Deane. This meant that single newly unemployed people would no longer be able to make claims for separate benefits and would now have to make a claim for Universal Credit. At the time, due to the group of people who could claim, the number of tenants claiming was low.
- 3.5 Since 26 October 2016, Taunton Deane moved from the "live" service and is now in the "full" service. The main difference is that now everyone who makes a new claim or those with a qualifying change in circumstances will have to claim UC.
- 3.6 Under the "full" service UC sends an email to the Council asking us to verify that the claimant is a tenant and also the total amount of rent that they are liable for. They also send verifications for those in Temporary Accommodation and those we have placed in bed and breakfast.
- 3.7 All Housing Officers offer support to tenants who need help to make their online claim and can sign-post those who are able to make the claims themselves but do not have internet access to areas where there is free access. For vulnerable residents the Housing Benefit Team receive funding from The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to help them make their claims. There is also an element of support needed to help people manage their claims online, as they do not receive anything in letter form - it is all by messages in their journal on the online account.
- 3.8 Clearly for some managing an online account when they have very little knowledge of a computer can be difficult and very challenging, this group of people will call on us to help them through their difficulties.

- 3.9 Some tenants have had a very easy transition to UC while others seem to have experienced issue after issue! Some of the recent problems we have had are:-
- Housing Costs payments not being included in their first award and in some cases this going on for two or three assessment periods;
 - Payments not being made on the correct day;
 - Other benefits or elements of previous benefits being stopped when they should not have been;
 - Bedroom Tax or Non Dependant Deductions being incorrectly applied; and
 - No responses to messages left for DWP on the claimants journal.
- 3.10 We know that UC is a massive culture shift and it has taken some time to embed. Many residents were not used to paying their own rent as they could claim Housing Benefit and they are now having to pay monthly and budget monthly, which for some is still a challenge.

4. Deane Helpline

- 4.1 The Helpline Team and the Emergency Response Team (ERT) continue to provide an excellent service to which I can personally testify. My elderly mother recently had a fall and coincidentally I was in the Helpline Control Centre at Kilkenny when the call came through. Their professionalism was exemplary and I accompanied the ERT to my mother's house where she was lifted by the specialist equipment we have and was none the worse for her ordeal other than some cuts and bruises. I would like to register my family's heartfelt thanks for a job well done!!
- 4.2 Just to emphasise the quality and service with regard to falls in particular SWASFT recently organised an event to meet with local service care providers to promote the awareness of operational emergency ambulance demand (e.g. who takes responsibility for non-injured fallers) and our management team were asked to provide a presentation on Deane Helpline and how we assist the Ambulance Service.
- 4.3 During the presentation they highlighted that since April 2016 our Emergency ERT have attended 1,300 incidents where someone has fallen. For all these call outs we only needed an ambulance 136 times (as medical intervention was needed), preventing 1,164 unnecessary ambulance dispatches and saving the NHS money.
- 4.4 It costs £280 once a decision has been made to dispatch an Ambulance, not including treatment or conveying to hospital. Out of the 1,168 incidents that ERT have responded to, the Deane Helpline has saved the NHS an enormous amount of money, which was acknowledged at this meeting.

5. Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Service

- 5.1 The team continues to investigate complaints of neighbour nuisance and ASB throughout the District. It is sometimes difficult to fully appreciate the work of the

team, the complexities involved and the sheer time scales of projects. Here are just three cases amongst many:-

Case A

Our team of officers have been working with partners on tackling reports of serious and persistent anti-social behaviour in the Holway area of Taunton. In 2016 Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) obtained a court injunction, with a further extension granted by the Court in 2017.

Following a breach of the injunction TDBC, at a hearing in September 2018, secured a conviction against the perpetrator resulting in a sentence of six weeks imprisonment suspended for the duration of the injunction which is valid until July 2019.

It is hoped that this will help put a stop to the problems

Case B

Tenants in council flats located in central Taunton have been reporting ASB, including illicit drug activity. ASB officers working closely with the Police have put Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and a Local Lettings Plan in place to help address the issues.

Closed Circuit TV is to be installed at the premises and further measures including a controlled door entry system will be implemented.

Other residents have already expressed their thanks for the progress thus far.

Case C

At a County Court hearing in August 2017 TDBC were granted a Suspended Possession Order against a tenant for breaches of tenancy, including neighbour nuisance and ASB.

Following a further breach of the Order an Application for Warrant was upheld at a hearing in September 2018.

Officers are now waiting for confirmation from Taunton County Court of the time and date for the eviction of the tenant.

- 5.2 These cases are just the tip of the iceberg and shows that the officers are committed to preventing ASB and, where it does occur, will work in partnership to tackle it effectively and robustly, recognising that failure to do so can have a devastating effect on our communities