

Full Council Meeting – 15 December 2020

Report of Councillor Fran Smith – Housing

Housing Development and Regeneration Team **Housing Strategy**

- The establishment of the Homelessness Reduction Board is progressing to commence its work early 2021
- A comprehensive demand study is being undertaken to inform SWT housing supply. The study is looking at the demand for general and specialist accommodation including homelessness, accessible homes, other specialist accommodation (working closely with SCC)
- A delivery officer is being recruited to the team to deliver and oversee the Hinckley point C Housing Action Plan
- The revised Private Sector Renew Policy to be considered by members in December

Housing Enabling

- Significant achievement in increasing the supply of homeless accommodation in Minehead through securing £1m grant fund for YMCA and progressing discussions with Home Group
- Rural Housing enabler has been appointed to support community led housing particularly in the Exmoor area
- Significant time committed in relation to Planning Authority matters phosphates and delay in planning approvals, planning white paper, new S106 data base
- Continue to investigate new models of low cost home ownership and their potential role in the District

HRA New Homes

- Laxton Road Development competition date expected late December
- Zero Carbon Pilot – Procurement of modular contractor has formally started, planning pre-app discussions commenced with 39 units likely to be possible through the first five sites.
- New Low Carbon Employers Requirements (ER) have been developed to support all future developments
- North Taunton Woolaway Project – Final designs issued for phase A, Pre Construction Services Agreement (PCSA) to conclude in December with a fixed works cost and specification agreed for phase A. Next steps report with Council for consideration in December
- Seaward way and Oxford Inn reports to be considered by members in December
- Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper option appraisal underway
- Up to four new market acquisitions for HRA to support Right to Buy 1:4:1 spend and provide new affordable council owned homes underway.

Housing Property Team **Responsive and Void Repairs**

- All responsive repairs (both emergency and non-emergency) are being undertaken, with measures in place to keep both residents and staff safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out.
- The backlog of non-emergency repairs following the previous lockdown is still being addressed and, whilst reducing, it is challenging to eliminate due to both difficulties in recruiting additional competent trade people and access problems during the current lockdown.
- Void repairs are continuing, although again undertaking the required works to bring up to the Lettable Standard within agreed timescales whilst at the same time keeping staff safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out poses additional challenges.

Property Safety Compliance

Ongoing progress on property safety compliance includes:

- A review of all common areas for flat blocks being undertaken to validate existing safety actions.
- Recruitment to a new post within the Property Compliance team - a Mechanical and Electrical Manager.
- Asbestos management survey programme to flat blocks completed, and dwelling asbestos management surveys and re-inspections being undertaken.
- Procurement and commencement of an additional programme of Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Continuing to undertake recommended remedial actions from previous FRAs, and maintenance inspections.
- Continuing with Gas Safety checks.
- Undertaking a programme of Water Risk assessments.
- Carrying out electrical checks to communal areas, and checks to dwellings procured and due to start shortly.
- New stair lift safety check and service contract procured and started.

Housing Asset Management

- Stock condition surveys due to recommence have been put on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions in the new lockdown period.
- Procurement of external resource to undertake additional energy surveys has been undertaken, but again this work has been put on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions in the new lockdown period.

Capital Programmes

- All capital programmes currently continuing during this lockdown period following government guidance. Measures in place to keep both residents, SWT staff and contractors safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out.
- Additional procurement for future capital programmes being undertaken.

- Existing external painting and replacement soffits and gutters contract completed.
- Kitchen, bathroom, window, insulation and door entry programmes on site.
- Heating programme to commence shortly.
- Condensed timeframe to complete all planned capital works programmes likely to be a challenge by end of March 2021.

Housing and Communities Teams

Extra Care Housing

- SWT has 2 Extra Care Housing sites. Both have an on-site care provider, Way Ahead Care, who are commissioned by SCC. SWT staff sit on the Extra Care Housing panel meetings, which consider all extra care housing applications. These meetings have continued to take place online. SWT has noticed that there is a higher level of need and care being referred for extra care housing, than previously and are monitoring the impact of this on the schemes.
- SWT staff have worked alongside Way Ahead Care throughout the pandemic, to ensure that all maintenance and gardening works can be safely undertaken and have continued to be available to meet with tenants, regarding any tenancy or neighbour concerns. The care teams have done a great job of keeping both sites COVID free, adapting the care and support they offer to tenants, to ensure all concerned are kept safe.

Sheltered Housing

- The Sheltered Housing Team have continued to be affected by long term staff sickness and reduced working hours. The remaining team have been working across the whole of sheltered housing, making welfare calls to tenants, updating their personal and health information and making home visits where necessary, to complete aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, install Lifelines and support tenants who find using the phone challenging due to hearing impairment for example.
- During any visits all staff wear PPE and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance for these visits. Although tenants have appreciated the phone contact and visits, many remain very anxious and nervous about having anyone in their home, due to concerns about COVID-19. Tenants have also reported concerns for cancelled hospital appointments and fears around attending hospital. Staff offer reassurance and remind tenants of the precautions hospitals are taking, in addition to the importance of having their health needs met.
- Many tenants have also continued to have less contact with family and friends. In some cases, this has left them feeling lonely and isolated. Where appropriate and helpful, we have encouraged the tenants to have regular welfare calls from Deane Helpline, which allows tenants to have regular calls and a check on their welfare and a brief chat. Deane Helpline report any concerns for a tenants welfare or health back to the team, and a member of staff calls the tenant, to find out more and complete relevant referrals etc. In many cases, this includes liaising with family members and next of kin, who have also been appreciative of the follow up we have provided.
- The team has continued to respond to crisis and emergencies, as they arise. There have been several tenants who have needed to be admitted to hospital and we have working with Adult Social Care and hospital staff, to ensure that their capacity is fully assessed and any additional needs identified. In some cases, tenants have

been successfully returned home, with some aids and adaptations a care package of daily support, which allows them to maintain their independence.

- We have also had some cases where tenants' health and capacity has declined to the point where they are requiring ongoing support within a different type of housing setting, due to brain injury, dementia, confusion etc. We have worked alongside family members and other professionals to support referrals to more suitable housing and end their SWT tenancies. Staff have supported and advised family members during these processes, which is often a challenging and upsetting time for them.
- We had planned to have a partial reopening of the meeting halls within the sheltered schemes, for staff to be on-site for one day a week, to complete pre-arranged meetings with tenants and complete home visits. Unfortunately, the ongoing staffing constraints meant that we haven't had capacity to sustain this. We have reviewed this each month and will do so again after the current lock down. The meeting halls continue to have weekly health and safety checks, completed by the Facilities team.

Lettings

- Property advertising and lettings that were suspended at the beginning of the first lockdown have now resumed. Properties are now being advertised on Home Finder Somerset on the weekly cycles. For example in the week commencing 26th October we advertised 7 properties in the week commencing 9th November we have placed 12 adverts which equates to 16 properties including the New build flats in Laxton Road.
- The Lettings team are still working to COVID-19 risk assessments and procedures, ensuring they are in line with the SWT safe working practices. Verifications are carried out remotely, and viewings take place by the prospective tenant independently, in a COVID-19 compliant manner. Enabling the viewings not only to be able to take place but in the safest possible way for all concerned staff and tenants alike.
- The Home Moves Plus officer (HMP) started on 2/11/2020. The officer has already commenced working with both internal and external partners to collect data on those SWT tenants that fall within the downsizing remit for the role. To date there are a potential 64 cases that he will be working on in the coming weeks. Letters have already been sent to some of those tenants.
- Laxton Road Flats: The Lettings team have carried out a site visit with the project manager and the builders. There were some concerns over the potential delay with builders caused by one of their suppliers not being able to supply the doors. This has been overcome and no longer appears to be an issue. The flats were advertised on Home Finder Somerset (HFS) in the advertising cycle on 11/11/2020. We have shortlisted applicants in line with the agreed local lettings plan for those properties and are now in the process of verifying them.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- Only essential and outdoor work continues and all other construction has ceased due to the return of lockdown. The team have revisited the various risk assessments and updated them accordingly.
- The SIP managers have reverted to the Recovery Plan and brought emergency measures into play. The plan makes provisions for this scenario and has been rehearsed on a number of occasions.

- Contractors have been issued with work instructions and Purchase Orders for work to commence in client's homes from the 2nd December subject to any further Government guidance.
- With the pressure now on the hospital with the numbers of flu and COVID-19 related illnesses intermixed with patients who have been admitted following abstention from hospital in the summer for fear of contracting COVID-19, has meant a tenfold increase in workload for the Hospital Resettlement Coordinator. The hospital is desperate for beds to be freed in order to accommodate more admissions.
- In the last quarter hoarding has become an increasing problem as families have been trying to cope mentally and physically with lockdown. The hoarding service provided by the Independent Living Officers of SIP have proven to be a welcome lifeline for the individuals concerned, their families and wrap around agencies. The SIP Recovery Plan has contingencies built in to manage the threat of clients regressing with no contact whilst in the second lockdown.
- As it stands, there is nobody on a waiting list in either Somerset West & Taunton, Sedgemoor or Mendip. At the end of May 2020, there were approximately 180 clients waiting for a visit or at various stages of their application for a Disabled Facilities Grant. Thanks to the dedication and hard work of the team, all those clients have been processed and Somerset West & Taunton now have just two new cases to be allocated.
- A revised Private Sector Renewal Policy will be presented to the SWT Council on the 1st December 2020. The change includes introducing a range of grants and assistance to help vulnerable owner occupiers with essential repairs and increasing the DFG from £30k to £40k. There are also comprehensive measures for assistance with renewables and other energy efficiency measures to improve people's homes.

Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

- The provisions for rough sleepers at Canonsgrove in Trull and The Beach Hotel in Minehead, both managed by the YMCA are still operational, Canonsgrove is currently accommodating 51 clients and there are 21 at the Beach.
- There are 14 rough sleepers across the district. All but 2 have been verified and of those 12 who have been verified, all have been made offers of accommodation or cannot be accommodated in SWT emergency provision because they have been evicted due to their behaviour.
- The annual rough sleeper count took place on Friday 20th November and identified 18 verified Rough sleepers across the District. All have been made offers of accommodation or cannot be accommodated in SWT emergency provision because they have been evicted due to their behaviour. The Rough Sleepers team continues to engage and support those who request help.
- A monthly meeting is now convened and chaired by Jerry Davis with voluntary sector partners to share information on rough sleepers in the district and how services can work in partnership to coordinate support.
- Severe Weather provisions were activated in October and 2 rough sleepers were brought in as part of this provision. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was not possible to use the usual voluntary sector partners to host this such as Canons

Street Church and Open Door. Accommodation was provided at Canonsgrove as an alternative.

- We have developed an isolation facility at Canonsgrove where singles homeless households who are symptomatic or positive can be housed safely. We have had one client exhibiting symptoms who we were able to isolate and test. Their test result was negative.

NSAP Funding

- We are working with ARC and Second Step via the MHCLG Next Steps Bid funding to pro-actively move on those who are currently in COVID-19 accommodation and who are identified as being ready to move on into more permanent accommodation. The scheme will offer intensive tenancy sustainment support to ensure that future accommodation is successfully maintained. The aim of this work is to move-on those who no longer need the higher levels of support provided at these accommodations in order to ensure there is a “flow” through the system. This will help us to meet future demand as this is expected to increase going into the winter and with a second lock-down.

Housing Options:

- Housing Options have seen 354 homeless approaches between June and October.
- Of these 24 have had a full duty accepted and 20 cases have had their homelessness prevented.
- We have had no families in B&B for over 6 weeks between June and October.
- We are seeing a rise in presentations recently from families and friends who are no longer willing or able to accommodate. This appears to be as a direct result of COVID-19 and the 2nd lockdown, with increased anxiety being felt about the risk of virus transmission. In addition we are seeing an increase in non-violent relationship breakdowns.
- Adverts are appearing this week for the remaining three vacancies within the team; a Private Rented Sector Worker, a Tenancy Sustainment Officer and a Senior Case Manager. Our aim is to have these vacancies recruited into by December 20.

B&B Spend:

June	July	August	September	October
£2268	£7478	£11629	£10749	£6509

- Spend on Bed and Breakfast has reduced since the beginning of COVID-19. This is primarily as a result of having specific accommodation for single homeless households at Canonsgrove and The Beach Hotel. The availability of temporary accommodation for families has been increased by the availability of accommodation at the North Taunton Project which has led to less need to use commercial B&Bs. However, we have seen an increase in the complexity of cases coming through the Duty to Refer routes from Hospital and Prison discharge. Often the only accommodation options available for these clients is commercial B&B.

Homefinder

- Homefinder continues to have a backlog of approximately 8 weeks although the team has worked hard to get this down. We have taken the decision to employ a

temporary member of staff for a period of 4 months in order to address both this and the processing of renewals. The new member of the team started on 11th November and having worked with the system previously has quickly got up to speed and is helping us reduce our backlog.

- A bulk email was sent to 1100 applicants needing a 1, 2 or 3 bed property who had not accessed their application or bid in over a year. Only 61 responded and so the remainder will be closed down. This goes a long way to address the data that needs cleansing and we can then continue to run renewals in smaller batches for the rest of the register.
- In order to ensure we address time-limited banded applications in good time I have allocated a named officer to work on these so that there is no delay in move-on, Emergency band and Harassment band applications are being processed and monitored for bidding.
- The contract for the procurement of the new system for Homefinder Somerset has been finalised and the invitation for contract was issued on the 23rd October and the tenders are due in on the 30th November. Presentations from those who are shortlisted will be delivered via Teams the week commencing the 14th December.

Income

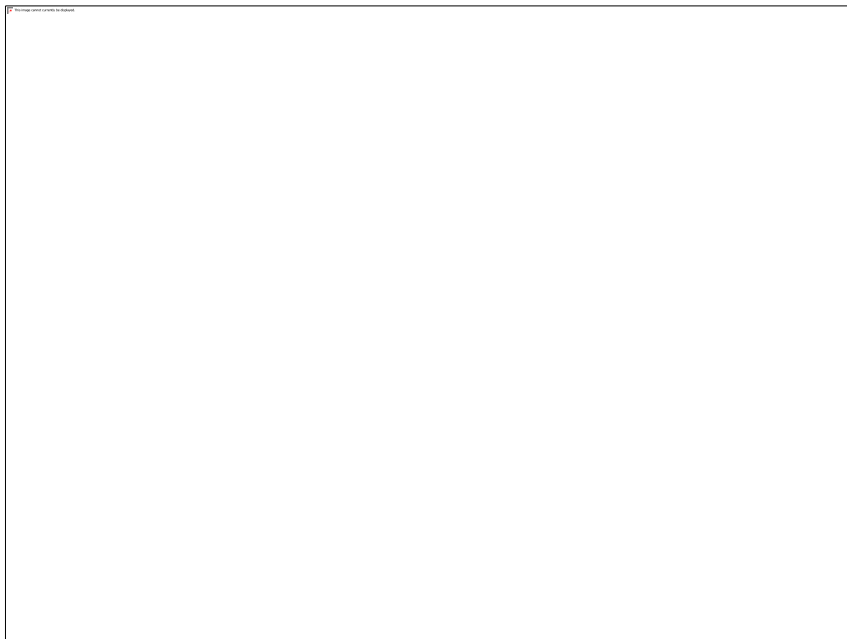
- The Rent Recovery team are still working continually to help and support those tenants who are effected by a reduction in income due to COVID-19. Rent arrears have reduced to 586k (as of 06/11/20) which is a fantastic result for the team and show the hard work and dedication they have all committed through the pandemic
- The Team will soon be working on a Christmas Rent Campaign which will include sending text messages, providing information on paying rent on the website and also taking part in the Talking Café held by the Village Agents to promote priority payments over the Christmas period.
- We have recruited a second Debt and Benefit Officer who started on 16th November and is strengthening the support we can give to our tenants. This will mean we can help a larger number of tenants quicker. We want to ensure that our tenants are claiming all the benefits they are entitled to and are maximising their income.

Anti-Social Behaviour

- Serious ASB/neighbour nuisance is still high on the team's agenda in particular we are currently dealing with a hate crime (racially aggravated) and a serious incident of harassment and intimidation. These cases will need to have enforcement action taken against them and this in turn is extremely work intensive.
- The lockdown again has caused minor nuisance cases coming to our attention; and we will utilise our COVID-19 nuisance letters from the last lockdown to try to deal with this. If these does not settle down then we will work with the Police to carry out joint visits and take any necessary action to get the perpetrators to amend their behaviour.
- Many of our low level complaints are about noise nuisance and we have been exploring a mobile noise app. We have researched with other registered housing providers who have been using the noise app successfully for some time and have had good success when cases have been presented into court. Our trial period will be coming to end in the next few weeks so we will be able to provide more details on whether we are going to be buying into this service.

Tenancy/Estate Team

- The team have now prepared schedules for re-introducing Estate Walkabouts and block inspections and these have now been published on our website. We have prepared a process and monitoring sheets and managers will work closely with officers to ensure that we have consistency in all areas across the district. During a recent inspection of the area within North Taunton we have picked up that a number of pathways need to be made safe; moss to be cleared from some pathways; trees need cutting back from flats; new street signage is needed; pot holes in garage areas need to be repaired. Once the orders have been raised we will be providing feedback to residents of our findings.
- The estates team and open spaces team have been working together to help improve the areas where our tenants live. These photos show a before and after of some work carried out to the front gardens at Style Flats in Wiveliscombe:



- We will continue to work on completing proactive Annual Tenancy Checks with an officer visiting households to assess the condition of the tenancy and property. Various addresses are now coming to our attention from estates walkabouts.
- Staff are also working on improving our sign up pack for new tenancies and we hope to be able to roll this out in the next couple of weeks.
- We have successfully recruited one member of staff; and her induction period has now ended and I am confident that she will be very successful in her role covering the Wellington patch. Sadly, on the start date the other person recruited declined the offer. We have still retained two temporary officers so we can still provide a full service in all areas.
- We are also going to introduce a rota system for the tenancy team. This system will ensure that someone is available to take any emergency calls as they happen and to work on our Firmstep cases as they come in. Firmstep is an area where we are behind in dealing with general enquiries. We are hoping that this will help us see an improvement in this area during November and December.

Housing Performance Team

- The Housing Performance Team has been created to drive service improvements in our customer experience and service delivery as well as oversee housing governance, risk and performance. Recruitment of the team is almost complete and six staff are now in post.
- Directorate performance and governance meetings are underway.
- We have produced and sent to all tenants and leaseholders a newsletter to inform everyone about the Unitary issue and to signpost to more information and the way in which tenants can comment on both the Stronger Somerset and the One Somerset proposals.
- Key pieces of work to be completed by Christmas are:
 - Christmas Newsletter to tenants and leaseholders
 - STAR survey council tenants and leaseholders. This is a comprehensive satisfaction survey completed every two years by an independent company. Results will be published in the new year.
 - 2019-20 Annual Report to tenants
 - Restarting meetings of our Tenants' Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group.
 - Review of our complaints process including self-assessing our performance against the new Housing Ombudsman code.

Thank you to all the officers in the Council who have worked so hard during this exceptionally difficult year and especially the support given by all of the Housing Teams. I would like to wish everyone a very Happy Christmas and peaceful New Year.