

Full Council Meeting – 23 February 2021

Report of Councillor Fran Smith – Housing

Introduction

Since the last report in November our main focus continues to be COVID-19 and in particular since the New Year, re-adjusting the services to respond to the latest lock down measures. I would like to acknowledge the flexibility of the team, our partner organisations and contractors who once again have made substantial changes to what services we offer; and also our tenants who have been so accommodating and understanding. We will continue to monitor issues closely.

Since the New Year we have not seen any significant impact from Brexit with our supply chains holding up, however we are starting to hear accounts of price increases on some supplies such as timber.

Elsewhere our project to replace our main housing management IT system has kicked off, this is a major piece of work and will run for around 16 months.

Lastly it was pleasing to see improvements in our STAR survey results (Survey of Tenants and Residents); particularly that in the last two years we have been through major organisational changes and have experienced nearly a year of COVID-19 impacts.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

Housing Strategy

- Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy - The service is producing an accommodation strategy to respond to the Government aspiration to maintain accommodation support to reduce or end rough sleeping by 2025. The strategy will help inform the Council's partnership and investment decisions.
- The Homelessness Reduction Board is progressing to commence its work during 2021.
- LHA Housing Advisors Programme – Somerset councils and ARK consultancy have submitted the draft report into Better Futures for Vulnerable People in Somerset. This sets out how Somerset authorities work to support the most vulnerable people, provides examples of good practice and sets out under six themes opportunities to delivery better outcomes. The report will support the Homeless Reduction Board set its priorities and action.
- A Delivery Officer is being recruited to the team to deliver and oversee the Hinckley point C Housing Action Plan, unfortunately our first recruitment process was unsuccessful.
- The revised Private Sector Renew Policy was considered and supported by full council in December.

Housing Enabling

- 2020/21 completions are currently estimated as: 128 affordable homes by 31st March 2021, 265 completions are forecast in 2021/22.
- Although completions are low, this year has seen significant start on sites across our Council area including: 42 affordable homes at Cornhill, Wellington; 60 affordable homes at Allers Mead, Williton and 19 affordable homes at Paddocks, Bishops Lydeard.
- SWT was recognised as a High Affordability Area by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in December and is now eligible for social rent grant funding in addition to Affordable Rent and Shared Ownership tenures within the 2021 – 2026 Affordable Homes Programme.
- Viability and Self Build seminars have been hosted through the Enabling Team and have been well received by both Members and Officers.

HRA New Homes

- Laxton Road Development completion and handover took place 15th January providing 8 new HRA homes. Here are a couple of photos of the build just before the finishing touches were put in place.



Laxton Road development, Taunton

- Zero Carbon Pilot – The procurement of a volumetric modular contractor was not successful. The Development Team are progressing zero carbon through a more traditional approach. Although some time has been lost, the specification and approach to be adopted is established and the lessons learned have already been adopted on this and other projects. Lessons are also being shared with other local authorities, community led housing and registered provider partners.

- Oxford Inn – This scheme gained support from Members in December and will provide new zero carbon homes by Spring 2023.
- Seaward Way, Minehead – The community has recently been consulted on this scheme of 54 units, through social media and other formats. The planning application was made on the 2nd February. This scheme will be zero carbon and delivered by Autumn 2023. Here are some images of how the site will look:



Proposed view of Seaward Way development, Minehead

- North Taunton Woolaway Project – The final designs for phase A are complete and contract costs are being finalised through the Pre Construction Services Agreement

(PCSA). Members supported the scheme at Full Council in December and a cross-party working group is being formed to ensure the Council's new build housing programme has the focus and support which its scale merits. An approach is being adopted initially for phase A to achieve 80% zero carbon at first letting and 100% zero carbon when the grid decarbonises. This approach means a moderate investment in fabric and technology will reduce the carbon produced by the new homes by nine times compared to a standard (part L) new build home; and by twelve times compared to a Woolaway home. Fuel savings to the customers are calculated to be 70%-80%. A report has been placed in the Member library on the approach and assumptions.

Housing Property Team

Following the government's recent lockdown/Tier 5 announcements, we have undertaken a review of services and those listed below have been deemed essential to our customers and therefore need to be maintained. This decision has been taken with an awareness of continuing COVID-19 challenges, in particular the recent high number of positive COVID-19 cases in Taunton and Wellington. Our Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) are being reviewed to ensure the ongoing safety of our staff and residents whilst these works are undertaken.

- Responsive Repairs - Emergency works, and all external works (i.e. both emergency and non-emergency works) only. We will continue to log all requests for repairs and make contact with residents to arrange appointments when appropriate to do so.
- Property Safety Compliance checks and works all to continue – including gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works & fire safety checks, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works.
- Compliance includes ongoing block inspections and estate walkabouts where officers will focus on identifying safety hazards.
- Asset Management visits: Stock Condition Surveys (SCS) and Energy Assessments to cease (other than SCSs and Energy Performance Certificates [EPCs] in Voids).
- Voids repair works to continue (with updated Risk Assessment Method Statements [RAMS] in place); pre-void visits to pause.
- Capital Programme – Roofline, external painting, door replacement, roofing, and door entry systems to continue. All other planned capital works programmes to be put on hold.

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- The hold placed on non-emergency internal responsive repairs will inevitably lead to an increasing backlog of works. This will be monitored closely and options for tackling this will be considered during the 'lockdown' period. Residents will be advised of the situation via communications on the Council's website and when they contact us with a repair request.

- Void repairs are likely to take longer due to updated COVID-19 RAMS (for example, fewer trades working in the property at one time to reinforce social distancing).

Property Safety Compliance

We are maintaining ongoing progress on property safety compliance activities, including:

- A review of all common areas for blocks of flats to validate existing safety actions.
- Asbestos management surveys and re-inspections.
- Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Remedial actions from previous FRAs, and maintenance inspections.
- Gas Safety checks.
- Water Risk assessments and remedial actions.
- Electrical checks to both communal areas and dwellings.
- Passenger lift and stair-lift safety checks.

Capital Programmes

- Additional procurement for future capital programmes is being undertaken.
- Only the works as listed above are to continue at present. We are contacting all residents affected by capital programmes placed on hold, and will closely monitor to see when it is possible to recommence some, or all, of these programmes when it is considered safe to do so.
- We will not now be able to complete all planned capital works programmes by the end of March 2021. We are evaluating the financial and service delivery implications of this situation and the impact on next year's budgets.

Housing and Communities Teams

Extra Care Housing

- SWT continue to work with Way Ahead Care (commissioned by Somerset County Council) in our Extra Care Housing sites. We have revisited the lockdown arrangements to ensure we keep residents safe, whilst still allowing support to be delivered safely. This has necessitated the cessation of visitors to the schemes to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection.

Sheltered Housing

- The Sheltered Housing 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.
- Due to lockdown we will be ensuring that face-to-face visits are only done by exception when a telephone call cannot resolve the issue. During any visits, staff will wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance for these visits.

- We are aware that many tenants have less contact with family and friends. In some cases, this has left them feeling lonely and isolated. Where appropriate and helpful, we have continued to encourage tenants to have regular welfare calls from Deane Helpline, to check on their welfare and have 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.
- We had planned to have a partial reopening of the meeting halls within the sheltered schemes; however the continuing evolving picture with COVID-19 means that this remains on hold.

Lettings

- Property advertising and lettings that were suspended at the beginning of the first lockdown have now resumed and we plan to continue these as we re-enter lockdown again. Properties will continue to be advertised on Home Finder Somerset on the weekly cycles.
- 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 continue to be carried out remotely, and COVID-19 compliant viewings are taking place by the prospective tenant independently.
- The Home Moves Plus Officer (HMP) started in November. 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. This post will provide invaluable support to help people downsize which will reduce the burden of those struggling with 'bedroom tax' as well as releasing larger accommodation for households in housing need
- Laxton Road Flats: The new tenancies of the eight new properties at Laxton Road have all been signed up.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- With the return of the third lockdown, although limited to essential assessments of people homes, we have been able to keep construction on site with expenditure on track (although below that of pre pandemic levels).
- The SIP managers have continued to keep under review the SIP Recovery Plan and are now in the fourth phase with exploratory work progressing on various projects to coin the phrase 'build back better' preparing for the ever building demand for health services and requests for assistance from the vulnerable population. Particularly will be felt when the nation moves out of lockdown.
- Somerset County Council is seeing an increasing number of clients presenting themselves, having had serious falls due to trying to cope and not asking for help. We are seeing a rise in safeguarding referrals, some of people's plight hidden during the first lockdown and exasperated by the second. Mental health is also becoming a major concern.
- Hoarding cases have not relented in either the Somerset West & Taunton area or Sedgemoor, some of which is a reflection on the pandemic. On average the

Independent Living Officers are each receiving an average of 8 complex cases a week up by 75% on this time last year on top of their 'run of the mill' referrals.

- There has been no respite for the hospital with the number of COVID-19 related admissions. Our Hospital Resettlement post is receiving 6-8 referrals a day for housing related cases, many of which are for patients who cannot be discharged due to the condition of their property. We have excellent working relationships with our partners through the agreed working practice and channels to act quickly with 48hr turnarounds. All in order to free up beds in a timely manner. We have reallocated a staff resource from another part of the service to assist and provide respite for the Resettlement post to avoid burn out.
- Adult Social Care have reported that they have 242 cases which are on their waiting list for assessments. The majority will be for moving and handling, some may transfer to a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) application.
- In terms of positive steps moving forward:
 - Putting together a new home maintenance service which will provide low level advice to assist people with maintaining their own home through our website, our interagency coffee mornings, literature, social media; a framework of contractors who will be able to assist with small works and can be referred into SIP by any of the agencies; and financial assistance to help the low income households with the repairs. We are developing small video clips which will be posted on the website providing useful tips to look out for in maintaining key components of the fabric.
 - Appointed a new Housing Options Occupational Therapist for the Children's services who will work alongside the Adult equivalent posts.
 - Appointing two Occupational Therapists solely to focus on adaptations to enable the locality leads to focus on manual handling. All the posts are funded by SIP through the Better Care Fund including the specialist Housing Options posts and employed by Somerset County Council.
 - Confirmation from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) that SIP was successful in its bid for a Green Homes Grant: Local Authority Delivery (LADS) 1b to further the work from the LADS 1a bid for retrofitting both social and private housing, adding a further £800k to the already awarded £518k from the first round.
- SIP is commissioning a study with sponsorship from the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG), Hospital Trust, NHS England and Somerset Strategic Housing Officers Group (SSHG) to look into the obstacles for a successful hospital discharge in Somerset, looking to recommendations to streamline the process, reduce inefficiencies and duplication. ARK will undertake the work with assistance from the University of the West of England (UWE).
- SIP is leading on streamlining the minor works contracts that County have for their Care Act duties and SIP's prevention work into one new framework which will be combined with the framework bundle for the home maintenance project. Simplifying the referral process, fixed prices for work and turnaround times.
- Currently putting together, a tender document for a new stairlift leasing scheme to replace the current process of applying for a DFG for a stairlift. With aims of a five-day turnaround (currently 2 – 8 weeks) and all stairlifts maintained through the contract.
- Empty homes and how SIP can assist landlords with bringing empty homes back into use by providing an architectural service working alongside Steve Perry. A draft business case is being drawn up.

- Putting together an offer to assist landlords with essential repairs through a list of contractors through the minor works framework project.

Rough Sleeper Delivery Plan and Cold Weather Fund:

- We were successful in our bid to MHCLG to secure £80k funding to deliver cold weather provision to rough sleepers. This work is taking place in partnership with the YMCA Dulverton Group (YMCADG), The Albemarle Centre, The Hope Centre and Open Door. The service delivery will extend outreach provision at weekends and evenings and will provide the capacity for day centres in Taunton and Minehead to open their services for longer. This bid has allowed us to establish and develop voluntary sector partnerships that will allow us to deliver an enhanced Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) offer.
- The RSI Team worked over the Christmas break to respond to the severe weather and have succeeded in reducing the number of rough sleepers from 18 to 9. This is an exceptional achievement as this represents success with some of the most entrenched and hard to reach individuals in our district.

Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

- The provisions for rough sleepers at Canonsgrove in Trull and The Beach Hotel in Minehead, Canonsgrove is currently accommodating 54 clients and there are 17 at the Beach.
- Severe Weather provisions were activated in December and January and 7 rough sleepers were brought in as part of this provision. We have used accommodation at the Beach Hotel, Canonsgrove, The Albemarle Centre, the Great Western Hotel and some B&Bs
- We have advocated for vaccinations for our homeless accommodation tenants and rough sleeper staff. On Friday 28th January all resident at Canonsgrove and 13 staff received their vaccinations. Lindley House residents were also vaccinated and further vaccinations have been booked in for the Beach Hotel.

Housing Options

- Housing Options have seen 204 homeless approaches between October and December. This is a significant reduction in the numbers we would normally expect to see.
- Of these, 11 have had a full duty accepted and 55 cases have had their homelessness prevented. This is a significant increase on previous months which indicates that we are seeing the desired outcome from our prevention focus and better case management.
- We have had no families in B&B for over 6 weeks between October and December.

Recruitment

We have the following vacancies across the service:

Rough Sleeper Team:

- 1 F Grade Tenancy Sustainment Case Manager fixed term until end March 2021
- 1 F Grade Cold Weather Provision Coordinator fixed term until end March 2021

Both will be advertised through matrix for agency staff or internal secondment due to the short term nature of these contracts.

Housing Options:

- 1 G Grade Senior Case Manager – Currently covered through agency, this will be extended until the new financial year.
- 1 F Grade Case Manager (Private rented Sector).
- 1 F Grade Case Manager (Tenancy Sustainment).
- 1 F Grade Case Manager (Housing Options). This has occurred due to a permanent staff member securing alternative employment elsewhere. Recruitment across the sector is a problem and this has been confirmed by other Districts both locally and nationally. Our approach to combat this is to encourage trainee and apprentice positions in order to grow our own talent.

Training Delivery Programme

- It was our intention to roll out the bulk of the training programme when all vacant posts had been filled and the team is fully staffed. Due to the unexpected delay in this area we are pushing ahead with the training programme as we recognise the need for staff to be fully skilled and knowledgeable to reach a position of compliance and better service delivery. Some training will be delivered as part of the monthly team meetings and some will be as stand- alone sessions. The team have received training from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), YMCA Tenant Accreditation Scheme (YMCA TAS) and the Armed Forces Charity SSAFA on Veterans. Second Step are scheduled to deliver training in the coming weeks. CAB will be delivering financial assessment training for officers this month.

Private Rented Sector

- We have started to roll out our new incentives package to targeted letting agents. We have briefed staff within the Housing Options and Rough Sleeping team on how the scheme works so that they can set expectations with their customers on timescales and be able to confidently explain the process. In addition to this the Private Sector Case Manager is monitoring the referral process to ensure the best quality information in order to match people to properties effectively. This will underpin sustainable tenancies and a successful scheme. Pointers Estate Agents are our first successful agencies to join our panel. They are based in West Somerset which will offer a much needed foothold in this area.

B&B Spend

October	November	December
£6509.00	£6954.00	£16012.00

- Spend on Bed and Breakfast remained low for October and November but increased in December due to an increase in Duty to Refers from hospital and prison. This has been influenced by the increase in specific accommodation as reported previously but has also seen the impact of better case management, a more robust front end assessment process within Housing Options and a greater focus on prevention.

Homefinder

- Homefinder currently has a backlog of work of approximately 10 weeks. Although the team are working hard to reduce this, it is challenging due to staff sickness, a high volume of calls and work into the team. We brought further capacity in and some progress was made prior to Christmas but the work that came in over the Christmas holiday period has pushed the backlog back up again. We are now looking to recruit a further member of staff to work on this as soon as possible, to bring this backlog down.
- The tenders for the contract for the procurement of the new system for Homefinder Somerset have been scored and this will be concluded in the next couple of weeks.

Income

- The Rent Recovery team continue to work to help and support those tenants who are effected by a reduction in income due to COVID-19. Rent arrears have reduced to 571k (as at 04/12/20), a further £15k reduction on the previous month and £220k below the level at the start of the Lean Review in September 2019. This is a fantastic result for the team and shows the hard work and dedication they have all committed to through the pandemic.
- The team rolled out a Christmas Rent Campaign which included 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 has started and this enables us to 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 and we have a small number of serious cases that we are escalating. These cases will need to have enforcement action taken against them and this in turn is extremely work intensive.
- The previous lockdown led to minor nuisance cases coming to our attention and it is likely that this trend will continue with the new lockdown. We will utilise our

COVID-19 nuisance letters from the last lockdown to try to deal with this. If these do not settle down then we will work with the Police to carry out joint visits if necessary and take any necessary action to get the perpetrators to amend their behaviour.

- We are still exploring the option of using a mobile noise app to deal with low level complaints that we receive. We will review this at the end of a trial period to decide whether we are going to be buying into this service.

Tenancy/Estate Team

- The team has restarted Estate Walkabouts and has been continuing with block inspections. Our programme of these is published on our website. We have a process and pro-forma monitoring forms and managers 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 needs 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. We intend to continue to do Estate Walkabouts during the new lockdown, although we will primarily be focussing on hazards and health and safety.
- 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:





Style Flats, Wiveliscombe

- We have started proactive Annual Tenancy Checks with an officer visiting households to assess the condition of the tenancy and property, however these have been put on hold during the new lockdown.

Housing Performance Team

Since our last report in November we have completed the following key pieces of work:

- The team produced a 16 page Christmas newsletter which was posted to tenants and leaseholders. It was also made available on the website and to 222 email subscribers.
- The Tenants' Annual Report covering the period 2019-20 has been published to our website (this was delayed due to COVID-19 lockdown but has now been completed and published).
- A Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) including tenants and leaseholders has concluded and draft reports have been received (see summary below). The STAR survey is a comprehensive satisfaction survey completed every two years by an independent company (Acuity). We will now work on our response to these survey results, communicate them to our tenants, staff and provide information on our planned actions.
- Produced a summary of the government white paper "new deal for social housing" and shared that with our staff and tenant groups.
- Linked to the white paper, we have completed a self-assessment of our complaints process against the new Housing Ombudsman code and are putting into place any actions to address any gaps.
- We have ensured that our business areas have prepared business continuity plans.

- We have supported our managers to consult our Tenants' Strategic Group on over 10 policy documents (since September 2020).
- The team have agreed terms of reference for our Tenants' Action Group, including independent assessment of the terms of reference from the tenant engagement experts, TPAS.
- We have developed new webpages to enable our tenants to access information including information on programme maintenance, walkabouts and block inspections.
- Internally we have ensured that regular governance meetings are held to oversee and manage the activities of the housing directorate e.g. programme management meetings, finance and performance and risk meetings.
- Reviewed how our internal customer contact software routes enquiries to our staff.
- During January our Maintenance Manager started an innovative pilot to complete an 'in the moment' satisfaction survey for each repair completed. The survey gives us responses to several repair related questions and also produce a net promoter score - NPS (which is a known industry standard measure for customer satisfaction). Having an immediate electronic survey allows us to be notified of any concerns straight away and deal with those promptly. It is early days in the pilot, but to date 100% of responses have been positive promoters of our repairs service which is a great start. The pilot will be used to inform our customer satisfaction survey development within Housing and the wider council.

During the next two months we will:

- Formally invite candidates for the Tenants' Strategic Group election.
- Create a response and action plan to share the final results of the STAR survey.
- Continue to support online meetings of our tenants' groups.
- Continue to develop webpages.
- Continue to consult on our housing policy documents.
- Continue to strengthen our internal governance through our meetings and reporting.
- Self-assess against the government white paper.

STAR Survey Summary

Whilst we await the final STAR tenant satisfaction report our draft report indicates the following highlights:

The results from the survey are very positive, and generally a little up on the results from the previous survey in 2018. The survey recorded many high ratings including satisfaction with the gas servicing arrangements (95%), having a home that is safe and secure (91%), the rent providing value for money (88%), the neighbourhood (85%), and its appearance (84%) – all of which are reflected in the finding that 83% of tenants are satisfied with the services provided by Somerset West and Taunton.

Key Findings are:

- Over eight out of ten tenants are satisfied with the services provided by SWT (83%), the overall quality of their home (81%) its condition (80%) and the repair

service (82%). 78% are satisfied that SWT keeps them informed about things that might affect them as a resident.

- Slightly fewer are satisfied that SWT listens to their views and acts upon them (62%). Satisfaction with most aspects of contacting the council are also a little lower. 67% found it easy to contact the right person, 65% feel the staff keep their promises and 69% were satisfied with the final outcome of their contact.

Suggestions for improvements:

- There are 574 comments giving suggestions on possible improvements to the service, however, 17% of these said they are happy with things as they are. Customer contact accounts for 12% of the comments for possible improvements, with tenants wanting better customer care and for staff to answer the phones more readily and to return calls when promised. The repairs service concerns 9% of comments with tenants wanting a better, quicker service and to be kept informed of progress. Other issues mentioned include communications, grounds maintenance and dealing with neighbourhood issues.

Day-to-day repairs and maintenance service:

- There are 82% of tenants satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service, and this has increased by 7% since the previous survey. Overall satisfaction with the last completed repair is 86%, and 95% are satisfied with gas servicing arrangements.

Communication and information:

- Nearly eight out of ten tenants (78%) are satisfied that SWT keeps them informed about things that might affect them. However, fewer are satisfied that SWT listens to their views and acts upon them (62%) with 17% dissatisfied.

Further analysis:

Throughout the survey some very good levels of satisfaction have been found, and the findings are an endorsement of the commitment of Somerset West and Taunton and its staff. However, slightly lower levels of satisfaction are also found particularly related to communication issues with the final outcome of the query, listening to views and acting upon them amongst the lower ratings.

Overall, having come through major organisational change and to also be in the midst of COVID-19, it is an achievement for many areas to have increased their levels of satisfaction. Upon receipt of the final report we will communicate results with our tenants, our staff and start the process of responding to the findings to improve our tenants' satisfaction with our services.