

Full Council Meeting – 30 March 2021

Report of Councillor Fran Smith – Housing

Below are the achievements that have taken place from 2020 and I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of the staff within the directorate for their hard work in making all of these things happen for the benefit of our residents, directly and indirectly, and especially during the past year where we have been dealing with a pandemic.

During 2020/21 we were globally affected by the Covid19 pandemic whilst also realigning to a new Housing and Communities Directorate, moving and appointing new staff to our new structure (pulling together a Housing and Communities Directorate of over 200 staff). As a council and Housing and Communities Directorate we responded to the pandemic and also delivered the following activities:

Housing Landlord

- The Sheltered Housing Team have worked across the whole of sheltered housing, making hundreds of welfare calls to tenants, particularly through COVID. They have made home visits where necessary, to complete aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, install Lifelines and support tenants who need it. They have also undertaken annual reviews of Support Plans with sheltered tenants and are striving for 100% completion by the end of March.
- Lettings of new properties was affected by COVID, but the team quickly put in place COVID-safe measures to ensure that vacant properties could continue to be let, including our new Laxton Road flats. The Home Moves Plus Officer started in November and has already had significant success in supporting tenants downsize into smaller, more affordable properties, freeing up much needed larger properties for families.
- The Rent Recovery team has supported tenants affected by a reduction in income due to COVID-19, whilst still managing to improve rent collection. Rent arrears have reduced to £517k (as at 05/3/21), a reduction of £275k from September 2019 and with 460 fewer tenants now in debt. This is a fantastic result for the team who really invested in the new 'lean' model we introduced and have worked hard to bring some real success.
- The Homeless team takes anti-social behaviour seriously and continued to support households affected by it last year, taking enforcement where necessary. They also introduced use of a noise app, which they are piloting to see whether this improves management of issues with neighbour noise.
- Tenancy Officers supported a wide range of households over the past year, setting up new tenancies, helping tenants move, dealing with general issues and supporting people through COVID. Wider work included undertaking a full programme of block inspections, to ensure compliance for fire and other risks. They also delivered Estate Walkabouts to identify issues, defects and improvements required which were then raised for the DLO to address. Finally they introduced new annual tenancy checks to visit households and assess the condition of the tenancy and property, to ensure properties are being managed well and in line with the tenancy agreement.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

- Last year, the Homeless Service set up Canonsgrove homeless accommodation and The Beach Hotel in partnership with the YMCA Dulverton Group to meet the government's 'Everyone In' requirement. This provision has supported close to 150 homeless people with multi-agency support. In many cases this has led to improvements in wellbeing, reduced addiction and moves in to independent accommodation. Aligned to this, we were able to bid for over £1m to purchase the Gascony Hotel to provide permanent homeless accommodation in Minehead and have also levered in significant revenue funding to support homelessness in our District.
- Officers in the homelessness service have supported a high caseload of people throughout the year with housing advice and accommodation. We are currently implementing an improvement plan that should see services continue to improve in 2021/22.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- The SIP service made a number of new innovations last year including introducing a Hoarding service to support households where hoarding is an issue. Demand is significant and currently officers are each receiving an average of 8 complex cases a week. A new Hospital Resettlement post receives 6-8 referrals a day for housing related cases, which often require improvements to the condition of their property to enable a successful discharge. This service supports the patient, the hospital and the homelessness service, resulting in quicker return to home for the majority of patients accessing the service.
- The SIP was again successful with its bid to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for a Green Homes Grant. This will add a further £800k to the already awarded £518k from the first bid and will benefit homes in our District in both the private and social sector that require retrofitting.

Housing Property

Listed below is a summary of the key activities undertaken within the housing property service over the past 12 months. The main focus has understandably been to maintain services as far as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, re-adjusting these to respond to each lockdown restriction level (meeting Government guidelines and taking the required measures to ensure the ongoing safety of our staff and residents whilst works are undertaken).

Responsive Repairs

All emergency works have been carried out throughout the year. Different arrangements have been in place during lockdown periods for non-emergency repairs; ranging from not carrying out any non-emergency repairs, only undertaking external non-emergency repairs, and completing all works. This has been exceptionally challenging for staff, particularly our tradespersons on the 'front-line'. Inevitably a backlog of non-emergency works has arisen and this is being monitored closely and plans are in place to resolve this. Residents have been kept up-to-date via communications on the Council's website and when they contact us with a repair request.

Void Repairs

Again, COVID restrictions have made it challenging to deliver this service. Works required to meet our lettable standard have taken longer due to our following updated COVID Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) - for example, fewer trades working in the property at one time to reinforce social distancing. Nevertheless, this service has been maintained throughout the year.

Property Safety Compliance

Despite the COVID challenges, very considerable progress has been made in this critical area. Following a new team being set-up and key roles recruited to, an updated database of all compliance areas against every property for which the Council has property compliance responsibility has been developed and implemented to improve monitoring capability for this activity. This includes the six key areas: Asbestos management, Electrical safety, Fire safety, Gas safety, Lift and Stair-lift management, and Water Management (Legionella). Together with a validation inspection of each compliance area, this provides an increased level of assurance. Some example specific work areas delivered are fire risk assessments and remedial actions, asbestos management surveys and re-inspections to communal areas, annual gas safety checks, and electrical installation testing. In addition, we have reviewed and updated our property safety compliance policies and procedures. All compliance activities are now monitored on a weekly basis, and despite difficulties in maintaining compliance in some areas due to obtaining access from some vulnerable tenants who are shielding or are anxious about allowing people into their homes during the pandemic, a recent positive audit outcome has demonstrated the strength of our approach.

Asset Management

The key to provision of an efficient and effective approach to asset management is obtaining accurate and up-to-date data, particularly for property stock condition and energy performance. There was a requirement to accelerate data capture for both of these areas during the year. However, during the majority of the year it has not been possible to undertake either Stock Condition Surveys (SCS) or Energy Assessments as these have not been considered 'essential services' in the lockdown periods, although we have continued to undertake both of these activities in void properties to enable them to be re-let. We have developed plans to recommence these surveys, using both in-house and external resources, when lockdown restrictions permit.

Capital Programmes

The various COVID lockdown periods have had a significant impact on delivery of our capital improvement programmes. Whilst some have been largely able to continue; e.g. roofline works, external painting, door replacement, roofing, and door entry systems; others (mainly due to being internal works) have been more challenging to achieve; for example, heating upgrades and kitchen and bathroom upgrades. We have not therefore been able to complete all capital works programmes planned for 2020/21. We are evaluating the financial and service delivery implications of this situation and the impact on future budgets, but the overall intention is to deliver both the outstanding works and the 2021/22 planned programmes (COVID restrictions permitting) during 2021/22. We have also been carrying out substantial procurement during the year, including a focus on driving-in value for money and longer-term contracting arrangements.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

The Housing Development and Regeneration team have been working hard to deliver new affordable homes directly by the council or through partnerships in the last year. The Housing Strategy team joined the service in September and have carried out a significant amount of strategy work to support better futures for the most vulnerable residents in the district. The Development team have been progressing a pipeline of new build Council schemes including zero carbon and low carbon homes. The Enabling team have continued their partnership working and have introduced projects promoting community led housing on Exmoor.

Housing Strategy

- The service produced a draft Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy to respond to the Council's and Government aspiration to reduce or end rough sleeping by 2027. The strategy, which will be considered by the Executive in March, will help inform the Council's partnership and investment decisions.
- The Homelessness Reduction Board has progressed and will start its work in April 2021.
- LGA 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 gives opportunities to deliver better outcomes under six themes. The report will support the Homelessness Reduction Board set its priorities and action.
- The team have coordinated the delivery of the Hinkley Point C Housing Action Plan.
- The revised Private Sector Renewal Policy was considered and supported by full council in December.
- The Housing Strategy team has been working on, and will shortly conclude its study on housing demand including general need, special need and homelessness.

Housing Enabling

- 124 new affordable homes are anticipated to have completed by end of 2020/2021. There are around another 400 affordable homes currently on site for completion by March 2023.
- Over 100 new affordable homes have started on site during 2020/21 with the team working on an active pipeline of over 70 housing schemes.
- The team led a proactive and dedicated Affordable Housing Development Partnership. Sovereign Housing have recently joined the partnership and work continues with all our Affordable Housing Development Partners to secure new affordable homes through both planning obligations and funding through Homes England Affordable Homes programmes. The team continue to receive positive and complementary feedback from the partners.
- The team secured a grant for circa £1m to support development of The Gascony Hotel, Minehead to provide 18 units, in support of single homeless accommodation.
- The team continue to deliver a number of special projects whilst managing its business as usual services.

- Following the successful appointment of the Exmoor Rural Housing Enabler, work started to facilitate affordable homes delivery routes within the National Park.
- Community Led Housing project is actively supporting community groups to deliver affordable homes within their communities.
- The team are leading the delivery of specialist new build affordable housing and lead the facilitation of joint officer working to deliver specialist housing.
- Informed responses have been provided during Central Government Planning Consultations held in 2020/21 which directly affect affordable housing delivery.

HRA New Homes

- The Laxton Road scheme completed and were handed over on 15th January 2021, providing 8 new HRA homes. Properties were let immediately and were in high demand.
- The Development team have progressed the zero carbon Affordable Housing Pilot through a more traditional approach and are considering five sites which will be submitted for planning in the Spring.
- Work has continued on other zero carbon affordable schemes, such as Oxford Inn Taunton and Seaward Way Minehead. Both developments should be complete in 2023.
- North Taunton Woolaway Project – The final designs for phase A are complete and contract costs are being finalised. 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.