

Full Council Meeting – 7 December 2021

Report of Councillor Fran Smith – Housing

The report is to update Members on work being undertaken and progress made by Housing Development and Regeneration Team

HRA New Homes

- NTWP Phase A is progressing with brickwork well underway on site. Some permissions are still required to support the creation of the new highway and progress the completion of foundations for two of the five Phase A sites. Equans/Engie are reprofiling works to minimise delays. Discussions have started with phase Ci tenants, preparing them for decant and to receive Gold Band Homefinder status. Phase Ci will be placed in the second contract package for the NTWP which is timetabled for demolition and then construction to commence in May 2022. A delivery programme for Phase E refurbishment is being finalised and a Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund grant application has been submitted which if successful will help support the costs. The fabric and external appearance of the retrofit will mirror closely the NTWP. The current proposal is not to introduce renewable onsite heat and power on the retrofit dwellings however this will remain under review until the contract is let in Spring 2022.
- The pre-contract agreement for the zero-carbon development at Seaward Way, Minehead, has been signed. There are challenges discharging planning conditions relating to highways works. Discussions are taking place to resolve this matter however works cannot start until the condition is discharged due to the significant earth works to raise the site in line with agreed flood measures.
- Planning applications for the zero carbon affordable housing schemes, on various sites in Taunton, have been submitted to the local planning authority. These schemes include a phosphate mitigation strategy which has also been submitted to Natural England.
- The Directorate has recently presented SWTs zero carbon affordable housing schemes at three national and regional events. SWT works on zero carbon new build are being showcased in a series of best practice guides produced by the Good Homes Alliance.

Housing Strategy and Enabling

- The Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Strategy and delivery plan was approved by Full Council in October. Several opportunities are emerging including successfully gaining a new grant, funding from Homes England and DLUHC (Department of Levelling Up, Homes and Communities), for 18 units of accommodation.
- The service is leading the thinking of the Council's HRA low carbon retrofit strategy. Over the next 18 months a financial and delivery plan will emerge. SWT has submitted (as part of a consortium bid), a grant request under the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. We will hear back in December if successful.
- New affordable housing in the district is set to see a higher-than-average number of properties completed this financial year. The pipeline of new units

is currently at its strongest in the west of the district, which is unaffected by the phosphate mitigation planning requirements.

- The Housing Enabling team are also preparing the District for the impact of First Homes which is a Government initiative to increase low-cost home ownership.
- The service has completed a study of housing demand, having assessed a range of data and intelligence. Seven broad conclusions emerged, together with 17 specific recommendations primarily requiring consideration and progression through existing partnership arrangements.
- The next meeting of the Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board is due to take place on 22nd Nov 2021 and will consider the Better Care Fund and a more flexible use of spend as far as it relates to housing.
- The service continues to provide strategic direction to the work of the Somerset Homelessness Reduction Board, as well as the programme management function to the delivery of the Better Futures programme
- We continue to deliver the HPC Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work, providing new bed space and support to vulnerable customers. Currently we are supporting a housing needs assessment within the parish of Stogursey, and are tendering for a contract for the provision of a debt and money management service for those who are struggling with their housing circumstances.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken.
- Emergency jobs are being delivered within our defined timescale (24 hours from logging).
- There is a backlog of non-emergency jobs. This is however, reducing following the use of external contractors.
- Void repairs are also being undertaken, although returning the properties back to our Lettings team promptly remains a challenge. This is primarily due to ongoing difficulties in the recruitment of skilled tradespersons in-house, delays in asbestos surveys and works, and the availability of electricians.

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken. These include 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.
- Weekly review meetings are being held to carefully monitor and manage these safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- Capital Work programmes continue to be undertaken; with recent contracts commencing including kitchen and bathroom replacements, emergency lighting, additional electrical testing, and door entry systems.

- Procurement activities remain at a high level; with recent tenders including roofing, estate improvement works, and a consultancy review of our materials supply chain.
- A number of staff changes have recently taken place in the team, and recruitment for replacement staff is now underway.

Asset Management

- The implementation of the Open Assets module of our Capita software system has now successfully gone live. Post 'go-live' work is now underway, including the development of a suite of bespoke reports and further data-loading from stock condition and energy surveys.
- Accelerated programmes of Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments continue to take place.
- Capital work programme planning (for both the 2022/23 financial year and forward plans) is actively being undertaken, as well as a review of their impact on our Business Plan.

Housing and Communities Team

Extra Care Housing

- Extra Care Housing has returned to 'business as usual'. Somerset West and Taunton staff are looking to engage some local volunteers in litter picks on the scheme.

Sheltered Housing

- Sheltered Housing is also back to 'business as usual', with tenants having the option to complete reviews in person or by telephone. Some tenants are still feeling anxious about the risks associated with Covid.
- Staff are working with some of the Health and Wellbeing Service Health Coaches. This will allow them to use the meeting halls to link in with our sheltered tenants on general and mental health matters.
- Staff are planning some skip days on schemes which are located some distance from the tip facilities for older tenants to dispose of unwanted items. This will be supported by LINK Power.

Lettings

- The Lettable Standard document has now been to HSMT and the Tenant Strategic Group for consideration. Feedback has been received and responded to.
- The Lettable Standard and the Leaving Well process will be discussed at the Tenant Action Group on 2nd December.
- 209 properties have been re-let year to date (April to October). This is a year-to-date average of 29 properties per month.
- Customer satisfaction (year to date) is running at 98%. Recent comments on the process and properties include *"I am over the moon – I now have a home not just somewhere to live"*.
- The Home Moves Plus project is still on course to achieve the target figures, well in advance of the target date. To date, a total of 35 households have been assisted in downsizing to a more appropriate property for their housing

need. This has freed up a total of 87 bed spaces, helping to ensure that we are making the best use of our housing stock.

- Void property turn-around times are still being adversely affected by shortages of trades staff and supply chain issues within the construction industry.

Income

- Tenant arrears as of 17th November 2021 were £617,552.82 with 1541 tenants in arrears. The team will continue to work in accordance with the “Lean Process” to reduce the arrears whilst continuing to support our tenants.
- Our level of arrears is lower than at this point last year, however our year-end target of £464k is going to be extremely challenging to meet. Additional in-year challenges including introducing the new Capita ‘Open’ Housing system, changes in staff and government Covid rules disallowing us applying notice to seek possession, means that this challenging target may not be met.
- We had two agency members of staff started with the team on 8th November who are currently being trained on the Lean process and our ways of working. We are hoping that they will be working at full capacity within the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, the team have worked hard to cover the work and help and support our tenants.
- The Open Housing project continues to present challenges with workload, but we are making progress with our modules.
- We are currently working on a plan to rent more of our garages as well as updating the current garage Tenancy Agreement. We are also putting in place a new lean process, for the rent recovery of garages.
- We are also commencing a “deep dive” into rent arrears with Homes in Sedgemoor, to gain an insight into our different ways of working and to look at any improvements we can take from their practices.

Housing Options

- Housing Options are moving homeless applications online. This was well received when we trialled it with supporting agencies. We have launched new webpages where customers can access advice and assistance and complete an online form to report homelessness. This will enable the team to be more responsive to customers with specific advice on the first phone call. This flexible service will mean that we are able to respond with minimal delay to customers who cannot use the online service and contact us by phone. We have recruited an additional Private Rented Sector Officer, Sustainment Officer and Finance Officer who will add valuable capacity to our prevention services and help support the team. We are looking to “lean” our processes to make things clearer and easier for our customers, this is on-going work involving the whole team.

Rough Sleeper Provision

- The Rough Sleeper team has an agreed action plan with DLUCH (formerly MCHLG) to endeavour to have no more than 5 people sleeping rough in our district. Our Outreach team is working hard to meet this figure and we are close to achieving this with a current number of 6. We have planned winter provisions and we will be making offers of accommodation to anyone found to be rough sleeping in the district between December and March.

- The Rough Sleeper team have also just started to use a new database, “rise” which will allow them to better record and report on information which will help inform the service in the future.

Homefinder

- The team are getting to grips with the new system and are tackling the backlog of work. Response times are down to a month (maximum) in all workflows which is a great achievement in addition to the delivery of a new system; and is in-line with wait-times in the other districts.
- We are integrating the work of Homefinder much more in prevention work in the Housing Options team. We have recruited a Senior Homefinder/Sustainment Officer who will be tasked with ensuring that we have intervened in cases at the earliest opportunity and to engage with prevention work to try to sustain any tenancies wherever possible.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- Since April 2021, the team have received 528 referrals which range from DFG’s feasibilities, minor works, prevention grants and private work. The team have processed 84 DFG’s and 229 minor works and prevention grants. The team have been suffering with staff resources against the ratio of referrals when the decision was made to clear the waiting lists with Adult Social Care using temporary staff. SIP has since employed two additional Technical Officers and is in the process of employing a third, on temporary contracts. SIP has also employed an architect’s service.
- Including Mendip, the waiting list is currently at 79 cases, down from 130 two months ago. Of the 79, 18 are feasibilities and 2 Decent Homes Grant applications. Waiting times from first visit to completion of the works remains at 12 weeks, despite the workloads.
- The Independent Living Officers were extremely busy throughout the first two quarters receiving and responding to 156 requests for service. The majority being hoarding (76) referred by Mental Health colleagues in Adult Social Care and the Fires Service. Half of the hoarding cases are in the SW&T area. The next largest being home safety checks, referred in the main via the Fire Service or the Village Agents. It is envisaged that the hoarding picture will not improve as further work by mental health teams are exposing increasing numbers of individuals and households living in very poor conditions and suffering with mental health problems as a result of the pandemic. Hoarding cases take up to 2 years to resolve. The team have recruited an additional ILO on a temporary 18-month contract to assist with relieving the pressures. The Officer comes with extensive experience from the NHS working in mental health.

Housing Performance Team

- The Customer Service training reported on previously has been running throughout September, October and November 2021. To date 157 members of staff have been trained with a mop up session planned for on 17th November.
- The arranged complaints training through HQN has taken place for managers and those within the directorate who deal with complaints. All sessions have been undertaken and 74 members of staff were trained.

- A Senior Complaints Case Manager has been appointed to assist with improving complaints responses and outcomes.
- The Annual Report to tenants has been published on the website.
- We have produced an Autumn newsletter to tenants and leaseholders, which was delivered to doorsteps on or around the 1st October 2021.
- We have started to develop a “reporting a repair” online form. Currently in the draft stages with our business analysts.
- Submitted 2020-21 Housemark data and continue to submit Pulse data so that we can benchmark with other housing providers.
- Setting up of a “damp and mould” working group with engaged tenants. First meeting scheduled for 5th November 2021.
- A review of our Housing Policies has commenced with the HQN (Housing Quality Network), the review will include rewrite and introduction of new policies where required.