

Full Council Meeting – 7 July 2020

Report of Councillor Fran Smith – Housing

Housing Development and Enabling

Since April, seven new HRA homes have been acquired at Pyrlands Fields and five buy back properties have been identified for Buy back. The new SWT build Laxton Road scheme will complete eight homes this year.

Although lockdown has led to contractors reducing capacity on sites, our officers have used this time to prepare SWT new build schemes for member approval and to allow delivery as soon as possible after lockdown. Engie were selected as main contractor for North Taunton Woolaways and LA Moore have continued work on Phase A properties with demolition due to complete by November to allow work to then commence on site. 27 North Taunton Voids have been made ready to support homeless families over the next 3-5 years which will have the added benefits of a rental income and preventing blight.

The team has prepared proposals for members for a 50 unit Zero Carbon Affordable Homes pilot and enabling works. The three priority schemes for the service are North Taunton Woolaways, Seaward Way and Zero Carbon Homes. Other Scheme sites include the Oxford Inn Taunton and Woolaway properties in Oake are also being prepared ready to progress at the appropriate time.

Housing enablers have been working with social housing partners to understand the Covid impact on their schemes and to be support them resuming delivery. Discussions are taking place with Homes England on accessing available grants for new build. Rural enabling work has seen a strong pipeline of homes coming forward and a partnership project with Exmoor national park is being finalised.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs, Void Repairs and Safety Checks

Essential emergency repairs have been ongoing through Covid and we have continued to meet our target response times on this work, despite resource pressures due to Covid restrictions. We moved to emergency only repairs once lockdown started but are now working on our backlog and are planning to resume non-emergency repairs (both backlog and new repair requests). It should be noted, however, that it will take some time to return to normal levels of service delivery in all areas of repairs work.

Void repairs have been undertaken during the period, although reduced capacity and a need for social distancing in properties has inevitably led to delays in completion. We are developing plans to mitigate further delays and reduce our empty properties.

We have maintained 100% compliance on gas safety checks as required by law, during lockdown.

Housing Property Safety Compliance

Significant progress on property safety compliance has been made, including:

- Fire Safety – ongoing delivery of Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) remedial actions; including fire safety housekeeping, signage and upgrading fire doors. We have started FRA sample audits to further validate safety measures on our properties.
- Asbestos – produced a new Asbestos Policy and procedure, and undertaken asbestos management surveys to communal areas.
- Electrical Safety – recommenced a programme of electrical checks to communal areas.
- Water Safety – procured contractor to undertake a programme of Water Risk Assessments.

Housing Asset Management

We are developing an approach to enable a return to survey work, including energy surveys and stock condition surveys. These will facilitate proposals to be developed for future energy efficiency programmes and planned maintenance work.

HRA Capital Programmes

All capital programmes ceased during lockdown. In the meantime, we have procured contracts and are planning our approach to recommence works, starting with external works (e.g. external painting and replacement soffits and gutters).

Income

The arrears and Debt and Benefit teams are working hard to support all our tenants through the financial effects of COVID-19, giving advice and helping tenants claim for benefits they are entitled to and make payment plans for ongoing payments. They continue to take the "Lean" approach and although arrears have risen slightly over the last couple of months (£711k) a reduction of £80k since the Lean review started. Across the country Registered Housing Providers have seen a 10% increase in arrears since April and SWT are slightly lower than that figure.

Anti Social Behaviour

Some increase in this area and officers are reviewing how cases are managed to ensure earlier involvement through our Estates officers and we are also reviewing our ASB policies.

Supported Housing

During lockdown, phone contact was made with all sheltered and extra care tenants, to check welfare and remind them of support available. We also referred to Village Agents for practical support for those shielding. Food parcels were delivered to tenants in crisis and in-person welfare checks for those not contactable by phone.

The vast majority of 'tenant reviews' have been completed, to provide current contact and medical information for Deane Helpline colleagues to respond to emergency call outs. Many tenants were also added to the Deane Helpline daily welfare calls schedule, to support those who were unable to get support from family or friends.

Sheltered tenants are receiving a monthly welfare check by phone. Home visits are made only when necessary and safe to do so. Tenants needing aids and adaptations are assessed by phone and visited where necessary to complete the assessment.

Extra Care tenants were requested not to have visitors, to reduce the risk of Covid. Our staff and care providers have worked together to ensure tenants have food and medications and that people are not feeling isolated. Gardening staff have completed some works across the sites and this has been positive for tenants to see.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

The Somerset Independence Plus has continued to work during the Covid Crisis and have been supporting clients by telephone as well as working with the Housing Options team occupational therapists. The team have been able during this time to identify clients requirements and prioritise ready for when work can commence with the contractors and suppliers. Site visits to void properties have been undertaken in preparation and outdoor works where possible have been commenced. Indoor work is hoping to commence where safe to do so in July.

Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

During Covid, the Homelessness team initially saw demand drop off as S21 eviction notices were stalled by government. However this is now picking up again and we anticipate a surge in demand once lock-down lifts and the full impact of Covid is felt on the economy. We are trying to mitigate this by encouraging landlords and tenants to contact us early if they are facing problems with rent.

To protect rough sleepers during Covid, we created the Canonsgrove rough sleeper accommodation to take rough sleepers off the streets and decant tenants from Lindley House into self-contained accommodation. We also brought 26 units forward at the Beach Hotel, Minehead. There are now 50 tenants at Canonsgrove, all who have individual support plans and receive support from a range of agencies. We are working hard with partners to find a sustainable solution to keep rough sleepers off the streets and build on the

success of this project. I attended the first of the Workshops with partner organisations and SWT officers on 19 June and a second one is planned at the end of June. It was very useful to hear about proposals and recommendations and this will be coordinated and a proposal for the future will come forward ASAP.

Lettings and Homefinder

When Covid started we stopped advertising new properties on Homefinder Somerset as only essential moves were allowed. Work continued so that tenants were ready for sign-up, to reduce delays when restrictions changed. We also facilitated direct matches into our properties for those who did meet the 'essential moves' criteria, which allowed us to minimise rent loss and free up temporary accommodation.

Restrictions have now been relaxed and we are advertising properties again and starting to enable moves for those who have been waiting for their property. We are in the process of allocating the 17 new properties at Pyrland Fields which we expect to be tenanted from mid- July.

A slowdown in demand during lockdown has also allowed the Homefinder team to successfully reduce a backlog of work. As restrictions have lifted the team have experienced a return to normal levels of new applications and an increase in phone calls. We have started running Homefinder renewals which will be a significant piece of work to ensure all applications are up to date and relevant.

Hinkley Point C - Housing Funding Strategy: We have £1.4M of developer contributions to invest in new housing initiatives. This includes proposals to support new affordable housing at Seaward Way (Minehead), provision of additional Temporary Accommodation, and investment in support services. Proposals will be considered by both Scrutiny and Executive during July

Gypsy and Travellers – Covid response: New protocols have been established on our approach to unlawful encampments, in conjunction with the countywide Transient and Nomadic People Cell. The protocol allows for reasonable delays to enforcement proceedings on sites that are deemed to be 'safe'. We are also looking to identify a temporary transit site to provide safe stopping facilities in the District.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the officers in the Housing team for their work during the Pandemic, they have gone above and beyond their roles and have shown great adaptability and care in supporting our tenants and residents during this time.