

# **Full Council Meeting – 27 July 2021**

## **Report of Councillor Fran Smith - Housing**

### **Director of Housing and Communities Introduction**

As can be seen from the contents of this report, the service has a huge amount of work to deliver in the current year to achieve the outcomes we expect for tenants and to get the service to where we want it to be. Our operating environment is certainly fast paced and constantly changing, which creates additional challenges. The volume of case work from customers is at a very high level, much of which is complex. I constantly review resource capacity with the senior team and we have recently taken steps to agree additional posts to help with key pressures and projects. However, we are also finding recruitment difficult in some areas for example, filling some of our tradesperson roles at the current time.

We are also looking to address the quality of what we do, as we are still experiencing a high number of complaints. We are supporting the team with training and process reviews to constantly try to improve our decision making and to actively try to learn from when we don't get things right - and when we do! As we continue to work mostly in a remote way, staying connected as a team and remaining co-ordinated as a service is something we have to work hard at, so I am pleased we are now able to take some small steps back to more face-to-face working practices, which I am sure will help us in many ways.

Lastly, I am massively proud of the team for the hard work that they continue to undertake and how they continue to strive to deliver the best service they can for tenants.

### **Housing Development and Regeneration Team**

The team continues to deliver new affordable homes directly by the Council or through partnerships. The team through its direct delivery, enabling and strategic work have been identifying and progressing opportunities to support the most vulnerable in the district, in relation to their housing and support needs.

### **Housing Strategy**

Somerset Homeless Reduction Board (HRB)

- A successful first meeting of this County wide strategic partnership was held in April, with a subsequent meeting in June. This partnership will meet regularly to identify how best to bring about better futures for some of the County's most vulnerable customers. This will include opportunities to introduce new commissioning arrangements for support services.
- The HRB has agreed to deliver a pilot project looking at improving support services for the residents of Canonsgrove (and other rough sleeper settings within the County). The results of this work will then be used to inform a work programme that seeks to deliver integrated commissioning between health, care and housing services.

Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Strategy

- The Executive supported a draft strategy in March, and a final version for approval will be going through Scrutiny (July), Executive (August) and Full Council (Sept).
- The strategy included the following vision: *‘Rough sleeping in Somerset West and Taunton will end by 2027. An active programme of Early Help and prevention will be established to proactively reduce the chance of homelessness and escalating need. For those requiring support, all single homeless people shall have access to a client centred service that will provide excellent coordinated support within a range of appropriate self-contained accommodation options that can flex according to changing demand’.*
- The Strategy is accompanied by a detailed delivery plan. The Housing Regeneration and Development function and the Housing Options service are working closely with partners to deliver the accommodation to support the strategy and delivery plan.

### Hinkley Point C

- We are currently working with the Development and Place Directorate to assess the impact of the workforce uplift on the local housing market. Peak construction workforce is expected to increase from 5,600 (previous assumption) to 8,500 (expected during 2022/23). Negotiations continue with EDF and Sedgemoor District Council concerning the nature of the impact, the geographical communities that will be impacted, and possible mitigation measures.

### Housing Demand Study

- The Housing Strategy team will shortly conclude its study on housing demand across SWT, including general need, specialist need and homelessness. This will be shared for discussion and it will then inform a supply / delivery strategy.

### HRA New Homes

- The contract for NTWP phase A has been signed and Engie will start on site in August after completing their site set up. The build period will be two years with some homes being ready to let within 12 months. The phase will see 47 new low carbon homes and a community facility built. The Service are progressing the details of the contract for the next phases which it is hoped will start April 2022. Work with the planning authority continues for Phases B and C.
- Community Working Groups continue to meet and the community were recently involved in a project with Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme aimed at encouraging engagement with our natural heritage. The project led to the decoration of some of the hoardings protecting sites and was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- The Council’s development of 54 zero carbon homes at Seaward Way Minehead, was recently approved by planning committee and contractors Classic Builders have been appointed. Classic Builders were the contractors who build eight council homes at Laxton Road which were completed in January. They also build the award winning zero carbon passivhaus apartments on Seaton seafront. Following a refinement of low carbon works the development is due to start on site this year.

- The zero carbon affordable housing schemes to be built on various sites in Taunton are being prepared for planning approval. The service has been working on a phosphate solution, which if approved by Natural England will support the planning applications. The service is also using the knowledge gained in designing and developing low carbon new homes to work with colleagues across the directorate on developing the Council homes retrofit strategy and delivering some early schemes.

## **Housing Enabling**

- As part of the National Rural Housing Week, the Enabling team have promoted the importance of affordable housing in helping rural communities remain vibrant and sustainable. Examples included a tour of the new affordable housing in Stoke St Gregory and promotion of the significant progress being made by the Rural Housing Enabler to facilitate affordable housing on Exmoor. There are a broad range of schemes under discussion with the Enabling team, ranging from tentative enquiries, to enquiries following physical completions. It is anticipated that circa 300 affordable homes are due to complete during 2021/22.
- The phosphates issue continues to delay schemes achieving planning permission in parts of the Council area and with ongoing viability challenges this will impact the affordable housing delivery long term forecast.
- The Annual SWT Affordable Housing Partnership Survey was issued to our ten affordable housing delivery partners as part of the team's 360 feedback and to identify opportunities to improve the current partnership. Initial responses received to date have been very positive with the majority ranking as extremely satisfied with the partnership and the Enabling service provided.

## **Housing Property Team**

A summary of all areas of activity being undertaken within the Housing Property team is provided below, but it should be noted that we are generally still in the process of bringing back services to pre-COVID lockdown period levels. That said, a positive direction of travel is being maintained. Specific updates on each of these work areas are as follows:

### **Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- Both emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs continue to be undertaken, although the hold placed on non-emergency internal responsive repairs during the lockdown period continues to lead to a backlog of these works. All emergency jobs are being delivered within our defined timescale (24 hours from logging), and the ongoing non-emergency backlog is being resolved by recruitment of additional resources for the in-house trade team. We are also using an external contractor (MD Group). We are continuing to carefully monitor and manage progress in this area and keep residents informed in relation to their repair requests.
- Void repairs are also being undertaken, but the high level of properties being received in poor condition (leading to 'major' void repair works being required), is causing difficulty as is the recruitment of skilled tradespersons. Delays in licensed asbestos removals (due to specialist contractors furloughing their staff)

is also presenting a challenge in returning the properties back to our Lettings team promptly. We are, however, continuing to take appropriate management action on these issues and seek to continue the positive overall trend in performance.

### **Property Safety Compliance**

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken, 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. Positive progress is being made to all areas, and they are being carefully monitored with weekly review meetings in place.

### **Capital Programmes**

- All capital programme works previously placed on hold during the Covid lockdown periods are now being planned for delivery.
- Many of the capital works programmes planned to be undertaken during 2020/21 were not completed. The capital programmes to be delivered in 2021/22 will now seek to incorporate these, although it should be noted that delivering this volume of works will be very challenging. As an indication of this challenge, the 2021/22 capital programme, combined with slippage from the 2020/21 programme, will total over £14m. We are recruiting additional capital programme staff resource to assist with delivery of these programmes. Capital work programmes currently being mobilised include:
  - ASHP's
  - Heating improvements
  - External doors
  - Fascias and soffits
  - Windows
  - Fire safety works
  - Insulation
- A substantial procurement exercise is in progress for a range of new capital contracts, and an additional Interim Procurement Case Manager has been recruited specifically to assist in delivery of this work for the Housing Capital Programme.

### **Asset Management**

- Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments are being undertaken, including use of additional external resources to accelerate these programmes to improve data in these areas. Capital work programme planning (for both this financial year and forward plans) is being undertaken, together with development of our energy efficiency / affordable warmth programmes of work.
- The implementation of the Open Assets module of our Capita software system project is continuing. We are currently reviewing the configuration of the underlying tables, undertaking 'gap analysis' and populating new validated data,

ongoing data cleansing, and undertaking User Acceptance Testing (UAT) to both the system functionality and reporting suite. We anticipate this module going live by August 2021.

## **Housing and Communities Team**

### **Rough Sleeper Delivery Plan**

- The MHCLG have confirmed that we are able to continue to deliver all existing rough sleeper initiatives. In addition, they have agreed to fund a floating support service to support people to move into independent accommodation who are currently living at Lindley House and Canonsgrove.
- We have 8 rough sleepers across the district, one in Minehead and seven in Taunton. The team are engaged with all these individuals and working towards securing appropriate accommodation.
- Gascony House in Minehead welcomed its first tenants in May. Gascony House offers 18 units of supported self-contained and cluster units. This was secured using Next Steps funding from the MHCLG. We were able to move across clients previously placed at The Beach Hotel, allowing The Beach to return to commercial use.
- The MHCLG are due to visit mid-July to observe the work of the outreach teams and to visit Gascony House, Canonsgrove and Lindley House.

### **Housing Options**

- Housing Options has 358 live homeless applications currently with full time Officers carrying an average of 30 cases each.
- We have experienced an increased number of 'duty to refer' cases from other statutory services, in particular hospital discharges and prison releases. We have seen an average of 15 a month, all of which are single applicants.

### **Recruitment**

- We have filled the following vacancies in our Rough Sleeper Team, meaning this team is now fully staffed:
  - 2 x Inreach/Outreach Officers (fixed term until 30/03/22).
  - 2x Rough Sleeper Tenancy Sustainment Officers (fixed term until 30/03/22).
  - 1x NFNO/RSI House Officer (fixed term until 30/03/22).
- We have also recruited the following positions in Housing Options:
  - 1 x G Grade Senior Case Manager (currently covered through agency).
  - 1 x F Grade Case Manager (Private Rented sector).
  - 1 x F Grade Case Manager (Tenancy Sustainment).
  - 1 x H Grade Case Management Lead (currently covered by agency allowing us to permanently recruit).
  - 3 x F Case Manager Housing Options (currently temporary staff whilst we go to permanent recruitment).

- 1 x D Grade Homefinder Officer (temporary cover for 3 months).
- 1 x D Grade Finance Officer (temporary position whilst we go to permanent recruitment).

## **Training Delivery Programme**

- We have commissioned some lone worker training so that we can start carrying out home visits. These are vital to allow us opportunities to prevent homelessness by being able to negotiate with families or landlords, but also to allow us to understand a customer's situation better and to complete a more accurate assessment.
- We have also commissioned training from Relate. This will be delivered over two days and will cover negotiation and mediation as well as professional boundaries and self-care for staff.

## **Private Rented Sector**

- We continue to roll out our new incentives package to targeted letting agents, however this is a very challenging market currently and competition for properties is high. That said, we have been able to secure properties for six of our customers.
- In conjunction with the sustainment team, we are pro-actively engaging with letting agents and landlords so that we are put in touch with any tenants who are struggling in their tenancies or who have been served notice. This will enable us to look to engage support and preventative interventions that mean we can sustain these tenancies and also build trust and confidence in our service with letting agents and landlords.
- We are engaging with landlords of HMO's to encourage them to come to us with any vacancies they may have.
- We are reviewing our incentives scheme and building on this with a view to promote this at a landlords' forum.

## **B&B Overview**

- We currently have 29 single placements and 3 families in B&B accommodation.
- We have seen an increase in the presentation of families and expect this to rise with the phased changes in evictions.
- We have seen an increase in presentations from those fleeing domestic abuse.
- The cost and availability of B&B provision has increased due to people holidaying at home.

## **Homefinder**

- Homefinder has reduced its backlog to around four weeks which is what we set as our initial target. This has been extremely challenging as we have experienced a high volume of documents for processing and calls into the service.
- We have taken on another temporary member of staff who has been focused on the pieces of work required to be completed before the data is migrated to the new system. We also have another temporary member of staff joining the team in

mid July, who will be helping to reduce the backlog as well as providing extra capacity in the team to allow for testing and training of the new system.

- The new system (Locata) is set to “go live” with the new look Homefinder Somerset on 2 August. This is a challenging date as we are still testing and refining some elements of this, but the Partnership is working hard to meet this date for the first properties to be advertised.

### **Extra Care Housing**

- Way Ahead Care (commissioned by Somerset County Council) staff and all SWT staff continue to work in COVID-safe ways, to minimise risks.
- All visitors are asked to follow government guidance and use PPE, as appropriate.
- The Outreach Clinic run by District Nursing has continued to run, which allows vulnerable patients access to health care support, without the need to enter the hospital.
- Way Ahead Care are running the ‘assisted dining’ for tenants, Mon – Fri (tenants are helped to the communal lounge for a meal they purchase). PPE is used and tenants sit on separate tables, to minimise risks.
- Monthly referrals meetings and lettings are still being undertaken, with Adult Social Care and other housing association partners.
- SWT staff continue to complete the weekly on-site Health and Safety checks.
- Gardening and maintenance work has continued to take place.
- SWT staff continue to meet tenants within the communal areas, or visit them in their home where essential, using PPE.

### **Sheltered Housing**

- The Sheltered Housing team continue to make welfare calls to tenants, updating the annual reviews.
- Staff have been undertaking home visits where necessary; for example, for tenants who have partial hearing, learning disabilities or where using the telephone presents an additional challenge.
- Aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, installation of lifelines, manage tenancies ending and responding to neighbour disputes is all taking place, to maintain business as usual.
- Staff continue to complete regular estates checks, involving tenants and local Councillors.
- Many sheltered tenants have had their vaccinations. The changing date for the relaxation of Government COVID rules and the newer strains of the virus are concerning for some tenants, leaving them feeling anxious about getting back out and about. Staff are supporting tenants to have phased returns to build their confidence, involving family and friends for support.
- During all visits, staff wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance, which has been regularly updated and reviewed.
- The Sheltered Housing team continue to run the Deane Helpline rota, to follow up on concerns arising from calls made to sheltered tenants by the helpline.

- Gardening works have been able to continue to take place and emergency repairs have also been completed.
- Plans for the meeting halls to begin to re-open in mid-June have been moved to September 2021, following recent changes in COVID transmissions and guidance. However, staff are continuing to prepare for the re-openings, including planning re-decoration of some venues and purchasing new furniture, where needed. Small groups of tenants are supporting this process and the decision making.
- A group of tenants at Taunfield Close are working with staff to create a planting area within the scheme, for growing some fruit and veg.
- Staff are attending a variety of Housing Qualities Network training, to develop their skills and knowledge regarding matters such as tenancy management, ASB, hoarding etc.
- Staff are meeting with EROSH to begin establishing plans to develop an accredited service and standard within our sheltered and extra care housing.

## Lettings

- The Home Move Plus project continues to develop well, with plenty of referrals for Housing Officers.
- Paul Hadley the Homeless Plus Officer is still on course to reach his target of 100 bedspaces by the project end date of May 2022.
- The recent housing newsletter article produced positive responses. An article in the next housing newsletter will focus on our more mature service users (the 60+ age group) to consider contacting the Homeless Plus officer.
- Work continues on “Open Housing” to replace the software system Academy. This and the new Home finder Somerset software “Locata” will impact the Lettings team in the transition to these new databases.
- The Lettings team are looking to work in a more normal pre-COVID way, taking a more non-pandemic approach to work. We have reinstated the weekly voids meetings where we work closely with the Voids team to plan works and reduce turnaround times. These are much more fruitful discussions resulting in better outcomes for all.
- Pre-void inspections have been reinstated, which in turn will help in the marketing and advertising of SWT properties on the Homefinder Somerset website.
- Since the last report in May, we have relet 83 properties in a six-week period. Of those tenants that have responded we are averaging a year-to-date average of 97.5% satisfaction rate of the standard of the property let to them.

## Income

- The Rent Recovery Team now have a new target for 21/22, this year’s target is £461k, the arrears on 16/06/21 are £565,7270.87 with 1501 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.
- We have recruited an agency member of staff who started in June, to cover a maternity leave position.



- The Open Housing Project has had an impact on the capacity of the team and will continue to do so. Therefore, it has been agreed that we can increase our team capacity with an agency member of staff for 6 months. This will relieve the pressure on the current members of staff that are involved with the project.
- We developed a backlog of garage lets during COVID and the lockdowns. We are now working through these to clear the backlog and let the vacant garages.
- The Debt and Benefit Officers continue to support all our tenants to maximize their income. They are currently exploring ways to help our new tenants, right at the start of the tenancy to stop them falling into arrears and falling behind on other bills such as Council Tax.

### **Tenancy/Estates and ASB Teams**

- The team have gone through significant pressure over the last two months with sickness and other absences. This has created real pressures for the team.
- As a department generally we are experiencing high demands for service from our customers. This is not unusual in the sector, as most housing providers have recently experienced similar high demands.
- It is pleasing that the team are now back to working at full strength; and are working hard to catch up on the backlog of work.
- We have successfully recruited some additional staff to help us through this period and to support the team during the Open Housing Project. The posts are as follows:
  - 1 x Senior Housing Case Manager – to help support both teams.
  - 1 x ASB Officer – for a four month period
  - 1 x Estates/Tenancy Case Managers – for a 4/6 months
  - 1 x Estates/Tenancy Case Manager – 12 months to support the team during Open Housing Project
- Once these staff are up and running we are hopeful that the team will get back up to speed and we can again focus on their process workflows in preparation for Open Housing. We are looking to ensure that for each task that we have that there is a workflow which will include guidance notes and processes, along with standardised letters. This will ensure that all our customers receive the same high standard of service across the whole area.
- We are also looking to roll out Service Standards for both teams and hope this will be able to deliver by late Summer, which we hope will help to reduce the number of complaints that are currently coming into the service.

### **ASB Team**

- We have currently just over 80 active open cases; with a small proportion of these being high level ASB. The team are currently preparing witness statements and are having ongoing discussions with our legal team.
- The temp ASB Officer has a Police background and will be supporting the team in getting these witness statements completed.
- The team are also recognising that several of the ASB Cases involve repeat offenders and we will be looking to take swift action to try to get these

perpetrators to amend their behaviour. Working closely with them in the past as not had the outcome we would have wanted, so we will possibly be looking to serve them with a Notice of Seeking Possession as a deterrent for any future bad behaviour. A Notice of Seeking Possession is the first step towards taking legal action against a perpetrator; this notice is valid for 12 months; and at any point during this 12-month period SW&T could decide to take Court action if their behaviour continues to cause nuisance and annoyance to the community.

- The outcome we want is to not evict but is to ensure that we get a long-term change in their behaviour. However, if we must evict then we will take that position.
- The team have also now served their first Community Protection Warning (CPW) as we have delegated powers to do so. This notice has been served on a person living in one of our properties but is not the tenant. We are now closely monitoring whether this has been successful. We will be able to provide further feedback moving forward. If the CPW is breached then we will be serving a Community Protection Notice (CPN).

### **Estates/Tenancy Team**

- The team have now held six skip events across the borough which have been successful and well used. We are planning to hold a further event in the Halcon area as two of the largest skips were completely filled. We have included a couple of photographs of our successful skip days at the bottom of this section.
- We have also worked closely with Link Power (Volunteer group) and they have worked extremely hard and supported us in these events.
- As these events have been successful, we will be planning more.
- Block and estate inspections are also continuing and staff are stating that blocks are now looking good and most continuing to remain clear. We are now working closely with our Compliance team as legislation is now allowing for internal balconies to be checked to ensure that they are not cluttered and to not present as a fire hazard. Again, we will be able to report on this further as and when we establish a process for moving this forward.



*Our very successful skip days*

## Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- As the Country continues to ease out of lockdown, Somerset Independence Plus (SIP) is witnessing a steep rise in referrals from Occupational Therapists as they work towards clearing their backlog of assessments due to not being able to make face to face contact with clients. Somerset County Council staff are finding clients with increased mobility issues and poor health due to isolation, lack of exercise and social contact. In the last two months, SIP received 90 referrals in the Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton area. We are currently assessing our staff resources and prioritising cases. There is also an emphasis on managing the backlog as quickly as possible as the NHS, County Council and SIP prepare for the demand brought on by tackling the surge in cases for people needing operations which is a Government priority. The Hospital Resettlement post is working hard to prevent bed blocking, with a current caseload of 62 cases. Embedded in Musgrove Hospital, the post has been extremely busy in finding housing solutions for patients so they can go back to a safe home. There will be some relief for the post as there is currently an advert out for a second post.
- Besides the immediate situation with ambulant and no ambulant care, the service is also being inundated with referrals from health professionals such as mental health and social workers, as well Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue and Community Village Agents, Health Connectors and GP's for clients who have reached crises point with hoarding and houses in a poor state of repair. There are two Independent Living Officers and they have received over 200 referrals in the last year up 25% on the previous year. In the last two months, 40 referrals of which it is a 50/50 split between Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton. Many are presenting themselves due to a year in isolation due to lockdown.
- There is a great deal of prevention work taking place, working with the Social Housing Providers to improve the DDA compliancy of the stock as part of their refurbishment programmes. SIP has also designed off the shelf plans for developers to use as part of designing in facilities and easy access for households with disabilities in affordable housing. SIP has been working with Homes in Sedgemoor to redesign and configure a number of sheltered units investing heavily in assistive technology, a spin off from SIP's involvement with the County Council in the assistive technology pilot. SIP is working with contractors to ease the pressures of material shortages and price increases due to unprecedented demand.
- Finally, SIP has been delivering on the retrofit programme for energy measures in social housing, owner occupied and privately rented properties. Having been successful with bids for LADS 1A and 1B (£518k plus £809k respectively), Warm Homes Fund £1.3 million and now working with West Of England Combined Authority and the SW Energy Hub to deliver £200 million, to install energy measures. This ranges from air source heat pumps through to AWI insulation and external wall insulation. To date SIP working with SW&T Social Housing officers, SHAL, Homes in Sedgemoor and the CSE have surveyed all 75 properties in the LADS 1A and now surveying for LADS 1B. The works have tight turnarounds in terms of deadlines from award of the bid to completion with the job not made easy by subsequent lockdowns preventing surveys. LADS 1A has to be completed by the end of August and LADS 1B by the end of September.

The surveyed work is now progressing to installations. The Warm Homes Fund has seen significant assistance in energy advice with over 3,000 people given free energy advice in the last year with in excess of £665,319 in benefits delivered to households such as fuel bill savings, take up in benefits etc. Of the 3,000 households, 2,634 were in fuel poverty. Over a quarter of the people assisted were in the Somerset West and Taunton area. Besides advice the Warm Homes Fund will also assist with 175 air source heat pump and first time gas installations (the latter being a very small percentage and applied in properties where there is no other solution) to Somerset West and Taunton managed Council stock.

## **Housing Performance Team**

Since our last report we have been progressing the following key pieces of work:

- We have started work on the STAR action plan, addressing the “communication” theme e.g. sourcing customer service refresher training and designing the mystery shopper programme for volunteers.
- Producing an annual report to tenants to be published over the summer.
- Working to implement the new housing software (Open Housing). This continues with many groups set up to implement the various modules.
- Held the first Tenants’ Strategic Group meeting (virtually) with the newly appointed group.
- Produced a training plan for the Tenants’ Strategic Group including access to TPAS training (TPAS are a tenant engagement organisation).
- Supported our managers to consult our Tenants’ Strategic Group on policy documents.
- Held our Tenants’ Action Group meeting to consider sub-groups and forward business.
- Supported the responses to complaints within the 10-working day deadline.
- Started to review how we can improve our complaints process. There is a corporate review being undertaken in the next few weeks.
- Continued our development of website forms and pages, which we will report upon during this meeting.
- Continue work on our in-depth assessment against the consumer standards part of the white paper.
- Produced summer newsletter content to tenants and leaseholders.
- Continued to publish a two weekly newsletter to staff to share information across the service.
- Internally we continue to ensure that regular governance meetings are held to oversee and manage the activities of the housing directorate e.g., programme management, finance, performance and risk meetings.