

Full Council Meeting – 28 March 2023

Portfolio Holder Report for Housing – Cllr Fran Smith.

Annual Report.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team Housing Development and Regeneration Team

HRA New Homes, Housing Strategy and Housing Enabling

- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. Members approved the Strategy and Delivery Plan in December. The Strategy seeks to place tenants at the heart of zero carbon retrofit and this has commenced with tenants influencing the strategy. SWT has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with E-ON which pledges £20m of energy company obligation for SWTs ECO4 Neighbourhood Fuel Efficiency Project. This fund will see some of the worst energy performing council homes and some private home, where owners qualify, improved by two EPC bands which will see a significant reduction in fuel usage to keep their homes warm.
- SWT has been awarded SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund) Wave 1 funds and has made a substantial bid for Wave 2 funds. SWT will be informed if it has been successful in being awarded wave two funding in February. The award of the fund will be known in March.
- SWT has completed the first two new build SWT low carbon homes at North Taunton. These dwellings are the first of 49 low carbon homes delivered in the next 6 months at North Taunton (NTWP). The council is reprocurring a contractor for phase B&C due to the main contractor pulling out of new contracts in the South West.
- A consultation event at Rainbow Way, Minehead was held in January. The scheme is progressing well with brick work, using large porotherm blocks, allowing a speedy build to first floor level. The 54 units at Rainbow Way off Seaward Way will provide a variety of property types and be zero carbon.
- Unfortunately, inflation and market conditions continue to create challenges for building and retrofitting homes. We recognise that the increased cost of building homes is no longer a risk but a reality and the HRA is addressing these challenges as it reviews its 30-year business plan.
- Our Enabling Development team works with housing partners and our own development teams and through this we see an increasing challenge in meeting affordable housing need in the district and specialist accommodation.
- Despite the volatility of the housing market the district has seen a higher-than-average number of affordable homes 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 council was awarded £750k through the government Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme to accelerate the new provision round three including the purchase of six homes and refurbishment of six others for the

Housing First model of accommodation. Eight of the twelve units have been completed and let.

- The service continues to deliver the Hinkley Point C Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work. This programme is providing new bed spaces in the district and support to vulnerable customers affected by the change in the housing market because of the uplift of workforce at HPC. The service has received circa £440k to start new projects and extend the delivery of some existing projects up to April 2025.
- The Housing Strategy Team continue to work hard with partners to improve the services for vulnerable adults. The team are helping influence the integrated care system through the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Integrated Care Partnership. Working with Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) the team are identifying better ways for health, care and housing services to work together for the benefit of customers.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken, largely within our defined timescales.

- We are continuing to monitor performance levels for responsive repair requests (now being taken by a cohort of specialist repair call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team) and have now introduced an 'overflow' of calls process to repairs schedulers when available. Nevertheless, this remains an area of challenge to ensure calls are answered within the corporate SLA.
- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP). However, progress to improving ICT systems (e.g. job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.) and further review of available reporting functionality is still being delayed by a corporate 'change freeze' to existing IT systems prior to LGR Vesting Day on 1st April 2023.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard and have commenced a new procurement exercise for external contractor support.
- We have completed an update on the Materials Supplies Audit previously undertaken, including implementing an updated imprest van stock.
- We are progressing with implementation of an improved materials supply chain process, although again this has been affected by the current corporate 'change freeze' to existing IT systems.

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, lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works, and radon monitoring.

- We have recently procured an independent specialist consultant (Savills) to undertake an overall desktop Property Safety Compliance Audit. This will act as a key opportunity to measure our progress as we approach Vesting Day into Somerset Council. They have indicated we have effective systems in place and, following their undertaking a detailed review of our data sources, have confirmed they have found no areas of concern relating to our compliance records. However, their audit has reaffirmed our need to ensure we continue to focus on Electrical Inspections (Electrical Inspection Condition Reports – EICRs) and Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) servicing. We are undertaking a range of activities to achieve this as a key priority.
- We are using our new iAuditor software to undertake compliance data collection for emergency lighting visual inspections, fire door inspection, fire safety housekeeping 'sterile communal area' checks (flat block inspections), water risk assessments in dwellings and fire risk assessments.
- We have undertaken a review and update of our compliance policies and procedures.
- Additional procurement has taken place to deliver compliance programmes, including emergency exit release switches to door entry systems on communal doors, fire alarm systems to extra-care schemes, and an extension to the third-party independent audit process for certification of gas systems and electrical inspections.
- We have produced a Building and Resident Health and Safety Strategy (as required by the new Building Safety Act).
- Weekly compliance meetings continue to carefully monitor and manage all of these safety critical areas, and an update report has recently been presented to the Audit Committee.

Capital Programmes

- A range of capital work programmes continues on-site; including kitchen and bathroom replacements, fire safety works (replacement fire doors, fire safety flooring and emergency lighting), roofing, replacement gutters and fascias, and door entry systems. As previously noted however, available contractor resource remains a challenge and accordingly some programmes will not be completed by the end of this financial year – the balance of any outstanding works will be completed during the 2023/24 financial year.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating our Retrofit aspiration.

Asset Management

- The service has identified pathways to Zero Carbon for 12 of the Council's 14 main archetypes. The service is working to integrate low carbon retrofit investment with the decent homes and capital investment programme

- New energy surveys are complementing programmes of EPC, Stock Condition and validation surveys. This date will continue to enrich the services knowledge of its stock.
- Post 'go-live' work on the Open Assets module of our Capita software system is now underway, following the Open Housing implementation.
- The service is working with colleagues to refine the start to finish capital investment process from business planning through to delivery to updating data following investment. This work has particular focus on the tenant's journey.

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- Bi-monthly estates and compliance checks continue, and we are working with colleagues to ensure that bin stores and any scooter parking is located in the safest locations possible. Most communal hallways are clear when inspected, but staff regularly remind some tenants to remove their personal items/arrange for items to be removed.
- The team continues to have several very complex and time intensive cases running including cases related to County Lines, self-neglect, hoarding and significant mental health where we are working hard to support the tenant. Unfortunately, some of our tenants with complex needs are not easily persuaded to engage with the appropriate support and services and this can take some 'hand holding' by our staff to introduce and persuade them to engage with these services.
- The team are liaising well with the mental health teams that are supporting tenants who have had severe issues and need to be accommodated within their wards due to significant mental illness. We meet with them to support them to return home, when and where appropriate and support them to end their tenancy where they will be moving to a more specialist provision. This engagement and support is often challenging and upsetting both for the tenants and staff.
- We have completed the paperwork for a 'Domestic Homicide Review', which will begin in the next few weeks, regarding one of our tenants who died.
- We regularly have deaths where there are no known next of kin, which can make ending the tenancy challenging and time-consuming. We have to ensure that tenants rights and property are protected until the necessary processes are in place for us to take back possession of the property. Our officers make enquiries with tenants during their annual review about next of kin to ensure this information is up to date for when it is required.
- We continue focussing on compliance work and are arranging for all the communal lofts to be emptied and secured/kept empty.
- We are liaising with Deane Helpline to be prepared for digital switchover in 2025 to ensure that all tenants have working equipment after this date.
- The team have been referring tenants who have damp and mould to have the areas treated and to provide advice and support.
- Business as usual continues day-to-day; sign ups, leaving wells, completing annual reviews, estates and block checks, ad-hoc calls and emergencies, referrals to specialist help and support, Deane Help Line Rota etc. The team has struggled with capacity in the past few weeks due to some sickness

Lettings

- Customer satisfaction remains very high with both the Lettable standard of the property and the process of lettings the properties. The satisfaction surveys via QR did not gain much traction the uptake was low. A manual system is now back in operation which affords a further opportunity to engage with tenants and gain valuable feedback.
- A further 34 properties have been let since the date of the last report.
- Average turnaround times per void is currently 37 days.
- Relet for a Minor void is 30 days against a target of 31 days.
- Relet for a Major void is 56 days against a target of 44 days.
- Since October 2022 478 properties have been let through HFS of which 153 were SWT properties accounting for 32%
- SWT have 3,815 applicants registered on HFS.
- An SWT 2-bed house will attract an average of 205 bids.
- HMP project remains ahead of target.

Income

- Due to staff absence within the Debt and Benefit service, we are running at half capacity for at least 6 weeks. We will therefore be prioritising those tenants who are already in rent arrears and those new tenants who need support at the start of the tenancy to prevent them falling into arrears. We will then be prioritising other work in accordance to need and making referrals to CA and other support agencies, as necessary.
- The rent recovery officers continue to support tenants to reduce their rent arrears in accordance with the Lean Recovery process.
- We are working with a number of tenants who have very complex needs, these cases can be very time intensive.
- The team will continue to sign post to any grant funding which may be available for tenants to help with their rent arrears and also to help with the cost of living.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- The Estates Team have now introduced a new Tenants Handbook. We are really pleased with the new handbook and hope that it will be of interest and useful to all our new tenants. We are also preparing a new version in preparation for vesting day.
- We are pleased that we have also been able to recruit a temporary Tenancy/Estates Case Manager, so we are back to having a full team. We will be looking to recruit for a permanent member of staff in April.
- We are now reporting that during the last few weeks we have experienced some serious anti-social behaviour. Resulting in two tenants being remanded in custody and another being sectioned. These extreme cases are

becoming more frequent; as well as the concern for our other customers this is impacting on our staff and how they go about conducting the day-to-day work.

- We have also had to prepare two reviews from the Domestic Homicide safeguarding team.

Housing Options

The Housing Options service remains busy with an average of 120 approaches from customers who need housing advice or at risk of losing their accommodation each month. The main cause of homelessness in the district remains family evictions but there is some evidence that no-fault evictions from the private rented sector is increasing

- Whilst the main cause of homelessness remains eviction by family; is anticipated that this will increase as families struggle with the costs of accommodating extended families during the current cost of living crisis
- The high turnover of staff has continued this quarter; partly attributed to uncertainty surrounding LGR and to a renewed focus on performance management. Long standing vacancies are proving difficult to fill; this is reflected across the other districts and not specific to SWT. In February, four temporary staff and two permanent staff left the team resulting in significant capacity issues. As a result, the ability to undertake proactive, preventative work, has been limited

Temporary accommodation

The recent focus on improving pathways into and out of temporary accommodation continues but has been limited by capacity due to staff turnover.

- The number of households in temporary accommodation decreased by circa 25% from April 2022, this is due to the continual focus on improving performance and ensuring a through flow of customers in temporary accommodation.
- The biggest challenge in this service area moving forwards will be in retaining a positive relationship with commercial B&B providers who, historically, have implemented a policy of not accepting booking from the current County Council. This has been highlighted as a risk post 1 April 2023 and is on the radar of the Housing 2 workstream.

Homefinder Somerset

On average, 300 new households apply to join Homefinder Somerset in the Somerset West and Taunton area each month. This is anticipated to continue to rise as a result of the current cost of living crisis and a lack of affordable properties in the Private Rented Sector (less than 5% are available at Local Housing Allowance rates or below).

- The team continue to support customers to bid on appropriate properties, this work continues to provide positive outcomes and is closely linked to ensuring that customers move on efficiently from temporary accommodation.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- SIP have successfully recruited a new Senior Technical Officer who started with the grant team on the 27th March 2023. Their work will mainly focus on disabled adaptations.
- SIP have successfully recruited a new Community Retrofit Project Officer. Their primary role to project manage the £12 million retrofit programme through the Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) schemes from the Department for Energy.
- SIP will have successfully retrofitted 72 homes as part of the HUGS 1 scheme spending £1 million providing insulation and heating measures. Some of the measures include external wall insulation, new windows and doors, loft insulation and air source heat pumps.
- SIP have secured £8 million in HUGS 2 funding from the Department for Energy for retrofitting insulation and heating measures. The scheme will assist 400 households over a five-year period.
- The Independent Living Officers who assist clients with acute mental health issues to reduce hoarding and undertake home safety checks have completed over 800 Ukrainian sponsor visits, the purpose to ensure that the home is safe for the Ukrainian refugees to move to. The team have also eliminated their backlog of hoarding and home safety checks which occurred when the team were managing the massive influx of Ukrainian home safety checks. The backlog was over 150 cases.
- SIP have received over 7,500 enquires this year, a record 1/3 again on last year.
- SIP as the lead for private sector renewal as part of the LGR preparations has drafted a new Private Sector Renewal Policy for the new Somerset Council which will be going to the Somerset Council Executive on the 15th March 2023 for approval. The policy sets out the grant provisions to assist disabled, vulnerable and low-income households with access to grants for disabled adaptations, essential repairs, insulation and heating upgrades.
- SIP will be in the Communities Directorate in the new Council under the Service Director for Housing

Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team (Shari Hallett)

- It has been and continues to be an incredibly busy time for the team working on our governance, risk, tenant engagement, complaints and preparing for TSM surveys becoming mandatory in April 2023.
- Our tenant engagement work continues with our core groups namely Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. We also started the joint tenant steering group with Homes in Sedgemoor, specifically to engage tenants on LGR. Alongside these core groups sub groups for low carbon, voids, mystery shopper, damp and mould have also taken place.

- During the year a number of our engaged tenants have attended the TPAS (tenant participation) conference to network, attended training, as well as visiting our newly built properties. They have also reviewed our tenant portal and provided feedback for us to use developing this in future.
- We have continued to communicate with our tenants through four printed and posted newsletters. From April we are researching how to reduce the postage costs for those tenants with electronic and web access.
- Although we will remain a separate legal entity to Homes in Sedgemoor, we are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- We continue to strive for improvement in our complaint handling and have been able to maintain an average of 83% of stage 1 complaint investigations completed and responded to within standard since the beginning of October 2022. The Housing Ombudsman has not investigated any complaint made against us in this financial year to date, although they have advised landlords that they are currently around six months behind in their own workloads and investigations.
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. We are now finalising the texting (SMS) option, the tenant portal which we hope to be live in a few months time subject to any ICT freeze or restrictions imposed as a result of moving over ICT platforms to the new council. The portal will give tenants direct access to rent balances, tenancy and personal details, repair history, view communication, view housing officers. It will also give links to make payments and raise repairs and other communications.
- This year we concluded the policy review work with the HQN (Housing Quality Network) and consulted with our Tenant Strategic Group as policies were created.
- We commissioned and undertook a Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) two pilot surveys in readiness for the mandatory survey in April 2023. The results are a key source of information and steer for our focus.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the officers and members of staff at SWT who have helped shape and deliver the work that has taken place over the lifetime of this council and who worked for the district previously within Housing.

I am very proud of the achievements whilst being the Portfolio Holder for Housing since 2019, I would like to highlight the very difficult time working through the pandemic and how our amazing staff went above and beyond to continue to provide the service for our tenants and residents as well as the work carried out by our Homelessness team in relation to Canonsgrove.

For the future, I hope the completion of the housing development that we started at SWT will leave a legacy of new homes for local residents and that Somerset Council will continue with development of much needed more homes for the wider area of Somerset, whilst also maintaining and managing our existing ones.

