

Report by Councillor Pete West, Portfolio Holder for Housing

This is, perhaps, my fourth annual report and, at least from the landlord side of my role, does feel to have been a year of continued progress and I will concentrate on that prior to addressing the private sector role.

With the appointment of the new Tenancy Services Manager, the Director has now filled the senior positions within the tenancy management side although there is still a longstanding vacancy in Housing Development.

There have been several achievements of note during the year:

- The refurbishment of Shuttleworth House at a cost of £3.4m was accomplished on time and budget – this will give the tenants much improved heating efficiency. There are still some minor heating figures to be collated and submitted by Kier to achieve our full ECO funding.
- The completion of the renovation at St Botolphs Court is finished except for the reconfiguration of the previous warden's accommodation to give 2 extra flats and some external work. This seems to have been well received by the residents.
- The latest phase of our own building programme was completed with the 20 bungalows on the Birchwood being ready in the early months of 2016.
- A development agreement with Waterloo Housing Group was approved that will bring 155 new affordable properties into the City, of which we will get 84 at the equivalent of nearly £2.5m in grant.
- We have started a programme to fit overbath showers into all our properties – unless a level access shower has been recommended by an Occupational Therapist - and this will continue at pace during the coming years.
- We have committed to a major programme of external environmental improvements around our estates – this is the first such planned works for many years.
- Real progress was made with our IT issues during the year – the Servitor system was made to work – this may not seem to be important but it is the basis of much of our repairs performance data. The customer appointments portion of the repairs system also went live without any hitches.

There are still challenges we face.

Not least is the uncertainty likely to be caused by the full implementation of Universal Credit, the reduction in the Benefit Cap and the sum we may have to pay to cover right to buy provision for Housing Authorities. Thank goodness the Government saw sense and dropped the Pay to Stay proposals.

We have made a good start but have further work to do to implement our 3 pronged new build strategy (building within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), co-operation with other Housing Authority providers and building outside the HRA) for increasing the affordable housing within the City.

We must continue to get ourselves in the best possible state of readiness for re-assessment of our Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) services in the spring.

The assessment of the options for De Wint Court will be available April / May '17 and we must then make some decisions. The announcement on 5th January that our application for £3.2m assistance from Homes and Communities to develop an Extra Care Housing Unit is great news.

Turning to the specific performance issues – for tenancy services there are no shortage of indicators but I will concentrate on the more important ones – rents, voids and repairs – before looking at others. All figures are taken as at end of November.

On rents we set ourselves a very challenging target of 2.25% for current tenant arrears. At the end of November the figure stood at 2.86% having reduced by nearly £30k in the previous 4 week period. The figure at the end of December (traditionally the lowest point after two rent free weeks) stood at 2.15%. It will be a challenge to achieve the year-end target but we must not forget where we were just two years ago when arrears were over 4%. Our intention has never been to drive arrears to the lowest possible level but always to give our tenants every opportunity to cover their rent.

On void turn-around times the report is much rosier. The year to date figure was 23 days for all dwellings including major works against our target of 25 days. In November there were 33 relets and the monthly performance was 18.7 days. If we exclude major works the year to date figure was 19 days. These are very good figures and congratulations should go to all concerned. This performance improvement represents a saving of around £100k a year from where we two years ago.

For repairs it is once again a very positive picture. Only 2 emergency repairs have failed to meet the 24 hour target this year and that leaves 99.95% within deadline – in November there were 621 such repairs. For all reactive repairs the year to date figure was 97% within deadline against a target of 95% (with 3024 repairs in November) and the average time for such repairs was 5.22 days. The percentage repairs completed right first time was running at 83.55% just short of our target of 85% - this applies to Housing Repairs Service only.

Turning to other matters and starting with homelessness.

The total number of homelessness applications received so far this year is 153 compared to 142 at the same time last year. Of those applications received 66% have been accepted for rehousing compared to 56% at this time in '15/16. We continue to use Bed and Breakfast as a last resort and to date we have placed 42 applicants in such accommodation with the length of stay being reduced from 3.4 weeks to 3.3 weeks at present. The number of applicants in other temporary accommodation remained fairly constant at around 18 to 20 at any one time however the length of stay has increased to 11 weeks at present against 7 weeks last year.

There are currently 1774 applicants on the Housing Register, compared to 2762 at this time last year. Over the past year we have contacted every applicant on the anniversary of their application and this review has substantially reduced the numbers.

The number of non-decent homes, excluding refusals, stood at 20 in November, which is 0.24% of our stock and will reduce further as the works are completed during the remainder of the year.

ASB figures show some solid performance with some 46 cases being closed during the month with a resolution rate of 97.8% - this is above target – but the yearly rate is 84% and below the target. The number of days to resolve cases is running at 59.5 days, well within yearly target despite a bad month in October and is some 34 days better than last year.

Turning to the private sector, the achievements are much less tangible and certainly the performance indicators are not of the same level. This, however, does not make the work any less valuable.

During the past year much work has been carried out with Planning colleagues to understand the actual position and then devise a policy under the Article 4 Directive to control the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) within a location. This went live in April '16 and we are now seeing the implications with previously unknown HMOs coming forward for planning permission. We will, perhaps, only know the robustness of our policy when there are challenges.

Numbers for HMO licences were 59 applications during '15/16 and 41 issued. At March '16 there were 238 licenced HMOs with 63 more applications in process. However since Article 4 has come into force there was initially a 70% increase in HMO licence applications compared with the same period last year.

There are suggestions that the Government may remove the qualifying requirements for licencing thus making all HMOs licensable, this would indeed extend our workload considerably with an estimated 1500 additional properties that would require licencing. We expect to hear later this year on the result of the consultation.

Another area of work was the introduction of the Landlord Accreditation Scheme. This is an overarching scheme which draws together other schemes and promotes them under a common badging – each individual scheme must be committed to the principle of being a good landlord. The scheme is strengthened by a requirement that 10% of properties should be inspected.

During the year we received a Government grant under its Rogue Landlord Scheme. This was a time limited project to tackle some of the worst perceived areas and we decided to concentrate our efforts on the Sincil Bank area. During the project some 580 inspections were carried out with 318 notices issues and 101 enforcement actions. There was, also, 1 notable and very successful prosecution brought with total fines in excess of £30k. The information collected during this project will not be lost and will give rise to follow up actions.

The Empty Homes Strategy has continued throughout the year with the aim of getting long term empty properties back into use. This involves giving a mixture of advice, help, coercion or compulsion to, often, reluctant owners. It is a hard task and last year only 13 properties were brought back into use, however, it not only brings its own financial reward but often removes a blight from a particular area. The Empty Homes Strategy will be reviewed during 2017.

The Housing Assistance Policy was suspending in March '15 pending a review of its application. There were, however, a few cases in progress and these will continue to completion. Of the 6 completions during the year the average grant was £10k. A minor works grant was introduced for 2015/16 at a maximum of £2k, one payment has been made and there is a commitment for 3 others. The same scheme is running over this winter period.

Finally, I would thank all Officers for their support and advice during the past year.

Councillor Pete West
Portfolio Holder for Housing