

REPORT UNDER RULE 2 (VI) OF THE CITY COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES

Report by Councillor Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing

INTRODUCTION

This report concentrates on the most challenging area of performance within housing and also looks at aspect of health which comes within the remit of this portfolio.

In general terms members will be aware that the Housing Strategy, as well as the 30 year business plan, is in the process of being reviewed. Members have been involved in two briefings so far which have provided valuable feedback as well as giving members the opportunity to have their say on future priorities. There will also be further opportunities for members to contribute as work on the strategy proceeds.

The year ahead is an important one for housing. Not only is the Housing Strategy being updated but this coincides with the centenary of Council Housing in Lincoln. A series of events involving tenants are planned to mark the 100 year anniversary and full details of these are currently being finalised. The very first Council house in Lincoln, on what was then known as the Wragby Road Estate, later to be renamed St Giles, was tenanted in November 1920. The changes identified through the Housing Strategy review will provide the framework for us to give an excellent service to tenants in our second 100 years.

The Housing Strategy will be supported by data obtained from the Housing LIN document, which provides evidence on the future housing needs for over 75s in the city, and from our own Housing Needs Survey, carried out in August and September. Further information has been obtained from a series of Ward Walks across the City attended by the Director and myself. Many members of council will have been involved representing their respective Wards.

The performance figures for housing for the first three quarters of the 2019-20 financial year show that three of the 16 strategic measures are below target. All three measures below target have shown an improvement in the third quarter. Of the more specific data set for housing services, in which there are 20 measures, 16 are on or above target. Of the four showing as red one relates to customer services and is considered in another portfolio.

A number of challenges lie ahead amongst them the issues of homelessness, Climate Change, the need to respond to the demand for quality affordable housing, and dealing with the negative effects of Universal Credit .

As well as providing and managing Council housing we also have a role in regulating the private sector and the work of our Rogue Landlord team, funded by Government money, has been has helped raise standards as well as resulting in a number of prosecutions of landlords for renting out substandard, and on occasions dangerous, housing.

I have also included the latest Health Profile for the City of Lincoln which was published in November 2019 and provides detail of some of the health issues faced by our resident.

Finally I would like to thank the Director Daren Turner, the three Assistant Directors of housing, Yvonne Fox, Matt Hillman and Andrew McNeil, and staff at all levels throughout the Housing department for their hard work over the 12 months in what continues to be challenging circumstances. Many of the performance figures are excellent and that is down to the effort put in by the workforce. Thanks also go to the Council's Director of Communities and Environment Simon Walters and Assistant Director Simon Colburn, and the private sector housing team.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness continues to be a significant issue in Lincoln as in many towns and cities across the country.

Rough sleepers are just the most visible aspect of this. The official 2019 annual count undertaken on 8 November identified 27 rough sleepers which is very similar to the figures for 2018 (26) and 2017 (28).

The opening of the Nomad Trust's new premises at the YMCA premises on St Rumbold Street is a welcome addition to the provision of emergency accommodation but there is a need to increase the amount of "move on" accommodation available to allow those staying at Nomad and similar accommodation to progress.

A number of different schemes have received funding to help reduce the homelessness issue. The City Council is the lead organisation for the ACTion Lincs project which provides a housing first approach to dealing with homelessness accompanied by support. Over 100 homeless people across the county have been assisted by this scheme. Our own Rough Sleeper Project team housed 73 people in its first year and assisted 146 people with mental health issues. I am delighted to report that MHCLG are extremely positive about the response of the City Council to the homelessness issue and as a result have allocated another £1.1m the council to continue its good work and explore other avenues, working with the private sector, to resolve this growing problem.

Homelessness, however, remains a real issue for the city despite all the efforts of ourselves and other organisations such as the YMCA, P3, Framework, LEAP and Addaction who work in partnership with us. The move by Lincolnshire County Council to cut £1 million a year from its housing related support budget will only make the situation worse in the coming years.

An indication of the problem is that a total of 356 people approached the Council as homeless in the first six months of 2019-20.

We have been working to reduce the number of homeless individuals and families placed in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation. This has on occasion resulted in households being placed out of Lincoln which is something we are working to avoid where possible. In the period between 1 January and 31 December 2019 a total of 299 households were placed in temporary accommodation. This is a high number but

we have been able to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by utilising former council homes bought under the “purchase and repair” scheme. The average time spent in temporary accommodation was 30.6 days.

TENANCY MANAGEMENT

Rent arrears as of the end of Quarter Three were £107,000 above the same point last year and 2.82% as a percentage of the debit. This is 0.83% better than the target of 3.65%. There has been an increase of 641 tenants claiming Universal Credit (UC) in the past 12 months which is having a significant impact on arrears. An Income Officer has been recruited until the end of March 2020 to assist specifically with income collection and mitigate the impact of Universal Credit.

In my report last year I acknowledged that more work needed to be done with tenants to ensure that they are in the best place to maintain their tenancy and have effective support in place to assist them to do this. As a result a number of measures have since been implemented.

A UC Interview and claim procedure has been implemented which ensures all UC claimants are contacted within three days of making their claim. This new interview ensures a payment arrangement is made as soon as a claim is made and ensures tenants are given sufficient knowledge on UC and the impact this will have on their rent account. Tenancy Services also received specialised UC training which gives Housing Officers the knowledge to manage UC claims on their own patches. Previously this was only done by three officers. The Housing Assistants are now also assisting with arrears collection and are having success managing low level arrears in their respective teams.

Our current rent arrears procedures are being reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose and a Universal Housing consultant will also be making improvements to the current housing management system. This will mean Housing Officers have more capacity to manage the increasingly complex cases they are facing.

Tenancy services are currently achieving 100.32% in year rent collection rate against the target of 98% and continue to prioritise income collection and a significant emphasis has been placed on mitigating the impact of Universal Credit. This has been achieved whilst almost halving the number of evictions carried out compared to the previous year.

Tenancy Services continues to strive to maintain and improve on the high standards of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) service delivery which resulted in being awarded Housemark Accreditation. The figures to the end of Quarter 3 show that the average length of time to resolve ASB cases was 55.5 days (target 70 days). In addition 96.23% of cases that were closed were resolved (target 94%).

NEW BUILD/ALLOCATIONS

The addition of 172 new Council homes during 2018-19 was the most significant increase in the number of Council houses in Lincoln in a 12 month period for over 40 years. We are continuing this progress with work underway on building the 70-bed extra care unit on the site of the former De Wint Court sheltered housing scheme. This

project, funded in part by contributions from both Homes England and Lincolnshire County Council is the first of its type built by the City Council and will help address the shortfall in this type of accommodation within Lincoln that is identified in the Housing LIN report which provided data on the accommodation needs for older people (over 75s) across Greater Lincolnshire. The Council is in the process of putting together a programme of future building. Work on developing the former Markham House site on St Giles has commenced and a plan for a mix of shared ownership and council rented properties on land off Rookery Lane is being finalised. De Wint Court is scheduled to be completed in summer 2021 and the Markham House site in late 2020. Approval has been given for the work needed to provide access to the Queen Elizabeth Road site which has outline permission for 325 new homes. The current intention is that the housing on this site will be a mix of tenures. We have also been buying properties, in the main former Council houses, under the purchase and repair scheme which has enabled the authority to add further to our housing stock.

There remains a significant demand for Council housing within the City and it is important to continue to make progress building and acquiring additional properties. We lose between 50 and 60 homes a year through Right to Buy which not only has an effect on the number of City Council properties available but also on the rental income into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). In the current year the number of properties sold to date totals 44, the full year effect of income loss is in excess of £190k pa. Another effect of Right to Buy is that our housing stock is now predominantly one and two-bed properties as many of the three and four bed properties, with the discount offered, have been sold over the years.

The number of live applications for Council properties at the end of Quarter 3 was 1,477. Since the end of May 2019 the number of applications awaiting assessment or requiring validation documents has been reduced dramatically. At 31st May 2019 this total was 475 but by the end of Quarter 3 this was down to 46. The downward trend is testament to the hard work of the Housing Solutions team.

Due to a shortage of affordable housing in the city, the Housing Solutions Team are working with the Private Rented Sector landlords to encourage them to offer their properties to applicants at a reasonable rental level and support is offered to the landlords with managing the tenancies so that it encourages them to accept applicants that may need that additional support.

The % of offers of tenancy which have been accepted first time has considerably improved. In April 2018 just 61.54% of tenancy offers were accepted first time – which meant almost 40% were not. At the end of Quarter 3 of the current financial year 84.59% of offers were accepted first time which is above the target of 80%.

HEALTH

Although Lincolnshire County Council has primary responsibility for public health the City Council also has an important role. Our provision of services such as leisure centres, sports facilities, parks and children's play areas all contribute to assisting our residents to live a healthy lifestyle. Our role both as a housing provider and as a regulator of private housing also contributes because poor housing conditions have a direct effect on people's health. Similarly our role within economic development in

working to attract new, better-paid jobs also has an effect due to the link between higher income and better health.

The annual health profile for Lincoln produced by Public Health England again shows some challenging data. The life expectancy at birth for both men and women is worse than for the rest of England. The figure for men is 77.3 years (compared to 79.6 years for England) and for women is 80.9 compared to 83.1. Both figures are worse than in 2018. Within Lincoln the figures show real inequalities of health with life expectancy being 12 years lower for men and 8.7 years lower for women in the most deprived area of the City than in the least deprived areas. Lincoln is one of the 20% most deprived districts/unitary authorities in England and 21.2% children live in low income families.

Economic deprivation is a significant factor in health and housing is another major factor. To reflect this housing is a priority within the Lincolnshire health and wellbeing strategy. There is a direct link between improvements in housing and improvements in health. Any improvements we can make in our own housing stock and in the private sector will have the effect of improving the health of our residents.

The 2019 Health Profile for the City shows that 22.4% of Year 6 children are classified as obese which amounts to 216 children. Levels of teenage pregnancy, GCSE attainment, breastfeeding and smoking in pregnancy are all worse than the England average while for adults the under-75 mortality rates from cardiovascular diseases and cancer are also worse than the England average.

Other figures are positive. The number of alcoholic-specific hospital admissions for under-18s equates to only three admissions in the year. The percentage of adults who are overweight or obese is slightly less than the national average and the percentage of physical active adults is also better than the average and going up.

CONCLUSION

Vision 2020, the Council's strategic plan, sets out a number of measures of success for the quality housing portfolio. These include i) Increasing the availability and provision of housing in Lincoln; ii) Improving the quality of both public sector and private sector homes; iii) Increasing the availability of supported housing for older people with high levels of need. This report, I believe, shows we continue to make progress in achieving these outcomes.

Donald Nannestad
Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing