

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE JANUARY 2021

REPORT UNDER RULE 2(vi) OF THE COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES REPORT BY COUNCILLOR DONALD NANNESTAD, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR QUALITY HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

The last 12 months have been an extraordinary time for everyone with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting all aspects of life. In terms of housing the service we have been able to offer has varied in relation to what level of lockdown we have been in at the relevant time. The situation has changed a number of times and at the time of writing this we are in a period of what is described as “lockdown” although this is not as severe as the lockdown imposed in March. Many areas have been operating in different ways and where possible staff have worked from home with some areas such as homelessness services being delivered via telephone. Construction work, after the initial lockdown, has continued De Wint Court, as allowed under the current regulations, but we are only able to run a restricted repair service dealing with essential and priority repairs. At various times some of our housing staff have either been furloughed or redeployed.

The Council’s executive has taken the decision that performance data for quarters one and two should be published but the information for quarter three should be delayed and published with quarter four. As a result, this report is only able to cover housing data up to and including quarter two. There are 19 measures for housing. Five out of those 19 measures reported as below target for quarter two, and two reported above target. Three of these measures are volumetric and therefore do not return a status. Three measures reported as acceptable, with the remaining 6 having no data supplied for the reporting period. In addition, some of the usual performance data has not been collected and is not available. Although this may be frustrating to some members, I am sure everyone realises we are in a situation that has no precedent during the life times of any of us. The fact that we have been able to keep services operating as much as possible is an achievement in itself and I pay tribute to every single member of staff who have done some extraordinary work over the last 12 months.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness continues to be a significant issue in Lincoln as in many towns and cities across the country. Rough sleepers have in recent years been the most visible aspect of this although at the start of the pandemic the Government introduced its “Everybody In” policy which has led to accommodation funded by Central Government being provided for homeless people. The number of people presenting to the City Council as homeless varied in the first two quarters of the current year from a low of 21 in April to a peak of 52 in July. The team has been working remotely during and dealing with cases by phone. Lockdown has reduced the options available for temporary accommodation and that has been an issue. A further issue that will have effects long-term is the County Council decision to cut £1 million from its housing related support budget. This is the funding that provides the extra support required to help homeless people improve their lives, many of them having complex problems which are not possible to solve without help.

I am delighted that we have responded to all of the various Government homeless and rough sleeping initiatives during the pandemic and continue to do so. The recent imposition of SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) saw every rough sleeper on Lincoln’s streets being housed for the cold weather period. Our track record in homeless prevention and intervention has enabled us, as a trusted partner of MHCLG, to draw down funding as part of the Next Steps Accommodation Programme. This will

provide 15 units of “move on” accommodation in the City. To date the Council has acquired two properties under this Programme, the first of which was acquired in December 2020 and I am delighted to say that the City of Lincoln is the first council in the country to acquire a property under this programme. Further, we have been able, due again to our excellent service, to draw down significant funding in rough sleeping grant which is more than last year and will enable us to continue assisting some of the most vulnerable people in our City.

TENANCY SERVICES

Tenancy Services staff have worked extremely hard to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on rent arrears and collection. The two-week rent-free period, which is normally over the Christmas/New Year period was brought forward to the start of the financial year. We also set up a discretionary rental hardship fund which assisted 179 tenants. Although this was brought to an end at the conclusion of the first national lockdown, we are in the process of reviving it with the assistance being provided to those who have difficulty paying their rent as a direct effect of COVID-19. Our response has been featured by ARCH (the Association of Retained Council Housing) in their monthly magazine and on their website

At the end of quarter two rent arrears were £64,617 less than at the same point in 2019-20 with the rent collection rate being 100.75% which is both above target and an increase of 2.71% on last year. The number of tenants in arrears was 3.47% compared to 3.72% at the same time in 2019/20. Moving the rent-free weeks has made it difficult to directly compare rent arrears with the previous financial year, and it is likely that we will not see the true impact on rent arrears until the end of March 2021. However, compared to the councils we benchmark with we have fared much better. I will be able to give a verbal update to the meeting on the situation with rent arrears. We are planning to use the first week of February as an action week targeting rent arrears.

At quarter two end 1,899 tenants were on Universal Credit which is an increase of 50% over 12 months. The number of tenants that are under occupying their property continues to decrease due to work with tenants to ensure accommodation is adequate for the number in the household. Instances of under-occupancy have reduced from 436 to 364 when comparing the data for quarter two between 2019/20 and 2020/21.

A further effect of COVID has been that evictions have been suspended since March 2020. The ban on evictions was due to be lifted earlier this month but has now again been extended by the Government to 21 February.

HOUSING REPAIRS

This is an area where only two of the four measures were collected during quarters one and two. The percentage of repairs fixed first time was 90.11%. The percentage of appointments kept was 99.95% in quarter two which is an almost perfect figure. Data for the percentage of reactive repairs completed within target time and the percentage of tenants satisfied with repairs are the two areas that have not been collected. One effect of COVID appears to have been a reduction in the number of repairs reported. During the current financial year, we have also introduced a system of Scheduled Repairs which means that repairs covered by this system will be carried out area by area at set times. We are continuing to carry out our priority repairs within 24 hours and urgent repairs within 3 days. The Schedule Repair system allows us to plan all the work in each area and ensure that we have all the right resources and materials in the right place so we can complete any repairs reported in one visit. This gives everyone more certainty that the repair will be carried out on the expected date. It also drives down delivery costs and will drastically reduce our carbon footprint as we scale back journeys across the city.

VOIDS

At the end of quarter two there were 65 properties in voids. The process of bringing back into use has been substantially affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. The number of workers able to work within one property at the same time has been restricted causing delays in work being completed and COVID also affected the supply chain. These two factors have resulted in the performance being 50 days (keys handed in to keys handed out) for voids when the target is 32 days. Since my last report to this committee, we have changed voids contractors. There were some initial teething problems with the incoming provider which have now mostly been resolved. I have asked the Director of Housing to specifically target void turnaround going forward as we must seek to maximise our housing supply in these difficult times.

HOUSING INVESTMENT

Two key areas in this section are in red as far as performance is concerned but, in both cases, this has been a direct effect of COVID. Firstly, the number of Council properties that are not at the Decent Homes Standard. The data showed 0.81% at the end of quarter two excluding refusals. However, in a further 207 instances the tenant had refused to allow work to be carried out – often due to the tenant shielding or concerned about visitors to their home during lockdown periods. A similar situation has arisen with the figures for the number of properties with a valid gas safety certificate. This was down to 85.84% at the end of quarter one but had increased to 93.58% at the end of quarter two. As with the Decent Homes Standard work, we expect to catch up as time goes on although further refusals are likely during lockdown periods as we are experiencing at the time of writing.

NEW BUILD/ALLOCATIONS

The pandemic has slowed up work on new properties. The five new properties on the site of the former Markham House building on Swift Gardens were completed in December and have been tenanted. Although the timetable for completion of De Wint Court extra care unit has been affected we are still hoping to be able to finish this during the current calendar year. Progress is continuing to be made on the next proposed development at Rookery Lane. We have also continued to acquire properties under the purchase and repair scheme using right to buy receipts. From April 2019 to the end of December 2020 we purchased 65 properties.

At the end of the second quarter, we had 1,418 people on the housing register. One major effect of lockdown has been on the number of properties that have become available. These have dropped from an average of 20 sets of keys being handed in per month to just two or three, many of which are in sheltered housing schemes. In addition, government advice has been to restrict lettings to emergency cases only. As a result, the open bidding system on Homefinder has in effect been suspended apart from properties by rented by other social housing providers. This has been a source of frustration for many people seeking to move but we simply have not had enough properties available to operate as normal.

HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely dominated health over the last year. The annual health profile produced by Public Health England has not been published in its usual format but I am able to produce some data from the PHE website.

The incidences of COVID-19 fluctuate on a daily basis and as members will recall Lincoln at one point was in the top five authorities in England for cases per 100,000 population. Thankfully figures have reduced but not to the extent we would have liked and as I write this report, we are about to commence mass community testing. The work needed to set this up has been extremely challenging and has involved staff from all departments of the City Council who worked extremely hard to ensure that this happens. Our public health staff have not only been involved with this but also in many other COVID-19-related activities including issuing advice to businesses and (jointly with the police) in enforcement as well as organising the COVID-19 marshalls.

In terms of general health, the data from Public Health England shows that life expectancy at birth for both men and women continues to deteriorate and continues to be worse than for the rest of England. The figure for men is 76.9 years (data for 2017-19) compared to 77.3 years in the previous year (the figure for England is 79.8 years). For women the 2017-19 data shows life expectancy at birth to be 80.6 years which is slightly lower than last year's figure of 80.9 years and below the national figure of 83.4. The figures for England as a whole are worse than last year which in turn were worse than the previous year.

The two charts I have included both show that Lincoln's health figures are poor not just in comparison with England as a whole but also in comparison with the East Midlands.

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. Similarly, anything we can do to improve the income levels of our residents will also have the effect of improving health.

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