

**REPORT UNDER RULE 2(vi) OF THE COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES REPORT
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HOUSING**

INTRODUCTION

The last 12 months have continued to be a challenging time for housing. The various levels of Covid restrictions have had their effect on housing performance but we have also experienced issues in the supply of materials with the additional problem of a shortage in the labour market. The performance of voids, notable for the amount of red in the quarterly performance report, has further been affected by the fact that the contractor we were using at the start of the financial year went into administration. That said there have also been some excellent areas such as rent collection while the imminent completion of De Wint Court extra care home is a flagship development for us.

The City Council has just under 7,800 properties of which 45% are houses and 42% flats with the remainder made up of maisonettes, bungalows, and sheltered housing. The ratio between houses and flats has been skewed out of proportion by Right to Buy which has seen us lose a significantly higher number of family homes compared with the number of flats bought by tenants. In addition, eight out of 10 of our homes were constructed before 1974 which creates challenges – in particular when it comes to improving energy efficiency.

In this report I set out the various performance data. It is clear that some areas, particularly voids, need improvement and changes have been made with the anticipation of the required improvement being made although some factors are out of our hands.

My portfolio includes health. There is a direct link between housing conditions and health while household income and levels of air pollution are also key factors which affect the health of our population. These three areas are all ones in which the City Council can influence health. In addition, we are responsible for leisure, parks, and green spaces all of which are so very important in both physical and mental health. We are in the process of finalising a district health and wellbeing strategy and will be seeking more involvement with health provision within the city. This shows that although Lincolnshire County Council which has the wider responsibility for public health, we also have an important role to play.

I have included a power point presentation in the appendices which shows the correlation between income, health, and housing across the city.

Finally, many thanks to all the staff who have not only assisted with this report but given me tremendous support during my period of illness. I also thank the Lincoln Tenants Panel for the valuable work they have done and continue to do to improve the lot of tenants. The Social Housing White Paper emphasises the fact that the voice of tenants must be heard. The Charter sets out seven key commitments all of which have been adopted by the City Council and are included in our Tenancy Involvement

Strategy as well as in the refreshed 30-year Housing Business Plan which was approved by the executive committee on 21 February.

HOMELESSNESS

Significant work has been done over recent years to reduce homelessness in the City with Government funding being directed at Lincoln amongst other cities and towns across the country. In relation to this we were able to draw down funding to purchase 15 flats for move on accommodation as part of the Next Steps Accommodation Project. We were the first Council in the country to acquire a property under this programme and were successful in purchasing the required number. A further three flats have been purchased with money from a second phase of Government funding. Regular checks on street homelessness have, on occasions, produced a nil head count which is the first time this has been achieved.

Homelessness remains an issue. There is a particular pressure as a result of the availability of suitable move-on accommodation and general needs housing in both our own stock and in private sector housing. Up to the end of Q3 707 people had approached the Council as homeless this year. Of these the housing solutions team were able to successfully prevent 43% from becoming homeless. We have, at this time, unprecedented numbers of homelessness applications.

TENANCY SERVICES

Tenancy Services staff have worked extremely hard to ensure rent collection has been maintained. Emphasis has been placed on direct contact with tenants through visits and calls with targets in place for staff. This is a success story with both performance indicators (125B and 126) showing green. The target of 96.5% for rent collected has been exceeded in each of the first three quarters of this financial year with a collection rate of 100.52% of in the third quarter. This has resulted in a decrease in arrears compared to 2020/21. At the end of Q3 rent arrears were £1.052 million which is a reduction of £78,000 compared to 12 months ago. Arrears as a percentage of rent debit was 3.68% at the end of Q3 which is an improvement on 2020/21 when the end of year figure was 3.74%. A number of challenges remain not least of which is the impact of Universal Credit. The number of tenants claiming UC has increased by 1,028 year on year and arrears on UC claims totals almost £670,000 which is 63% of the total arrears. The cost-of-living issue which tenants, as well as everyone else, face is another matter which has the potential to seriously impact on rent collection but how serious that impact is will only become apparent in the coming months.

VOIDS

In contrast to the success of rent collection it is fair to say that the performance in voids is not where we would like to be, but we are working to rectify the situation. A number of matters have affected performance with the most significant being the fact that the contractor we started the financial year with went into administration. We have experienced delays in ordering kitchens, plastering products and some timber lines while recruitment of new staff has been affected by the high national demand for labour. Covid restrictions have also played a part. The target remains at 32 days for properties needing minor works and 38 days where major works are required.

Currently performance is at 46.4 days and 57.6 days respectively which means both performance indicators are red. Since the initial contractor went into administration the work has been picked up by our own DLO, who have been allocated extra staff, and additional private contractors have been taken on for this work. I anticipate that performance will improve in Q4 and during this quarter a number of long-term voids are expected to be completed. We have just finished a procurement exercise to replace the voids contractor who went into administration. We have done this in lots around the city to give more resilience. The number of voids is reducing very quickly and has fallen by 25 since the start of the year. We have realigned working practices, dedicated more team leader time, and changed team structures to help resolve the position. At one point we were 25% down in our labour force but this is improving and, for example, in January six new joiners came to work for us. This should put us in a better position in Q1 of 2022/23. However just a brief caution about the performance indicators. Long-term voids only become counted when they are completed and so the fact that we are completing a number of long-term voids will initially make the data look worse.

HOUSING REPAIRS

Out of the six performance indicators relating to housing repairs four are green, one amber and one red. The sole red indicator is the percentage of urgent repairs carried out within the three-day time limit and the amber indicator relates to priority one-day repairs. There is now closer management of one- and three-day repairs and a repairs co-ordinator has been appointed. One- and three-day repairs are being prioritised over 100-day tickets. As with voids there have been issues with obtaining materials, but performance does need to improve to an acceptable level. However, 99.3% of priority repairs (one day) are being carried out within the time limits and 99.3% of priority and urgent repair appointments are being kept. In the long-term the recently introduced policy of improving the standard of kitchens and bathrooms that we fit should have an effect in reducing the number of repairs.

HOUSING INVESTMENT

Two key areas in this section which were red at the time of last year's performance report are now amber which is an improvement although further improvement is now needed to take this into green. 82 of our Council properties currently do not meet the Decent Homes Standard. 58 are in a programme for a replacement door and in a further 22 properties we have been unable to gain access to undertake the five-year electrical inspection. We also currently have 178 properties which are considered 'not decent standard' as a result of tenants refusing us entry. This figure has shown continued improvement over the last six quarters from a peak of 216 in Q1 of 2020-21.

99.14% of properties have a valid gas certificate which is better than 2020/21 but still below the target. Cases where the tenant refuses access for the gas safety inspection are, as a matter of course, referred to legal services for the appropriate action to be taken to ensure we gain access.

NEW BUILD/ALLOCATIONS

De Wint Court, our flagship extra care home, will be officially opened later this month. In addition to the opening ceremony there will be an open day on 25 March to which all councillors have been invited allowing those who wish to look around what is an excellent project. Although the completion has been slightly delayed due to issues out of our control it is within budget. Homes England and Lincolnshire County Council both contributed funding towards this project which is our first extra care home.

Construction work is now well underway at Rookery Lane which will add 42 new homes to our housing stock and work on the redevelopment of Hermit Street flats is anticipated to start later this calendar year. This involves remodelling the existing properties with a number of additional new-build homes.

In addition, we are working with Barnardo's to provide supervised accommodation for care leavers.

We have continued to acquire properties under the purchase and repair scheme using Right to Buy receipts (RTB). In the first three quarters of this financial year, we purchased 8 properties under this scheme with a further 10 due to be completed in Q4. This has ensured our RTB receipts are spent within the required time. RTB receipts will be used towards the funding of the new properties which form part of the Hermit Street project.

The demand for Council housing remains high with 1,448 on the housing register at the end of Q3 which is an increase of 30 compared to my report to Performance Management last year.

DECARBONISATION

The Council in July 2019 approved a resolution declaring a climate and environmental emergency and resolved to deliver a carbon neutral vision for Lincoln by 2030. The role housing is to play in this is set out within the Council's Decarbonisation Strategy and Action Plan approved by the executive in December of last year. This commits the Council's new build properties to be either net zero carbon or EPC A rated in projects commenced from 2022-23 and to raise the standard of all Council homes to an average of EPC C rating. Recent new build projects such as the Markham House site and Rookery Lane have been low carbon and have EPC B ratings. Rookery Lane includes sustainable urban drainage. All recent new homes have been fitted with EV charging points.

In terms of our older stock (80% of which was built pre-1974) we are committed to review the Lincoln Homes Standard to improve energy performance. We will also consider retrofit solutions for our existing stock with trials to commence subject to funding.

Our Council together with all other housing stock authorities and registered housing providers, faces many challenges to achieve the progress we need to make. For instance, achieving EPC A ratings/net zero carbon on new build properties significantly increases the cost. The logistics of installing ground-source or air-source heat pumps

and solar panels to many of our properties produce real challenges which in some instances cannot, at the moment, be overcome.

What we have done already is introduce a number of changes in the way housing repairs operate which have significantly reduced our carbon footprint. The introduction of scheduled repairs has led to a reduction in mileage travelled by our workforce. The result has been a 44% reduction in CO₂e emissions from fleet vehicles since the baseline year. A higher standard of kitchens is being fitted which should reduce the number of repairs while splash boards are now fitted in bathrooms rather than glazed tiles. Currently no housing repair waste is sent to landfill. 37% is recycled and the remainder goes to RDF (Refuse Derived Fuel).

HRS are in the tender process for a new fleet provision which will continue to reduce the CO₂ emissions with more electric vehicles becoming part of the fleet in five years.

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING

The team is currently investigating 61 housing condition complaint cases relating to private sector housing with 46 new service requests received between October 2021 and January 2022. These include issues of disrepair, overcrowding and illegal evictions. In terms of complaints regarding disrepair, Park and Abbey Wards account for 60% of the total reported. We continue to take action against private landlords and a number of final Civil Penalty Notices have been issued with further investigations underway.

At the time of writing this report 222 HMO licence applications have been fully processed during the current financial year with a further 57 being processed. We are also working to catch up backlogs of HMO license inspections following Covid, and the team is working hard to prioritise these routine periodic checks.

We await further details of the Government proposals in the Levelling Up White Paper in relation to a White Paper in the spring. The Government is to consult on introducing a legally binding Decent Homes Standard in the private rented sector, explore a National Landlord Register and bring forward other measures to reset the relationship between landlords and tenants including through ending “no fault evictions”.

The target for bringing empty private sector homes back into use is 50 which will not be met this year. By the end of January 17 properties had been brought back into use and a further number are anticipated to be added before the end of the financial year. There have been challenges with gaining access to empty properties during Covid coupled with the escalating cost of materials/availability of builders to bring empty homes back to a habitable state. The number of empty properties has increased over the last year so the work in this area is important. At the end of January, 61 properties had been empty for more than four years – an increase of six. In particular in the Sincil Bank area the number of long -term empty properties have been increasing. In Q3 an additional 12 properties became empty for more than six months.

The team has also processed a large number of Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) applications to adapt homes enabling people to live in their own homes as long as possible. A total of 82 applications has been received so far this year and the estimated

spend will be just over £1 million on home adaptations in the private sector. This is funded from an annual Government grant of just over £850,000 but we are seeing demand outstrip supply and have been using reserves built up from lower demand in previous years. We anticipate demand for DFGs will continue to increase over the next few years and we are in a strong position to meet this increased demand.

Finally in this section the City Council has been successful in attracting grant funding to better insulate and heat the homes of those most in need. This is a hugely important work given the escalating energy costs and the increasing number of people falling into deeper fuel poverty. In 2019 the estimated number of households in Lincoln which met the Government's fuel poverty criteria was 6,568 and the city has the second highest level of fuel poverty among the Lincolnshire district councils.

So far, the Council has attracted £479,600 in external funding to retrofit up to 40 energy inefficient homes in Lincoln during the current financial year and £2,203,194 to deliver the Sustainable Warmth Programme in 2022-23.

In addition, officers are looking at how, under the Housing Assistance Scheme, we can use DFG funding in a wider context to help those with health conditions to access support for better insulation and better heating where cold homes are affecting their health.

These schemes will have a positive impact for the poorest in our community.

HEALTH

The annual health profile for the city produced by Public Health England has again not been published but data, although less comprehensive, is still available. Covid has dominated health over the last 12 months at the number of cases in Lincoln reached a very high level earlier this year but at the time of writing this report there were around 400 cases in the city in the previous week of which the majority were in the 18 to 60 age range. What is not clear at the moment is the long-term effect of Covid on those who contracted the virus and in particular those who have been seriously ill as it is a new virus.

Health data invariably lags behind real time data. Very few of the performance indicators for the city are in green and the majority are red as can be seen from the attached appendix. In particular life expectancy for both men and women in the city is lower than both the East Midlands and the England averages. For men this is 76.1 years (2018-2020), and this has deteriorated in each of the last two years being 76.9 in 2017-19 and 77.3 in 2016-2018. For women life expectancy slightly improved in 2018-20. The suicide rate attributed to Lincoln (2018-2020) is the worst in England. Life expectancy varies between wards with a difference of 8.1 years for males between the best Hartsholme at 80.3 years and Park at 73.2 years. For females the difference within wards is starker at 10.7 years between the best of Witham at 83.9 years and the worst of Moorland at 73.2 years.

As I mentioned at the start of this report, the City Council has an important role to play in the health of our residents and anything we can do to increase household income, reduce air pollution, and improve housing conditions will improve health.

To finish I encourage members to attend the workshop scheduled for 9 March which will look deeper into the health statistics and look at the work programmes the City Council is undertaking to help tackle a range of health related issues.

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