

REPORT BY COUNCILLOR DONALD NANNESTAD, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR QUALITY 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.

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. The number of people approaching us as homeless by the end of Q3 is almost identical to the number for all of 2020-21 which was 709.

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 operates 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.

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