

**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 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 of performance such as rent collection and the completion of De Wint Court extra care home which 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 have included some of the performance data and it is clear that some areas, particularly voids, need improvement. Changes have been made with the anticipation of the required improvement being made although some factors are out of our hands.

However, we are making significant progress in several areas including the introduction of a pilot digital repairs reporting scheme; the completing of the De Wint Court extra care home; the introduction of scheduled repairs which has reduced significantly the carbon foot print of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA); work on Rookery Lane is moving on rapidly with the first properties due to be completed by the year end; and planning for the regeneration of Hermit Street flats is also moving forward with the aim of starting work during the current financial year.

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. Although Lincolnshire County Council has the wider responsibility for public health, we also have an important role to play.

Finally, many thanks to all the staff who have not only assisted with this report but given me tremendous support during my recent 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.

## 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 four quarters of 2021-22 with a collection rate of 100.18% at the year end. This has resulted in a decrease in arrears compared to 2020/21. Arrears as a percentage of rent debit was 3.63% at the end of Q3 which is an improvement on 2020/21 when the end of year figure was 3.74%. The target was 4.45%. A number of challenges remain not least of which is the impact of Universal Credit (UC). The number of tenants claiming UC has increased by over 1,000 year - on-year and arrears on UC claims account for around 60% 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 become clearer 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 it 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 45 days where major works are required. The relevant performance figures for 2021-22 were 56 and 83 days. These are continuing to reduce and the performance as at 6 June was 43 days for minor works and 78 days for major works with the overall average being 57 days. I anticipate both these times will continue to reduce as many of the long-term voids have been completed over the last few months. It must be remembered that voids are only included when they are actually completed so by clearing long-term voids the average length of time will initially go up. Since the initial contractor went into administration the work has been picked up by our own Direct Labour Organisation (DLO), who have been allocated extra staff, and additional private contractors have been taken on for this work. We have carried out a procurement exercise to replace the voids contractor who went into administration. This was done in 'lots' around the city to give more resilience. 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 at the end of Q1 of 2022/23.

## HOUSING REPAIRS

Out of the performance indicators relating to housing repairs two are green and one red. The 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. In terms of three-day tickets 90.69% of these were completed within the time limits which is well below the 97.5% target. However, 99.1% of priority repairs (one day) are being carried out within the time limits, which is amber as the target is 99.5% and 99.46% of priority and urgent repair appointments are being kept which is above the 97% target. 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. We have recently introduced a pilot scheme for reporting repairs online. This will not only assist those who use the scheme but also reduce the numbers phoning in repairs. That in turn means that the time spent in a call queue should be reduced for those tenants phoning in repairs.

## HOUSING INVESTMENT

Less than 1% of properties were classified as non-decent homes but we also currently have 183 properties which are considered not decent standard as a result of tenants refusing us entry.

99.19% 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, was officially opened in March. Although the completion was slightly delayed due to issues out of our control it was 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. A ceremony to name this development took place earlier this month and the scheme is due to be completed by mid-December. It will be known as Ward Paddock after the Ward family who lived for 60 years in the house that was demolished to make way for the scheme. 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 2021-22 we purchased 15 properties under this scheme. 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 1,440 on the housing register at the end of 2021-22 Q4.

## 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. We have, at this time, unprecedented numbers of homelessness applications. The number of people approaching us as homeless in 2021-22 was 990 compared to 709 in 2020-21 which is an increase of nearly 40%.

## 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 for 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 produces 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 reduction of more than 40% 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 to be 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 56 housing condition complaint cases relating to private sector housing. These include issues of disrepair (which accounts for the majority of cases), 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.

The target for bringing empty private sector homes back into use is 50 and we need to make sure this is met. 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. In Sincil Bank the number of long-term empty properties has now reduced to 20. Across the city as a whole, we have around 800 properties classified as either second homes or empty furnished homes. The majority of these are student housing which hasn't been occupied in the current student year.

The private sector housing team carried out property checks related to the housing of Ukrainians who have escaped from the war in their home country. These checks are being carried out in a timely manner although at the moment the numbers are relatively small.

The team has 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. The spend in the last financial year was just over £1 million on home adaptations in the private sector. This is funded from an annual Government grant which for 2022-23 is £851,990. As can be seen 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 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 has dropped significantly and the figure for the 31 May to 6 June was 58 cases, over half of which were in the 30-60 year 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. 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.

Over the past year we have been working with the other six Lincolnshire district councils to produce a Lincolnshire District Health and Wellbeing Strategy. In addition, the refreshed Let's Move Lincolnshire Strategy aimed at increasing physical activity levels is to be launched at this year's Lincolnshire Show. The City Council has played a key role in the production of these two strategies.

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.

**Donald Nannestad Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing**