

REPORT BY COUNCILLOR DONALD NANNESAD, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR QUALITY HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

An update of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan was approved by the Council's Executive Committee last month and we are currently in the process of carrying out a complete review which will result in a new 30 year Business Plan. Council members and Tenants Panel will have the opportunities to contribute and key issues already raised by members are estate regeneration, building more Council homes to meet demand and how we progress with decarbonisation of our housing stock.

The world of local authority housing is changing rapidly with increasing demand for Council homes and increased need for consulting with tenants. For example, from 1 April this year all registered social landlords must collect and publish 22 satisfaction measures on areas such as repairs, safety checks, complaints, and tenant perception of their landlord's services. Some of these are measures we already collect but some are new. We will ensure that the new data is collected from the required date.

In particular, I highlight two issues facing us. Firstly, new Fire Safety regulations come into place later this month which is the outcome of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. The regulations apply to all buildings containing two or more sets of domestic premises which have common areas through which residents would have to evacuate in the event of an emergency. Buildings which are seven storeys or more are in a higher category. Shuttleworth House, Jarvis House and Trent View all fall into this category. We dedicated a small team to this issue, which has enabled us to respond to the changes to date. If resources allow, we will look to making this team permanent in the new financial year.

Secondly the issue of mould and damp. The Rochdale inquest held in November into the death of two year old Awaab Ishak and the Coroner's findings have highlighted the dangers presented by mould and damp. We have since received a significant increase in complaints about mould and damp both in our Council stock and in the private sector. During the current Council year, we received an average of 8 inquiries a week up to the date of the inquest findings being published. In the two weeks after the Rochdale inquest was reported we received 95 inquiries. On many occasions more than one visit is needed and more than one repair is raised. In just one week in December 121 repairs were raised.

We currently have a team of four operatives specifically dealing with mould and damp and if the current volume of repairs related to mould and damp continues, we will seek to make this team permanent in the new financial year. Some housing stock holders in other areas of the country have received mould and damp complaints from tenants living in newly built property so it is not just about the age of properties. It is also not just an issue for Local Authority housing.

The Housing Ombudsman previously issued a spotlight report on mould and damp, "It's not lifestyle" and a few weeks ago issued an update identifying 10 key factors that will have an impact on how successful any action plan is in practice. We will be working through the identified key factors to continue to improve how we deal with this issue. Having a high number of complaints raised is not necessarily a bad thing as is set out in the updated report.

The first key factor is "Find Your Silence" which I repeat here *"Complaints systems are there so people can raise their issues and get them addressed quickly. Landlords should analyse who is not using their complaints process, and why.....Most importantly, however, finding your silence will help to ensure parity in accessing the complaints process and help to identify any shortfalls in its reach. Receiving a high volume of complaints is not necessarily indicative of a failing. Rather, it could indicate your complaints process is accessible, you are open and transparent, residents feel they can complain and believe there is a value to doing so. The Housing Ombudsman is as concerned by low levels of complaints as high ones, particularly with larger landlords."*

Within all of this it should be remembered that we invest significantly in our housing stock. Over the next five years we are planning to spend £66.7 million on improvements.

I finish this introduction with some thank yous. First of all, a big thank you to all members of the Council's staff working in housing and facing other significant issues such as the two I have highlighted above. They do an excellent job at a time when all local authorities are under increasing financial pressures. Secondly thank you to our Tenants Panel who have continued to do very valuable work during the last year.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness continues to be a significant issue. The number of people approaching the City Council as homeless up to the end of Quarter 3 was 967 which is an increase of 36.7% compared to a year ago when the number was 707. Homelessness applications are increasing nationally and the increase is in line with national averages. The percentages of successful preventions and relief of homelessness against the total number approaching the Council as homeless decreased to 44.23% which is just below the 45% low target. However, it proved to be increasingly difficult to prevent or relieve homelessness during the quarter into anything other than council accommodation, as most of the council's applicants were not able to afford privately rented accommodation.

The number of people on the housing register at the end of Quarter 3 was 1,573 against a figure of 1,448 a year ago. This is an increase of 8.6%.

TENANCY SERVICES

The City Council has just under 7,800 properties of its own housing stock, 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.

Rent Collection has been maintained above the target figure up to the end of Quarter 3 which is testament to the work of tenancy services staff. The performance target is 96.4% rent collected of rent due. This continues to be a success story with the target exceeded in each of the first three quarters and in Quarter 3 106.91% was collected. Between 1 April and 31 December 2022 100.46% was collected which is an improvement on last year. Rent arrears as a percentage of rent debit was 3.33% at the end of Quarter 3 which is better than the target of 4.45%.

In monetary terms the rent arrears at the end of Quarter 3 were £1.012 million which is a reduction of £40,000 on the same period last year and £118,000 less than at the end of Quarter 3 in 2020-21. These are excellent figures and have been achieved at a time when tenants, like all residents of the city, have been affected by cost of living issues. We can only wait and see if these improvements are maintained but a lot of work via the new tenancy sustainability team and housing officers has gone into achieving these figures and this work will continue.

VOIDS

The three performance indicators covering voids remain in red but are showing improvement compared to 2021-22. The target remains at 32 days for properties needing minor works (keys handed in to keys going out to new tenant) and 38 days where major works are required. Currently performance is at 43.3 days and 55.7 days, respectively. In both cases this is an improvement on 2021-22.

The percentage of rent lost due to vacant dwellings up to the end of Quarter 3 was 1.41% which is the same as the year end figure for 2021-22. The positive news is that the Quarter 3 loss was 1.1% which means we are getting closer to the target of 1%.

The improvement in performance needs to continue to improve. Since my last report we have taken on three private contractors to carry out voids work in place of the single contractor we had in the past and this should help us improve.

HOUSING REPAIRS

Out of the six performance indicators relating to housing repairs four are green, and two are amber. In relation to the two amber indicators both are showing an improvement on 2021-22. 99.42% of priority (one day) repairs were completed on time which is slightly below the 99.5% target. The percentage of urgent (three day) repairs completed on time was 95.03%. This was red at the time of my report last year when the figure was 90.69%. However, despite a significant improvement we are still below the target of 97.5%. 98.8% of repair appointments in the year to date were kept. 5,509 appointments were made with 5,443 kept.

HOUSING INVESTMENT

The performance measures in this service area both remain amber. The percentage of council properties that were not at the Decent Homes standard (excluding refusals) was 1.43%. This was just outside of the low target for this measure of 1.5%.

99.08% of properties have a valid gas certificate which is below the target of 99.96%. 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. In instances where we go to court to obtain an order we obtain an order for the life-time of the tenancy.

NEW BUILD

De Wint Court, our first extra care home, has opened since my last report to this committee adding 70 additional homes to our stock. As could be expected from a project such as this there have been some teething problems but things are now settling down.

Construction work is now close to completion of the Rookery Lane project which will add 42 new homes to our housing stock. It is anticipated these homes will be handed over to us towards the end of March.

Construction work on the first phase of the redevelopment of Hermit Street flats is anticipated to begin in late summer. This involves remodelling the existing properties with a number of additional new-build homes.

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. 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.

In the first nine months of this year 39 properties were sold through Right to Buy of which 19 are three-bed.

The largest project for the future is the Western Growth Corridor development which includes 640 affordable homes. The first affordable housing is on a site at the Tritton Road end of the scheme which will include 120 affordable homes on land owned by the Housing Revenue Account.

We have a good record of adding to our stock and from the start of 2018-19 have added over 350 properties through a mix of new build and acquisitions.

DECARBONISATION

We are committed to a policy that all Council new build homes commenced from the current financial year will be either net zero carbon or EPC A rated. We are also committed to raising the standard of all our housing stock to an average of EPC C rating. Our average SAP rating for our own stock was 70.43 at the commencement of

the current financial year which is above average for the UK. In addition, 5,862 of our properties have an EPC rating of C and a further 100 are rated B. The total rated at C or above is 76% of our total housing stock. Maintenance including the fitting of new boilers and windows continues to improve our ratings.

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.

I anticipate that a timetable and estimated costings will be included in the new 30 year Housing Business Plan.

The new vehicle fleet contract has now started. There is currently a crossover period with the old contract. The reason for this is that we are receiving the vehicles in a sporadic handover which is as and when they arrive. This is caused by the ongoing issues caused by Brexit and by supply issues regarding parts caused by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

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