

REPORT BY COUNCILLOR DONALD NANNESTAD, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR QUALITY HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

In this report I set out developments in housing together with performance data.

The areas of performance data produced for housing are set by Council members. However, from 1 April the Social Housing Regulator is expanding its role to include inspections of Local Authority owned housing departments and will require its own performance measures some of which coincide with what the Council already produces and some of which are different. In the light of that it may well be worth members reconsidering the performance measures that are produced.

One of the most significant events since my last report to Council has been the approval of a new 30-year Housing Business Plan which sets out our overall strategy for our own housing stock through to 2054. The priorities within this strategy are improving core housing services; delivering additional affordable homes; regenerating neighbourhoods and estates; and reducing carbon emissions. There will be a £1.5 billion investment in our housing stock over the next 30 years. Importantly, all Councillors and tenants were given the opportunity to have their say in this over a series of workshops which were well attended. The next stage is now underway which is to produce strategies and action plans for these priorities.

A significant development in progress is the Housing IT Replacement (HITREP). Recent staff changes within the team have led to some delays. The new system is on target to be installed and in operation during the forthcoming financial year 2024-25. The existing platform has been used for more than 15 years and technology has improved dramatically in that period. This investment will enhance services to our tenants and make a huge difference to the way our staff are able to operate. HITREP is a massive step forward and once fully operational this will improve both housing performance and data gathering.

We also continue to build new homes. The latest development handed over to us was at Ward Paddock, off Rookery Lane, and work has started on construction of 11 new houses at Hermit Street.

The Council has produced a new Communal Areas Policy and updated the Repairs and Maintenance Policy. Work is currently underway on a down-sizing policy, an aids and adaptations policy and a garage site strategy. The Pets Policy is currently being reviewed as is the Tenancy Agreement.

Changes in senior housing personnel have been made with Matt Hillman appointed Assistant Director for Asset Management and Paula Burton appointed Assistant Director for Housing Management. Matt has already taken up his position and Paula takes up her position on 1 March. There was member involvement in a comprehensive recruitment process which attracted significant interest from external candidates.

Housing has faced major challenges over the last 12 months and similar challenges face the Council in the year ahead. There is a housing crisis both in Lincoln and across the country. Increases in private rents have put these out of reach of anyone on benefits due to the freeze on Local Housing Allowance (LHA) which is the amount available to be claimed under housing benefit for a property. The Government announced in its Autumn Statement that this freeze will be lifted as of 1 April but this is a one-off increase and the freeze will then be reimposed which means that as landlords increase rents then their homes becoming increasingly unaffordable to tenants on benefits.

Lincoln has a further problem in that our Local Housing Market, the geographic area within which our LHA is assessed, covers both the city and Gainsborough. Private rents are lower in Gainsborough and so that reduces the LHA for Lincoln. Our research has shown that it is very rare for any private rented property to be available within Lincoln where the rent will be totally covered by LHA.

The effect of private rents not being covered in their entirety by LHA together with the continuation of no-fault evictions are two of the main factors that have led to an increase in people presenting themselves as homeless to the City Council. This in turn has led to a huge increase in the need for temporary accommodation as the Council often has no alternative but to place homeless families and individuals in bed and breakfast/hotel accommodation. The cost of this varies depending on the time of year and what events are taking place but the Council can only claim back a fraction of this cost through housing benefit with the financial burden then falling on the General Fund rather than the Housing Revenue Account.

The problems outlined here are identical to those faced by councils up and down the country. We have been working with the District Councils Network (DCN) on this and they lobbied over the Autumn Statement and are continuing to lobby both over the issues with LHA and Temporary Accommodation. The considerable increase in temporary accommodation costs has been described as “district councils’ social care moment” with some districts in other parts of the country warning the additional costs could force them into bankruptcy.

On top of these issues the Council continues to face financial pressures in housing. Earlier this year Council agreed to impose the Government guideline for rent increases of CPI as at September 2023 plus 1% which come to 7.7%. However, this follows a rent increase for the current year 2023-24 of 6.5% when the Government restricted increases well below what on their own formula should have been 11.1% made up of 10.1% CPI at September 2022 plus 1%. The financial situation also has to be seen in the context of previous Government policy which meant that rents were reduced by 1% year on year for four years to 2020 which meant that the Housing Revenue Account lost out on £17 million which is money that would have been spent in its entirety on housing services and investment in our homes.

The cost of sub-contractors at the end of fixed price contracts has increased by more than 20% and considerable efforts are being made to reduce this. As an example, the Council operatives now have the required training to install fire doors which means this can now be carried out in-house.

We also have additional costs imposed on us. The Social Housing Regulator is, from 1 April, expanding its role to include Council housing departments which will involve submission of performance data and inspections. This will come with a charge to the Council which is currently anticipated to be in the region of £60,000 a year.

Workforce recruitment is another issue for us as it is for other local authorities and for private construction companies.

Finally in this section I wish to thank all members of the Council's housing staff. 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 carried out very valuable work over the last year.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness continues to be a significant issue reflecting the situation that there is a housing crisis both locally and nationally. The number of families and individual people approaching the Council as homeless has doubled in the last two years. A total of 334 approached the Council as homeless to the end of Q3.

The percentages of successful preventions and relief of homelessness against the total number approaching the Council as homeless is 50.37% which is an improvement on recent performance. The number of people on the housing register at the end of Q3 was 1,998 which is an increase of 86 over the last quarter.

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. Eight out of 10 of our homes were constructed before 1974. 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 with a lesser number of flats bought by tenants. Right to Buy has had and continues to have a serious effect on our ability to house people. I understand the aspiration of tenants to own their own home rather than rent but this has to be balanced with the much higher number of people who aspire to live in Council housing.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report we sold 22 Council homes in the first three quarters of this year early all of which were three-bed properties but over the same period a total of 268 people applicants were added to our housing register. Since Right to Buy was introduced the City Council has lost around 30% of our Council houses with many of these now private rented properties at rents considerably higher than Council homes.

The percentage of rent collected to the end of Q3 was 100.46% which is above the target of 97.5%. The rent income was £24.24 million. Arrears were 2.86% of rent debit which is again well below the target of 4% and is despite the fact that rent collection has become increasingly challenging in recent months with tenants, like all residents of the city, affected by cost of living issues. Current rent arrears at the end of Q3 were £0.93 million. Cost of living issues are not the only factor in this with another issue

being the migration of tenants on to Universal Credit (UC) which means that in most cases those on UC will no longer have their rent paid directly to the Council whereas previously the authority received this money directly in the form of housing benefit.

At the end of Q3, 98.97% anti-social behaviour (ASB) cases that were closed were resolved. A total of 193 ASB cases had been closed to the end of Q3. These cases relate only to housing ASB cases. The average time taken to resolve cases was 44.1 days which is well within the target of 70 days. Both measures are categorised as green.

VOIDS

The three performance indicators covering voids remain in red but continue to show improvement. However, in comparison with national benchmarking figures we are in the upper quartile despite being outside of our own performance figures. Our target stands 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 in the first three quarters of the financial year is at 41.1 days and 47.72 days, respectively. In both cases this is an improvement on the 2022-23 figures and in instances where major works are required this is a reduction of eight days. Taking Q3 alone the average re-let period for homes excluding major works was 38.43 days which is the first occasion in recent times this has fallen below 40 days and is an improvement of 5 days from this year's Q1 figure. The percentage of rent lost due to vacant dwellings in Q3 was 1.13% which is very close to the target of 1%. There were 370 relets in total in the first three quarters of which 123 required major work.

Although there has been a positive impact on performance the number of properties that require cleansing prior to works starting continues to have a significant impact on the overall performance. The need for cleansing can delay works commencing by up to two weeks. To help reduce this impact, the team is focused on carrying out pre-void inspections, which will allow conversations with tenants to take place encouraging them to ensure the property is fully cleared when they leave.

We are also using videos explaining to tenants the condition in which they should leave their property.

In time these measures should help to reduce the number of void properties being returned requiring significant cleansing. In addition, we continue to recharge tenants where expense is incurred in cleaning and emptying properties.

HOUSING REPAIRS

The number of priority and urgent repair appointments has increased by 50% compared to the first three quarters of 2022-23 from 5,509 to 8,275. There are several reasons for this. There have been a significant number of extra repairs due to damage caused during the storms in October and December; some repairs have been recategorized and are now priority or urgent; and the large increase in the number of additional repairs related to damp and mould.

Monitoring has taken place to ensure that requests are placed in the correct category. In addition, there has been a restructure of operatives which has increased resource and availability to ensure more work can be completed on the first visit.

As regards scheduled repairs the Council has started moving from a 12-week cycle to a 9-week cycle.

At the end of Q3 four of the six performance indicators relating to housing repairs showed as green. 99.45% of priority (one-day repairs) were carried out within the time limit with a target of 99.5% putting this in the amber category. The number of priority repairs completed to the end of Q3 was 3,252.

The percentage of urgent (three day) repairs completed on time was 89.49% with the number of repairs being 4,700. This is the sole red indicator within this section with the target being 97.5%. The average time to complete urgent repairs was 2.18 days which is a very slight improved performance on the year end 2022-23 when it was 2.2 days with both figures within the 3-day target. Again, this will have been impacted by Storm Babet and Storm Henk.

96.64% of priority and urgent repair appointments were kept to end of Q3 with a target of 97%. This is 7,997 appointments kept out of 8,275.

The number of damp and mould issues raised during 2022-23 increased by 38% year on year with 227 cases compared to 164 for 2021-22. This was in the main due to publicity arising from the Rochdale inquest which has led to people being much more aware of the danger damp and mould can pose. In the previous years, the number of cases fluctuated between 130 and 205. The latest figure I have for the current year is that there have been damp and mould issues raised at 772 properties. Some of these issues may not have been reported by tenants in the past but the awareness as a result of the inquest findings means that these are now being highlighted by tenants.

100% of priority (one day) gas repairs were carried out within the one-day time limit by our contractor Aaron Services to end of Q3. This was 3,086 repairs.

HOUSING INVESTMENT

At the end of Q3 the percentage of council properties that were not at the Decent Homes standard (excluding refusals) was 0.86%, which is 67 properties. This performance measure is in the green category with the target for the year end being 1%.

At the end of Q3 98.29% of properties had a valid gas certificate with a target of 99 % - again placing this as amber. 93 homes did not have a valid certificate. Cases where the tenant refuses access for the gas safety inspection has increased since the Covid 19 pandemic. As a matter of course these cases are 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 lifetime of the tenancy.

Fire risk assessments are now required on all of the Council's low- and high-rise blocks of flats as a result of changes in regulations. Assessments for the three high rise blocks

were completed and registered with the Building Safety Regulator before the deadline. Within the last three years the Council has completed assessments of all of our low-rise blocks. Some of these assessments were carried out in 2021 and these are now being assessed again as required under the regulations.

NEW BUILD

Since my last report to Council the 42 new homes at Ward Paddock, off Rookery Lane, have been completed and tenanted.

Construction work has now begun on 11 new houses as the first phase of the redevelopment of Hermit Street. These new homes consist of six three-bed and five two-bed properties. The energy efficiency measures for these homes include air source heat pumps; triple glazing; and water butts to reuse rainwater. The use of a local contractor reduces carbon emissions and travel to work while 90% of waste will be recycled. Each of the properties will have EV charging points and will have two parking spaces. In addition, there is a biodiversity net gain of 17% through introduction of grassed gardens, additional landscaping, and removal of some tarmac hardstanding.

Work has started on the first phase of the Western Growth Corridor development. This will see the construction of 3,200 new homes of which 640 (20%) are scheduled to be affordable homes. The first affordable homes to be constructed are in phase 1B which is to be accessed off Tritton Road. This phase includes 120 affordable homes.

We continue to work with the charity Barnardo's to provide supported accommodation for care leavers with on-site staff. A site, owed by the City Council, has been identified for what would be the first so-called Gap housing project provided by Barnardo's in England. The project is referred to as Gap housing because the proposal is to utilise suitable sites within gaps. This would be a Barnardo's, rather than a City Council project, but we have enabled and supported this by offering our land.

We have continued to acquire properties under the purchase and repair scheme using Right to Buy receipts (RTB). At the end of Q3 we had purchased five properties. A further 10 are in conveyancing (which includes three new build), three more are awaiting sign-off to purchase following valuation and a further property is awaiting valuation.

In the first nine months of this year 22 properties were sold through Right to Buy of which 19 are three-bed.

DECARBONISATION

We are committed to a policy that, where possible, all Council new build homes commenced will be either net zero carbon or EPC A rated. Where this is not possible we will build to EPC B rating. We are also committed to raising the standard of all our housing stock to an average of EPC C rating.

As at the end of Q3 6,646 of our Council housing stock were rated at Band C or above. That is 85.3% of our houses. The average score across all our dwellings is 72.04.

Band C covers between 69 and 80. The 14.7% of properties below Band C are as follows: Band D - 1,133; Band E – 4; Band F – 2; Band G – 0. New targets reflecting our priorities in relation to Climate Change are being proposed for 2024-25.

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.

LINCARE CONTROL CENTRE

There are two performance measures for the Control Centre which are related to the Lincare Housing Assistance service.

At the end of Q3 the percentage of customers satisfied with their new Lincare Housing Assistance service connection to the Control Centre was 95.92%. This outturn is above the high target for the measure of 95%. A total of 105 surveys were distributed relating to new connections. 47 out of the 49 respondents were satisfied and two were not. All negative feedback is forwarded onto the Lincare Manager to review.

The percentage of Lincare Housing Assistance calls answered within 60 seconds in Q3 was 97.77%. This is above the low target for the measure of 97.5%.

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