

Homes & Communities Portfolio Holder Report

Introduction

'My first few months in this role have been busy and I have enjoyed immensely getting to know the Officers in the service and understanding in much greater detail how this hugely operational, front facing area of the Council works.

Part of my induction to the role has been about getting to know our Officers and I have taken it upon myself to understand parts of the service from an operational perspective, this has been helpful for me to understand how our services are delivered and where improvements need to be made.

I have been delighted to meet many residents in my short time as PH, I have had many opportunities to understand and learn about the issues and problems that really effect people living in our District and I have seen the fundamental difference our housing service as well as other services we deliver makes to people life's every single day.

I have been working closely with Senior Officers to support the range of additional support measures we are putting in place to help people with the cost of living crisis, we have had to divert additional time and resources into this and this has come on top of many competing priorities and projects that the service are already focused on.

We have many challenges ahead and I look forward to leading our team of passionate and dedicated Officers through this.

I have tried to summarise through this report what has been a very busy period'

Existing Plans/Strategies in Place

I have spent a significant amount of time familiarising myself with the range of plans and strategies that underpin my Portfolio area, of which there are many.

Housing Service Plan

We have continued to ensure a focus on the objectives as set out in the Housing Service Plan 22/23 and more recently I have met with the Housing Leadership Team to look carefully at objectives for the coming new Housing Service Plan for 2023/2024. This has been co-ordinated across the Housing Task Force also as I have been keen to ensure that the objectives set out for the Housing Task Force compliment the ongoing work of the housing service due to how interlinked they are.

As a reminder of our core purpose as set out in the Housing Service Plan, our over-riding housing service vision is to deliver a **decent home for all** residents of East Devon. This compliments the Council Plan priority of **Better Homes & Communities for All**.

I am committed to delivering our Housing Strategy which sets out four key objectives:

- To provide a housing options service for all who are homeless or threatened with homelessness;
- To provide, maintain and manage our own council housing stock;
- To work with housing developers and housing associations to deliver more affordable housing;
- To regulate and improve other social rented, private rented and owner occupied housing.

Public Health Strategic Plan

I have spent time reviewing the Councils Public Health Strategic Plan to ensure we help more people be and stay healthy, enhance self-care and community resilience, and integrate and improve support for people in their own homes.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019- 2023

I recently attended a monitoring group meeting to understand progress we are making on delivery of our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019- 2023.

The strategy is based upon the results of a review of homelessness in our area and has resulted in establishing the following four priorities:

- Maximise prevention activities and outcomes;
- Increase accommodation options;
- Minimise rough sleeping;
- Improve health and wellbeing.

Recognising the pressure on this particular area of the Service, in September I worked with the Housing Service Lead to bring forward 4 additional posts required in order to ensure we can maintain the homelessness and advice service that through the current cost of living crisis is an area continuing to see increasing demand. I reviewed this carefully, understanding in detail why we needed to increase resources and we successfully approved making two current temporary Housing Officer positions permanent as well as getting approval for an additional full-time Temporary Accommodation Officer. This has given us some stability from a staffing perspective.

This additional resource will ensure continuity for the increasing number of our residents having to access these services and also ensure the staff in this team have the additional resource they require to ensure they are not overwhelmed. As with all of the teams in housing, our Homelessness team are dealing with increasingly complex situations everyday-situations such as people who are threatening suicide, very complex mental health problems, serious domestic violence and safeguarding cases where children are often at risk and Officers have to work closely with a number of additional agencies to provide emergency intervention to ensure peoples safety.

Poverty Strategy

I have continued to support Officers to ensure the work we are doing in this area remains a high priority. Given the current economic instability across the Country, our commitments set out in this Strategy mean we have already been working on ensuring we are supporting people in a range of ways to lift them out of poverty and I have been proud to pick up the excellent work the previous Portfolio Holder started on this topic.

As we know this situation shows no sign of improving any time soon, in fact this has got worse in my time as PH and in order to build on the excellent work already started here, I have supported the housing team to look at more measures we can put in place to help support people in a range of additional ways. Some of this I have set out below under the Housing Winter Pressures Plan.

The five strategic objectives of the Poverty Strategy remain very much at the forefront of work across the whole of my Portfolio, these are all being led by the relevant Service Leads;

- 1 Helping people on low incomes to maximise their household income and minimise their costs, building financial resilience and reducing indebtedness. Lead Service- Finance.
- 2 Strengthening families and communities, including supporting groups of people that are more likely to experience poverty, and community and voluntary groups working to combat poverty. Lead Service- Housing.
- 3 Promoting an inclusive economy, by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low incomes. Lead Service – Growth, Development & Prosperity.
- 4 Addressing the high cost of housing, improving housing conditions, creating affordable warmth and reducing homelessness. Lead Service – Housing/ Environmental Health.
- 5 Improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health care and ill health prevention. Lead Service – Environmental Health.

Focused areas of work

I have summarised below some particular areas of focus I have supported and led on;

Housing Winter Pressures Plan

Linked to our brilliant work set out in the Poverty Strategy, I have been keen to develop a specific housing offer that focuses on tenants living in our properties to ensure we are doing everything we can to help people through these increasingly difficult times.

This work remains ongoing and so far includes;

- Opening of our Community Centres across the District as warm spaces, we are now starting to open Centres on different days in different areas. This provides a safe, warm space for people to come together. As well as a warmth initiative, the spaces

also provide a space where people who might be isolated can come together and the social benefits of this we are very keen to promote.

- We are providing refreshments in our warm spaces and as all community centres have broadband, there are also benefits we can promote where people who could be digitally excluded are able to come along and access broadband which may help them with other areas of their life's (in a world where increasingly everything has to be accessed online!)
- Creation of a specific housing hardship fund, £50k has been set aside for tenants who may need additional financial support this winter. Cases will be assessed on an individual basis but support can be offered in a range of ways such as help for those one off 'big spends' such as a washing machine breaking down- many of our tenants find themselves in difficult situations when such occurrences happen and I am keen to be able to help people directly with additional financial support.
- The financial hardship fund can also be offered to tenants struggling with heating bills, we recognise the number of heating upgrades required across our stock and that due to this heating bills in these properties might be higher, we therefore are keen to assist where hardship arises due to this.
- This specific financial support aimed at tenants is in addition to the number of grants and financial support streams that can be accessed via our revenue and benefits team.
- Pro-actively visiting tenants who live in our least energy efficient properties, recognising the additional investment that is required into our stock to see what practical, short term measures can be put in place to help them get through the winter- we are issuing items such as draught excluders and blankets as practical, helpful items that our tenants can greatly benefit from.
- Launching our special edition tenant magazine- *Housing Matters* that offers a brilliant range of practical, helpful tips for tenants and ways to cope with the current cost of living crisis. I have asked Officers to ensure all Members have access to the information so they can promote the magazine across their communities.
- Pushing more pro-active measures in supporting people with financial resilience such as holding drop in sessions where tenants can come along and get advice and guidance on money management and maximising benefit income. Our rental Officers and Mobile Support Officers are regularly undertaking these reviews and continue to see success in significantly improving people's financial situations.

The work on the housing winter pressures plan is very much still in development but an excellent start has been made. We have a full-time Officer working on this area to ensure these initiatives are being developed at pace ready for the coming months.

Strategic Asset Management/Stock Condition Survey/Decarbonisation

Our ageing stock requires considerable investment.

I have undertaken many site visits in my time as PH and recognise the huge level of investment that will be required over many years in order to ensure our stock is fit for purpose. Covid has got in the way of some of our previously planned upgrade works such as our kitchen and bathroom programmes but we are making good progress ramping these

back up now across several sites in the District. I am keen to ensure we are looking at investment opportunities on a much wider scale such as whole site regeneration, where difficult decisions will need to be made around areas where disposal might be the best option. To drive all of these decisions, the absolute priority currently is that the stock condition survey continues to be carried out and that we start to ramp up the pace of it. The survey is being completed geographically across the District, it is gathering pace and we have had some successful recruitment into this newly formed team in order to keep this important project moving forward.

We have ambitious plans to survey 100% survey of our stock by the end of the summer 2023, I have been keeping the pressure up on this area in order to ensure we can achieve this. This data will be absolutely key in helping us review the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan which is in urgent need of a refresh on the basis that we need to ensure we understand the levels of investment required to our current housing stock. We have to consider the raft of new Legislation that has been introduced by Government in recent years to ensure our stock remains compliant. Our borrowing capacity needs to be carefully considered particularly against risks such as the current rent cap that the Government are looking to impose as well as the rising cost of inflation and debt. We are about to commission external expertise to specifically undertake this refresh and rewrite of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and I look forward to seeing this progress.

Housing contributes a significant amount to the council's carbon footprint and therefore we have a big part to play in the council's carbon neutral ambition. I am working with the Service to produce plans to reduce the carbon footprint of our tenant's homes and housing services. This will involve significant expenditure over many years, so we are ensuring that the Housing Revenue Account prioritises expenditure over the next twenty years plus for this work and this will all be factored into the refresh of the Business Plan as outlined above.

Whilst we await the data from the stock condition survey, we are not stood still- we are continuing to deliver upgrade programmes to our stock across a variety of work streams.

Off the back of previous successful bids we have made to central government for decarbonisation funding, we have also very recently submitted a further bid for funding under the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, this is a bid for just over £2million over the next 2 years, we have committed almost the equivalent to match fund from the Housing Revenue Account. I am encouraging the team to access as much Government grant funding as we can in this area.

Integrated Asset Management Contract

Ensuring we are providing an efficient housing repairs service has been one of my key areas of focus and I have spent a considerable amount of time linking in with the Officers in this part of the service in order to better understand the operational workings of how we deliver this contract.

I am acutely aware of the emphasis and importance placed on this area by tenants, many of them have told me this is the area of our housing service they care most about.

One thing I have been particularly keen to work on is our reputation in this area. Coming into the role I was acutely aware that the our reputation in this area had been struggling for some time and I have therefore been keen to ensure we are getting out into our communities in an attempt to re-connect and engage with tenants. As one way of doing this I am working with the Officers on running a series of Social Value days and I have been delighted to attend and participate in all of these so far. I have been keen to encourage Members to attend these days in order to meet our contractors and learn more about the service we deliver. These events so far have been held in Lymebourne Park Sidmouth and Greenhaven, Budleigh Salterton, both were very successful with high attendance.

Activities on the day have included;

- Offering refreshments
- A repair on the day service, with operatives on hand to respond immediately to responsive repairs that can be completed on the day.
- Gardening and general clean ups of communal areas
- Use of a large skip, we have encouraged tenants to use to dispose of items from their homes.
- A money advice service, tenants could sit with one of our trained Officers and get tailored help and advice.
- We used the days as community consultation opportunities, for example in Sidmouth we displayed plans of proposals to improve the bin areas and asked tenants to tell us their views.
- Representatives from partner agencies such as the fire service and the police have attended the days also.
- Attendance by the probation service who engaged on some of the estate clean up work we wanted to achieve, this was very successful and I have asked the team to consider where we could engage them on other projects across the district.

Our performance indicators that underpin our contract performance have continued to steadily improve which is a positive step taking into account the extreme pressures on staffing in this area. I have been keen to limit additional distractions for this team in order to ensure they can remain entirely focused on delivery. I have been pleased to see a focus remaining on the specific Action Plan that was created at the beginning of the year that highlighted a number of areas that we have needed to improve on, in particular the need for better communication with tenants. I take many opportunities to visit tenants who have been dis-satisfied with our service and have ensured always that Officers are dealing with such cases urgently and that we are learning from what has gone wrong.

Due to some of the vacancies we have been carrying in this area (out of a team of 4 Maintenance Surveyors, we still only have 2 in post) the service has been what I would refer to as 'firefighting' and there has been too much pressure on the remaining Officers. I have supported the management team to engage the support of a specialist consultant who is offering valuable support to the Property and Asset Manager to ensure we can remain focused on the issues raised in the Action Plan.

As always at this time of year, the winter will bring significant demand and the service will come under increased pressure. We are certainly going into this period in a stronger position than we were in a few months ago however this area still needs particular focus and I intend to ensure I remain closely linked in.

Void properties

Increasing numbers of people on our waiting list means we must ensure we are turning properties around as quickly as we can to ensure people are able to access safe, secure accommodation. We have struggled in this area over recent months and I have continued to drive the urgency and focus that is required to ensure our performance is improving, this is now starting to happen. I have liaised closely with Managers to understand some of the delays we have experienced and have encouraged us to focus more resources in this area in order to improve. Officer turnover in this area has not helped us and this coupled with our Contractor struggling to obtain labour resources has further added to the problem. This area is however now moving in a more positive direction, work still to do and this will not be resolved overnight but I am very confident we are moving in a better direction but it is an area I will be continuing to monitor closely.

Damp and Mould problems in our Housing Stock/ the work of Private Sector Housing Team.

Again, due to the age of our housing stock, issues with damp and mould regularly arise. We have a legislative responsibility to ensure our homes remain habitable and I have been very supportive of the Officers bringing forward our first ever specific housing damp and mould policy that will set out clearly our responsibilities in this area and how we set out to manage these issues in order to ensure the comfort of tenants living in our homes. This is a complex area and we must ensure we are pro-actively supporting and educating tenants to manage damp and mould as part of how they live in their properties, our policy will set out how we intend to do this.

Issues of damp and mould are not unique to social housing, many residents living in the private sector find themselves in a situation where they struggle to get the support and help they need from their landlord to deal with such issues.

As the local housing authority, our Environmental Health Private Sector Housing team are continuing to provide a key service that ensure they are providing information; advice and enforcement in the owner occupied and private rented properties including registered social landlords.

Private landlords have a duty to comply with a range of legislation to prevent damp and mould; to have suitable heating and effective energy efficiency measures. To ensure that their property is fit for habitation and has an energy performance certificate A to F.

PSH has a role to investigate and undertake risk assessments under the Housing Act 2004 The HHSRS covers 29 hazards including 'damp and mould' and 'excess cold'.

This area of our work is absolutely critical and as recently highlighted by the tragic death of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale, is an area that we as a Council must continue to prioritise and I am having regular discussions with the Senior Officers about these areas of our service.

Community Development/ Launch of Resident Involvement Consultation exercise

I have been very keen to drive our focus in this area to ensure we are back out in our communities and visible and our team of Community Development Officers play a key role in this. I have overseen a restructure in this team and supported the need to recruit a dedicated operational Manager into this team. I have been pleased to see us ramp up in this area in a number of ways including the continuation of our work with Fairshare to tackle food poverty as well as linking in with the many brilliant voluntary/community groups we have in East Devon who are undertaking fantastic work in the Community.

I was pleased to see the Housing Review Board approve the recommendations to commence consultation on our new Resident Involvement Strategy. Ensuring tenants have the opportunity to input and help us shape our services is something I am very passionate about and the launch of our new Strategy which is due to commence early next year is a great opportunity for us. I have asked the Senior Officers to ensure we promote this important opportunity for tenants to get involved with the consultation and help us shape and improve our services to ensure the things that really matter to tenants are at the heart of everything we do.

Homes for Ukraine

Following the invasion of Ukraine and the Governments commitment to support people fleeing the war, we have had to work closely with Devon County Council to set up and deliver the Homes for Ukraine scheme. At the start, considerable time had to be spent setting up how this was going to be delivered and a virtual project team was formed with relevant Officers from across the Council engaged in ensuring we could meet all expectations being placed on us by central Government. This has been achieved successfully and recently we have also assigned a dedicated Project Officer to oversee the area and work closely with our partners in Citizens Advice to ensure we are offering the required levels of support and welcoming people to ensure they are settling into our District. The scheme does bring risks for us with the potential of increasing levels of homelessness, particularly where sponsor arrangements might end and people may turn to us for support with accommodation options. As mentioned above, we have increased resourcing in the team in order to prepare for that.

Housing Task Force

As the Chair of the Social Housing Task and Finish Forum I led wide ranging discussions around how we could increase our supply of social housing and redress the balance of the

losses incurred by the Right To Buy Scheme. There were a number of recommendations tabled which the forum felt had merit and required further investigation and resourcing. As a result I have been pivotal in the inception and implementation of the new Housing Task Force

The remit of the Task Force is to increase delivery of both Affordable and Social Housing across the district and reduce the numbers of people currently on our Devon Home Choice waiting list. The service is initially funded for 2 years after which time it's outcomes will be reviewed

The team went live in mid-February 2022 and like most of the council has struggled to recruit the required posts. However at the point of writing we do have a part time Enabling Officer and a part time Development Surveyor working alongside the Service Lead. Following the Pay Review we are hopeful we will be able to recruit to the remaining posts early in the new year.

In spite of the above the team has got off to a strong start with their initial focus being on redevelopment of land within HRA ownership. They started by reviewing our areas of housing need and cross referencing this with our underutilised garage sites.

Procurement has been successfully undertaken and 3 sites in Honiton have been sent to our Preferred Development Partner ZedPods to take through site design and financial feasibility in preparation for sign off by cabinet. We will shortly be having a ZedPods Demo Home sited on the upper overflow carpark at Blackdown House, for use in tenant and community consultation and for members to use as publicity to show the strides EDDC are taking in dealing with both the current housing crises and the climate change agenda. At this point we believe these three sites will yield us up to 25 new carbon neutral homes in mid-2023

In addition to this the team have been reviewing wider council assets that have been earmarked for disposal, which could be redeveloped to provide housing. Jarvis Road Carpark and Toilet Block in Exmouth is one such site with real potential. An architect has been instructed to draw up initial design schematics in preparation for a report to go to SMT+ before Christmas

They are also exploring One Public Estate sites and are currently working with DCC on securing the asset transfer of an old school site in Honiton. If successful this would also yield 20-25 homes. We hope to complete negotiations on price and agree terms before Christmas

We are currently looking to purchase a smaller site in Sidbury which already has planning for 7 homes. We are keen to acquire this site to help address the dire need for housing in the Sidmouth area as development within the town is severely limited. We also have a significant committed sum to spend in the area and we hope to secure the land within this amount

We have an indicative pipeline of development opportunities for further exploration and feasibility in addition to those mentioned above and we are actively seeking others. To

support us in the preparation and delivery of schemes we are procuring (via a framework) specialist consultants. We had a favourable response to our expression of interest for Architectural Services and the team are currently reviewing the responses

The team continues to work closely with Homes England, our RP and CLT partners to develop affordable housing

There are a number of potential risks to highlight for the future of our development and growth aspirations, not least of which is the current economic crises. We have competing priorities for the HRA budget (carbon reduction, maintenance impacts of the stock condition survey and our desire to build new homes) The proposed rent cap will impact widely and during discussions with our RP partners they have stated that they will very likely be scaling back on their affordable housing delivery in order to absorb the losses incurred to their rental income. The Natural England Embargo on development within the Axe Valley is also having an impact as we have a number of good sized potential sites in the area, but we are continuing to explore these and add them to the pipeline in preparation for the embargo being lifted

Conclusion

This report has touched briefly on what I have considered to be some key areas that have been a focus for my first 6 months in role but there are many areas of my Portfolio that I have not included and some of these areas I am yet to familiarise myself with.

There are many challenges ahead for the service, there is a raft of new legislation coming into play in the format of the Building Safety Act and the Social Housing Act and I have seen much preparation for this to ensure we are well prepared. Some up and coming work for me includes a review of the void standard to ensure our offer of a home to people really does set people up with the best start as well as plans for a number of Estate walkabouts in some of the areas I am still not familiar with. I am also part way through attending a number of team meetings across the Service where I have a brilliant opportunity to meet frontline Officers, I have used these opportunities so far to thank staff on behalf of Cabinet for the amazing work that they do.

The ramping up of the work of the Housing Task Force is exciting and it has been great watching this develop, I look forward to continuing to work closely with Officers to deliver new homes- as we know this has been an over-arching priority for us for a number of years.

I have been pleased with progress being made particularly given the recruitment challenges that the housing team have had to endure and this remains very much ongoing as although progress has been made in many areas the recruitment and retention challenges continue to impact. Through my fortnightly briefings with the Strategic Lead and the Housing Service Lead, I have supported them as best I can with decisions that have had to be made quickly in order to maintain frontline service delivery.

I remain ambitious and passionate about how we can continue to build our services but want to see more exposure of the great work being undertaken. I have set up a weekly

communications briefing with the communications team and representatives from the housing team to ensure that we are constantly pushing good news stories. We need to celebrate more the diverse range of services we offer and recognise the difference we are continuing to make to the life's of people in our District.

I am happy to expand on any of the information I have provided in this report.

Dan ledger – Portfolio Holder Sustainable Homes & Communities