

## Homes & Communities Portfolio Holder report

**Introductory statement** - I am passionate about my portfolio and my ambitions can be summarised as striving to achieve Better Homes & Communities for All.

It has become more of a full-time job for me during the last six months. I have spent time getting to know individual members of staff and supporting the teams, promoting a collaborative approach fusing political and professional energy towards great outcomes for individuals and communities.

I focus my efforts on the policy framework and strategic direction of the varied and diverse services that make up my portfolio. I rarely get involved in detailed casework, as I have established a trust with officers and the knowledge that they will follow statutory processes and locally adopted policy.

I have a three-weekly call with the Housing Service Lead and six-weekly catch-up with the Strategic Lead to ensure that I am briefed on policy and operational matters.

The last nine months have been dominated by Covid-19 and I have been delighted to see the way we have adapted and maintained services in my portfolio to ensure that our tenants, residents and communities continue to be served well. We have a caring, professional, creative and effective team of people that I am proud to lead.

This report is necessarily a summary of what has been a busy period so I have picked out some highlights over the last twelve months to include:

**Housing Service Plan 2021/22** – We have reviewed and refreshed the Service Plan over the last few months. I have worked in tandem with Housing managers on the latest version of the Plan.

Our overriding Housing Service vision is to deliver a **decent home for all** residents of East Devon. This complements the emerging 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.

We have adopted the following purpose(s) where we have undertaken Systems Thinking reviews in Housing:

- To match the right people with the right home (voids & allocations).
- Do the right repair at the right time, get it right first time, and stay fixed (responsive repairs).
- Do the right service/repair at the right time, and leave safe (gas servicing).

- To collect the right amount of rent at the right time (rent management).
- Deal with customer emergencies promptly (Home Safeguard).

I have wanted to ensure that our services are delivered consistent with the Council's 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.

Our approach to managing and tackling homelessness has been reviewed and articulated in 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.

**Contribution to Council Plan/Statement of Intent** - I have contributed to and influenced the Statement of Intent ensuring that Housing and Communities are recognised as a priority for the Council. Our clear intentions are:

We want to ensure better build quality of new homes, more affordable and social housing and a good standard of maintenance to ensure homes are fit for purpose across all sectors. To us, delivering better homes is about so much more than bricks and mortar; it is about using our resources and influence to keep people healthy and safe. It is about the quality of the setting of the homes, whether that is town, village or countryside and the amenities, the open space and infrastructure that serve the houses and contribute to the wellbeing of residents.

As a council we also wish to reduce poverty and deprivation and intend to use our resources to achieve this. We intend to deliver on our commitment on Better Homes and Communities for All by:

- Increasing the supply of quality social and affordable housing. We will also provide housing options for those in housing need through our own housing revenue account and working with our partner housing associations (Registered Providers). We also intend to:
  - Deliver on the commitments in our Housing Strategy and Housing Service Plan
  - Implement our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy to assist those in greatest housing need
  - Work with communities to develop community-led housing schemes
  - Work towards the adoption of a new local plan at the earliest opportunity

- We will review the purpose of our Housing Company to ensure that it is focused on our ambitions, specifically the delivery of a council build and acquisition programme
- Deliver plans to decarbonise housing consistent with our climate change ambitions
- Ensure that Council homes are well managed, in good repair, fit for purpose and safe for our tenants
- Obtain high performance and value for money from our Integrated Asset Management contract for repairs and maintenance, and continue to invest in tenants' homes guided by stock condition data
- Engage with and involve tenants in decisions affecting their homes
- Advise on and enforce standards in the private sector to attain suitable management and safety standards, including affordable warmth, houses in multiple occupation, mobile homes and private water supplies
- Promote Home Safeguard services and develop our supported housing offer
- Lobby central government on ceasing the "right to buy" and allowing greater flexibility in spending Right to Buy receipts
- Ensure that developers meet their obligations with regard to social and affordable housing and ensuring that the new local plan contains robust policy and provisions to ensure this.
- Create and implement a poverty strategy to reduce hardship and inequality in the district
- Implement the actions in the Public Health Strategy designed to improve public health, wellbeing, and the quality of life of our residents
- Promote community well-being programmes through a culture and activities offer, led by THG, Seaton Wetlands, Wild East Devon, and expand our community development activities

I am pleased that these areas have prominence in our plans for the future.

### **Covid Response & Recovery**

I am sighted on weekly reports on infection rates, housing rents and Covid KPIs.

Response & Recovery actions during the Covid-19 pandemic has been a major achievement, maintaining essential services to tenants, using alternative methods of communication and contact, maintaining tenant safety, switching to agile/remote working and supporting the Community Support Hub.

During the Response phase of the pandemic we quickly established a set of guiding priorities for the Housing Service, which are reproduced below:

# Housing Priorities- Covid-19

<p><b>Keeping residents safe</b></p> <p>Maintaining our Housing Options Service to ensure everyone has access to housing advice in order to prevent homelessness.</p> <p>We will respond to any reports of rough sleeping immediately and prioritise engaging with these individual's to prevent street homelessness in every instance.</p> <p>Prioritising Home Safeguard Alarm calls, ensuring we maintain full service cover with additional staffing at peak times.</p> <p>Increasing levels of phone support for residents living in Sheltered Housing, signposting and assisting them to access additional help and support through the many volunteer networks that have been set up across the District.</p> <p>Encouraging residents to ensure they have their pendant alarms on them so they can access help and support if required.</p> <p>Pro-actively contacting General Purpose Residents who are over the age of 70 or who have a disability to check they have support in place, again signposting to additional support where appropriate.</p> <p>Attending all Emergency Repairs as required ensuring safety measures are put in place- asking residents to vacate rooms whilst Operatives are in attendance and ensuring the safe distancing measures are put in place.</p> <p>Prioritising Gas Safety Checks, working with residents to ensure these are undertaken on-time and safely.</p> <p>Prioritising the need to ensure private sector tenants are being advised accordingly in relation</p>	<p><b>Protecting Residents Income and Livelihoods</b></p> <p>We will take a supportive, sensitive approach to residents who are struggling to pay their rent as a direct result of Covid-19.</p> <p>We will signpost residents to other avenues of support and help that might be available to them such and benefits, DHP and unemployment advice.</p>
<p><b>Sustaining Critical Services</b></p>	<p><b>Supporting Communities and Recovery</b></p>

<p>We will recognise the impact that Covid-19 has on our own Officers and their families. We will be constantly aware of increased demand on front-line services and prioritise our Officers health and well-being to ensure we are able to maintain services.</p> <p>We will constantly monitor demand on our front-line services in order to assess where staffing levels might need to be increased, we will consider re-deployment opportunities where appropriate.</p> <p>We will keep our website updated of all the latest information in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on the Housing Service.</p> <p>We will continually adapt and be flexible to ensure we can respond to changes required to our services as required through Legislation/Government Guidance.</p>	<p>We will promote health and well-being initiatives amongst all of our residents to help people cope with self-isolation recognising the impact on mental and physical health.</p> <p>We will pro-actively use of Social Media platforms to engage and communicate with residents.</p> <p>We will think creatively of ways we can keep in touch with residents and encourage group activities to support people connecting with each other. We will be mindful of the issue of loneliness and will look at measures to help combat this with increased contact to individuals who live alone.</p> <p>We will work closely with residents within our Shared Accommodation sites to ensure we are supporting safety measures that need to be in place in relation to self-isolating, recognising that there will be challenges with facilities are shared.</p> <p>We will be alert to planning for the backlog of work that will impact on many areas of the housing service (responsive repairs) to ensure a smooth transition back to business as normal once the time comes.</p>
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**Housing Recovery Plan** – The Response phase moved to a Recovery phase as we moved out of the first national lockdown. Housing produced a detailed Plan to ensure that business critical operations such as responsive repairs; gas servicing; fire risk assessments; and work to void properties were uninterrupted, but with Covid secure methods of working. We initiated a ‘call before visiting’ protocol early in the pandemic, which subsequently became good practice in the sector.

We also initiated a system of telephone calls to all vulnerable tenants that was subsequently rolled out to all tenants. We checked on the welfare and the needs of our 4,200 tenants.

Tenants’ safety has always been our top priority and in addition to all our regulatory and compliance work we have added the risk of infection by Covid-19 as a key consideration. As a consequence risk assessments and safe systems of work have been created to meet this important new risk.

**Housing Review Board policies adopted, direction of travel** – I have shaped the agenda for the Board and encouraged and supported tenants to play a full part in the management of their homes. I fully support the Chair and the work of the Board. I attend and contribute to all meetings.

The last Board meeting covered a range of diverse housing subjects including:

Integrated Asset Management Contract-Update
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Disrepair claims
Advantage South West: Renewal of Subscription
Advantage South West: Recruitment and Skills Project
Climate Change Action Plan, decarbonising housing
Air Source Heat Pumps installation programme
Neighbourhood and Community Standard Self-Assessment
Covid-19 Housing Recovery
Finance Report (end of August 2020)
Stock Condition Survey
Formal Complaints
Sailors Rest, Exmouth: Allocations and Management
Structure of the Housing Service

**Homelessness and Rough sleeping** – I oversaw the update report to Cabinet in October which detailed the recent position on the increase in homelessness. The rough sleeper count undertaken in November identified 13 people most from out of area. I have tried to encourage and support the Housing Options team who have experienced a huge increase in demand and have performed remarkably well with reduced options as a result of the pandemic. The team got Everyone In when the government put out the request earlier in the year.

I have attended the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy group that includes partners and service users. Our approach has been based on prevention and early intervention, refined as the pressures have grown in recent years.

I have encouraged the Service to bid for grants designed to eliminate rough sleeping and manage homelessness. We have been successful and have rough sleeper navigators and housing officers funded through grants we have secured.

**Poverty Working Panel** – I chair the Panel which has met three times and agreed terms of reference and has also considered a range of contextual and national policy issues.

The Council's approach set out in this emerging Poverty Strategy reflects evidence on the nature of poverty in East Devon and changes in the national social policy over the past decade. Poverty is a cross cutting theme with a number of Council Services involved in our interventions.

It also builds on the learning from the Council's existing approach to supporting individuals and communities. This learning includes:

1. The importance of balancing efforts to address the immediate effects of poverty, with preventative work to address the root causes of poverty.
2. Being clear on which issues can be addressed by direct delivery by Council services, which issues can be achieved through partnership working (where more can be achieved through collaboration), and which issues require influencing and lobbying activity (where powers lie with Government or other agencies).
3. A need to build the capacity and resilience of residents and communities.

Poverty is defined in different ways including not having enough possessions or income for a person's needs; the condition of being extremely poor; a person or community that lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living; household income below 60% of the average.

Six types of poverty have been recognised – situational; generational; absolute; relative; urban; and rural.

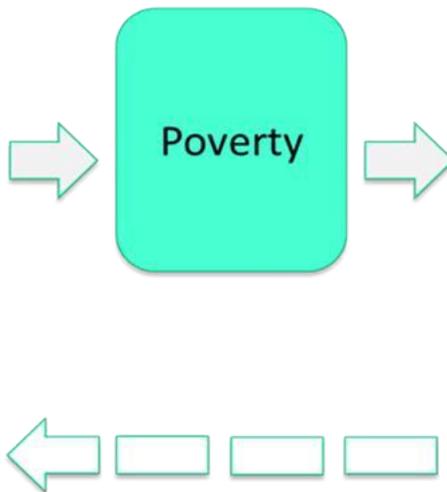


There are 3 levels of poverty

The causes and effects of poverty identified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, local stakeholders and consultees are summarised in the diagram below.

## Causes

- Low-paid, insecure jobs
- Low skills or education
- Ineffective benefits system
- High cost of housing, goods and services
- Financial literacy
- Discrimination
- Weak family relationships
- Childhood poverty
- Chaotic lives
- Abuse or trauma



## Effects

- Difficulty meeting basic costs
- Housing problems
- Homelessness
- Becoming a victim or perpetrator of crime
- Health problems
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Teenage parenthood
- Relationship and family problems
- Lower educational achievement
- Digital exclusion
- Fuel poverty

### Our five strategic objectives

Our ambitions have been explained in five strategic objectives (Service Leads are leading each objective):

- 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.
- 5 Improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health care and ill health prevention. Lead Service – Environmental Health.

**Decarbonisation** – 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 tenants’ 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 for this

work. We are also exploring the need to recruit expertise to create knowledge and capacity to deliver the ambitious programme. We need to accelerate current energy efficiency programmes refocusing on affordable warmth for tenants with a dramatic reduction in the use of fossil fuel heating, low carbon building products and maintenance services.

We made a successful bid for government funds that will be spent on an air source heat pump installation programme. We secured a grant of £500k which we have to match fund. Start on site is imminent with completion required by March 2021.

**Community Development** – A key part of my portfolio is our work in the community, whether that is through the Housing Community Development team or the large number of community and voluntary groups in the district. I have encouraged our own team of Community Development Workers to assist the Council's Community Support Hub and work locally during the pandemic. I have been hugely impressed with their work with food banks and supermarkets, providing food to low income households who have been struggling to put food on the table.

**Meeting with Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) groups** – I was unable to hold our annual conference with community and voluntary groups this year due to Covid risks, but with Councillor Bailey I attended a zoom meeting with CVS groups and thanked them for their impressive contributions during the first national lockdown. We also enquired about what we could do to support them and they agreed that guidance and advice on volunteering, safeguarding, setting up arrangements etc. would be useful. A second meeting is to be held before Christmas.

One of my ambitions is to provide better support and coordination to the community and voluntary groups by assuming a leadership role. I want to produce a CVS strategy and provide or commission a support service to allow our CVS groups to thrive.

**Community Support Hub** – This concept was mobilised during the first national lockdown and we seconded some Housing staff to form the backbone of the Hub. A key task was to support shielded people and provide a safety net to ensure food, medicine, and social needs were met. We provided signposting via our website to community and voluntary groups, and in a number of situations actually delivered food.

We re-mobilised the Community Support Hub at the start of the second national lockdown, this time primarily to support the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable. The Hub made contact with many individuals on the government's programme, ensuring they had access to essential food, medicine and social support. We have signposted many callers to support and assistance providing a helpline and ensured out of office hours cover through Home Safeguard.

**Acquisition programme** – I with others use delegated authority to approve acquisitions using Right to Buy receipts supplemented with Housing Revenue Account and/or borrowing. We acquire 20-30 properties each year, which are added to our portfolio of homes for letting to people through the Devon Home Choice allocation process. We have also acquired the former Sailors Rest, in Exmouth and a house in multiple occupation in Morton Road, Exmouth. Both

have been commissioned and provide much needed homes for single people and small households.

I am proud to say that during 2019/20, 356 new affordable homes were delivered through our programme, and the majority through our housing association partners. We work closely with planners, developers, landowners, registered providers and community land trusts to achieve this output.

**Right to Buy lobbying** – I have been lobbying for the cessation of the Right to Buy primarily because it creates a loss of housing stock that we desperately need for households in housing need. We are required to sell homes with large discounts and we have the nonsensical situation where we are acquiring homes at market prices to replace the stock lost. I will continue to pursue this change in legislation and take the view that if Wales and Scotland can achieve it so can we.

I have recently held the first of my Housing Portfolio team meetings which consist of members who are particularly interested in the policy direction of our Housing Service, including both the Right to Buy issue and the need for more social housing. These meetings will be held every three months.

**Public Health** – The pandemic has demonstrated the importance and value of public health. I believe that good health matters to us because most people want to be in better health. People are living longer, but often in poorer health. We believe we have an overarching responsibility to consider health and wellbeing in all our council activities.

Our high level public health aims are to help more people be and stay healthy, to enhance self-care and community resilience, and to integrate and improve support for people in their homes.

We will meet our aims in the following ways:

- Identify health and wellbeing priorities in each annual service plan
- Encourage officers, members and partners to help determine what is important to people
- Continue to build strong community partnerships
- Plan for healthy communities
- Ensure our outstanding environment contributes to health and wellbeing
- Ensure sufficient resources to reduce inequalities and achieve greater health and wellbeing
- Support East Devon's communities and residents in making it a healthier place
- Seek and respond to new opportunities
- Embrace technologies for sharing health messages.

We have also committed to:

- Develop annual implementation plans with SMART objectives in all council services.
- Monitor progress.

- Report and publish progress annually.

Our priority activities will focus on:

- Physical activity
- Diet and nutrition
- Smoking
- Alcohol
- Mental health
- Loneliness and social isolation
- Dementia
- Long-term conditions
- Frailty and falls
- Housing and homelessness
- Indoor environment factors.

**Private Sector Housing** – I have overseen a restructuring of the Housing Service which saw the Private Sector Housing team move to the Environmental Health & Car Parks Service. It was considered that with Environmental Health Officers in the team and the regulatory nature of the activities the team would sit well with Environmental Health colleagues.

This area of work is still within my portfolio and I take a keen interest and my vision for better homes applies equally in the private sector, where there is considerable room for improvement in rented homes, houses in multiple occupation, mobile homes, tenant safety etc. We also have an important role to play in private water supplies, hoarding, pest control, safeguarding, and ensuring homes are fit for human habitation. I will continue to support our staff delivering against these activities.

**Integrated Asset Management Contract** – I have been involved in the letting of a new contract, mobilising a new contractor and assisting them settle into local premises, and understanding our standards and requirements for East Devon tenants. The new style contract involves a price per property/price per void to maintain our properties and bring our voids back into use. This is designed to achieve value for money and proactive maintenance.

Mobilisation went well, but prior to lockdown dissatisfaction increased and we had to work with our partner to improve performance using an improvement plan process. I am pleased to say with a determination on both sides to deliver improved performance we have achieved this despite the pandemic. The contract required considerable culture change on both sides and with high performance the contract allows for planned work, improvements and compliance work to be delivered through Ian Williams.

The **East Devon Traveller Forum** was established earlier this year to ensure that the needs of Gypsies and Travellers are adequately met in East Devon and that this under-represented group do not feel disenfranchised.

Unfortunately, due to Covid we have only been able to hold one meeting which was in February, with the second one put on hold until it is safe to meet again face to face.

This is not an exhaustive list and just provides a flavour of some of the things I have been doing. I am happy to expand on any of the information I have provided in this report.

**Megan Armstrong – Portfolio Holder Sustainable Homes & Communities**

**December 2020**