

## **Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing 2022-23**

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken across the Housing portfolio since the last report in 2022. The past twelve months have continued to be like no other period before. Whilst residents across the District started to adjust to life post-pandemic, significant external factors have had a major impact across all of the council's housing delivery functions linked to increased inflation, consumer and energy prices; rent caps in social housing; access to the private rented sector has become increasingly difficult for those who rely wholly or partially on benefits to supplement rent, whilst numbers on the Council's housing waiting list continues to increase. However, in the most difficult of times, Lancaster has also been a beacon of solidarity for those fleeing the war in Ukraine with more residents being welcomed into host families than any other area of Lancashire.

Whilst 2022/23 has undoubtedly been challenging there has also been much to celebrate, the underneath recognises this whilst also highlighting some of the significant areas of work which will be the focus of the different services which make up the housing portfolio and the new administration in the year ahead.

### **Council Housing**

At the end of 2022, Lancaster City Council won the coveted Council of the Year award at the UK National Housing Awards, this continues to demonstrate the services drive towards excellence under the leadership of Jo Wilkinson as Head of Housing. Focus remains on improving the energy efficiency of the Council housing stock through the completion of the Mount Avenue – whole house improvement scheme and ensuring tenants get the right support through the dedicated Energy Support Officer. In March 2023 it was announced that Lancaster City Council as part of Blackpool Council's bid had secured funding as part of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to continue it's efforts over the next two years. The service continues to place tenants at the heart of its operations, with improvements to tenant engagement including two summer specials, a focus on reviewing the delivery of the Council Housing ASB function and support for new tenants through tenancy health checks and provision of furniture packages. Performance continues to improve, with the year end void relet time reducing to just over 27 days and rent collection remaining top quartile across the sector at less than £100,000 – this means additional money can be reinvested into our delivery and stock. Significant and ambitious regeneration programmes continue with the agreement to purchase the former Skerton High School for new affordable housing and plans being developed for a Council-led housing scheme on Coopers Field, supported through funding secured through the governments Brownfield Land Release Fund.

Social Housing providers are moving into a period of significant change as the Social Housing Regulation Bill is expected to receive Royal Assent over the coming months, as this happens the Regulator of Social Housing will embark on consultation, although the focus is expected to remain around tenant voice and decency, with greater emphasis on building safety.

The service has also led on the plans for the redevelopment of Mellishaw Gypsy and Traveller Site, with residents currently being supported to move off site and works expected to commence at the start of 23/24.

### **Private Sector Housing**

A key focus of the team has been in supporting the different refugees and asylum seekers living within the District. As highlighted above, a year on from the start of the war in Ukraine see's 210 Ukrainian nationals settling in the District through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Other refugee programmes are also supported locally and at the end of 22/23 a dedicated

Refugee Support Officer has been recruited to help those who need it. In addition, the Council and partners have worked hard to support those asylum seekers living in the two contingency hotels located within the District adapt and link in with the local community.

Other areas of note for the team remain to continue to tackle poor housing conditions within the private rented sector, tacking enforcement action where necessary, and as with the Council Housing Service a renewed focus has been seen around those living in damp and mouldy conditions following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale. A review of caravan sites across the District has been completed providing a better picture of conditions on sites and seeking improvements where this is needed as well as focussing on building / fire safety in private high rise blocks, working closely with the Fire Service on this.

### **Home Improvement Agency**

The Home Improvement Agency through John Helme and the team continues to be an exemplar across the sector winning both the Innovator of the Year award at the UK Housing Awards and the Sustainability in Home Adaptations award at the Foundations ceremony at the end of 2022, specifically linked to dedicated retrofit and energy improvement advice and interventions supported through the team. Over the winter the HIA have delivered over £136,000.00 of winter warmth / energy efficiency measures into vulnerable and elderly residents homes linked to funding from Lancashire County Council and the Household Support Fund. In addition, the HIA has received 18-months funding from Lancashire County Council to expand its delivery of our hospital discharge scheme, with the team being co-located within the hospital to help the transition from hospital to home. The HIA continues to deliver a £2.1m Disabled Facilities Grant programme, a minor adaptations service on behalf of the County Council – acting as a retailer of equipment prescriptions as well as the handyperson service.

### **Homelessness Service**

The cost-of-living crisis and constricting access to the housing market has seen the service face increasing pressures linked to more presentations and placements into temporary / bed and breakfast provision. Data shows that those placed into temporary accommodation are facing longer periods residing there whilst alternative accommodation is sourced. The team continues to work closely with public sector, voluntary / third sector and lived-experience groups through continued engagement with the Homeless Advisory Group and Homelessness Forum and secured funding through government for continued support for the befriending service – Lets be Friends, as well as additional focus on health and wellbeing for those who choose to live on the streets and those in temporary / supported accommodation. Funding has also been secured through government to work jointly with Preston City Council on a Supported Housing Improvement Programme tackling poor providers and ensuring residents receive the support they need. The Changing Futures programme has now been operational for twelve months with a focus on transition to mainstreaming and service changes in the second half of the project.

### **Strategic Housing**

Kathy Beaton has been instrumental in bringing forward a twelve bed scheme in the city centre for longer-term transition accommodation for those who have moved off the streets including floating support this was supported through government funding and works to bring the property up to the required standards co-ordinated by the Council Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service. At the end of March 2023 residents have started to move into their new accommodation.

Kathy continues to support the promotion of green skills and funding amongst contactors alongside the Business Support Team and Lancaster and Morecambe College.

Finally, the Council's Housing Company – Morehomes for the Bay saw its inaugural business plan approved helping to set the direction and ambitions of the company moving forward.

As can be seen above, the teams continue to support the Councils corporate priorities, Sustainable Development Goals, providing additionality through Social Value and contribution towards tackling the climate emergency. All credit must go to staff throughout Housing for their energy, skill and enthusiasm in creating change and supporting many of our Districts most vulnerable local residents.

**Cllr Cary Matthews**  
**Portfolio holder for Housing**

**April 2023**