

Annual Housing portfolio holder report – Caroline Jackson

The past year in Housing has been a time of significant change and development in all areas. Housing officers at all levels have been challenged and stretched in what they have been asked to do. My thanks extends to all of them as they continue to grapple with new regulations, new requirements and new relationships whilst contending with everything from enthusiastic appreciation to debilitating criticism. The leadership in Housing has been stretched by its own inspiring level of ambition, so special thanks to Jo Wilkinson and all team members particularly Sharon Parkinson, Fiona McLeod, Kathy Beaton, Pete Linsley and Andrew Whittaker.

This report is of necessity a snapshot of the work being done in the area of Housing. More detailed information on HRA can be found in the budget reports to Cabinet and Full Council.

Progress with Social Housing Regulation Act

The council housing team have continued to focus on Regulatory changes in preparation for a forthcoming inspection. Their success is reflected in the increased tenant satisfaction measure scores across the board. The work with Tenant Voice has reflected rapid progress towards becoming a tenant led service. There has been continued focus on tenant engagement with the production of first scrutiny report into Repairs and Maintenance, establishment of Building Safety Resident Engagement group and updated Tenant Voice Strategy.

The Council Housing Advisory Group has met regularly to survey the five consumer standards areas and provide data scrutiny. In particular, the scrutiny of our housing stock had reached 86% of homes by Quarter 3 a good percentage but revealing the extent of problems presented by the age of our houses. Progress on updating and retrofitting homes to a higher thermal efficiency level is a priority and we made a successful Warm Homes grant funding application as part of Liverpool City Region to decarbonise 100 homes.

Repairs spend has exceeded budget in several quarters this year due especially to damp and mould concerns – reflecting a national problem as repairs services are spending around 60% more than in previous years across the country. The service has increased its efficiency in responding rapidly to issues in advance of the introduction of Awaab's Law. However, despite investment the service has been subject to a number of disrepair claims, again a national problem.

Complaints relating to repairs and to anti-social behaviour are areas of focus reflected in the TSM. The former are often linked to our outdated communication system and progress continues to introduce a comprehensive digitalised system that will allow tenants and officers to track problems efficiently. The new ASB team has been a successful resource in working with tenants to resolve issues more quickly and effectively and the analysis of both complaints and ASB issues is a useful learning point for teams Across Housing. The team working with tenants on rent collection continue to be one of the most successful in the country with income support gained for tenants of £31,000 in the first half of this year. The voids turnaround time has increased slightly to 25 days but is being reduced and should be viewed within the context of sector average standard relet times being double what ours are.

Our commitment to maintaining the importance of council housing and council housing services has been made clear in signing up as a signatory alongside over 100 other Councils to Southwark Councils 'The Future of Council Housing' report.

A recent visit from an MHCLG officer confirmed the rapid, visible progress the housing team have made over the last eighteen months and complimented the team on their dedication to creating a genuinely tenant-led service.

New social and affordable housing

We have continued work on maximising use of existing stock and available land by gaining planning permission for four units on Hastings Rd. At Alder Grove we are in the very final stages of development with residents expected to move into the highly energy efficient properties at the beginning of the new year. The previous community room is now being redeveloped to provide an additional flat.

On the Skerton site we were successful in the planning application for one hundred apartment homes and thirty-five terraced houses all to sit within HRA and the site has been cleared using Brownfield Release Funding. Currently the Mainway Green Book business case for the project is nearing completion. Homes England funding has been announced to open in the summer and we are already working with Homes England in anticipation of a bid. We have had two meetings with our MPs, Cat Smith and Lizzi Collinge to increase their appreciation of the sector and the need for funding for increasing and updating stock of council and affordable housing in the area. Work on the Coopers Field site in the Canal Quarter had temporarily halted last year but will now go ahead to provide a hundred and twenty new dwellings including both shared ownership, affordable and council housing. The Nelson Street site is now proceeding towards development by a registered provider, which will also provide further affordable housing.

Housing Standards, Empty Homes and refugee accommodation

In the area of Housing Standards the Selective Landlord Licensing process came to a conclusion without a recommendation to proceed due to lack of evidence. However, the process improved relationships with landlords and the Landlords Forum is now supporting better communication on landlord responsibilities including preparing for the Renters Rights Act introduction later this year. The Housing Taskforce has looked particularly at supporting families and tenants needing low-cost rental accommodation. Empty homes has also been an important issue and the Empty Homes strategy and action plan has been renewed this year.

A new Homes Strategy is required for the new Local Plan and this is commencing with a Condition Survey of private housing stock which will allow us to work on the issue of HMO numbers and gaining funding for further retrofitting and improvement work.

The Green skills group continues to meet involving local construction companies and training organisations to work together to improve the availability of skilled workforce in this area.

Work on community-led housing with not for profit organisations is in progress with support for Lapwing housing which has now successfully acquired a property and for the Senior Co-Housing scheme.

Lancaster continues effective support for refugees and asylum seekers housed by SERCO or within the private or affordable housing. County council funding is administered by us through third sector organisations ensures drop ins can provide practical and legal support and initial language learning. A successful Local Authority Housing Fund application secured grant funding to purchase 4 properties to support temporary accommodation reduction and resettlement housing. We are expecting a further small number of Afghan families to come to Lancaster as a result of government moves to end hotel accommodation.

Homelessness/temporary accommodation

The increasing number of Section 21 evictions over the previous year led to a steep increase in temporary accommodation costs similar to that experienced in authorities across the country. However, this year has seen a budget saving of around £300,00 against our B+B budget due to better management of homeless households, quicker turn round in acquiring suitable rental properties and using some of our own empty properties. We are using hotel accommodation as little as possible and for short term needs, though problems with finding suitable larger family accommodation continue. Staff recruitment has been very difficult and the service has operated with three or more vacancies across the year putting pressure particularly on the speed with which homelessness cases could be assessed. Two recently recruited new members of staff to support administration and team leadership are beginning to turn this round. All credit to Sharon Parkinson who despite a broken collarbone was back to work in days rather than weeks.

The Homelessness Strategy was reviewed last year and the action plan continues to focus on improving prevention by work with partners in health and advice services. The Allocations Policy was reviewed and approved by Cabinet. Work on improving the Choice Based Lettings procedures has increased digitalisation to remove paper-based procedures and the Housing List has been completely renewed.

The Homelessness Advisory Group and Forum have recommenced meetings with particular reference to supporting street homeless. Numbers have slowly increased to between ten and fifteen over the last two years. Calico operates an experienced support service for us, but we are seeking further suitable accommodation and opportunity to put Housing First in place.

Taking the Lead in the Housing sector

The HIA continues to be an outstanding service recognised across Lancashire for its efficiency and independent approach to accessing funding to keep people living independently in their homes. This year HIA have developed a dedicated in-house Occupational Therapy service which has very much improved time taken to initiate improvements and has delivered around £2.4m in Disabled Facility Grants in residents' homes.

Alder Grove has benefited from using modern methods construction to increase the speed and thermal efficiency through off-site construction. It has also provided an opportunity for local firms to be involved in this as the first building in the north of England to be constructed in this way.

We are happy to report residents from Mellishaw Park have now all moved back on site and are impressed with the new accommodation they helped to design.

Overall, the previous year has been highly successful in all areas. Where difficulties are evident it is clear that data is available, scrutiny is applied, and steps are being taken to remedy deficiencies. Budgets are very tight and the need to manage costs is appreciated throughout the service. Housing is a service area we are rightly proud of as an authority and congratulations go to everyone who works within it.