

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
9 NOVEMBER 2021**

HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY REPORT AND UPDATE

Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Bob Evans
Responsible Officer: Simon Newcombe, Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing

Reason for Report & Recommendation: To provide an update to Members on enforcement and other activity undertaken by Officers in the Housing Service teams of Mid Devon Housing.

Recommendations:

- 1. Members note the report**
- 2. Members agree to receive future quarterly service delivery reports covering the combined activities of both housing and building services under a single Mid Devon Housing report**

Financial Implications: The activity of the Service spans both General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) but is largely managed within the latter. The HRA is ring fenced and subject to specific financial controls.

Budget and Policy Framework: Policies agreed by the Homes Policy Development Group govern the work of the landlord service. The HRA is funded in large part by rental income and therefore maintaining the revenue stream must be a key priority for the Housing Service. Nonetheless, this report makes no budget or policy recommendations.

Legal Implications: Tenancy management is funded through the HRA. The tenancy agreement defines the Council's relationship with tenants and sets out the rights and responsibilities of both parties. This takes account of legal and regulatory requirements. The Housing Act 1985, the Localism Act 2011 and the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 contain many provisions which must be taken into account by the Housing Service.

Risk Assessment: The Service has approximately 3,000 homes in management which represents a huge investment. Failure to provide an effective tenancy management service has the potential to result in failure to meet legal and statutory obligations including those relating to health and safety issues, tenancy fraud, and potential negative publicity in the event of, for example, a serious fire or anti-social behaviour leading to residents on an estate feeling stigmatised. Failure to collect rental income could impact the ability to fund necessary management and maintenance activities.

Equality Impact Assessment: There is a suite of housing related policies. The use of these helps to ensure that Service delivery is consistent and fair. These are subject to ongoing review with the aim of more closely aligning them with the regulatory standards as set out in the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing. There is a regulatory requirement for registered providers of social housing to tailor

their service to meet the needs of the tenants and the Housing Service requests diversity data from tenants to enable compliance to be monitored.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Homes and the environment are a priority for the Council and this includes increasing the supply of affordable homes in the District and also supporting and growing active tenant engagement.

Impact on Climate Change: We recognise that the provision of sustainable communities is important. As part of our commitment to meeting the provisions of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard within the Regulatory Framework, the Council offers a menu of involvement which provides opportunities for tenants to get involved in Service delivery. We will be reviewing our offer to tenants with regard to their involvement in the running of the Housing Service and as part of this we will be looking at ways to allow people to get involved online thereby reducing travelling expenses. We use social media to promote sustainability and publish information relating to a variety of topics including fuel efficiency, recycling and healthy living.

With regard to the homes in our management, our repairs and improvements strategies are informed by the need to reduce carbon emissions with a decarbonisation programme; and the need to reduce fuel poverty is also a key consideration.

1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 The Housing Service has approximately 3,000 homes in management. The Neighbourhood teams are responsible for income collection; and tenancy and estate management in relation to these properties. The Officers operate in specialist roles although they work within a patch-based framework to deliver housing management services. There is a specialist HRA Income team which works alongside the Voids and Allocations Officers. This supports a risk based approach which ensures that the needs of our tenants are clearly understood. Other Neighbourhood Officers work together in the HRA Estates team and it is these Officers who are generally the first point of contact for tenants. These teams are supported by colleagues in our Housing Finance and Performance team.
- 1.2 The Regulatory Framework and the Social Housing White Paper published in November 2020 both require social landlords such as the Council to put “tenants at the heart” of everything we do. We have therefore reviewed our structure and introduced a wide range of changes as part of an approved restructure business case to bring both the Housing Services and Building Services elements of the HRA into a combined housing service business unit (to be known as Mid Devon Housing going forward). This was widely consulted upon and supported with the changes being implemented over recent months.
- 1.3 As part of these changes, a new Customer Engagement Officer (CEO) who has commenced in post on 18 October 2021. This new post was established to play a key role in delivering regulatory compliance. The CEO will work closely with the Housing Policy Officer and the Complaints Officer to further develop our approach to service improvement, the delivery of increased

customer satisfaction and related policy reviews. Supported by the Tenant Involvement Officers, the post-holder will also be involved in:

- Undertaking consultations
 - Delivering neighbourhood initiatives including work associated with the environmental improvement budget
 - Providing support to tenants who are being decanted
 - Supporting colleagues to ensure that our communications strategy meets the needs of tenants with all messages being jargon-free, and written in such a way as to ensure that they can be widely understood.
- 1.4 There are also plans to enhance our approach to tenant scrutiny to ensure that tenants have meaningful opportunities to influence the work of the Housing Service, policy changes and to comment on performance.
- 1.5 There will be a renewed emphasis on engaging with tenants across a wide age range and from a variety of different backgrounds in order to ensure that the group of engaged tenants is as diverse as it can be.
- 1.6 An informal logo for the newly combined Mid Devon Housing Service, to be used alongside the existing MDDC logo, has been developed in-house and will be used as part of our customer communications in all its various forms in the future. This logo is shown below and will be subject to further refinement especially around shading/colour depth. Its first use is likely to be within our updated Service Facebook pages and pending tenant engagement projects. We are also working with the Communications Team around other ways we can start to introduce the new look to the Service.



- 1.7 The responsibilities of the staff in the Housing Service are many and complex. The discharge of the duties associated with the management of our own housing stock can be resource-intensive and involve significant enforcement activity. The aim of this report is to show the range of action taken over the second quarter of 2021/22 which covered the period from 1 July 2021 until 30 September 2021.
- 1.8 Annex 1 shows a summary of enforcement and other related activity and Annex 2 shows a summary of safeguarding activity undertaken in connection with the wellbeing of tenants, members of their households or anyone else,

regardless of whether they live on our estates, where a concern has been identified.

2.0 Enforcement activity and priorities

- 2.1 The Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) operates the Regulatory Framework which contains a number of standards which set out the required outcomes and specific expectations associated with the performance of registered social landlords (RPs).
- 2.2 The Neighbourhood and Community Standard contains provisions relating to the management of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and in line with these, RPs are expected to work in partnership with other agencies to prevent and tackle ASB in the neighbourhoods where they own homes
- 2.3 Neighbourhood Officers in the Housing Estates team are responsible for managing nuisance and ASB.
- 2.4 During the quarter, the Service Business Continuity Plan (BCP) was partially implemented in response to some significant resourcing issues which impacted the HRA Estates team. These arose as a result of unfilled vacancies, sickness and workloads. For some weeks, at the beginning of September 2021, following some staffing changes, there was a new Neighbourhood Team Leader, and only two Neighbourhood Officers who were able to work. Under the BCP, Officers prioritised tasks according to a scheme which categorised work to take account of risk. This meant putting those high risk activities at the front of what we delivered including the management of serious ASB, safeguarding and work which could impact the health and wellbeing of tenants, their household and any visitors to our estate.
- 2.5 At the same time, a new triage system was implemented. This is now managed by the Housing Business Support team. Officers in this team are able to respond to some queries by using the scripts contained in workflows. In cases involving low-to-medium risk, they are instructed to manage expectations. This involves sending appropriately-worded emails or calling in response to issues raised to explain the situation regarding resourcing in order to ensure that those contacting the Housing Service are aware of the delays in Service delivery.
- 2.6 In order to reflect these changes and short-term pressures, aligned with other external challenges such as recruitment difficulties and material supply issues, the Corporate Manager for the Service recently wrote to all tenants giving them an update to help manage expectations, and setting out ways we can work together to ease the situation. A copy of this communication is contained in Annex 3.
- 2.7 It should also be noted that the composition of the HRA Estates team has changed during the last year with only one Neighbourhood Officer having been in post since before the start of this financial year. This Neighbourhood Officer has also resigned and will be moving to alternative employment with another local housing provider. Although two of the new Officers have transferable skills and experience which supports the work that they are

employed to do now, there has been a period of “on the job” training and development and this continues.

- 2.8 As at the beginning of October 2021, the team is being supported by an experienced temporary member of staff who is working in the Neighbourhood Officer role. This individual has been tasked with undertaking the majority of Neighbourhood Walkabouts scheduled to take place during the autumn; and routine estate inspections which involve visiting our blocks of flats in order to identify and manage health and safety risks.
- 2.9 A Neighbourhood Officer post was recently advertised and offers to two successful candidates have been made. Both individuals have transferrable skills and experience but have not worked in housing management previously. As a result there will be an inevitable period of transition whilst these new Officers are inducted and undergo the appropriate training to enable them to fully understand how to discharge their new duties.
- 2.10 The table in Annex 1 shows the range of work associated with the management of ASB under the heading: “Neighbourhood and Community Standard”.
- 2.11 The table shows little activity during the second quarter of this year. However, there was considerable work behind the scenes to manage some very serious and highly complex ASB cases and this involved working in partnership with other agencies including the Police and Social Services.
- 2.12 The management of serious ASB can be time-consuming given the need to gather evidence, work with witnesses and liaise with other partner agencies. Officers may also need to provide reassurance to members of the local community.
- 2.13 The work can also be challenging given the issues which may be presented and the conflicting accounts about what is happening.
- 2.14 The work undertaken by the HRA Income Team is shown in the table at the end of Annex 1. It is now possible for RPs, such as the Council, to commence possession proceedings since the pause on this and evictions ended earlier this year. Members will recall that these activities were paused by the Government during the pandemic in order to minimise homelessness. The Team continues to work in a more collaborative way in order to help those households who may have been experiencing financial difficulty to sustain their tenancies.
- 2.15 It should be noted that following the successful appointment of one of the Neighbourhood Officers into a new role within the Service, her post was advertised. Fortunately, this resulted in the successful recruitment of an individual with suitable experience who will be commencing work in the Team during November.
- 2.16 The Team makes contact with those who owe rent to discuss their circumstances and to offer advice and information as appropriate. The Officers work closely with the Council’s Customer Welfare Officer and other

agencies, including the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to maximise incomes. The approach involves having open and honest conversations with those who may have multiple debts and enabling them to address them. The team signposts and refers tenants to other agencies which can help, as appropriate.

- 2.17 23 notices of seeking possession were served on the grounds of rent arrears during Quarter 2, with the aim of protecting the interests of the Council. These notices are served to make the tenant aware that they have breached the terms and conditions of their tenancy agreement. There will have been some work done prior to the Officer responsible taking this step, in line with the Court pre-action protocol. The Council is required to give tenants an opportunity to clear their rent accounts, or to make an arrangement to do, at the earliest possible stage. If a case is heard in Court, the Officer responsible for presenting it will be required to explain what they have done to raise awareness of the issue and that they have given the tenant(s) involved every opportunity to make an arrangement or to clear the debt.
- 2.18 Our integrated housing management system is used to manage rent debt. It prompts action as necessary in line with policy and procedures and also acts as a tool to record action. Records held on the system can be used to prove a breach of tenancy should a request for possession of a property on the grounds of rent arrears be made to the County Court.
- 2.19 The pause on evictions meant that the debt associated with some tenancies increased to a very high level before the property could or can be repossessed. It has taken a long time to resolve some cases where the tenant had abandoned their properties before the pandemic. This was due to the ability to seek a possession order being curtailed during most of 2020 and into 2021. Consequently, once a property is re-possessed, there could be a large debt which then becomes a former tenant debt. The HRA Income Team is now working to address these cases in a systematic way and Managers are monitoring work to ensure that, where appropriate, requests for write off are made in line with the provisions of the corporate policy relating to debt. Prior to seeking write off, Officers will liaise with other teams within the Council in order to ensure that there is a joined up approach to the management of the debt. This will always be the preferred option in cases where it would be uneconomic to pursue the debt or when someone has died with no estate.

3.0 Safeguarding Activities

- 3.1 Every Officer of the Council is required to undertake safeguarding training on a periodic basis. Safeguarding activity is given a very high priority and it can be noted that during the quarter, housing management staff opened one domestic abuse case and made seven safeguarding referrals as a result of concerns.
- 3.2 It should be noted that this area of work can impact the wellbeing of our staff. Managing such delicate and sensitive cases can be quite emotionally demanding as staff sometimes have to work with those in trauma, who are upset or who by virtue of their needs struggle to make themselves understood. Such work can also involve working with people who display

challenging behaviour and also with those who are unable to articulate what they want to say without resorting to verbal abuse of staff.

4.0 **Recommendations**

4.1 The following recommendations are made:

1. Members note the report
2. Members agree to receive future quarterly service delivery reports covering the combined activities of both housing and building services under a single Mid Devon Housing report

4.2 The second recommendation will enable Members to benefit from a broader report on activity across all elements of the newly combined Service (Mid Devon Housing). As result we will be able to include additional information around activities such as the newly combined, single tenant support team, repairs, voids, planned maintenance, stock management, decarbonisation and delivery of new social or affordable housing units within the HRA.

Contact for more Information: Mrs Claire Fry, Operations Manager for Housing Services, 01884 255255 (and request a call-back), email: cfry@middevon.gov.uk or Simon Newcombe, Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing email: snewcombe@middevon.gov.uk.

Circulation of the Report:

Members of the Homes PDG
Cllr Bob Evans, Cabinet Member for Housing and Property Services
Leadership Team
Corporate Management Team
All Operations Managers
Legal Services

List of Background Papers:

The Regulatory framework for social housing:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-standards>

The Government Social Housing White Paper:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-charter-for-social-housing-residents-social-housing-white-paper>

Annex 1

Service Delivery – Enforcement Activities

Neighbourhood & Community Standard – Housing Revenue Account – Estates Team						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD	Comments
Fraud cases opened	0	0				
Fraud cases referred to an external investigator	0	0				
Acceptable Behaviour Agreements signed	2	1				
Good Neighbourhood Agreements signed	2	0				
Community Protection Notice warnings issued	0	0				
Community Protection Notices issued	0	0				
Possession Actions commenced on grounds of ASB	0	0				
Closure Orders – obtained	0	0				
Injunctions sought	0	0				
Evictions on grounds of anti-social behaviour/ other tenancy breach	0	0				

Income Recovery – Housing Revenue Account – Income Team

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD	Comments
Notice of Seeking possession served	35	23				
Judgement obtained	1	0				
Warrants issued	0	0				
Evictions on grounds of rent arrears	1	1				

Annex 2

Service Delivery – Safeguarding Activities

Neighbourhood & Community Standard – Housing Revenue Account						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD	Comments
Domestic abuse cases opened	1	1				
Domestic abuse cases referred to Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)	0	0				
Safeguarding referrals made (to all agencies)	2	7				

Annex 3

All tenant communication September 2021



Message from our Corporate Manager for Housing

Dear Tenant

Providing good customer service is really important to us, but this is difficult at the moment. Like many housing organisations, we're sometimes finding it hard to provide the level of service that we're committed to. I'd like to explain why.

All of our services continue to operate and we're doing all we can to minimise disruption. But a number of external factors mean that the challenges are likely to continue for a while. So we're asking you to be prepared for a longer wait for some services.

Over the last few months, our customers have reported considerably more repairs than in the period before the pandemic. And there has been an increase in the number of people looking to move home resulting in a much higher number of empty properties we need to inspect, refurbish and reallocate.

National shortages of skilled labour and materials are affecting us too and adding further pressure. Recruitment of people providing front-line services is also very difficult and we have an above average number of vacant posts as a result. The availability of materials essential for many repairs (such as timber, roof tiles, kitchen fittings, and electrical and gas components) is limited and unpredictable. For example, national shortages mean that some fencing materials won't be available for several months, which is leading to delays in certain repairs and planned works.

This is extremely frustrating for us because it means that we will sometimes fall short in our commitment to you. I would ask for your help and patience over the coming months.

If we are struggling to deliver a service in a timely way, we'll do our best to explain this to you and tell you when we expect to be able to do so. We recognise this may not be what you want to hear but as I've explained, there is a limit to how much we can influence some of these factors.

What we're asking of you

- As most of our contact channels are busier than normal, don't forget you can find an answer to your queries at <https://www.middevon.gov.uk/residents/housing/>. This can give you access information on a wide range of topics and help you undertake transactions remotely

- If you need to report a repair, our web form is the easiest way <https://www.middevon.gov.uk/residents/housing/council-housing/repairs/contact-us-about-repairs/> and only use our contact number 01884 255255 if you don't have access to this
- If you've already reported a repair and we've explained that there's a problem and it will be delayed, please don't contact us to chase it. (Of course, you should continue to get in touch if you have an emergency, or a delayed repair deteriorates and becomes a danger)
- We're progressing mutual exchanges and other tenancy and neighbourhood actions as quickly as we can, but replying to requests for updates is hampering our teams' ability to action these applications. So, again, we would ask you to limit follow-up calls here too
- Our property teams are always busier in the autumn and winter. You can help to avoid a surge in calls by checking your heating early – for example, by turning it on long enough to be sure that the radiators are working. This way, if there is a problem, you can contact us before the colder weather hits

We'll continue to prioritise emergency and essential services and to use our resources as effectively as possible.

I hope that you understand why, despite the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic being behind us case numbers are still very high and our staff are still at risk, so there are still some tough times ahead for organisations and individuals across the country.

Our staff continue to operate in Covid secure ways, which sometimes slows things down but being safe and looking after your welfare and that of our teams remains our priority. But rest assured, Mid Devon Housing at MDDC remains committed to providing the highest level of service, and to returning to better levels of service as soon as possible.

Thank you for your support and please stay safe and well.

Simon Newcombe
Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing
Mid Devon District Council