

# FAREHAM

## BOROUGH COUNCIL

### Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

**Date**                    **03 February 2022**

**Report of:**            **Deputy Chief Executive Officer**

**Subject:**              **TENANCY MANAGEMENT, REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE OF  
COUNCIL OWNED PROPERTIES**

#### **SUMMARY**

This report provides the Panel with information about the housing management and maintenance services provided by the Neighbourhood Team and the Repairs and Maintenance Team.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Panel consider the contents of this report and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The Council owns 2432 homes comprising general purpose and sheltered housing properties. This stock figure is affected by Right to Buy sales, re-purchases, new builds, demolitions and other disposals such as sale on the open market or change of use.
2. A breakdown of our properties by size, type and area can be seen at Appendix A.

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD AND SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICES**

3. The team responsible for the delivery of tenancy services to our residents is split into two distinct teams. Officers in the Neighbourhood Team are all based at the Civic Offices and each have their own geographical 'patch' of properties within the Borough. The Sheltered Housing Officers are based at our core sheltered schemes and provide on-site or mobile support to our older residents.
4. The functions provided by the teams include the following:
  - Tenancy & Estate Management
  - Rent Collection
  - Tenancy Sustainment and Welfare Support
  - Right to Buy
  - Mutual Exchanges
  - Tenant Engagement and Involvement
  - Tenancy Fraud
5. The team also work closely with the Repairs and Maintenance team in the management of our empty properties and adaptations for disabled tenants.

## **TENANCY & ESTATE MANAGEMENT**

6. Tenancy and estate management encompasses a wide range of functions including lettings and new tenancy sign-ups, neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour, dealing with resident enquiries and concerns and providing support, all with the aim of enabling our tenants to live independently in safe and secure homes.
7. In December 2021, the Neighbourhood Team began an exercise to visit all tenants who are over the age of 70 years, living in general-purpose accommodation. Many of these tenants are unknown to the Neighbourhood Officers as their rent accounts are up to date, there are no neighbour issues or repair requests and therefore it was felt that a visit would be useful to check on their welfare. As part of these visits, the Neighbourhood Team will look at the suitability of the accommodation and discuss with the tenant whether a move to a sheltered scheme would be of benefit to them. Any relocation will only be with the full agreement of the tenant and where a move is feasible, it will free up general purpose properties for households on the Housing Register.

8. This exercise will take a number of months to complete as 377 tenants have been identified. A summary of the results will be brought back to Panel at a later date.

## **RENT COLLECTION**

9. Income collectable from rents for the current financial year is £12.3m. For most of our tenants, we charge 'social rent' (set using a Government formula and typically 50% of market rent) but for those in newly acquired properties or some new-build properties, an 'affordable rent' (80% of market rent is set).
10. In addition to the weekly net rent, many tenants pay a service charge for the following:
- Sheltered Housing Support & Management
  - Cleaning of communal areas
  - Grounds Maintenance
  - Heating
  - Water Rates
  - Communal laundry facilities
  - Motor Scooter Storage
11. The gradual replacement of Housing Benefit for Universal Credit over the last three years has increased the level of rent arrears across the social housing sector nationally. Housing Benefit is paid weekly, directly into the tenant's rent account, whereas the housing element of Universal Credit is generally paid directly to the tenant and at least one month in arrears.
12. This national picture has been replicated in Fareham and we have seen arrears rise from 3.43% (of the projected annual rent collectable) in April 2019 to 5.02% in January 2022 which correlates with the gradual transfer of tenant's Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.
13. Rent arrears continued to rise during the pandemic and in November 2020, an additional dedicated Rent Recovery Officer was employed. Their focus was to contact all tenants in arrears, making payment arrangements and monitoring these. It was at this point we decided to change our approach to recovering rents and instead of focussing on normal process driven exercises which involves sending out letters and issuing notices seeking possession, our approach was to focus on individual tenants and use the phone and text as well as emails and personal letters in order to engage tenants in conversations with us, showing them we have empathy for their situations and having conversations about what is expected of them in paying rent and how we can move forward with them in reducing their arrears.
14. All staff are empowered to make payments arrangements with tenants based on their individual circumstances and if necessary, will refer tenants on to our Welfare Support Officer to assist tenants with other debts they have and offering assistance with food parcels and other necessary household items via charities such as Acts Of Kindness.
15. All officers have worked closely with the Benefits Team and been able to agree some

awards of Discretionary Housing Payments to reduce arrears where the pandemic has severely affected the financial circumstances of a family. In some circumstances the Neighbourhood Officers have been able to downsize tenants to more manageable accommodation thus ensuring arrears do not increase further and any incentive payments due to the tenant used to reduce arrears.

16. Universal Credit payments have also been rigorously checked and where tenants have been identified as vulnerable or falling into arrears, the housing element is paid directly into their rent account.
17. We have been able to secure a Single Point of Contact within the Universal Credit Delivery Centre to deal with enquiries and payment anomalies where the tenant is unable to do this themselves. This has been particularly effective for us in relation to those tenants who have drug/alcohol/mental health problems and are unable to deal with these issues and has also been effective for those tenants who have not engaged with us but there is an issue with their rent account.
18. The graph below shows the rent arrears from April 2019. The steady rise in arrears due to Universal Credit and the pandemic can be seen clearly and they reached a high of £705,478 (5.74% of annual rent collectable) in November 2021. Following the interventions and support detailed in the paragraphs above, rent arrears have reduced and we expect to see this trend continuing.

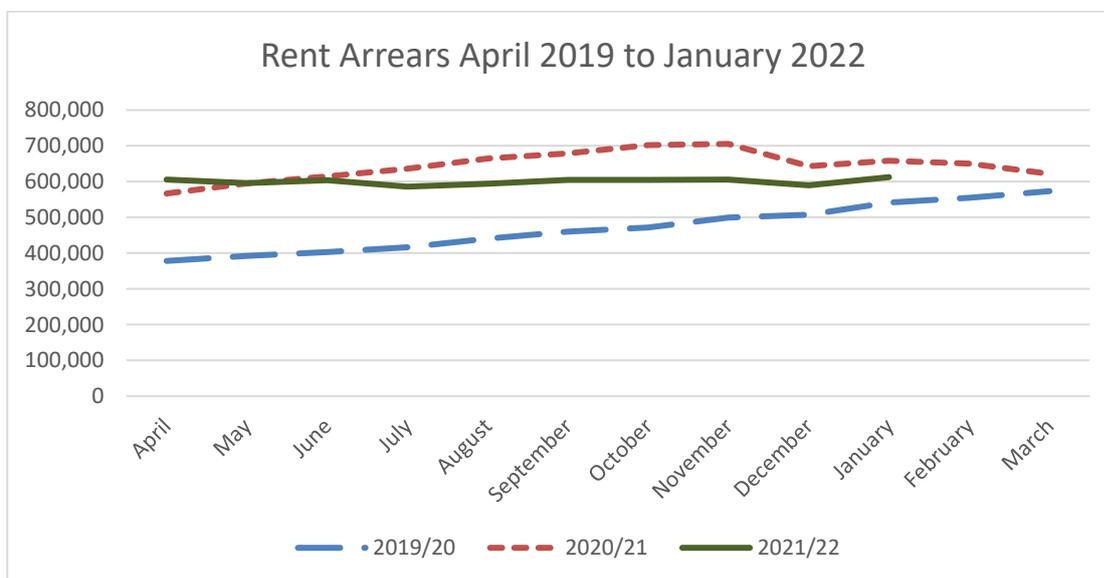


Figure 1: Rent arrears by year

## RIGHT TO BUY AND MUTUAL EXCHANGES

19. Most tenants who hold a secure tenancy for at least 3 years are eligible to purchase their home through the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme. This however does not apply to tenants who do not have a secure tenancy and those tenants who live in accommodation which is designated for the elderly and some accommodation which is designated for the disabled.
20. Under the RTB scheme, tenants can claim up to 70% discount off the purchase price subject to a maximum discount amount of £84,600

21. Over the past 5 years, 57 properties have been purchased through the RTB scheme:

Year	1 bed-flat	1 bed-bungalow	2 bed-flat or maisonette	2 bed-house	3 bed-house	4 bed-house	Total
2017	1	0	7	0	6	1	15
2018	0	1	4	1	5	1	12
2019	1	0	4	2	9	0	16
2020	2	0	2	0	3	0	7
2021	1	0	3	0	3	0	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>57</b>

Table 1: Right to Buy by year

22. Tenants who hold a secure tenancy have a right to exchange (swap) their home. This is a mutual agreement with two or more parties who must have the written consent from their landlord.

23. Exchanges are a preferred housing option for many social housing tenants who may be adequately housed but want to move to a different area or are looking for a move to a larger or smaller home.

24. The Council has signed up to a national exchange scheme called HomeSwapper and all secure tenants are eligible to apply through the scheme to exchange with another social housing tenant almost anywhere in the Country. On applying to HomeSwapper, tenants are asked to provide information about their present property and say what property they are looking for.

25. The HomeSwapper scheme will match applicants' needs and notify them of potential exchange opportunities. When tenants believe they have identified a property they are interested in, they contact the Council to obtain our written consent. On receipt of the exchange application and confirming eligibility, housing officers arrange an inspection of the property together with a building surveyor and both parties to the exchange. The purpose of this visit is to identify and agree work that will be carried out by the Council and any work that the outgoing tenant needs to carry out prior to the exchange. In some cases, the ingoing tenant may accept responsibility for the future maintenance and upkeep of any non-standard fixtures and fittings.

26. In the event that other parties to the exchange are social housing tenants of another local authority or housing association there will be an exchange of tenant references before any consent is given.

## TENANT ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

27. We offer a range of involvement opportunities and consultation events enabling tenants to be involved in the services we provide and to play a key role in shaping and monitoring housing services. To ensure tenants are able to fulfil this vital role, we fund training and allocate resources where necessary.

28. Due to the pandemic, it has not been possible to hold our regular Tenant and Leaseholder Forums, however it is envisaged that these will commence again this year.

## **TENANCY FRAUD**

29. Tenancy fraud occurs when one of our properties is occupied by someone who is either legally not entitled to be there or has obtained use of the property fraudulently. Therefore, it is vital that we tackle tenancy fraud to ensure legitimate tenants have access to affordable homes.

30. Some examples of tenancy fraud are:

- Application fraud – a prospective tenant provides false information on their housing application in order to gain a property
- Right to Buy fraud – a tenant knowingly provides false information when applying to buy their home under the scheme
- Subletting fraud – a tenant rents out all or part of their property to someone else without our knowledge or permission
- Succession fraud – a person moves into a property when the legal tenant either dies or moves away and that person does not have the right to live there

31. Prevention is always better than cure. It can be a very difficult and expensive process to end a tenancy or take action against those who have committed tenancy fraud so stopping fraud in the first place is a key priority for the team.

32. We reduce the risk of fraud by carrying out detailed residency and identification checks on all our tenants. These checks are carried out at different stages of a tenancy, including at the start of the tenancy, changes to sole/joint, assignment, succession and Right to Buy. All reports of sub-letting and abandonments are investigated in full and appropriate action taken. Our Investigation Officer undertakes tenancy audits to check that the authorised tenant is living at the property.

33. The counter-fraud work carried out with the Neighbourhood Team, including the numbers and outcomes of fraud cases is reported to the Audit & Governance Committee on an annual basis.

## **REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICES**

34. The main functions provided by the Repairs and Maintenance Services include the following:

- Responsive Repairs
- Planned Maintenance (including Servicing and Cyclical Maintenance)
- Void Properties
- Fire Risk Assessments and Measures

35. Throughout all these functions the teams work closely with the Neighbourhood and

Sheltered Housing Services. They also support wider corporate requirements (such as repairs to public conveniences) and provide services to some of the Borough's Community Associations.

## **RESPONSIVE REPAIRS**

36. The Housing Responsive Repair Service is primarily delivered by directly employed operatives. There are currently 11 operatives employed by the Council who cover specific trades (such as plumbing, plastering, groundworks, electricians etc.) as well as several operatives who are multi-traders. Job adverts are also currently posted for vacant positions.
37. In addition to the directly employed operatives a contractor Framework is in place to provide additional and further access to trades such as groundworks, fencing and windows. This allows the Council to easily appoint other companies to undertake repair work on the Council's behalf; normally used for larger or specialist repair works it also provides some contingency for the Council and helps to manage peaks in workload or staff absence.
38. During 2020 and 2021 the Responsive Repair Service inevitably focused on adjusting to, and mitigating, the implications of the COVID pandemic. As reported to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in July 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had presented some significant challenges for repairs in Council properties, whether that be down to national restrictions or the availability of staff/materials. The backlog of works due to the pandemic has now largely been addressed.
39. In the coming year there will be increased focus on refining and improving the relationship and workings with our Responsive Repair framework contractors. This will look at opportunities for improved communication and monitoring to ensure work is undertaken in an appropriate and timely manner.

## **PLANNED MAINTENANCE**

40. Planned Maintenance is the collective term for all major repairs, cyclical maintenance, and improvements to our properties. This includes improvements such as installation of central heating, fitted kitchens, bathrooms modernisations and double-glazing replacements when they reach the end of their useful life. It also includes any major repairs to the outside of properties such as external redecoration, roofs, and balcony repairs as well as improvements to the general environment in hard landscaped areas.
41. Disabled adaptations are another important and significant aspect of this work. The number undertaken by the Council have increased significantly in recent years (see table below).

Year	Disabled Adaptation	Kitchen Modifications	Bathroom Modifications	Total
2019/20	16	10	5	37
2020/21	39	30	163	163
2021/22 (inc. ongoing)	39	32	39	165

*Table 2: Disabled Modifications/Adaptations by Year*

42. Projects to facilitate disabled adaptations can be significant and are often resource intensive. This can include extensions to properties to provide a ground floor accessible bedroom and shower room, or alterations to make large parts of a property wheelchair accessible. Although individually time consuming these works are hugely beneficial in helping to facilitate an individual or family affected by disability to stay in their home, or to create a bespoke property for a family who have been on the waiting list for some time due to their individual needs.
43. Increasingly Planned Maintenance will also reflect the aspirations to make the Council's housing stock 'greener', taking forward the principles of the Fareham Housing Greener Policy. Capacity funding work is underway (grant funded) to better understand the most appropriate 'green' solutions for many of the Council's blocks of flats (i.e. where solutions are often more complex than an individual house). The intention will be to improve the heating, comfort and costs for Council tenants whilst reduce the impact to climate change. This work stream will result in some significant projects for the coming years. The Planned Maintenance team have also been involved in ensuring the LAD2 grant funding opportunity (which is providing photovoltaics and other improvements to many Council homes) can take place.
44. During 2022 a programme of planned maintenance works for the years ahead will be further established to ensure priorities can be clearly understood, and to understand if sufficient resources and staffing is in place to deliver our planned maintenance responsibilities and aspirations in the medium/longer term.

### **VOID PROPERTIES**

45. Void properties are those Council homes that become vacant. Works are normally required to a home before it is let again. This can vary from very simple/minimal work (such as replacing some broken tiles) to a complete property clearance and refurbishment. In a typical year over 200 voids might be processed for or on behalf of the Council.
46. Void works are normally undertaken by Mountjoy as part of a contract arrangement with works and costs overseen by the Council's Void Surveyor. During the last six-month period over 90 voids have been processed by Mountjoy. Just three of these were completed late, and in two of those instances they were just one day late.
47. In light of the relative success of this arrangement, and in order to provide some continuity after a turbulent two-year period, there are currently no proposals to significantly change the arrangements with Voids.

### **FIRE RISK ASSESSMENT AND MEASURES**

48. As part of the Council's fire safety approach officers regularly meet to discuss any national guidance or legislation updates, either in place or emerging.

#### *Fire Risk Assessments*

49. The Council have a statutory responsibility to carry out Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) on all communal areas in our buildings (corridors, staircases, lobbies etc.). These assessments are either carried out in-house or by an external independent consultancy. They are undertaken at regular intervals as determined by previous assessments and the risk rating of the building. Any actions from these are prioritised and recorded.

50. The actions from the FRAs are recorded on a rolling format (so often as quickly as things are addressed new actions are identified). There are currently three 'Immediate' (Priority A) actions. As an example, this includes excessive combustible material stored on a balcony. Once identified any Priority A matters are prioritised for further action by officers and the current Priority A actions are being addressed.

51. There are also several short, medium, and long-term actions that will need to be addressed (see table below). Most actions are not easy or quick to address, for instance where they need to include tenant liaison, where there are leaseholders to consider, where planning and/or Building Control approval might be required, and where the process needs to include the appointment of suitable contractors to undertake the work (often involving a tender exercise). In the majority of cases work is already underway to move these actions forward.

Type	Timescale	Total (Jan 2022)
Priority A	Immediate	3
Priority B	Short Term – Within 3 months	153
Priority C	Medium Term – Within 6 months	88
Priority D	Long Term – at refurbishment etc.	58

Table 3: FRA Actions

#### *Smoke Detection Checks*

52. Annual smoke detection checks continue to be successfully undertaken and can be reported in more detail at year end. Typically, over 99% are completed and any outstanding checks are typically associated with difficulties in obtaining access into the property or contact with the tenant. When this occurs the relevant Neighbourhood Officer is involved in working with the tenants to ensure that the checks can be undertaken.

### **RISK ASSESSMENT**

53. There are no significant risk considerations in relation to this report

### **CONCLUSION**

54. This report provides panel members with an update about the work of the Neighbourhood and Maintenance Services.

#### **Appendices:**

Appendix A – Council owned homes by size, type and area.

#### **Enquiries:**

For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman (Ext. 4645) or Robyn Lyons (Ext. 4305).