Housing & Property Services Portfolio Holder
Update on the last 12 months for Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Notable achievements/successes

Delivery of Affordable housing

The redevelopment of the former Fetherstone Court sheltered housing scheme into Sayer Court, a new modern facility of 76 apartments for the active elderly and five bungalows for families with a disabled member was completed and handed over to the Council in the last fortnight. The first offers have already been made and the first tenants will be moving in shortly. A formal opening is planned for January 2017.

At the time of the last report the purchase of 21 new HRA homes (15 shared ownership and 6 social rented houses) at Great Field Drive in South West Warwick had just been completed. All these properties were quickly occupied and the Council's first venture into the shared ownership market, to date the preserve of housing associations, went without any hitches – a credit to the Lettings team.

Through the W2 Joint Venture with Waterloo Housing Association a further 31 new affordable homes have been delivered in the past 12 months. Waterloo started on site in October on the first phase of the Station Approach redevelopment, which will ultimately deliver 212 new homes, 160 of which will be affordable, in this landmark, brownfield site.

Other Registered Providers (RPs), (i.e housing associations), are also delivering affordable homes either

1) Through participating in private sector development sites that are required, through s106 planning agreements, to have a proportion of affordable housing or
2) on sites developed by the RPs themselves where they can deliver an all-affordable housing scheme. 186 new affordable homes were completed in the district in 2015/16 by RPs and a further 96 have been completed in the first two quarters of 2016/17.

Allocations

All the new affordable homes referred to above have been, or will be, allocated to applicants on the Council's HomeChoice scheme.

The new HomeChoice Allocations Policy was implemented in June 2016. This allows existing council and registered provider tenants with limited housing need (reasonable preference as defined by the Government), but good reasons for wanting to move, the opportunity to transfer. As well as giving existing tenants more options to move this also enables the Council to make better use of its scarce housing stock resources.

Other changes include the restriction of applicants to those with a local connection, except in specific circumstances, and the removal of the ability to bid for one bedroom in excess of need.

The new customer information documents accompanying the policy change were crystal marked by the Plain English Campaign to make them as readable as possible.

Although we are still in the bedding down phase of the new policy, so far it is going as planned, with a review scheduled for 2017, to address any issues.

Homelessness

The robustness of our homelessness procedures was examined by the courts following a legal challenge against one of our homelessness decisions. We had made an offer of accommodation following an acceptance of a household as homeless and that the Council had a duty to house them. The offer was rejected as unsuitable by the household who requested a review. We completed the review and upheld our initial decision that the offer was reasonable. This decision was challenged by solicitors acting for the household and went to County Court on the 27 October 2016.

Had we lost we would have been liable to pick up court costs that were in excess of £20,000 but the Court found in our favour, finding our decision making process robust and upholding our decision on the suitability of the offer. This case is a good example of the pressures that our Homelessness Team face.

Financial Inclusion

We are unusual amongst stock retaining Councils in having two staff that offer specialist advice to tenants who are struggling to pay their bills and maintain their tenancies. One of the team is qualified and the other member will also be undertaking a qualification for the Institute of Money Advisors. We have started the Rental Exchange project which should broadly result in more tenants having access to cheaper financing.

Priority Families Support Worker

We also have a dedicated post, jointly funded by Warwickshire County Council and Warwick District Council, to support households living in our homes who have been identified as meeting the criteria of the Government's Priority Families Programme, designed to provide support and the earliest possible interventions for households with complex needs who would otherwise require expensive interventions from a range of public agencies.

James Orchard has now been in post for 12 months and has been able to support seven families to sustain their tenancy, by working with the family to address rent arrears, getting to the route cause of anti-social behaviours and signposting to enable them to receive appropriate support. Other local authorises are now keen to consider doing the same in their area and are now using our project as a pilot.

Tenancy visits

We started a programme of cyclical visits to tenants' homes for all our general needs properties in July 2016, with a plan to visit all these properties within a 3 year cycle. We hope to identify issues early, such as tenants who are having difficulties paying their rent or those with previously unidentified support needs to ensure that we make the relevant referrals to support them. We are currently ahead of schedule on these visits and they are proving to be of good value. We have found that 75% of tenants really look after their property and really love where they live, that 20% are struggling to sustain their home and will require further visits and potential interventions, with only 5% not currently willing to engage with us.

Neighbourhood and Estates Team

The new Neighbourhood Officers are now all in post, replacing the previous Estate Supervisor posts. The team of four is managed by Philomena Sheen and between them they manage 279 blocks of flats, carrying out various duties to maintain the communal areas to a high standard. They are a mobile team and in December they will be issued with liveried vans carrying the WDC logo, so that they will be able to become a real

presence in our communities. They have already begun undertaken projects to make our tenants surroundings more appealing.

Lifeline/Warwick Response

This team are collecting the BMW i3 Electric Pool cars at the moment that have also been 'wrapped' with the WDC 'brand' and logo. We will be doing a press release when the vehicles are fully deployed, as part of a wider marketing plan to sell more of our services across the district. It continues to provide a valuable service to both council tenants and private sector tenants.

Anti Social Behaviour

We have recently used for the first time one of the new powers granted in the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, to seek possession on a tenant who committed a serious crime in the locality of the property. The process has yet to be completed but demonstrates our willingness to tackle anti-social behaviour and those that have been affected have expressed gratitude that the Council has taken their complaints seriously.

Stock Condition Survey

In the last month the Assets Management Team has received the Stock Condition Survey data which, for the first time ever, was commissioned on the basis of a full survey of the building components of every HRA home. The data will be supplemented by further specialist surveys, including condition surveys of the high-rise flats, and will enable us to derive a detailed picture of the condition of every home. This will allow a tailored approach to our investment and improvement packages in a more cost effective way and deliver the aspirations of the Council and its tenants faster and more efficiently.

Housing repairs

We have moved from an open book basis to a schedule of rates this year and this is reflected in the HRA business plan. We are also looking at introducing mobile phone text satisfaction surveys for our tenants, so that we can get rapid feedback on the quality of the works being done.

What is planned in the coming 12 months?

Completion of the Housing Futures project

Housing Futures has two interlinked strands that, taken together, will allow us to strategically assess where the Council needs to support, or even intervene, in the local housing market to ensure that its is balanced and offers choice and opportunity for households living in the district, or wishing to live here in the future, with differing levels of income.

Part of the project is to review, update and approve a new Housing & Homelessness Strategy. We have finished the consultation period, are analysing the responses and will be taking a draft Strategy to the Housing Advisory Group in late January and Scrutiny & Executive in March.

The other strand of the project is a full review of the HRA Business Plan, as how we maintain, manage, and hopefully grow our own housing stock is an important element of the wider strategic approach. The review will be based on an assessment of the outcomes of a full Stock Condition Survey, partially completed (see above) but with additional surveys ordered for our 7 multi-storey blocks and properties of a non-

traditional construction type, e.g. steel frame or concrete panel. It will also review the financial implications of the Housing & Planning Act.

I reported on the main provisions of the then Bill a year ago but although the Bill received Royal Assent earlier this year, the detailed Statutory Instruments that will govern how its provisions are implemented have yet to be published. We are, therefore, still awaiting detailed guidance on two crucial elements of the Act which will have a financial impact on the current Business Plan:

- The extension of the Right-to-Buy to RP tenants and the proposal that the costs of discounts are funded by stock-retaining councils, either through a 'notional' levy or funded by the sale of 'high-value' council homes as they become empty.
- The introduction of the 'Pay to Stay' levy for council tenants in a household with an income of more than £31,000. The levy will be placed on stock owning councils, initially at a notional level based on an estimate of the number of such households in that Councils area, with an expectation that the Council will collect the sums due by charging those tenants a higher rent than other tenants.

This means that this element of Housing Future will slip from the previous March reporting date and that, unfortunately I am, as yet, still unable to provide a revised date. I have recently written to ARCH and the Minister expressing our concern at the delays in laying the regulation before the House, and the potential impact on the delivery of affordable housing.

Delivery of affordable housing

We have therefore put on hold the work that had been started to review options for delivering new homes, developed and owned by the Council, on either redundant garage sites and other small parcels of Council owned land, as the viability of such schemes is dependent on the outcome of the Business Plan review. However, significant review work has already been undertaken so hopefully we will be able to re-start this project during the next 12 months.

Consideration is also being given to further large scale opportunities for new housing, including the potential for the HRA to purchase the affordable homes developed on the Europa Way site and the ability to develop new homes to support wider social and economic development and regeneration in Lillington. However these potential schemes will also need to be considered in the light of the regulations issued under the provisions in the Housing and Planning Act.

HomeChoice

A review of the new allocations policy will be carried out twelve months after implementation to see whether there are any further changes required.

Houses in multiple occupation (HMOs)

A Task and Finish Group is currently investigating the issues surrounding the proliferation of HMOs in and around South Leamington. The Government has also indicated an intention to extend the mandatory licencing of HMOs to include a wider number of properties. We will be considering the findings of the Task & Finish Group in due course and dovetail this in with the implementation of the new Government rules as and when the regulations are issued.

Temporary Accommodation

We are undertaking a review of our Temporary Accommodation for households awaiting a homelessness decision or awaiting an offer where a duty to house them has been

agreed. As part of this we will be setting out an action plan to look to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation in all but emergency cases. One element of this is the decision to use the five self-contained units at 69 Willes Road as temporary accommodation rather than selling the property when it is returned to us by Chapter One, who had previously leased it to provide supported accommodation.

Housing Related Support

We will complete the review of our own supported housing services, following the withdrawal of funding from Warwickshire County Council last August. This affects both our Lifeline Services and our Housing Support Officers who provide support to our five sheltered schemes as well as designated properties for the over 60s. We are in the consultation period, with leaflets having been sent out to all affected tenants of these properties for comment before the end of the consultation period on the 20 December 2016. There have also been a series of nine public meetings in early November to discuss the proposals and provide answers to any questions. These were well attended and very helpful. A report will be taken to Executive in February 2017 with recommendations.

Rents Policy

We are updating our rent arrears policy, and this is going to Executive tomorrow and then on to Council for approval. Once this is agreed we will update procedures to ensure actions are as effective as possible and we can continue with the journey to improve performance.

Financial Inclusion

The Government introduced a revised Benefit Cap, further reducing benefits payable to affected households earlier this month. This currently affects 32 tenants and their households, all of which have been contacted by our staff with advice and support offered. Further engagement is planned in January for any of these tenants who may be struggling to pay their rent as a result of their benefit reduction.

A further challenge to tenants' ability to manage their rents will come with the introduction of Universal Credit. The roll out to JSA claimants continues and we currently have 43 tenants in receipt of Universal Credit. The full roll-out plan has just been announced with Warwick District seeing all new claims being for Universal Credit from June 2018 with roll-out to existing claimants after that. This gives us some time to talk to tenants about payment plans and introduce support for any who are likely to struggle with the transition. We intend to work with the DWP on awareness training for staff and tenants.

We are looking to move ahead with the Rental Exchange project, which we believe will improve tenants' ability to access cheaper loans by improving their credit scores and, therefore, their ability to access affordable loans.

Aids and Adaptations

Following the Council's review of the Warwickshire Housing Assessment Team (HAT) pilot project, delivering housing aids and adaptations to help support people with disabilities remain living at home, we will be joining the new single shared service across the whole County starting from 1st April 2017.

The WDC staff in the southern area HAT pilot, a partnership between WDC, Stratford upon Avon District Council and Warwickshire County Council will be TUPE transferred to

the new service, apart from the fixed term Project Manager who has secured a new position within the Council.

Any issues the Service Area faces

Homelessness

Homelessness is a matter of increasing concern for the district. There has been:

- an increasing number of people approaching the council as homeless
- reductions by Warwickshire County Council in funding for housing-related support services for vulnerable people
- significant turnover in staff in our homelessness team

Along with other issues this has led to people staying longer in temporary accommodation with a knock-on effect of greater use of bed and breakfast and consequent high levels of expenditure and a need to increase the budget to cover this.

This is being considered as part of the preparation of the new Housing and Homelessness Strategy and a broad review of temporary accommodation provision for the homeless.

Housing Waiting List

With the completion of Sayer Court the Council currently owns 5,455 homes. However, the rate of Right to Buy applications and sales is increasing with 27 sold during 2014/15 and a further 42 in 2015/16

The current Housing Register for affordable housing stands at 2,712 applications. Most of the demand is for smaller homes as the following table shows:

Property required	**Number of applicants**	**Number of voids in period 1st November 2015 to 31st October 2016**
1 bed	1677	174
2 bed	727	138
3 bed	253	77
4 bed	44	1
5 bed	9	0
6 bed	2	0
Total	**2712**	**390**

The current levels of affordable housing and their likely depletion when the Right to Buy is extended to RPs constrains our ability to offer accommodation to all those on the Housing Register.

Any areas you believe that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee might usefully examine/scrutinise to help.

The Housing Advisory Group will be considering the proposed revised Housing & Homelessness strategy in January, prior to it being formally presented to members. The intention is that the new five year strategy will have an accompanying action plan and that progress against this is formally reported to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis, allowing the Committee to consider whether it wishes to undertake any further detailed scrutiny of any aspect of the Action Plan.