

Dorset Council Plan Priorities – Housing

Cabinet – 25 July 2023

Portfolio Holder update from Cllr Jane Somper

The Dorset Council plan sets out its priorities from 2022 until 2024, reflecting what is important to the administration and the residents of Dorset. Within this plan and the associated delivery plan, housing and creating stronger and healthier communities are two key priorities.

It is important that Dorset Council continues to monitor and report on its progress against these key priority areas. This report outlines the strong progress that we are making in housing, and also reflects the considerable challenges and opportunities which exist.

Access to good quality housing is the foundation upon which people can build happy and successful lives¹. We are developing a new and ambitious Housing Strategy for Dorset, to provide an overarching plan to guide the Council and our partners in tackling the major housing challenges facing the residents of Dorset.

The Housing Strategy is entering the formal consultation stage. This has included positive and constructive discussions at the People and Health Overview Committee and wide engagement and interest from Members. This is due to come to Cabinet on 5 December 2023 for consideration and approval. Prior to that meeting, there will be a further paper to Cabinet on 5 September 2023 to consider the current delivery plan for Housing, and how we are to respond in the most effective and efficient way to rising demand, rising costs, and declining availability of private rented housing. This will also show details of a new Housing Board to support the delivery of our objectives.

Some of the key challenges include:

- The rise in demand for social and affordable housing in 2022/23 is being sustained in the first quarter of 2023/24.
- In the financial year 2022/23, we had 3996 households approach us as being homeless, or at risk of homelessness. This is 600 more than the previous year. We are receiving up to 400 new applicants per month for the Housing Register, with a range of needs being presented, as well as homelessness.
- Currently, we have 369 households in temporary accommodation, of which there were 113 in bed and breakfast. The fact that the overall number is static is testament to very strong performance in preventing homelessness (from those first people first approaching us) and moving people on into settled housing. The figure is static, but there is a regular flow of people moving into temporary accommodation and then moving on into settled housing, such as those offered through Registered Provider Housing Associations. For example, a typical ten-bedroom hostel that we use, has had 30 households move through the scheme in the past two years.

¹ [Housing and health: a reading list - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/libraries/commons/2023/07/27/housing-and-health-a-reading-list)

- The cost of temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast is rising, with increases greater than inflation being common. The Local Housing Allowance rate is frozen, so any increase in temporary accommodation charges take the rents further away from what can be recovered through Housing Benefit. We are focusing on sourcing and managing more cost-effective temporary accommodation, rather than over-reliance on expensive housing such as bed and breakfast. The cost of providing B&B is much higher than traditional forms of accommodation. This is a cost purely between the Council and the provider. Invoices are paid by the Council and are not subject to any contribution from the occupier. Examples of this breakdown are in this table:

Room Type	Eligible Cost of room per week	LHA subsidy	Subsidy Loss
Single	£320	£102	£218
1 adult, 1-2 child	£450	£102	£348
Larger family	£700	£102	£598

- We work well to enable and support the development of new affordable housing, with 664 new homes built in the last financial year. This is higher than at any point during our time as a Unitary Council and is delivered when the economic challenges are greater. We also work to encourage the best use of the existing homes owned by Housing Associations and to work similarly with the private landlord sector. This helps to close the gap between the demand for housing and the availability of affordable homes to rent.
- Part of our work is to ensure good housing standards across sectors, with a team in place to encourage best practice from landlords and to take enforcement action when necessary. This includes a current rise in awareness and concern about damp and mould, and our team work with landlords to maintain the best conditions for tenants. We also work to bring empty homes back into use, and have had a strong success recently in Blandford, bring back an empty home and converting into a home for six homeless people.
- We have made good use of capital resources and Government grants, delivering a hostel acquisition, a programme of rough sleeper accommodation, empty homes acquisitions and a programme to acquire temporary accommodation to use initially for Ukrainian and Afghan households.

The work on the Housing Strategy is driven by the need for Dorset's residents to live safely and securely in well-designed and well-built homes which meet their needs. The need to match the demand for housing to the supply of available homes is a key challenge, and the Housing Strategy is looking to find ways to increase the availability of housing across tenures, as well as to help people to explore options when they are facing homelessness or living in unsuitable housing. Our work also focuses on making sure that homes are maintained at a decent standard and be accessible. Our teams work to ensure that landlords and owners can deliver to that level.

As a non-stock holding Council, we are clear that our role as an enabling authority is a critically important one and this strategy recognises the importance of collaborating with partners to deliver high-quality, affordable, and sustainable housing for our residents.

This point also translates to other demands for housing or accommodation from across the Council's areas of need.

Housing is a key foundation of a good life. If someone or a family has a decent home, they stay healthy, work locally, study successfully, age well and contribute to wider communities. Without a decent home, that reverses – poor health, unemployment, low educational achievement, age related decline and a limited ability to contribute. Our paper to Cabinet on 5 September will outline in more detail the context of how we are operating as a Housing Authority and how this supports the delivery of the wider range of Council objectives and aspirations.