

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

11 September 2023

Registered Providers of Social Housing: A review of the work of five Housing Associations operating within the Dorset Council area

For Review and Consultation

Chair of the People & Health Scrutiny Committee: Cllr Gill Taylor

Local Councillor(s): All

Report Author: Andrew Billany on behalf of the People & Health Scrutiny working group on registered providers.

Report Status: Public

Brief Summary: A panel of People and Health Scrutiny Committee members held a series of meetings with representatives of five Housing Associations (or Registered Providers of Social Housing), during 2022. The panel was Cllr Gill Taylor, Cllr Molly Rennie, and Cllr Jean Dunseith. Also present, as observers, were the then Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety, Cllr Graham Carr-Jones, and the Corporate Director for Housing and Community Safety, Andrew Billany.

The chosen Housing Associations represented those with the largest number of properties in our area and with the largest programmes to build new affordable homes. They were: Abri, Aster, East Boro, Magna and Sovereign. We thank them for their enthusiastic, thorough, and open participation in this review.

In addition to the meetings and interviews, a set of questions was sent for the Housing Associations to complete and this supplemented the information gathered.

The timing of this report coincides with the current consultation being held for Dorset Council's new Housing Strategy. Over 1000 responses have already been received, and comments at this meeting, relating to the work of Housing Associations and all Registered Providers, will be taken into account, when relevant.

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to note the findings of the review and to consider the ongoing work relating to the Housing Strategy and the associated roles carried out by Registered Providers of Social Housing.

Reason for Recommendation: To support the ongoing work to scrutinise the delivery of Dorset Council's Housing objectives.

1. Interview headlines

This report summarises the responses from the Housing Association interviews and surveys. There was a strong line of consistency across all five organisations interviewed, with the following headlines:

- Strong joint working between Dorset Council and Housing Associations. Praise for how Dorset Council supports Housing Associations in their work to develop new homes, through its 'enabling' approach.
- Commitment to develop new homes in Dorset, despite challenges relating to cost and labour shortages. Praise for the fact that the number of new affordable homes has risen each year since 2019, with the 2022/23 figure being 664.
- Commitment to maintain high standards of customer service for existing tenants. Recognition that complaints are higher than before the pandemic and that there has been a rise in concern for issues such as damp and mould and anti-social behaviour. Agreement to develop improved access for Ward Councillors, with one Housing Association having developed a dedicated email address for Dorset Council Councillors to focus responses. The Housing team will circulate a note of how Housing Associations are set up to handle enquiries.
- Eagerness to speed the process of developing new homes, and utilising Dorset Council interventions to the best effect. Commitment to setting up a dedicated Development Forum for Housing Associations to liaise with Dorset Council staff, and include Planning Officers. This would be to supplement already existing quarterly liaison meetings with individual Housing Associations and Dorset Council. (These meetings include the Portfolio Holder, Corporate Director and senior staff from Dorset Council and the regional leads from each Housing Association). Commitment to

working constructively to efficiently and speedily manage schemes through the Planning phases.

2. Report

The following section summarises the responses to the set questions in the survey and interviews. Actions are summarised in bullet point format and these were taken away to implement by the Housing team.

a. Liaison between your Housing Association and Dorset Council – what works well, what could be done better?

All five organisations spoke positively about their collaboration with staff across a range of disciplines at Dorset Council. Particular praise was offered for the work of the Housing Enabling Team, who work to support Housing Associations in their programmes to develop new affordable homes for rent and sale. It was also noted that there is good work with the team running the Housing Register, who provide nominations for new lettings, and the Housing Standards team, who work on a range of projects, such as disabled facilities grants and energy efficiency initiatives. Work with Planning Officers was seen as good but there was a common wish to speed up Planning applications and tackle delays in the process.

- Set up regular liaison meetings to focus on the development programme (building new homes). This to supplement existing meetings with individual Housing Associations
- Explore other areas where Housing Associations can assist, such as temporary accommodation for homeless people and families, supported housing and extra care housing. These are already provided by Housing Associations – such as Sovereign recently converting properties to deliver supported housing for homeless people in Shaftesbury and Blandford – and this contribution is welcomed as a model where more is done.
- Include Housing Associations more effectively in broader issues and initiatives. As a major local employer and community focused organisation it was felt that there was more to offer across the range of work happening to address community, environmental, economic and social challenges.

b. Links with the Council Plan and Strategies – how do you see your corporate objectives fitting with Dorset Council's?

All five organisations made it clear that they paid close attention to Dorset Council's Corporate Plan and associated strategies, and that they reflected that in their local, regional and organisational strategies. They reiterated their mission to provide affordable housing and excellent services or tenants and shared

owners, and recognise the importance of having this fit with the specific needs of localities. There was consistent enthusiasm around the development of Dorset Council's new Housing Strategy and a wish to contribute.

Members raised the question of homes being sold when this may be depleting a small number of affordable homes in a village or small town. It was recognised that having a standard approach to assessing the viability of a property, and then selling an 'unviable' home, may disproportionately (and negatively) impact on a small community.

- Set up specific routes for Housing Associations to engage with the Dorset Council Housing Strategy – including meetings and focus groups.
- Hold at least annual meetings with the Housing Association Chief Executives and Council leadership, to focus on strategy alignment and to supplement the liaison at local leadership level.
- Commit to constructive discussions where mismatches between corporate objectives appear, or where operational delivery produces local challenges (e.g. work to take local factors into account when considering the disposal of a property)

c. What are your plans to build and acquire new homes in Dorset?

All five Housing Associations have good pipelines of new homes due to be built and at various stages of development. All five committed to continuing to do so in Dorset. It was noted that all five had committed to Dorset as a location where they were able to provide locally focused services and had enough homes and dedicated staff and contractors in the area to do that well.

- The good performance in development of new homes was noted and welcomed. The wish to see a broad range of new homes built was also noted, with the shortage of larger family homes and adapted properties being an area Members wanted to see incorporated in future development decisions.
- The development of small scale housing schemes was welcomed, alongside the larger sites. The work of East Boro was highlighted for their smaller developments, with Aster, Sovereign, Magna and Abri all also offering a good range of new homes, with affordable rental and shared ownership homes being built. It was noted that initiatives relating to modular modern methods of construction, mentioned in the Magna interviews, had great potential to produce more homes.
- Housing Associations encouraged more joint work in relation to Council or publicly owned land, to deliver greater numbers of new homes. Closer liaison across the Housing and Place teams was accepted as being necessary, noting that this was making progress.

d. Tell us about your approach to providing a ‘local offer’ to Dorset and the various localities?

All five Housing Associations have roots in Dorset, with Aster, Magna and Sovereign having taken transfer of former Council homes many years ago. They all committed to their own versions of ‘local offers’ and had teams of housing officers, maintenance teams and welfare specialists all operating across the area. The rise of anti-social behaviour complaints was highlighted as an area which needed local focus and the point around disposal of empty properties was also raised in this context (recognising that small villages rely on affordable housing to keep people in their communities).

- This to be kept under regular review at the quarterly liaison meetings, to make sure that national or regional policies from the Housing Associations are relevant and effective at local level.

e. How do you involve residents in local decisions in Dorset?

All five Housing Associations have resident engagement strategies and ways to be involved in service development and decision making. In recent years, and accelerated since the pandemic, many of these approaches are via online or digital methods, with a decline in face to face and traditional tenants’ association contact. These are still valued, but there was a consistent wish to make sure that all tenants were listened to. Members stressed the need to keep the local focus and understanding and to work with Ward Councillors and Town and Parish Councils to help to do that well.

- This to be kept under regular review at the quarterly liaison meetings, to make sure that Housing Association resident engagement, and satisfaction levels, are monitored and kept effective.

f. How do you liaise with community groups and Ward Councillors in Dorset?

All five Housing Associations described how their community focused staff engaged with community groups and Ward Councillors as part of their daily work – including estate and scheme inspections but also on case work and where community groups were offering support or intervention with a tenancy matter. Members felt that this was patchy in some areas, with Ward Councillors sometimes finding out late about a matter, when they could have helped to resolve it if they knew earlier. Community groups providing support to vulnerable tenants were seen as very important, and good links in areas such as hoarding, mental ill-health and frailty due to age were seen as a crucial supplement to the work of housing officers.

- Quarterly newsletters or other ways to keep up regular communication was promoted as a way to keep Councillors and community groups informed.
- Housing Associations are encouraged to have their housing officers and community workers to make direct contact with Councillors on matters of interest, rather than relying on the complaints process (when it is often too late to prevent a problem arising)

g. How do you support residents when they are vulnerable? How do you respond when that support need leads to housing management challenges (e.g. drug or alcohol addiction, mental ill health)?

Good examples of supported housing or welfare related work were provided by the Housing Associations. When tenants are vulnerable, work to support them often relies on good will and good practice from generalist housing officers, so the need for that to be supplemented by specialist staff was recognised. Good work with homeless people who had previously been sleeping rough was noted, with the 'Housing First' model working well, providing a Housing Association tenancy with 'wrap around' support. It was recognised that tenants have a broad range of support needs, with specialist and well trained approaches being needed for areas such as mental health, addiction and frailty. Housing Associations would welcome more funding in this area, and will happily help with any bids to Government or working up proposals in areas such as Health or Social Care.

- Commitment to including housing needs as part of broader Social Care and Health commissioning. This is already reflected in Council Commissioning strategies and a rising matter on the Integrated Care Board agenda.
- Commitment to work with Housing Associations to minimise delays in administering care packages or providing nominations for supported housing schemes.

h. Local lettings plans (LLPs) often look to exclude so called 'difficult' tenants, such as people with a history of offending or drug use. That excludes some of the people we have a duty to house. What do you suggest we do about that?

Housing Associations commit to enabling balanced communities, so want to make sure that lettings plans are able to support that principle. It was stressed that these should only be used where there are actual examples of anti-social behaviour or when a new scheme is being let for the first time. It was accepted that the good work with the Housing Register and lettings team was essential to make sure that housing schemes were occupied by people who could get on together and thrive as a set of neighbours, but not to discriminate against people. In practice, this means that people with complex or challenging behaviour need

to be appropriately housed and with support in place when necessary. It was agreed that local lettings plans are important but need to be used sparingly, and balanced so that all people in housing need are able to secure the right kind of housing.

- Commitment to develop local lettings plans only when they are necessary and make sure there is a workable and fair balance which provides homes across the range of needs.
- i. **What is your approach to asset management of your stock in Dorset – so that we maximise the available affordable housing, as well as investing in the quality of people’s homes? We are concerned about the loss of available housing when properties are sold, so would like to know your approach to that and how we gain more than we lose.**

The five Housing Associations all committed to delivering a new build programme which delivers more new homes, whilst disposing of a smaller number of vacant homes when they are seen as unviable. This is backed up by the current statistics on newly built affordable housing. The point, noted earlier, about making informed decisions about disposals and sales was accepted. It was confirmed that all five organisations invest considerable sums to maintain and improve their housing, and take into account new approaches to maintain safety and to protect against damp and mould.

- Commitment to sharing information and strategies to invest in social housing stock across the Dorset Council area. This to include close alignment on strategies to invest in energy efficiency, net zero and environmental standards.
- Commitment to transparency on decision making when an empty property is sold, explaining the reasons why this is happening and how the proceeds are used to reinvest in new stock or improvements.
- j. **We want to minimise eviction and prevent homelessness. How do you help with that?**

All five Housing Associations have policies to sustain tenancies and minimise evictions and were convincing on this being used as a last resort. The need to alert the homelessness team early if an eviction is going to happen was stressed. New tenancies are supported through advice and guidance on setting up life in the new home and with money advice and support needs being identified early. If debts arise, the Housing Associations work closely with the tenants and advice agencies to reduce and manage those arrears.

- Commitment to early work to set up new tenants with the information and support they need to establish themselves in their new homes and to maintain their tenancies.

- Commitment to early alerts to the Council where tenancies are failing, alongside ongoing support from the Housing Association to those tenants.

k. How do you bring your policy and specialist expertise to help us – especially when there is a new initiative or Government policy, such as the Domestic Abuse Act

The expertise of the Housing Association teams is welcomed across areas of relevance, and the quarterly liaison meetings are used to share experience and knowledge. There has been some attendance at the Domestic Abuse Forum and committed interest in doing more to prevent abuse occurring or act decisively when it has occurred. It is recognised that the Council sometimes works in a 'silo' and should do more to bring Housing Association expertise in early when there is a new Government or policy initiative to develop. Domestic Abuse was raised in the question, but this also applies to new and developing policies relating to areas such as sustainable development and decarbonisation, as well as economic regeneration, health and social care. With 20,000 homes, all the Housing Associations in Dorset make up a major element of the local economy, as well as contributor to meeting social objectives.

- Commitment to bring Housing Associations in earlier to develop new policies and to make better use of their expertise. This works well in areas but can be broadened.

3. Financial Implications

There are no significant additional financial costs associated with this paper. Having an efficient pipeline of new affordable housing developments make a considerable positive impact to reduce the spend on temporary accommodation for homelessness.

4. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

The fact that there are 20,000 homes managed by Housing Associations and a pipeline of new homes being built (664 last year) this has a large impact on our natural environment, climate and ecology. The paper does not propose any change to that fact but encourages joint work and initiatives to contribute to Dorset's policies and to mitigate the negative impacts of residential development.

5. Well-being and Health Implications

Again, as major landlords and owners of housing stock, a large proportion of Dorset's population live in Housing Association homes. It is well accepted that

having a decent home is a component part of having a healthy life and that poor housing contributes to ill health, so this paper's focus on improving that position across all of the stock is relevant.

6. Risk Assessment

7.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as: Medium

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

This is not a matter for decision and there has not been an EIA. The commitment to provide accessible and decent housing for those in need is a key factor in the policies being discussed in the paper.

8. Appendices

There are no appendices.

9. Background Papers

None