

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

7 March 2024

Registered Providers of Social Housing. Six-month update following the review at the September 2023 Committee of the work of five Housing Associations operating within the Dorset Council area.

For Review and Consultation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr J Somper, Adult Social Care, Health and Housing

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: V Broadhurst, Executive Director of People - Adults

Report Author: Andrew Billany

Job Title: Corporate Director of Housing and Community Safety

Email: andrew.billany@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

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.

At the meeting of the People and Health Scrutiny Committee on 11 September 2023 a detailed report was provided summarising the work of the panel and the findings. This was welcomed, with an ongoing interest expressed in the work of Registered Providers and recognising the important impact on residents within Dorset.

It was requested that the Corporate Director for Housing and Community Safety provided an update six months after the points were considered and discussed at the September 2023 Committee.

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.

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 the report last September coincided with the consultation being held for Dorset Council's new Housing Strategy. The Housing Strategy was adopted in December 2023, having included comments and data from Registered Providers, and matters relating to the development of new affordable homes and the management of affordable tenancies.

The Housing Strategy, now adopted, will support a comprehensive set of delivery plans. These will include the work undertaken by Registered Providers of Social Housing, in developing new homes and providing effective housing management, maintenance and support services to their tenants and leaseholders.

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to note the update, having already noted the findings of the review, and to note that the ongoing work to develop a delivery plan for the Housing Strategy will feature close work with all Registered Providers active in our area.

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

1. **Questions and points raised at the September 2023 meeting.**

This update will follow the format of the questions raised by Members at the September meeting, answers or comments made after each point.

- a) *There were 52 housing associations in Dorset. The smaller housing associations have less resources than some of the larger associations in Dorset.*

The need to pay attention to all housing associations in Dorset is accepted, with open invitations to all to attend forums and meetings to discuss development, homelessness or the housing strategy. It is

understood that some of these organisations are tiny, so will have different needs to the larger developing Registered Providers, but we note the point about resources and make sure that our enabling, housing needs and advice teams respond regardless of size. We have expanded the number of organisations where we have more focused liaison meetings to include BCHA and Abri, as well as Aster/East Boro, Magna and Sovereign, to reflect the scale of their activity in Dorset. The work of the Housing Enabling to support very small Community Land Trusts is an example of how this is done well, and Dorset Council has a strong track record of commitment to this kind of housing development and community led management.

- b) *There were concerns about engagement and communication between registered providers and councillors.*

This is recognised as a mixed picture, with some good practice and good responsiveness from many RPs, but some examples of poor communication and slow replies to enquiries. This has been raised through the liaison meetings and there continues to be direct contact from the Portfolio Holder and Lead Member, as well as Director, to improve engagement. It is a standing item at the liaison meetings, and Councillors are encouraged to contact the Director of Housing if the normal channels to the RP do not succeed.

- c) *Some registered providers had dedicated email addresses for councillors, and these would be shared with members following the meeting.*

This was provided at the meeting and will be emailed again, separately to Members.

- d) *Some registered providers create annual reports to communicate with residents and councillors.*

All RPs provide annual reports for residents, but it is noted that this could be improved by local and Dorset focused reporting for residents and Councillors. This is a mixed picture, with good annual report information in general, but a regular request for this to be as local as possible. All of the listed RPs, above, report to the liaison meetings about their local activity and account for their work with the Dorset

Council area.

- e) *The possibility of a dedicated Planning Officer for planning applications by registered providers.*

This has not been progressed, with the current system of close collaboration between Planning and Housing Enabling Officers looking to make sure affordable housing schemes are considered as fairly and efficiently as possible, in line with policy.

- f) *There needed to be more engagement with local communities so there was support for new homes.*

This point is noted and welcomed by the RPs and the Housing team, and engagement activity is a key part of new homes applications. Demonstrating the local benefits to be gained by a new housing scheme is also seen as important by the developing RPs.

- g) *Registered providers should be encouraged to build new homes that were already compliant with upcoming legislation.*

This point is noted and has been shared with RPs. The general comment from the developing RPs was that they take this seriously and do build compliant homes and anticipate future standards and requirements where possible.

2. 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.

3. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

The fact that there are 23,000 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 did not propose any change to that fact but encouraged joint work and initiatives to contribute to Dorset's policies and to mitigate the negative impacts of residential development. Individual RPs are in touch with our Dorset Council teams to develop their strategies in this area of work.

4. 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 (RP) 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 improving that position across all of the stock is relevant.

5. 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

6. 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 considered.