

Report of Executive Member for Housing, Planning, Local Plan and Safer Communities

It's a huge pleasure to be presenting my first report to Full Council and I would like to start by offering all my thanks and gratitude to all the incredible council staff working across my portfolio areas who every day show perseverance, compassion and support to those residents who contact them and to their colleagues. I hear about the support our Housing Management Officers give to residents, our navigators and hostel staff show to those on the streets and in hostel accommodation, those ensuring our houses are well maintained and safe, those working within our communities' teams, enforcement and safety teams. They're not easy roles, there are many challenges, we don't always get things right, and when so many are vulnerable and look to the council for help, we must always look to improve, but I hear from residents and colleagues, how the little acts of kindness we show, really does make a difference.

Housing and Housing Repairs

It is against this very challenging environment that our repair teams are working and achieving very positive outcomes. Recent legislation and changes in the way concerns about housing conditions are responded to have seen huge increases in the reports of damp and mould. In 2021 the repairs service received 23 calls about damp and mould, in 2022 this rose to 47, by last year this increased to 485 and already 185 in the first two months of this year. The proposed Awaab's Law will give strict time limits on councils to investigate complaints of damp and mould within 14 days and then 7 days to remedy serious issues.

Our surveyors and repairs teams are already working hard to reduce and remedy damp problems but clearly this huge increase in calls as well as other repairs is stretching our capacity. However, despite that, in Q3 80% of all repairs were completed within specified timescales, 85% of repairs were completed in one visit (compared to 80% in 22/23), and void numbers have reduced markedly from this time last year. This will decrease further as I have agreed to transfer additional resources in order to meet the growing need for social housing as our housing waiting list continues to increase. Over two months at the beginning of the year the teams brought an additional 25 properties above the normal rate into the lettable stock.

The July budget allocated funding to the council undertaking its first ever comprehensive stock condition survey of all 7,500 council homes. The work was procured and commissioned and began in January, initially in Westfield and Acomb and has just started in Clifton. Serious problems will be reported for immediate repair, and this has already been welcomed by residents, pleased that the council is supporting and investing in their homes. It is envisaged by officers that the whole 7,500 homes will have been inspected by the end of 2024. We have already seen the number of homes with an EPC C energy rating increase from 42% to 44% this last financial year and the work on insulating homes is continuing apace.

The need for housing is certainly growing and there is no glossing over the scale of the problem. Years of austerity, a growing affordability gap across both buying and rental sectors, and pressures of delivering sufficient affordable housing have seen those registered on the housing waiting list grow to 1,480 at the end of Q3 from 1,209 last year. The lack of sufficient affordable housing delivery is a growing concern. The Local Plan process identified an annual need of 573 new affordable homes, whereas the past three years saw only 463 in total delivered. Unless we can address this, both through those delivered through developer contributions and an increase in those built by social housing providers, the already challenging situation will rapidly become a significant risk to the future prosperity of the city as a whole.

Housing Delivery Programme

The Labour Administration recognises that unless there is a sea change in genuinely affordable housing delivery, those who are essential to the city's wellbeing, its health and social care sectors workers, those teaching our children, policing our streets, those delivering our hospitality and tourism offers will continue to face the prospect of living further away from York or being unable to leave home.

We have already seen the census results show that our population in most age groups other than the over 55s either falling or remaining static over the past decade. We therefore decided to completely revisit the Housing Delivery Programme which in our opinion was not going to address the issues faced by the city. We have now redesigned the Ordnance Lane scheme to make it 100% affordable, increasing the density by 20 homes and are able to now offer 101 genuinely affordable

homes, rather than the 49 as originally agreed by the previous Administration.

The plans have been submitted to the Planning Department to be determined by Committee in early summer with the financial business plan being prepared for Executive to consider shortly. Groundworks are about to start, and the first homes should be visible by the end of the year. Similarly, the Willow House scheme is currently in design and should be submitted to Planning later in the year.

We are also changing the approach from the last Administration of using market sales to provide the capital receipt from one scheme to fund the delivery of the next. We feel that this would be a process that would take many years to provide any number of affordable homes, not least because the majority of every scheme would be market sales. Each year York would lose more through Right To Buy than it would provide. By selling sites allocated for housing not currently in design or planning to Registered Social Housing providers, we will receive a capital return and affordable housing that can be used to reduce the housing waiting list. Soft market testing has identified significant interest and we are currently preparing a business case for Executive to consider over the next few months. We make no apologies for prioritising the need of so many in our great city for the housing that is so desperately required.

Homelessness

Whilst I have already referenced the work of our homeless services, it is acknowledged that rough sleeping remains a visible reminder that those on the streets tonight, tomorrow and next week are human beings who deserve all the care, sympathy and support we can give them. We have been doing the same things for thirty years or more and still nationally our rough sleeper numbers continue to grow. We need a new approach which puts the person at the centre of the support offered rather than an approach which says “this is our offer, take it or go back to the streets”. We need a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach which addresses not just the need for safe, secure housing but the often complex and multiple issues that both take people onto the streets and sadly too often keeps them there. We are working on a new Resettlement Strategy that will go to consultation and co design with those with lived experience as well as those working with them in public and third sector organisations.

Local Plan

70 years since York's last Local Plan and almost 6 years since this Draft Local Plan was submitted we are at last coming towards a conclusion? March 6 saw the 5th Public Hearing since submission to consider concerns within the Draft Plan about the strategy for additional Gypsy and Traveller provision. We are expecting the Secretary of State's Inspectors' report on whether this aspect of the Plan is sound any day and their overall findings on the soundness of the Plan as a whole shortly thereafter. We chose not to interfere with the Plan, given the late stage of the process on taking control of the Council in May. Any changes could have put the whole plan in jeopardy and would certainly have led to considerable delays. We await the Inspectorate decision and will then look at the options available, including discussion on next steps through the Local Plan Working Group.

Planning

On taking office myself, the Leader and Deputy Leader have taken every opportunity to inform developers and investors of our vision for an affordable, sustainable city, including the newly appointed master developers for York Central. At the request of the Chamber of Commerce Property Forum, we held a roundtable event attended by around 40 representatives from private, public academic and social housing developers to look how the planning process works in York, examples from other cities and best practice. From the meeting we are looking at a variety of ways to streamline the process to ensure that the best quality plans are produced. A protocol is being explored between the Chamber and the Planning Department that seeks to address issues that have been raised by both officers and developers themselves.

Before Christmas the department bid for £100,000 from the DLUHC Digital Improvement Fund which was successful, and the money has been received already.

Performance within the team remains very strong, 2,300 planning applications were received last year, of which 80% of major applications were determined within agreed timescales (against national target of 80%), 89% of minor applications (target 70%) and 80% of other applications (target 80%). Planning enforcement has seen a massive increase over the past 12 months with 1,864 new cases compared to 523 last year.

Far and away the greatest number of these new cases are a result of the new licensing of all HMOs with 1,229 new investigations which is strong evidence that introducing this policy was the right thing to do. Of the new cases, officers were able to complete and close 1,812. Several cases have been successfully prosecuted or are in the preparation process.

Community Safety

During March I was pleased to meet with the examiners for the Purple Flag award as part of their inspection process. Led by the York BID, who prepared an excellent presentation of all that York has to offer, we are extremely hopeful that this first full re-inspection of the city will be successful, and that York will retain its Purple Flag status and that the BID and the council will work together to promote the many advantages of having it.

Neighbourhood Enforcement teams have been extremely busy and proactive in investigating cases including flytipping and dumped waste, rat infestations in public areas, and antisocial behaviour. Sometimes these are caused by the behaviour of residents leaving debris and dumped rubbish in gardens. The NEO team can offer support, advice and if necessary legal notices to clear the rubbish where rats can congregate.

NEOs are also working alongside North Yorkshire to develop the first Clear, Hold, Build initiative to address the negative consequences of county line drug dealing through arrest and enforcement and then to support the community. The launch of Clear, Hold, Build was held at the Guildhall on 11 March and will be operating extensively during the Spring and Summer. It is a locality-based model using analytical tools to identify the support residents need to feel safe in their homes and neighbourhoods.

City centre anti-social behaviour is increasing and the work of the multi-agency Safer York Partnership and local enforcement officers alongside the street rangers, BID, the racecourse and Police are developing an approach which will build on the work carried out last summer, which saw levels fall, especially in respect of race days to ensure that the city is safe throughout the year.

Communities

A huge amount of work has been done by the communities' teams to support the most vulnerable in our city, especially those so badly

affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Last June, the York Cares Big Community Challenge attracted 600 volunteers who made a massive improvement to urban green spaces across the city. Volunteering and supporting the work of volunteers is a significant area of success and the Volunteer Service for Children and Young People now has 235 active volunteers working alongside colleagues in Social Care and the Youth Justice Service to deliver support to young people and parents to empower them toward increased resilience and community connections.

Family Hubs have now been set up in Hob Moor, Clifton and The Avenues Children's Centres as well as in Acomb, Clifton and York and Tang Hall Explore Libraries.

Threats to the Household Support Fund, although granted a six-month reprieve in the Government budget in early March, remain a huge concern. 1,000 food bags were distributed in the run up to Christmas and this year included toiletries and cleaning products. We were also able to distribute over 1,500 new and pre-loved toys from donations to children who risked not receiving any presents. It's perhaps not understood why the council should do this but without it, the consequences to health, emotional wellbeing and children's education would all be affected.

Whilst not a statutory service, the Communities teams work across the council, supporting every department, knitting together an holistic approach aimed at leaving none of our communities behind and offering those who need it a helping hand and a friendly face. It's not the best known work of the council but without it, we'd be in a sadder place and one with even more pressure on statutory services. The staff working in these teams, and all the staff working so hard every day under a very challenging financial environment have all my thanks.

Cllr Pavlovic, Executive Member for Housing, Planning & Safer Communities
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