

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 18 January 2024

The following sets out questions raised by the committee for the Portfolio Holder for Housing together with the responses:

Question 1:

Is there, or is there planned, an up-to-date survey of housing condition outside of the rented sector (where I understand a survey will be carried out in the Spring) with particular reference to insulation/fuel efficiency?

Response: We are not aware of any work to explore the housing conditions outside of the private rented sector. However, as part of the Safer Suffolk Renters project, there will be a stock condition survey undertaken of the private rented sector. Suffolk County Council will be publishing the Health and Housing Needs Assessment in early 2024. It will outline some of the wider challenges around housing condition across the housing sector more broadly. We will assess stock conditions with registered providers at our regular meetings.

We do know that there are more than 62,000 properties in Suffolk that are thought to have the worst Energy Performance Certificates of E, F or G, and an estimated 28 per cent of homes - 95,000 households – are in fuel poverty (data sourced from the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership). As part of the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, work has been taking place to try to engage with residents and improve the energy efficiency of these homes. We are starting to report on the upgrades of homes on a regular basis and this may lead to further analysis through the county wide partnership in the future.

Question 2:

As part of your increased engagement with Registered Providers, are you able to request such a survey of their stock? And then require improvements to be made?

Response:

We have recently been in contact with one of the largest registered providers in the area who provided information about their de-carbonisation programme. A further meeting is planned, which will also cover housing standards and adaptations in their stock. It would seem appropriate to use this approach with the other main social housing provider too. There have been requirements of Housing Providers made through the Housing Ombudsman to ensure that through their policies and plans, tenants are protected, the Decent Homes Standard being a legal requirement for the social rented sector. We will assess stock conditions with registered providers at our regular meetings.

Question 3:

Has consideration been given to providing financial assistance to homeowners who want to make their properties more energy efficient? If so, what is proposed?

Response:

One of the actions arising from the Environmental Sustainability Group which oversees and supports the delivery of the Environment and Climate Change Action Plan agreed by Cabinet in July 2023, is to explore the viability of a local scheme to retrofit housing as well as reporting on the performance of existing government funded schemes that support retrofit. The feasibility of developing such a project is currently being explored at a high level as part of the emerging housing strategy conversations, linked to the wider budget and resourcing conversations amongst Cabinet members.

Question 4:

Disappointingly, following objections from the likes of Persimmon, the draft Local Plan no longer requires new homes to be built to Minimum Space Standards. Given that the standards are not exactly generous anyway, could Housing please explore the possibility of the Council adopting of a Supplementary Planning Document in support of Policy LP10. ("New homes should be of a high architectural quality, meaning that: m. They are fit for purpose and function well, providing adequate space, light and privacy") which does require houses generally to be built to the Standards.

Response: The emerging Local Plan includes a policy which seeks all new builds to meet or exceed the nationally described space standards or any subsequent national standard or policy (Policy LP21 Housing Type and Tenure).

Developers have challenged a number of the housing policy requirements. These will be tested by the inspector throughout the examination in public programmed for late 2024.

A Design Code and/or Supplementary Planning Document will be prepared in accordance with national guidance to provide additional detail and support policies SP3 Design and LP10 Well Designed Places following adoption of the Local Plan to ensure that new housing is fit for purpose, can be developed with sustainable construction measures in mind, with adequate space, light and privacy.

Question 5:

How many families / people on the housing register and for how long?

- a. What type of property are they after – 1, 2, or 3 bedrooms?

Response: see tab 1 of the spreadsheet attached at Annex 1.

- b. How long they have been on the register?

Response: applications have been broken down into the year they were registered. See tab 2 of the spreadsheet attached. It should be noted that date in band and length of time on the register is impacted by applicants who are serving in the armed forces or veterans. Our [Lettings Policy](#) states that that date in band is backdated by the total cumulative period of their length of military service (including where they have made a homeless application). This will have the effect of raising their priority above applicants in similar circumstances who have not undertaken military service. This additional priority is awarded to meet the expectations set out in the Armed Forces Covenant and national legislation.

- c. Of the people on the housing register, how long have they been in West Suffolk?

Response: the reason for local connection has been included here because it was difficult to ascertain from the data how long an applicant had lived in West Suffolk. See tab 3 of the spreadsheet attached at Annex 1.

- d. Number of people looking to downsize and what incentive is available for them to do so?

Response: see tab 4 of the spreadsheet attached that shows 'under occupancy'. This relates to the number of applicants wanting to downsize. The two separate bandings are included for comparison purposes. The council incentives downsizing by awarding a higher band to those who are under-occupying. A band A is awarded to households that are under-occupying by two or more bedrooms, or release of adapted property. Band B is awarded to households under-occupying by one bedroom. This aims to facilitate a move to a more suitable property and releasing larger properties for use.

- e. What is the preferred location of those on the housing list?

Response: the main towns in West Suffolk are included and the data shows how many households have ticked the area of preference for that location. See tab 5 of the spreadsheet attached as Annex 1.

Question 6:

Amount of social or affordable homes available each year and what is the difference in pounds in rent for social versus affordable? Also, would be helpful to understand the difference in say Bury, Haverhill, Newmarket, Brandon and Mildenhall for what tenants pay.

Response: the difference in social and affordable rents is included as tab 6 of the spreadsheet attached as Annex 1 and the averages have been added.

Question 7:

An idea of complaints from tenants to Havebury and Flagship and other providers and how quickly are the complaints dealt with?

Response: this matter should be raised by Members directly with the registered provider concerned.

Question 8:

Anti-social behaviour from tenants and the ability of housing providers to deal with this and move them on.

Response: Registered providers have their own anti-social behaviour policies in relation to their tenants. Action is taken in line with these policies and registered providers seek the advice and support of the Council and other partners as appropriate. Some cases are brought to the attention of the Anti-Social Behaviour Forum which is co-ordinated by the Council. At this Forum, cases are discussed, and a partnership approach is agreed. This can lead to a series of escalated action culminating, if necessary, in a Closure Order whereby tenants are not allowed to return to their properties. A problem-solving approach is taken with eviction and Closure Orders being considered as rare and extreme.

Question 9:

Housing built in the last year – numbers and then a breakdown of what was provided for social and affordable as well as shared ownership and private sale?

Response: In 2022 to 2023, the total number of homes delivered was 1003. Of these 212 were affordable units and can be broken down as follows:

Affordable rented – 91
Social rented – 46
Shared ownership – 73

If we deduct the 212 figure from the 1003 (total homes), the presumption is that the remainder of 791 equals the number of units available for market sale. However, as referenced in 1.9 (e) of the Overview and Scrutiny report there are two different reporting categories specifically net and gross which can skew the data to make it appear that we have not achieved the 30 per cent affordable. It should also be noted that registered providers are securing additional affordable homes off the open market after completion of the development.

Question 10:

Number of migrants West Suffolk are housing?

Response: the issue of support for migrants is covered in section 2.7 to 2.9 of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee report (report number OAS/WS/24/001 refers).

Question 11:

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) – how many in West Suffolk and therefore the number of individuals?

Total number of known Licensable HMOs (5+ occupants) in West Suffolk	113
Number of Occupants living in Licensable HMOs (assuming full occupancy of known licensable HMOs)	982
Total number of known Non-Licensable HMOs (3-4 occupants)	116
Number of Occupants living in Non- Licensable HMOs (assuming full occupancy of known non-licensable HMOs)	436

Question 12:

Can we have numbers who rent privately but their rent is covered, or part covered by Universal Credit?

Response: The total number of applicants who rent privately and have an entitlement to Universal Credit for the housing element only is 589.

Question 13:

Homeless – idea of age and how many?

Response: see tab 7 of the spreadsheet attached as Annex 1.

Question 14:

Number of families / people – presenting as homeless – is this due to rent arrears, landlords selling? What is available to them?

Response: see tab 8 of the spreadsheet attached as Annex 1.