
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

27 September 2022

Audit & Scrutiny Committee

Title: Annual Assurance Statement to the Scottish Housing Regulator 2021/22

Purpose: To advise the Committee of the Council's Annual Return on the Charter 2021/22 submission, and request endorsement of the Annual Assurance Statement to be submitted to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Recommendation: That the Committee: (i) notes the Annual Return on the Charter submission 2021/22; (ii) notes the supporting evidence provided to demonstrate compliance with the regulatory framework; (iii) notes the Council's Covid related non-compliance with our gas, electrical and fire safety legal responsibilities, but also notes that all outstanding gas safety checks for 2021/22 have now been carried out; and (iv) authorises the Chair to sign the Annual Assurance Statement at Appendix 1.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Scottish Housing Regulator's framework for the regulation of social housing in Scotland includes the requirement for an Annual Assurance Statement to be submitted alongside the Annual Return on the Charter (ARC). The statement must be approved by the appropriate Committee within the organisation prior to submission.
- 1.2 This report provides information on performance reported in the ARC, highlighting areas of high or improving performance, declining performance, or requiring improvement, and areas of non-compliance attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain issues. The report also provides information on how the Council gains assurance that it is compliant with the Regulatory Framework.
- 1.3 Endorsement of the Annual Assurance Statement will ensure that the Council complies with regulatory requirements set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 sets out the statutory objectives, functions, duties and powers of the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR), a non-ministerial department responsible for regulating social housing in Scotland.

- 2.2 In 2012, the Scottish Government's Social Housing Charter was established. It sets out the standards and outcomes that tenants, homeless people, homeowners, and gypsy/travellers can expect from social landlords. This is monitored via landlords' ARC submissions to the SHR.
- 2.3 In February 2019, the Scottish Housing Regulator issued a revised framework for the regulation of social housing in Scotland. The new framework includes the requirement for landlords to submit an Annual Assurance Statement which has been agreed by a Board or Committee within the organisation. The Council must provide assurance that it complies with the relevant requirements of Chapter 3 of the Regulatory Framework.
- 2.4 The Assurance Statement is confirmation that, as a landlord, the Council:
- meets all legal duties and responsibilities, and adheres to relevant guidance and the requirements of other regulators
 - meets its statutory duties to prevent and alleviate homelessness
 - adheres to statutory guidance from the Scottish Housing Regulator
 - takes account of regulatory advice from the Scottish Housing Regulator and from other regulators
 - complies with all regulatory requirements

The Council must also confirm plans to fix any instances where there is a material non-compliance and notify the SHR about any material changes in their level of assurance during the year.

- 2.5 The SHR has requested that landlords provide assurance in their Statement that they have appropriate plans to implement an effective approach to the collection of equalities information and that they have started to consider how they can adopt a human rights approach in their work.
- 2.6 As a landlord, we collect data relating to each of the protected characteristics for existing tenants, new tenants, people on waiting lists, governing body members, staff, people who apply to us as homeless and service users on our Gypsy/ Traveller site. We are currently undergoing a system review alongside our partner landlords within the North Ayrshire Housing Register and have incorporated equalities data into the brief for the review to further develop our approach. We have also begun to consider how we can adopt a human rights approach in our work. Guidance issued by the Scottish Housing Regulator in 2021 will further inform this strategy.

Performance

- 2.7 The revised performance framework issued in early 2019 resulted in the removal of some historical indicators, introduction of new performance measures and changes in some methods of calculation.
- 2.8 Whilst comparative information from other local authorities for the 2021/22 ARC is not yet available, the 2020/21 comparisons from the Scottish Social Housing Charter show that North Ayrshire Council remains a high performing local authority housing service. Of the 43 indicators reported in 2021/22 ranked against other Scottish local authorities, North Ayrshire is in:

- The top quartile for 24 indicators (60%)
- The second quartile for 4 indicators (10%)
- The third quartile for 4 indicators (10%)
- The bottom quartile for 8 indicators (20%)

2.9 It was reported in the 2020/21 Annual Assurance Statement report that levels of performance were unlikely to be maintained or improved in the 2021/22 ARC return, due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This position should, however, be reflected nationally. When the 2021/22 comparisons are published, indicators will be scrutinised to determine areas where this is not the case, and improvement plans developed.

2.10 The areas highlighted below identify key areas of high/improving performance and areas where there has been a decline or improvement is required.

Areas of high or improving performance

2.11 Tenant satisfaction is high in terms of overall services as a landlord, and opportunities for tenants to participate and keep informed about services and decisions. Performance in this area is based on our tri-annual tenant satisfaction survey, which took place during summer 2021 to provide an updated position for the 2021/22 ARC submission.

2.12 The average length of time taken to complete emergency repairs reduced from 3.45 hours in 2020/21 to 2.61 hours, and from 9.75 to 7.66 days for non-emergency repairs. The increase in performance is more in line with pre-pandemic figures whilst Building Services continued to comply with COVID-19 guidance and the shortage of materials and labour.

2.13 The average time taken to re-let properties decreased from 27.13 days in 2020/21 to 22.38 days in 2021/22. Void turnaround times are returning to pre-pandemic performance levels. A review of the void process is ongoing to identify further improvements.

2.14 The percentage of antisocial behaviour cases resolved during 2021/22 was 84.24%, which is slightly higher than the previous year's performance of 82.97%. The method of calculation for the ARC does not consider that cases may open close to the end of the reporting year, or may be complex, and are therefore not closed in the same reporting year. Our internal performance reporting confirms that 99.3% of cases were resolved within target during 2021/22. There has been a 17% decrease in reported antisocial behaviour since 2020/21.

2.15 Whilst the number of court actions resulting in eviction has significantly decreased from 33.33% in 2020/21 to 0% in 2021/22, this is because, in line with COVID-19 guidance, no court actions were initiated, for rent arrears, antisocial behaviour, or other reasons.

Areas with a decline in performance or requiring improvement

- 2.16 There has been a decline in performance relating to the adaptations process, with the number of households waiting on an adaptation to their home increasing from 12 in 2020/21 to 142 in 2021/22. The average number of days to complete an approved adaptation also increased from 54.79 to 74.33. A joint improvement group with membership from the Health and Social Care Partnership, Housing, Building Services and Property Management and Investment has been reviewing this process to consider ways to achieve the best possible outcome for tenants.
- 2.17 The percentage of tenancy offers refused during the year increased slightly from 32.99% to 34.76%. This may be attributable to an overall increase in lets and a reduction in lets to homeless customers.
- 2.18 Satisfaction levels of tenants who had repairs or maintenance carried out in the last 12 months has decreased from 86.73% to 85.71% since 2020/21. This is based on responses from 98 tenants in 2020/21 and 2021/22 – an unusually low number due to the survey process being affected by the pandemic.
- 2.19 Gross rent arrears as a percentage of rent due increased from 5.46% in 2020/21 to 6.63% in 2021/22 despite ongoing communication with, and support to, tenants in arrears throughout the pandemic. Although a slightly improved position has been observed in recent months, rent arrears accrued during the pandemic are at a level where it will be extremely difficult for many households in North Ayrshire to recover from, given the impact COVID-19 has had on the economy and employment prospects.
- 2.20 Homelessness applications have increased by 14% in the last 12 months compared to a national average of 3%. There continues to be a significant proportion of households being asked to leave their home by either family or friends; in addition, we have seen an increase in action taken by landlords to recover their tenancy.
- 2.21 During 2021/22 there was a 10% decrease in tenants claiming Universal Credit. This decrease is broadly similar to the national reduction in those in receipt of Universal Credit and is due to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The arrears attributed to these tenants (with technical arrears removed) has decreased by 15%, in comparison to an increase of 108% the previous year. A review of our welfare rights and debt advice cases indicates that tenants are experiencing significant financial difficulty due to pandemic, which is expected to worsen with the cost of living rising over the winter months.

Area of non-compliance

- 2.22 During 2021/22, 360 properties did not receive their annual gas safety check within the statutory timescales. There is still ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission. During 2021 we implemented our access policy, which enabled forced entries to recommence, however whenever a tenant cited COVID-19 this process was halted, with an alternative later date agreed with the tenant.

- 2.23 Under normal circumstances, this level of non-compliance would be deemed material and merit a notification to the Regulator. As this non-compliance was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and all efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity, it is not considered material. All outstanding gas safety checks from 2021/22 have now been carried out.
- 2.24 During 2021/22 new legislation was introduced which reduced the statutory inspection regime for electrical installations from ten to five years. Despite engaging two contractors, 6,090 properties were non-compliant at the end of 2021/22.
- 2.25 Our Property Management & Investment team have procured a third contract to accelerate the testing programme. However, accessing properties remains a challenge, with a 50% average access rate. Our Building Services team have commenced working at weekends to assist in reducing the number of outstanding inspections. During 2022 PMI have implemented the Council's access policy to enable electrical inspections to be undertaken, similar to the arrangements already in place for gas compliance checks. It is anticipated that all outstanding properties will be compliant by the end of March 2023.
- 2.26 Also during 2021/22, new legislation was introduced with regards to smoke detection equipment. At the end 2021/22, 735 of our properties were non-compliant due to access issues.
- 2.27 During 2022 the Council's access policy was again implemented for this area of compliance. It is anticipated that all outstanding properties will be compliant by the end of March 2023.

Assurance

- 2.28 The overall performance of the Housing Service is continuously reviewed by the Head of Service and Housing Senior Management Team, with key performance information and action plans presented to the North Ayrshire Network, Housing Business Plan Group and Council's Cabinet regularly during each year.
- 2.29 Some ARC indicators also form part of the corporate performance monitoring framework, scrutinised by Chief Officers and elected members.
- 2.30 The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) Self Assurance Toolkit has also been utilised as a further method of self-assessment. The toolkit provides guidance to social landlords on gathering evidence to demonstrate compliance with regulatory requirements and standard and focuses on questions that governing bodies should ask to gain assurance that this is being achieved.
- 2.31 The ARC 2021/22, which can be accessed at [Annual Return on the Charter \(north-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/annual-return-on-the-charter), demonstrates the Council's performance against the outcomes in the Scottish Social Housing Charter.
- 2.32 Supporting evidence to demonstrate compliance with the regulatory framework and relevant legislation can be accessed at [AAS Supporting Evidence \(north-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/aas-supporting-evidence).

2.33 The Annual Assurance Statement, which is attached at Appendix 1, confirms that the Council has complied with the regulatory framework, all standards, and outcomes. It highlights North Ayrshire's non-compliance with our legal responsibilities around gas, electrical and fire safety. It also confirms the equalities data currently captured, and that North Ayrshire is considering how to adopt an increased human rights approach in our work. This Statement will be made available to tenants as part of the Council's performance reporting process.

3. Proposals

3.1 It is proposed that the Committee (i) notes the Annual Return on the Charter submission 2021/22; (ii) notes the supporting evidence provided to demonstrate compliance with the regulatory framework and relevant legislation; (iii) notes the Council's Covid related non-compliance with our legal gas, electrical and fire safety responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also notes that all outstanding gas safety checks for 2021/22 have now been carried out ; and (iv) authorises the Chair to sign the Annual Assurance Statement at Appendix 1.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

4.1 None

Human Resources

4.2 None

Legal

4.3 Approval of the Annual Return on the Charter submission 2021/22 and supporting evidence, and signature of the Annual Assurance Statement, will ensure that the Council complies with regulatory requirements set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010.

Equality/Socio-economic

4.4 None

Environmental and Sustainability

4.5 None

Key Priorities

4.6 None

Community Wealth Building

4.7 None

5. Consultation

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with Services within Housing and Public Protection; Sustainability, Transport and Corporate Property; Corporate Performance; the Health and Social Care Partnership; and the Scottish Housing Regulator during the preparation of the Annual Return on the Charter and Annual Assurance Statement.

RUSSELL McCUTCHEON
Executive Director (Place)

For further information please contact **Fiona Ellis, Senior Manager (Housing Strategy & Development)**, on **07795 805570**.

Background Papers

0

North Ayrshire Council Annual Assurance Statement 2021/22



North Ayrshire Council complies with the requirements set out in Chapter 3 of the Regulatory Framework. North Ayrshire Council is assured that we:

- ✓ Adhere to relevant guidance and the requirements of other regulators;
- ✓ Meet our statutory duties to prevent and alleviate homelessness;
- ✓ Adhere to statutory guidance from the Scottish Housing Regulator;
- ✓ Take account of regulatory advice from the Scottish Housing Regulator and from other regulators; and
- ✓ Comply with all regulatory requirements, encompassing:
 - Assurance and notification
 - Tenant and service user redress
 - Whistleblowing
 - Equalities and human rights
 - Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance.

We did not meet our legal obligations around tenant and resident safety as we did not comply with gas safety legislation for 360 properties during 2020/21. Due to new legislation introduced during 2021/22 regarding electrical testing and smoke detection equipment, 6,090 properties were non-compliant with regards to having an EICR and 735 for not having the new smoke detection equipment installed. There is an ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission. Labour shortages within the electrical industry affected the testing programme alongside access issues. All efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity and appropriate records were kept.

As a landlord, we collect data relating to protected characteristics for existing tenants, new tenants, people on waiting lists, governing body members, staff, people who apply to us as homeless and service users on our Gypsy/Traveller site. We are currently undergoing a system review alongside our partner landlords within the North Ayrshire Housing Register and have incorporated equalities data into the brief to further develop our approach. We have also begun to consider how we can adopt a human rights approach in our work. Guidance issued by the Scottish Housing Regulator in 2021 will further inform this strategy.

North Ayrshire Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee has considered sufficient evidence to give this assurance. The Annual Assurance Statement was approved by Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 27 September 2022.

Authorised by: _____
Chairperson of the Committee

Printed name: _____

Date: _____

North Ayrshire Council
Housing Services

Annual Assurance Statement 2021/22

Supporting Evidence
September 2022



North Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath

Introduction

In February 2019, the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) issued a revised framework for the regulation of social housing in Scotland. The new framework includes the requirement for landlords to submit an Annual Assurance Statement which has been agreed by a Board or Committee within the organisation. We must provide assurance that the organisation complies with the relevant requirements of Chapter 3 of the Regulatory Framework.

This document provides evidence to support our Statement that North Ayrshire Council is assured that we:

- ✓ Adhere to relevant guidance and the requirements of other regulators;
- ✓ Meet our statutory duties to prevent and alleviate homelessness;
- ✓ Adhere to statutory guidance from the Scottish Housing Regulator;
- ✓ Take account of regulatory advice from the Scottish Housing Regulator and from other regulators; and
- ✓ Comply with all regulatory requirements, encompassing:
 - Assurance and notification
 - Tenant and service user redress
 - Whistleblowing
 - Equalities and human rights
 - Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance.

As a landlord, we are also required to meet all legal duties and responsibilities. During 2021/22 we were unable to do this, as some properties did not have an annual gas safety check, electrical safety certificate or installation of the new smoke detection equipment within the legal timescales due to the continued impact of COVID-19 on gaining access to tenants' homes. We have provided information on this non-compliance in our Annual Assurance Statement and further detail in this supporting evidence.

In August 2020, the Scottish Housing Regulator published advisory guidance to assist landlords to adapt their approach to the submission of the AAS to reflect the impact of the pandemic. They requested that landlords include their position in relation to equalities and human rights in the 2021 Annual Assurance Statement. At that time, it was anticipated that the guidance on equalities data collection would have been available to landlords, however, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the production of that guidance, which became available following the 2021 submission.

In recognition of this position, the SHR has requested that landlords provide assurance in their Statement that they have appropriate plans to implement an effective approach to the collection of equalities information and that they have started to consider how they can adopt a human rights approach in their work.

Regulatory Requirements

Assurance and notification

We prepare an Annual Assurance Statement in accordance with guidance and submit it to the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) annually. The statement is available to tenants and other service users. We will notify the SHR during the year of any material changes to our assurance as set out in the Statement.

We can evidence that we meet all legal obligations associated with housing and homelessness services, and equality and human rights.

We have not met our legal obligations around tenant and resident safety as we did not comply with gas safety legislation for 360 properties during 2021/22. Due to new legislation introduced during 2021/22 regarding electrical testing and smoke detection, 6,090 properties were non-compliant with regards to having an EICR and 735 for smoke detection. There continues to be an ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about the risk of COVID-19 transmission. All efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity and appropriate records were kept, we have not considered this a material non-compliance.

We notify the SHR of any tenant and resident safety matters involving the Health and Safety Executive or reports from other regulatory bodies relating to safety concerns. There were no issues to report during 2021/22.

'Customer Connections', our Tenant Participation Strategy, is available to tenants and service users on the Council website.

[Customer Connections Strategy \(north-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/customer-connections-strategy)

Tenant and service user redress

Information on how to report any concerns around significant performance failures is available to tenants. Further information is contained in the Scottish Housing Regulator [leaflet](#).

North Ayrshire Council's Complaints Handling Procedure is readily available to tenants and other service users. It sets out the information they need to exercise their right to complain and seek redress. Responses are provided within timescales set out in the Procedure, in accordance with guidance from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). We have mechanisms in place to learn from complaints and other tenant and service user feedback, in accordance with SPSO guidance.

Whistleblowing

North Ayrshire Council has a policy and procedure in line with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 for whistleblowing by staff and elected members. This is readily available on the Council website and promoted through staff bulletins.

Equalities and human rights

Equality is one of the North Ayrshire Council's core values. The principles of equality and fairness are central to all council activities. Our Equality and Children's Rights Impact Assessment process for all policies, procedures and proposals ensures we meet legislative requirements. All decisions made by the Council's committees include an assessment of equalities implications.

As a landlord, we collect data relating to each of the protected characteristics for existing tenants, new tenants, people on waiting lists, governing body members, staff, people who apply to us as homeless and service users on our Gypsy/Traveller site. We are currently undergoing a system review alongside our partner landlords within the North Ayrshire Housing Register and have incorporated equalities data into the brief to further develop our approach.

We have also begun to consider how we can adopt a human rights approach in our work. Guidance issued by the Scottish Housing Regulator in 2021 will further inform this strategy.

Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance

We submit an Annual Return on the Charter to the Scottish Housing Regulator annually in accordance with published guidance. We have agreed our approach to this through the North Ayrshire Network (NAN), a group of representatives from the various Registered Tenant Organisations in North Ayrshire. You can read about our approach in Customer Connections, our Tenant Participation Strategy 2017-22.

Each year, we report on performance in our autumn edition of Tenancy Matters. The NAN work with us to agree the content of the report, which includes comparisons with previous years, other landlords and national performance. Within this report we identify how we will address areas for improvement and ask for feedback on our approach.

Standard 1 – The customer / landlord relationship

Outcomes:

Equalities

We promote equality and embrace diversity in all parts of Housing Services. All the information we produce is in line with the Council's Communications Strategy. All leaflets, and a number of documents, are published in Plain English and can be made available in large print, braille, tape or CD, and can be translated on request.

Communication

Housing Services provide a comprehensive range of information available in some leaflets, on the Council website and on social media. The Tenant Editorial Panel approves all leaflets prior to issue to ensure they are fit for purpose and easy to understand. Our 'tenant approved' logo shows tenants have endorsed our publications. In recent years we have developed a social media profile through Facebook and Twitter to encourage digital engagement with a wider and more diverse customer base.

We commission an independent organisation to undertake a tenant satisfaction survey at least every three years. The results of this help us to focus our efforts in improving communication and participation and understand what is important to our customers. We carried out our survey during summer 2021 with the next one scheduled for summer 2024.

Participation

The North Ayrshire Network (NAN) customer group has responsibility for ensuring that we continually improve the way we deliver services to tenants and customers. Part of their role is to challenge our performance against the indicators, outcomes and standards in the Charter. To do this, Housing Services report to the Network through presenting on performance both mid-year and prior to submitting the Charter annually, working together on developing our annual report to tenants and communicating any changes from the Scottish Housing Regulator directly to the group.

Our Tenant Inspection Panel scrutinise one area of service per year. They can decide this independently through review of our performance information, or with support from Officers. Scrutiny provides an opportunity for tenants to drive improvement in the services most important to them. This process continued virtually during the pandemic.

Customer Connections, our Tenant Participation Strategy for 2017 – 2022 encompasses and reflects the requirements of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the Council's priorities. These support communities' tenants and residents to grow and develop opportunities for active engagement and participation for all citizens by listening to local needs and aspirations.

Our latest tenant satisfaction survey told us that 92% of tenants are satisfied with the opportunities given to them to participate in our decision-making processes.

Standard 2 – Housing quality and maintenance

Outcomes:

Quality of housing

Our housing stock is in very good condition and is well maintained. We take a proactive approach to housing asset management and target improvements to ensure that our properties are SHQS and EESSH compliant. Properties are refurbished to ensure they remain attractive, meet modern requirements and tenant expectations. We have a range of planned maintenance programmes which are designed to achieve economies by replacing major element components just before they would otherwise require responsive repairs; anticipate changes in minimum acceptable standards; and reduce future requirements for cyclical maintenance.

We have not met our legal obligations around tenant and resident safety during 2021/22 as we did not comply with gas safety legislation for 360 properties. Due to new legislation introduced during 2021/22 regarding electrical testing and smoke detection, 6,090 properties were non-compliant with regards to having an EICR and 735 for smoke detection. There is still ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission. Additional contracts were put in place to try and achieve this by the date given, however supply chain and labour shortages for contractors impacted the programme. All efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity and appropriate records were kept. We aim to have all EICRs and outstanding smoke detection by end of March 2023.

Our ambitious Estate Based Regeneration Programme was approved in 2019 and makes financial provision for investment in our housing estates over a ten-year period. This includes a tenant led budget offering a participatory budgetary approach.

Repairs, maintenance and improvements

North Ayrshire Council is committed to delivering a high quality, efficient and effective reactive and planned maintenance service to all our tenants and factored owners in a manner which maintains high customer satisfaction. Our Repairs Policy sets out the service provided by the Council for repairs and maintenance and aims to ensure the needs of our current and future tenants are met in relation to the provision of high-quality housing. The policy was developed in consultation with tenant representatives.

The average length of time taken to complete emergency repairs reduced from 3.45 in 2020/21 to 2.61 hours in 2021/22, and from 9.75 to 7.66 days for non-emergency repairs. The increase in performance is more in line with pre-pandemic figures whilst Building Services continued to comply with COVID-19 guidance and the shortage of materials and labour.

Satisfaction levels of tenants who had repairs or maintenance carried out in the last 12 months decreased from 86.73% to 85.71% during the same period. This is based on responses from 98 tenants in 2021/22, which is the same amount as the previous year due to the survey process being impacted during the pandemic.

An efficient and effective void repairs service provides a quick turnaround on empty properties, which helps to speed the repairs process and reduce void rent loss. Void performance is affected by the additional time taken to rehouse tenants from our regeneration projects. The Council agreed to demolish a number of blocks of flats and rehouse all tenants, with an enhanced package of works carried out in tenants' new homes. A general increase in the number of properties requiring major works such as central heating, rewiring and full decoration has also impacted on performance. The average time taken to re-let properties has reduced from 27.13 days in 2020/21 to 22.38 days in 2021/22, with figures returning to pre-pandemic performance levels. A review of the void process is ongoing to identify further improvements.

Standard 3 – Neighbourhood and community

Outcome:

Estate management, antisocial behaviour, neighbour nuisance and tenancy disputes

Estate Management covers a broad range of situations and activities such as new tenant visits, permissions for garages and driveways in garden ground, abandoned tenancies, untidy gardens, neighbour disputes, problems with pets, abandoned vehicles, tackling graffiti and illegal dumping/fly-tipping. We have a comprehensive procedure manual to ensure we meet our responsibilities as landlord, and to support tenants to meet their responsibilities detailed in their Tenancy Agreement. Every effort is made to support tenants to address breaches of tenancy, however if a tenant is unwilling to do so, the Council will pursue appropriate legal action.

The Safer North Ayrshire Partnership (SNAP), comprising of a range of community planning partners, works together to deliver the multi-agency SNAP strategy which includes how we work together to tackle antisocial behaviour (ASB) and low-level crime.

We experienced an 17% decrease in reports of ASB during 2021/22. This was a 1.27% improvement in performance - as measured in line with the ARC indicator - compared to the previous year. The Council has locally agreed targets for the closure of cases, which are based on the complexity and level of investigation required to resolve them. Our performance against locally agreed targets is 99.3% of cases resolved within agreed timescales, against a target of 94%.

Our last tenant satisfaction survey saw a decrease of 12% in tenants satisfied with the management of the neighbourhood they live in compared to the previous survey carried out in 2018.

Standard 4 – Access to housing and support

Outcomes:

Housing options and access to social housing

A pilot voids project commenced in January 2022, which saw mandatory void targets being replaced by timescales mutually agreed by the Housing Officer and Building Services supervisor, based on the amount of work required. Initial reports are very positive, and performance has improved significantly. The pilot will be rolled out across the whole of our stock and following a successful review, it is expected that the new processes will be implemented later in 2022.

Housing management have periodic meetings with officers from North Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership (NAHSCP), who manage the process for aids and adaptations, and our Building Services team who carry out the majority of works in Council dwellings. This allows us to monitor performance and expenditure. To ensure ongoing improvement and quality of service provision, Occupational Therapy (OT) assessments are reviewed by Senior Occupational Therapists. NAHSCP has a formal Adaptations Criteria and Policy for all staff to adhere to whilst assessing adaptations. Joint complex case reviews are held monthly, with Partnership and Housing representation, before any complex adaptation is agreed. OT staff have been trained to explore housing options with all services for housing applicants who have long term conditions, to ensure that accessible housing needs are met where adaptations are not appropriate. These tiers of governance provide a formal procedure for all decision making, ensuring resources are targeted to those most in need of adaptations. Processes have, at times, been adapted in line with government and national policy updates arising from COVID-19.

There has been a decline in adaptations performance, with the number of households waiting for an adaptation to their home increasing from 12 in 2020/21 to 142 in 2021/22. The average number of days to complete an approved adaptation has also increased from 54.79 to 74.33. A joint improvement group involving Housing, Building and Property Management and Investment and the Health and Social Care Partnership continues to review this process to consider ways to achieve the best outcome for tenants.

Homeless people

We experienced a 14% increase in homelessness during 2021/22 - this is a 4% increase on pre-pandemic homeless approaches. The most significant increase relates to relationship breakdown within family households. We also continue to experience high levels of homelessness as a result of domestic violence and people being asked to leave the family home.

In partnership with Community Planning partners, we have undertaken a significant amount of work in relation to violence against women to tackle domestic violence. We have:

- launched a Domestic Abuse Policy for North Ayrshire Tenants and Residents

- launched a staff Domestic Abuse Policy
- developed and implemented a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) across the three Ayrshire Local Authorities and NHS Ayrshire and Arran
- developed and implemented a safe contact initiative
- undertaken a range of work across schools in North Ayrshire to highlight and tackle gender-based violence, including coercive behaviour

We did not lose contact with any households during 2021/22 and we experienced a 17% reduction in withdrawn applications. Whilst there has been an increase of 35% in applications being resolved prior to assessment, we have determined that this is as a result of people returning to the family home; the ability to do this had reduced significantly during the pandemic. The proportion of applications assessed as 'not homeless' has increased by 26% and remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. Analysis has determined that, in the main, this was as a result of households approaching the Council following a dispute with people within the wider community (74% of not homeless cases). Whilst they were deemed not homeless following investigation, these households were provided with appropriate advice and support, enabling them to return home or source alternative accommodation.

We have continued to prioritise lets to homeless people during 2021/22, with 45% of all North Ayrshire Council allocations being made to this group. This has resulted in an increase of households being housed into settled accommodation of 12%. These figures do not include allocations made to households threatened with homelessness, who are awarded insecurity of tenure points within our allocation policy which, when added to the above, takes the level of households resettled into a council tenancy to 47%.

Our duration of homelessness has decreased from 28 weeks (196 days) pre-pandemic to 23 weeks (161 days) during 2021/22. Again this is as a result of increased lets to homeless.

We have had no breaches of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order and have ensured that temporary accommodation continues to be available for anyone who needs it. Our inter-agency Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP) details our ambitious targets for allocations to homeless households over five years, based on robust independent modelling. It also details our approach to Housing First and temporary accommodation provision.

During 2021/22 we:

- Continued with the implementation of our Housing First Plan - we now have 60 tenancies created for our most complex households;
- Worked with national partners, including health colleagues, to identify further opportunities to prevent homelessness across North Ayrshire;
- Undertook renovations to our short stay hostel, improving the quality of accommodation available;
- Prioritised lets to homeless households and reduced the duration of homelessness.

Standard 5 – Getting good value from rents and service charges

Outcomes:

Value for money

Our robust Housing Revenue Account Business Plan provides clear strategic direction, ensuring that effective short, medium and long-term financial planning is undertaken. This clearly details how we will plan for, and deliver, key priorities such as compliance with the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and EESSH, investment in our current stock, our Council house building programme and rent setting.

The Business Plan was developed by a cross stakeholder working group which included representation from elected members, tenant representatives and officers from within Housing, Property Management and Investment and Financial Services. This approach ensured balanced decision-making that can stand up to both internal and external scrutiny.

The Plan provides a platform to develop an effective performance management and reporting framework that makes certain that we continue to provide value for money services to our tenants and, at the same time, keep rents at affordable levels. This is achieved while recognising that we are currently operating within an ever-changing and evolving economic environment that requires the flexibility to change and adapt.

The plan is easily accessible to stakeholders. It provides information to demonstrate that the Council has a clear picture of its strategic direction and the associated financial position of the service to deliver this, over the 30-year planning period. This plan is reviewed annually, and we are focused on providing value for money through a number of measures, such as operating robust financial management processes, implementing value for money principles, exploring efficiency opportunities, and managing competitive contractual arrangements.

89% of tenants felt that the rent for their property represents good value for money during our last tenant satisfaction survey.

Rents and service charges

Our rent levels remain lower than the national average, however we continue to invest significantly in our existing stock and new house building programme. We face challenges in, for example, changes to welfare reform, demographics and the housing stock profile. We are committed to delivering services in new, improved and more cost-effective ways.

Standard 6 – Other customers

Outcomes:

Gypsy/travellers

North Ayrshire Council provides services, advice and assistance to Gypsy/Travellers who live permanently in North Ayrshire and to those who visit on a temporary basis. North Ayrshire manages one permanent site at Redburn Grove, Irvine. The site has 16 pitches, and each pitch has its own amenity block with separate kitchen, shower, toilet facilities and utility room. A community room is available on site for partner services to meet tenants and their children within a safe and comfortable environment. The room is used by several Services, including: Education, the Welfare Reform

Advice team, Tenancy Support, the Community Link team and a regular GP surgery. Our Tenant Participation Team also support Redburn Grove tenants to hold regular tenants' meetings. The meetings allow tenants the opportunity to work in partnership with Council staff as we consider the options for current and future service provision. Six of the families who were digitally excluded were issued with Chromebooks and Wi-Fi access for two years as part of the Connecting Scotland initiative. This will help these low-income households with employment support, attendance at virtual tenant meetings, and with engagement more generally.

In 2016 the Scottish Government introduced minimum standards for Gypsy Traveller Sites across Scotland. North Ayrshire Council achieved the minimum standards at Redburn Grove; however we recognise that significant capital investment is required to ensure that it continues to meet expected standards. Work to replace kitchens within each amenity unit was completed in June 2021. This was the first phase of expenditure from the Council's £0.074m share of the Scottish Government's £2m capital investment fund. The second phase of the project included the installation of gates to every pitch, door replacement in the amenity units and the resurfacing of pitches. These projects were highlighted by the tenants as their priority for improvements on the site.

The Scottish Government has developed a draft design guide for Gypsy/Traveller sites to be used for new sites or major refurbishments of existing sites. The design guide has been provided to give advice on what good quality, culturally appropriate accommodation should look like. The Scottish Government have also made available a new capital fund to run for five years from 2021-25. In October 2020, Scottish Government/COSLA sought views on likely future investment needs over the next five years. NAC responded that approximately £2.5m funding would be required in year three for Redburn Grove. The Scottish Government has outlined the criteria for the fund, including how residents and travelling community members must be involved, together with a process for project selection. Future improvement proposals for the Redburn site will follow on the completion of our engagement with current tenants, to confirm their preferences for future housing.

Our response to unauthorised encampments is consistent and in line with the policy issued by the Scottish Government. Our Gypsy/Traveller Encampment Officer works to build relationships with visiting families to assess their needs. Where necessary they make referrals to partner organisations and provide advice on housing options, if required. The Officer also works closely with other landowners and members of the settled community and provides advice and assistance regarding the rights and responsibilities of Gypsy/Travellers who visit North Ayrshire.

Refugees

In 2015, North Ayrshire Council pledged a commitment to participate in the UK Government's Syrian Resettlement Programme. The Council agreed to resettle 160 vulnerable Syrian refugees over a four-year period and to coordinate the programme, a Refugee Support Team was introduced to deliver the required objectives. This service, along with input from Community Planning Partners such as the Health and Social Care Partnership, Education, Department of Work and Pensions, Police Scotland and voluntary organisations, delivers robust resettlement packages to assist families to integrate into the local area and access vital services to meet their individual needs. The Council has fully participated in the Syrian Resettlement Programme and, due to meeting its initial target numbers earlier than expected, increased its pledge on two further occasions, taking the overall total to 211 refugees (43 families).

The Council agreed to continue its humanitarian commitment and to participate in a new global resettlement programme, with the aim of resettling a further 30 refugees throughout 2020/21. This was paused due to COVID-19 restrictions on movement both overseas and in the UK. The programme recommenced; however, plans to resettle the 30 refugees by March 2022 have been interrupted by our response to the conflict in Ukraine.

We have also provided support for families fleeing the conflict in Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of American and NATO forces in August 2021. We will continue to support these resettlement programmes and add to the 36 Afghan nationals (8 families) who have already arrived.

More recently, the Council has responded to the humanitarian crisis created as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. We have pledged a significant number of Council properties to be used to provide accommodation for people fleeing the conflict. We are also providing support, advice, and assistance to those who have settled within the homes of North Ayrshire residents. We have set up a Welcome Hub within a local hotel to provide interim emergency accommodation and support to individuals and families while they await a more appropriate housing option. We will continue to monitor the situation in Ukraine and will increase our pledge of assistance, should that be required.