

Councillor Arthur Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing
Report to Full Council: 19 July 2022

I see housing in the social areas of our community as the number one area that must be improved over the coming decade. As the Portfolio Holder for this area I intend this first overview to be brief, however to also cover my main areas of concern in the sector, alongside some short term goals for myself and the Council to achieve as soon as possible.

In my meetings and discussions with the Officers who have responsibilities in the housing department, I have received detailed reports of our strengths and also some of our areas where we're not quite at the point of excellence we hope to achieve in the coming year. We are very good at collecting our rents, our rent arrears are well within the percentages any council would be pleased with. We are able to keep our rents of social housing below the affordable threshold. We have response times for enquiries within an accepted time frame, as set out by our policy. We have a hard working front and back office within the housing department, who help guide our community enquiries quickly and efficiently.

Our repair record of social properties are a work in progress, working within our shared contract with Norse we are well on our way to being able to meet 100% of our shared aims with Norse to all aspects of the agreed contract, we as a Council entered into early in this Council's lifetime. There have been difficult discussions regarding the partnership with ourselves and Norse over the last two or so years, mostly around reporting procedures that both Norse and ourselves have found difficult to find answers too. Most of this I personally put into two areas, one, our old way of reporting our housing repairs and statutory duties to our residents, which both parties have found difficult to progress to an accepted joint understanding of our partnership with Norse. Secondly I believe the structure agreed in the first place for our partnership, was and partly still is, short of detail on who oversees certain aspects of the reporting process. I personally believe that there is a missing tier of personnel between Department Director, senior Managers and the Norse reporting team. I intend to talk this through with the appropriate Directors, alongside our Chief Executive as soon as possible.

Moving on to in my view the most important part of our problem in our housing stock, is lack of it. Even taking in to account the two years of unprecedented loss of hours lost through COVID, we must work together as a Council to massively improve our building or securing more housing stock. In the first few weeks of my working within the Housing Department, I have seen the dedication of the Officers, Directors, and the Chief Executive in trying to support our community with more social houses. The deal with Barrett's, to secure our 19 homes in Dunmow is a great start, as I write we are hoping to secure several more later this month with the same builder. I have had several meetings with small developments, to question if there is potential for more small acquisitions along the same vein. One I am able to share at this early stage is the Alms houses in Saffron Walden. I have met three times with trustees in confidence to discuss if we can in partnership secure up to 18 one bedroom homes, alongside 2 two bedroom homes and 1 two bedroom bungalow. It's early stages, but

there is a possibility of a larger partnership also with up to another sixteen homes, if we can find an accepted way of partnership with the trustees. This will be a different way of providing social homes, to our normal, however we must be ready to look for all possible ways of bringing more of our community needs for social housing to Council for discussion. There are other discussions going on, and I will share with Council when these discussions are able to go public.

My last update will be to say how we are looking to update our present older homes also. We are at differing stages looking at our older stock, I was at Parkside in Saffron Walden two weeks ago along with Councillor Light and our Officer getting information on the brilliant update on this large redevelopment of this sight. There are several other sites that will be reported on over the next two to three months that we are looking to redevelop. My vision of the social housing for our area is for it to be of such a high standard, at affordable rents no one will want to exercise their right to buy. This must be a goal for us all and we can achieve this without banging heads with central government and trying to get them to amend their vision of right to buy. We can be the best landlords in the country providing the fastest repairs and most up to date environmental housing stock in the world, whilst offering the most cost effective service provided by our back room staff. All this would mean no need for our next generations to go for right to buy. They would have first class homes at a fraction of the price of inflated mortgages. Our residents would have more money to spend on their well-being and locally to energise our local economy, and our future generations would have a housing stock over and over to meet the needs of future generations. What a great legacy we as a Council can begin if we all work together for these outcomes. This report is a statement of intent, all it lacks is detail of how to achieve that intent. It is simple really, we as a Council just need to show courage and do something our country did after the last World War a commitment to social responsibility to houses for our community. I look forward to the coming months of working with Council to achieve these aims.