

## **Councillor Arthur Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing** **Report to Full Council: 21 February 2022**

As I am sure Members will acknowledge, this has been a really busy time for our Housing team and in particular, there has been significant activity to drive improvements in the way our homes are maintained and repaired.

Firstly, in asset management, the Council took the initiative to commission Savills to conduct a full stock condition survey for all of its 2800 homes. The purpose of the stock condition survey is to identify whether our homes have any health and safety hazards, including damp and mould. The other element of the survey is to provide an expert opinion on the condition of our homes in relation to the Government's Decent Homes Standard. This includes the condition of key elements, such as kitchens, bathrooms, roofing and heating/thermal efficiency. Once the Council has all the data, it will be able to make informed decisions on planned maintenance programmes, prioritising works and budgets based on fact. The Council is in the process of procuring a new IT asset management module so that it can own and manage the stock condition data. Other information, such as repairs and compliance information will be added, providing a complete, 'at a glance' picture of every one of our homes.

Since starting the survey on 9<sup>th</sup> January and up to 16<sup>th</sup> February, Savills have already surveyed 1298 homes. There have been a total of 239 severe hazards identified, 41 of which relate to damp and mould and 111 due to lack of a carbon monoxide detector. The latter is largely where there is a fossil fuel heating system. Generally the detectors are checked as part of a gas safety inspection and as such, their absence has not been picked up for homes which are not on the gas servicing programme. A programme is being put in place for those homes affected. There have also been 26 severe electrical hazards and 50 relating to fire/heat detectors (smoke/heat detectors). Any hazards identified are referred to the Interim Director of Housing, Health and Communities and working with her team, she then oversees UNSL in visiting the properties concerned to inspect the issues and arrange works.

UNSL have been attending electrical hazards on the day and has agreed with the Housing Team that they will follow up reports of no smoke detectors. UNSL has told the Council that they do not have the resource to carry out follow-up inspections/deliver remedial work for all the damp and mould cases, and so at the insistence of the Council, UNSL have brought in a contractor to carry out a mould wash, with the performance target of 7 days. Mould washes mitigate the risk to tenants by removing the living mould spores which cause a health hazard. A letter has been sent by the Council to tenants who report damp and mould, or where this was identified as an issue through the stock condition survey. The letter explains the process and provides assurance that a full inspection will be arranged. UNSL have also recently appointed a damp and mould coordinator to make sure that all cases are logged and sent to the mould wash contractor.

In addition to the damp and mould cases reported through the stock condition surveys, we are continuing to see damp and mould concerns self-reported by tenants, or through Member enquires or tenant satisfaction surveys. There are 170 open complaints of damp and mould. New cases come in every week, and these

are being logged and tracked by UNSL's damp and mould coordinator, with senior council staff checking that this is being done properly. In order to expedite follow up damp and mould inspections and arrange remedial repairs more quickly, the Council is in the process of identifying and procuring an external provider to carry out the inspections and arrange works. The marketplace for this specialism is difficult due to the massively increased demand, but the Housing Team is doing everything it can to put these arrangements in place as soon as possible. Norse is aware that the Council is having to take this measure. Most housing providers are struggling with this issue, which has come into the public eye since the death of little Awaab Ishak.

In terms of health and safety compliance, performance is improving week by week and performance has increased significantly since the Council self-referred to the Regulator of Social Housing last August. UNSL has reported this month that they have achieved 91% compliance for electrical safety checks carried out within 5 years, 98.9% compliance within a 10-year testing programme and 100% compliance for communal asbestos surveys, against a position of 0% asbestos compliance at the time of the self-referral. At time of writing this report the Council has received the findings from the data validation exercise from Pennington Choices and is making some final enquiries so that the actual position is agreed and signed off. Compliance reported by the validation process is largely in line with the performance now being reported by UNSL. Once signed off by the Council, the current position will be communicated to the Regulator, and we will await their decision on whether they will serve a Regulatory Notice on the Council.

I will report back to Members once this piece of work is fully completed.

We are micro-managing UNSL to deliver the improved health and safety performance, through in-depth weekly reporting and Maintenance Touch Point meetings, where Council officers scrutinise and challenge senior UNSL staff at a granular level. Performance reported every week by UNSL will be validated by the Housing Team, so that we know the information provided is accurate.

In other areas of property maintenance, more stringent contactor monitoring is in place. Senior council staff attend weekly void monitoring meetings with UNSL management, to track every single empty home and make sure they are being managed speedily and to the required standard. The Interim Director receives weekly void management reports.

New fortnightly case management meetings have also been introduced, whereby the Interim Director and her senior staff meet with the UNSL Operations Director and interrogate every single complaint made by tenants or raised by Members, so that they can be brought to a proper conclusion and agreed actions are taken within required time frames. The Housing Team is developing a new process for Member enquiries relating to housing complaints, to ensure a streamlined process and ownership of complaints by council staff until they are resolved. A more comprehensive system of complaints reporting is also being developed.

A new suite of repairs and maintenance KPIs is being formulated for the new financial year, to reflect this new robust approach. This will include damp and mould

indicators, in line with the proposed new 'Awaab's law' and other requirements as set out in the Social Housing Regulation Bill.

Reynolds Court in Newport has also received attention in previous months, due to the fire safety issues recently identified. I can confirm that Lovell, who developed the site have been held to account and are now in the process of rectifying the issues, at their own cost. Lovell have identified in consultation with the Council, all of the items which need to be remedied. Some items have been completed and for the remainder, Lovell are developing a time-bound action plan to deliver this. The Council will also be pursuing Lovell for the additional costs incurred by the Council as a result of the issues. Senior Council officers are carrying out an investigation of how and why things went wrong, so that tighter governance arrangements can be put in place to prevent issues such as this happening again. The waking watch will remain in place until the works are completed.

In relation to errors made by the Council in setting rents for the past two years, which was identified during a proactive audit commissioned by the Council last autumn, a new officer task group has been set up to put this right. This includes setting the rents at the correct level for each property and arranging refunds where tenants have been overcharged. The average weekly payment overcharged over the two years is in the region of £1.50 per property. Officers are developing a new policy and putting in place robust arrangements to tighten up the governance, so that all rent changes and rents for new homes or those which are calculated when a home is re-let, are checked by senior, qualified officers before being finalised. The Council is engaging with the Regulator of Social housing and a decision has not yet been made by the Regulator as to whether a Regulatory Notice will be served upon the Council.

The Housing Team is also continuing to prepare for the new regulatory standards, which will come into force from April 2023. This includes reviewing services and governance arrangements. A new suite of performance indicators is being developed and this will be presented to relevant Committees for sign off in due course.

A key area of the new regulatory framework is tenant engagement. The Tenants and Leaseholders Panel has been in discussions with senior housing staff over the new requirements and work will shortly commence, in collaboration with the Panel, to develop a refreshed Tenant Engagement Strategy. A key consideration will be the Council's approach to widen the reach of tenant involvement, so that tenants and leaseholders who do not traditionally engage with the Council can be encouraged to do so, whether this be by making it easier for tenants to be involved through digital channels, or by adding more community-based opportunities for engagement in locations and at times which appeal to a wider demographic.