

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 20 NOVEMBER 2024

LEAD MEMBER FOR HOUSING REPORT

As members will appreciate, the last 18 months have personally been very difficult. I never expected to have a stroke before the age of fifty, however, as I remember everyday, I am blessed to have a roof over my head and a warm bed to sleep in at night. My passion for housing and drive for this role has been a massive positive in my rehabilitation. My thanks to Cllr Clayton for allowing me to be his guinea pig in presenting a report on the Housing situation in North Devon.

I would like to outline some of the achievements of the housing team over the last year.

It was with some sadness that Mr Jeremy Mann announced that he had decided to retire at the end of last year in order to spend more time with his tennis rackets. He left (literally) some very large shoes to fill. I have been very grateful to Nina Lake for so excellently stepping up to the role and continuing the excellent management of the housing team. Our regular meetings have been highly informative as well as educational and as I have frequently commented: I came into this role with a passion to work towards an aim that all families in North Devon should have a safe, secure home within in their community. It was highly gratifying to learn that I was stepping in to work with a team that already had the very same aspirations.

Personal highlights of the last year have been Lord Bests visit to North Devon and the opportunity to discuss the specific needs of our community and also the invite by the Local Government Association (LGA) to speak at their annual conference

Empty Homes

The small empty homes team continues to address the issue in our region. I am now approaching parish and town councils to bring their local knowledge to bear on the matter. While it remains unfortunate that we have so many empty homes within our housing stock, the reasons for this are often very varied and complicated. The Empty Homes team should be commended for their diligence in prompting owners to bring these properties back into use and highlighting the ways that we can help owners bring their properties back into use.

Short Term Lets continue to be a significant drain on housing stock and be a major part of the Empty Homes figures, however, it can be noted that while the number of properties purchased for investment rather than family has continued to climb in the SW, the revenue and occupancy rates have started to fall. This appears to mirror a global trend where oversaturated markets and community-minded legislation has prompted a decline in the number of short term lets. It is hoped that as these properties are released back into housing stock we will see a positive effect on the unaffordability of homes for local people and a rekindling of some of our denuded villages.

Temporary accommodation

Obviously, Temporary Accommodation (TA) remains one of the biggest challenges faced by North Devon Council. It is essential that we thank our housing team, especially Sarah Bentley for the work they and she are doing to ensure that families made homeless are helped to support themselves and given shelter and assistance while they get back on their feet. It is due to the work done by our housing team that I was asked to speak on behalf of North Devon Council at the recent Local Government Association conference in Harrowgate. One key point I would like to share was the level of respect that other larger, less isolate councils have for the work we are doing here in North Devon. It was interesting to learn that while North Devon Council has a stock of TA housing to cover around 20-30% of our need, many other councils hold a far lower percentage (around 8-12% in councils I spoke to). It was made clear that this higher percentage is a key part of our ability to help people in crisis and many councils took home the message that they should look to emulate the work done here in Devon.

Sarah has provided some of the essential figures with regards to our TA usage. On the night of October 31st, this year, we had 82 families in TA. 27 were single occupancy, 1 was a couple and 54 were families. Children in TA were evenly split across age ranges. Shelter recently reported that 151,000 children are in TA, often in unsuitable accommodation. A consequence of NDCs positive approach to ownership is that we are able to protect children from the torture of being placed in bed-and-breakfasts, far from their friends and school.

The rise in single person homelessness is being driven by mental and physical health problems as well as high rental charges. This is compounded by social housing age restrictions. Currently NDC are working with North Devon Homes (NDH) to lower the age at which individuals are able to bid, therefore reducing their dependence on TA and also having positive benefits for the individual.

It should be noted that while NDC is in a stronger position than many other authorities, we are not immune from the risks of rising TA use. There is hope that the new government will move with more alacrity to ensure that TA costs do not become unmanageable but it is important to consider what approaches can be taken to safeguard both our community and also the council.

North Devon District Hospital

As people may know, I became interested in housing when I found that some of my co-workers were unable to find homes in North Devon and were being forced to move away from their families to work in Exeter or Bristol. While I do not want to go into any detail on the various housing developments around North Devon, I think it is notable and commendable that our excellent local hospital is now working to replace its "older" nursing accommodation with modern, sustainable staff accommodation.

Devon Housing Commission

Last year, Lord Richard Best visited North Devon and afforded the opportunity for Cllr Wilkinson, Cllr Roome and I to show some of the problems we face and the work

we are doing here in North Devon. This included visiting several estates, speaking to local residents and looking at the proposed CLT sites in Woolacombe and Ilfracombe. The Devon Housing Commission reported back to the Housing Taskforce earlier this year with a very detailed look at the state of housing in Devon and some eye-opening statistics regarding the level of the housing crisis we face. It should be noted that in a recent conversation with Lord Best it was recognised how seriously and promptly NDC are taking the recommendations within the Commissions report.

I include here some of the key recommendations of the report:

Overarching Recommendation:

- All local authorities in Devon, with national government support, should urgently address the shortage of affordable housing, which is causing hardship, increasing temporary accommodation costs, and impacting public services and the economy.

Recommendations to Devon's Local Authorities:

- Develop and implement local housing strategies aligned with the overarching Devon Housing Strategy.
- Enhance planning resources to expedite housing development approvals.
- Collaborate with housing associations and private developers to increase affordable housing supply.

Recommendations to the Proposed Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (CCA):

- As we understand, the CCA proposal may be subject to change under the new government. But Whether we have a CCA or a wider cross-county grouping, these proposals remain very pertinent to our situation.
- Establish a county-wide Development Corporation to oversee major housing developments.
- Create an overarching Devon Housing Strategy to address housing challenges over the next decade.
- Form a successor body to the Devon Housing Task Force to continue addressing housing issues.

Recommendations for Homes England:

- Prioritise funding for affordable housing projects in Devon.
- Support local authorities in land acquisition for housing development.
- Provide technical assistance to streamline housing project approvals.

Recommendations for Government:

- Introduce a new planning use class for short-term/holiday lettings, allowing local authorities to limit them in areas where growth is detrimental to the community.
- Proceed with the registration of short-term lettings and enable district councils in Devon and Torbay to double Council Tax on second homes.
- Implement measures to make homeownership more accessible for first-time buyers and local residents.

Recommendations for Other Bodies:

- Encourage housing associations to increase the development of affordable homes.
- Promote community-led housing initiatives to meet local needs.
- Engage employers in providing housing solutions for key workers.

Care Leavers

Agreements signed between NDC, NDH & Social Services for the delivery of a further 3 units of single accommodation for complex care leavers. This is a scheme to prevent those more complex care leavers from hitting TA, it is a joint project lead by NDC. The agreement states that only those with a local connection or residency in North Devon will be accepted into this accommodation. There will be wrap around support for this young person from the areas required such as social services and mental health with the drive to get back into education or employment

Teamwork

Housing team vacancies have dropped over the last year ensuring a more efficient and manageable service. Previously we had a dependency on agency staff but are now fully staffed with local employees. In one recent conversation with an Oxford councillor we discussed how the famous “west country stereotype” that we all seem to know everyone is actually a huge benefit and a curse in this situation. Our team bring a wealth of local knowledge and passion to the department. We now have a domestic abuse support worker (thanks to whom we are sometimes able to enable abuse victims to stay safely in their own homes rather than being forced into TA)

Renters Reform Bill & Selective Licensing

While we do not yet know what form these two projects may take, the housing team is already looking to ensure that we will be ready to implement them if they come to pass. There is a recognition that some landlords may choose to “sell-up” rather than adhere to guidance that is designed to safeguard their tenants. This places us in a difficult position and will work with landlords to help ensure that they are ready for these changes.

With regards to Selective Licensing, we recognise that this may be complicated for the council to implement but it is important to see that in every case where Selective Licensing has been implemented over the last decade, each authority has seen a

rise in living standards, a reduction in mental health concerns, a rise in social cohesion and a reduction in anti-social behaviour. I very much hope that this project will go for consultation in the new year and (subject to deliberation on that consultation), we will positively embrace this scheme. Selective Licensing has been effective from locations from Newham to Blackpool and there has already been significant national interest in what we are doing.

Community Land Trusts

We continue to see action in the various community land trusts across the region. And it remains notable that we are one of the most proactive councils when it comes to supporting these projects.

We now have planning consent in Paracombe, Ilfracombe and Woolacombe. In addition, we have trusts set-up in Braunton, Lynton & Lynmouth, West Down, Georgeham and South Molton with further sites identified for the future. CLTs are a positive route to increasing community engagement and safeguarding local social support networks. It is hoped that the recent devolution fund grant of £810,000 will help these sites to come to fruition.

I have recently spoken with former Cllr Wrigley of Teignbridge District Council, now the MP for Newton Abbot. He has a number of excellent suggestions with regards to how we can expand our CLT offering (without breaking the bank) and I look forward to looking into them over the next few months.

Modern Day Slavery

This continues to be a very minor issue in North Devon, however, incidents have occurred. Currently NDC are working with the LGA to identify how we can work with other agencies to ensure a positive response.

Ilfracombe Healthy Homes

The Devon Housing Commission Report highlighted Ilfracombe as having unique housing issues created by a number of factors. This has meant that Ilfracombe has required special attention to ensure that these problems are addressed. The Housing and Property teams have put significant effort into the exceptional ask for funding that would have enabled us to create a paradigm shift in the wellbeing of the town. Unfortunately, we were not successful, however, we continue to highlight the need for high level input into the town. As part of the Devolution Capital fund associated with the CCA, NDC have been offered just under £2,000,000 to take on a project to purchase properties in Ilfracombe.

In addition, the FLOW project collaborates with the Ilfracombe Task Force, focusing on addressing health inequalities and enhancing community well-being. This partnership brings together local organisations to tackle issues such as housing, employment, and social isolation, which significantly impact health outcomes and create a more integrated and responsive support system, improving the quality of life for residents with complex needs.

Barnstaple Flood Defences

Much of the brownfield and shoptop sites throughout Barnstaple is subject to a high flood risk. Currently the Environment Agency is working to assess how to handle flood risk in central Barnstaple. A report on the Taw/Torridge flood modelling is expected by the end of 2024. This feasibility project has the potential to open up many sites throughout Barnstaple with potential estimates being around 750 potential homes in an ideal location.

Local Plan Review

With thanks to Cllr Wilkinson for leading on this, it is positive to note that the Local Plan review is taking a very progressive approach to the new Local Plan. It is however, disappointing to note that at a recent all member strategy meeting, North Devon Councillors were outnumbered by Torridge Councillors at a ratio of around 4:1. As part of this review councillors were asked to steer ND&T officers on our preferred design for developments (new towns, new villages, growing towns, growing villages or dispersal). Overall there was a preference for new and growing towns but this conversation remains at an early stage. The development of our local plan will help define our community for another generation and I would encourage all councillors to attend any similar session. Over the next 12 months the Local Plan will complete its search for available sites with a view to completing the document by 2028.

Rough Sleepers

During October, NDC evidenced 31 rough sleepers. On 1st November we had 16 rough sleepers in temporary accommodation. The majority of rough sleeping occurs in Barnstaple, one case was reported in Ilfracombe. Between January and October the Freedom Centre opened 198 rough sleeper cases. 72 individuals were accommodated in Pods and 43 in temporary accommodation. As members would expect, the majority of rough sleepers are male, the average age of rough sleepers is 41.

The provision of pod accommodation and temporary accommodation has a positive outcome in 50-60% of cases have a positive outcome. The team continues to provide outstanding work and as has been previously noted, have been nationally recognised for its excellent work in the area.

The Freedom Centre continues its close work with local GP services to ensure healthcare provision for the homeless community. Since 1st September, there have been 65 patient registrations, including 3 temporary residents.

Over the last year it has been raised with our previous and current MPs regarding the need to find a more sustainable funding solution to provide aid to rough sleepers. Currently our Rough Sleeper Initiative funding runs until March 2025, Mr Roome has written to the MHCLG expressing our need to ensure that this funding is continued and the need to find a more reliable funding model.

Housing Strategy

On a similar theme, councillors will have received a copy of the draft housing strategy that I hope to implement over the next few months. This has been assembled by housing officers with input from various councillors and the next step will be a workshop to discuss the pros and cons of this initial draft. Housing issues affects every one of our constituents and I hope that we will be able to attend.

Afghan Resettlement Scheme

Working with RM Chivenor and the Pickwell Foundation and other associated groups we currently provide 18 homes for families of Afghan service personnel who worked alongside our military forces during the conflict in their country. During our month of remembrance, it is important to remember the sacrifice of these brave individuals who worked alongside our armed forces, and are now under a threat of death in their own country, along with their families. The Local Authority Housing Fund, stage 3, is enabling NDC to purchase four units of accommodation over the next two years. Two of these homes will be used to supplement our TA stock, the other two will be allocated to the Afghan Resettlement Scheme.

Improving Housing Quality

The Devon Housing Commission report was damning with regards to the poor quality of housing across Devon with Devon having the twelfth worst housing quality of all authorities across England. Sadly, North Devon was by no means the worst Devon council by this metric. We have been tackling these issues in a number of innovative ways. Notably the aforementioned Selective Licensing, our recent tightening up of HMO (House of Multiple Occupation) legislation, our Fixed Caravan licensing, and fire inspections of high risk private sector rental accommodation.