

# Tenant Annual Report

2020 - 2021





**Council Housing  
& Development  
Services**

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**Foreword - Cllr Laura Wright**

The year 2020/21 has been a year like no other for Exeter City's Council Housing and Development Service. When the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, there was a huge impact on how we delivered our services. Social distancing meant we had to immediately change the way we interacted with tenants, and staff had to quickly adapt to working from home. Despite these challenges, we have a lot to be proud of in 2020/2021.

I would like to thank the teams behind the Housing Service who, throughout this extraordinary year, have shown great dedication and adaptability under pressure. Their enormous efforts to keep services running are deeply appreciated.

We have achieved a lot this year in challenging circumstances, including new measures to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide our homes produce, bringing us one step closer to our Net Zero 2030 target. We have kept our key services operating and have kept our tenants up to date with any unavoidable temporary measures.

Finally, I would also like to thank you, our tenants, for your patience and understanding while we adapted to this new way of working. I hope this report provides you with useful information about how we performed over the last year.

We are always looking to improve, and if you wish to provide feedback or suggestions about ways we can do so, please visit our website or contact us on **01392 277888** or email us at **resident.involvement@exeter.gov.uk**

We are looking forward to a new year ahead.



**Cllr Laura Wright**  
Deputy Leader  
and Portfolio Holder  
for Council Housing  
& Development Services



## Introduction

Welcome to the 2021 Annual Report to tenants. Every year the Council publishes performance information about its Landlord services which are set against the standards laid out by the Regulator of Social Housing. Inside this report you will find information on how we performed in 2020/2021.

This report will highlight some of our achievements this year, as well as some of the challenges we faced. It will also outline how we adapted during the national lockdowns and the ongoing pandemic so that we could deliver these important services with as minimal disruption as possible.



## Your Property

“We pledge to provide safe, well maintained homes.”



### Safety email address for Council tenants

A new Health and Safety email address was created during the year. You can now contact the Compliance Team for any matters relating to the items in this article:

**housing.safety@exeter.gov.uk** you should receive a response within 48 hours (two working days).

Alternatively, simply call the repairs team on **01392 265031** and they will forward your query.

## Health and Safety

We take health and safety very seriously, and we have been working hard over the past year to make sure that you are safe in your home.

Despite national lockdowns, we have much to be proud of. We:

- Completed over 500 fire risk assessments for the communal areas of our blocks of flats
- Circulated fire safety advice to all tenants via social media and in an advice sheet
- Checked smoke detectors and fire doors in communal areas
- Completed 429 asbestos inspections in common areas
- Introduced a new electronic storage system so that contractors have access to the latest asbestos data
- Undertook, through our gas contractor Liberty, 4,500 gas safe inspections and installed 626 new boilers
- Completed, through Liberty, 4,565 breakdown repairs
- Caught up with any Covid-related overdue inspections so that by the end of the year 99.9% of gas annual inspections were in date
- Continued with 5-yearly electrical safety inspections
- Installed appropriate ventilation for 19 properties at risk of exceeding the new lower safe limit for radon gas

Further, when legionella testing in older persons' schemes had to be temporarily suspended because of Covid restrictions, we kept tenants updated with advice and information until the service resumed. Before the end of the year we were once again fully compliant.

Many tenants might have noticed new lighting in communal areas. We have been working on a major energy efficient emergency lighting upgrade programme. We installed lighting where previously there was none, and upgraded existing lighting. The project started in 2019 and is scheduled for completion in late 2022.

We have also completed a two-year programme of undertaking new risk assessments for all footpaths, retaining walls, steps and other structures which belong to Housing. Many repairs and upgrades have been made during this process, and the remaining larger and more complex repair works will be completed by the end of 2022.



## Repairs and Maintenance

During the first lockdown, we were only able to operate on an emergency and essential work basis, which meant our average number of days to complete a repair increased from 6.83 to 22.

Thankfully, once Mears staff came off furlough, and rigorous health and safety precautions were put in place, we were able to return to being fully operational for the rest of the year. This work return has meant that while there is still a backlog of work, it is manageable.

The pandemic has meant that our team has had to work in a more agile way, either from home or out in the field. We've started to fit key safes to reduce contact between tenants and staff and to reduce the need to attend the office.

In May 2020, we rolled out OpenHousing, a computer programme which helps us manage our work flow. It also gives us access to Total Mobile, which allows us to raise works orders and complete forms online from any location, meaning staff do not need to come into the office.

We are mid-way through procuring a new contract for the gardening scheme that we provide for vulnerable people and those over 70. We hope to see this go live in January 2022.

Despite the unusual year, we are pleased to have maintained good staffing levels and have not seen too much disruption due to self-isolation. We have even welcomed five new members of staff to the team this year, including four Surveyors and a new Technical Officer.



## Planned Works

Exeter City Council announced a climate emergency in 2019 and set itself a target to be carbon neutral by 2030. As part of this commitment, we have introduced new measures to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide that our properties release into the atmosphere. The new measures have the added benefit of reducing fuel poverty for our tenants and providing greener, more energy efficient and energy self-sufficient homes.

The improvements have been carried out to approximately 200 homes in part of one of the city's large social housing estates. This is the first phase of a larger programme, and we plan to roll it out across the rest of the city over the coming years.

The measures include some or all the following:

- Removal of old and failed cavity wall insulation and installation of modern thermally efficient insulation
- Installation of solid wall insulation for our least thermally efficient properties
- Installation of loft insulation, up to 300mm thick
- Upgrades to heating, where applicable, complete with smart heating controls & thermostats
- Improvements to the hot water provisions
- Installation of solar PV (photovoltaic) panels, which generate free electricity for use during daylight hours and help to reduce the amount of fuel bills
- Ventilation improvements
- Upgrades to windows and doors with new more efficient ones
- Installation of smart meters to help tenants monitor and control their energy consumption in real time

It is hoped that these improvements will mean a reduction in the amount of greenhouse gases produced in these homes by at least 70% compared to the 1990 baseline position. The remaining 30% of emissions will be offset by the planting of trees within the city limits on our housing estates. We will be monitoring the performance of these properties over the coming months.

We are also supporting our tenants to reduce their fuel bills and to remove the risk of condensation, damp, and mould, leading to much healthier homes and reducing fuel poverty. We have produced a handy booklet to help residents understand all the improvement measures, and to provide tips on how to reduce carbon emissions and save on their fuel bills.

Our staff and contractors are also receiving training and guidance about these new technologies. This way we hope to provide residents with as much support as possible and can maximise the energy efficiency of their homes.

Despite the lockdown restrictions, the team also installed 43 kitchens and 62 bathrooms last year.

## Stock condition

We continued to undertake surveys during the lockdown periods, but due to the restrictions we focussed our inspections on void (empty) properties and communal areas. This approach enabled us to continue to gather valuable data and identify potential health and safety issues with minimal contact with tenants. We now have accurate survey data on nearly 75% of our properties.

In 2020/2021 we:

- Helped to identify and prioritise suitable homes for the Council's carbon reduction programmes
- Provided a variety of regular reports and performance indicators which help the Council monitor its performance in relation to The Decent Homes Standard, the Housing Health and Safety Rating System and energy performance
- Continued to undertake Energy Performance Certificates to ensure the Council's statutory obligations are met

We are pleased to report that the percentage of properties which did not meet the Decent Home Standard reduced from 1.44% to 1.34%.

## New Homes

The Asset Management team has produced a Development Strategy that works towards the target of building 500 new homes over the next 10 years. The Development Strategy identifies 11 sites that have development potential and are capable of delivering 400+ new Council homes for those families in housing need.

During 2020/21 we also:

- Progressed a project to demolish and then rebuild a number of houses on the Buddle Lane estate, and the first 6 properties were snagged and ready for handover at the very end of the 2020/21 year
- Built and let 10 new 3-bedroom family houses on Bovemoors Lane
- Progressed work on our new Extra Care scheme, Edwards Court, (pictured below) with our main contractor, Kier Construction, working diligently within the Covid restrictions to keep construction going

As part of our goal to be carbon neutral by 2030, all of our new build properties are to meet the rigorous Passivhaus standard, which means they have high levels of insulation and are very energy efficient.



## Your Tenancy

“We pledge to work with tenants and leaseholders to ensure all terms and conditions of our tenancies are understood and complied with.”



The year started off with an action plan that included tenancy visits, new resident involvement opportunities and fire safety inspections. When the first lockdown occurred in March, we had to shift focus so that we could prioritise essential services and comply with government guidance. The changes meant that we had to make some difficult decisions on what we could and couldn't do this year. Above all, keeping staff and tenants safe was our top priority, which meant that we had to adapt our services.

Throughout the first lockdown:

- Tenancy inspections continued by telephone because we felt that it was important that we kept in communication with tenants, and through these conversations we were able to get a good idea of how people were coping
- OPPSOs (Older Persons' Property Services Officers) continued to work, if they could do so safely, and they kept an eye on tenants who were considered vulnerable
- Our contractor, Cobwebs, kept up with cleaning communal areas on Older Persons Sites, particularly where surfaces were being frequently touched, such as door handles, handrails and lift buttons
- Monthly inspections of common areas continued so that we could make sure these areas were safe for our tenants and kept clear of rubbish and fly-tipping
- Common rooms in our older persons accommodation were unfortunately kept closed for the period of lockdown as they could not be safely used
- We had to find ways of dealing with anti-social behaviour and complaints without the ability to undertake visits or initiate court action in the case of evictions

We have had to provide our service with lower than usual staff levels due to the need for some staff to shield during the year.

This year saw a rise in reports of anti-social behaviour, which increased from 177 to 288 cases. This was likely due to people spending more time at home, so they were therefore more likely to identify and report behaviour, and we have seen reports reduce when lockdown restrictions were eased.

As the situation evolved and restrictions eased, we were able to slowly re-introduce our former working practices. We were able to use our experiences in the first lockdown to adapt our approach during the November and January lockdowns.

## Lettings

“We pledge to let our properties promptly, fairly and consistently in order to meet housing need and help create sustainable communities.”



When we entered the first lockdown in March, we made a decision that we would continue to prioritise the re-letting of void properties. We worked very closely with our Assets Team to ensure void properties were made ready for re-letting so that they could continue to be advertised on Devon Home Choice.

We adapted our processes for void properties and new lettings so that they could be carried out safely and in a socially distanced way. For example, members of staff remained outside the properties during viewings, they provided sanitised paperwork in clean plastic wallets and new tenants were asked to provide their own pens when signing the agreements.

We understood the importance of being very flexible in moving people out, especially when people were shielding, or when there were difficulties securing removal companies. Contributing to the problem, recycling centres and charity shops were not open, which meant that people were struggling to get rid of old, unwanted furniture.

Once we had emerged from lockdown and were able to assess the impact of the pandemic on our voids performance, we set about drafting up an action plan which focussed on bringing down the voids times as quickly as possible and getting ourselves back to pre-pandemic performance.

The service is now returning to normal operations, though there is a small backlog of void properties that we are still working on. We are continuing to use social distancing measures where necessary and we are following Government guidance to keep our new tenants and our staff safe.

During the year we re-let 241 properties, with an average re-let time of 51.33 days compared to 29.57 the year before. Outside of lockdown, our void performance appears to have improved.

## Your Neighbourhood and Community

“We pledge to work in partnership with other organisations to create neighbourhoods which are safe and well maintained, and where people want to live.”



Because of the lockdowns and restrictions on meeting up, all in-person resident involvement activities ceased but we kept in touch with all our tenants by sending personal letters to everyone. We devised three clear stages of returning to pre-pandemic services and kept our tenants informed. At each stage, we wrote letters explaining what could be done in terms of repairs and maintenance and tenancy services while complying with the changing Government guidelines and regulations.

Throughout the pandemic, we kept the Housing Services Facebook page updated and increased the number of likes by 25%. We continued to ensure that the information held on the Exeter City Council website was kept up to date.

We helped to promote the Exeter Community Wellbeing service that operated throughout the lockdowns and is still running today. This service was invaluable for many people who were unable to access essential services such as shopping and prescriptions.

We were part of a project to deliver online digital confidence classes, including:

- The Everyday Internet
- Online Safety & Communication
- Basics of Social Media
- What is the Cloud?

These programmes were well received by participants, and plans are in place to repeat them as in-person sessions.



We consulted widely about the new Resident Involvement Strategy and used the results to inform the final document which was ratified in March 2021. As a result, two new Housing Community Initiatives Officer posts were created.



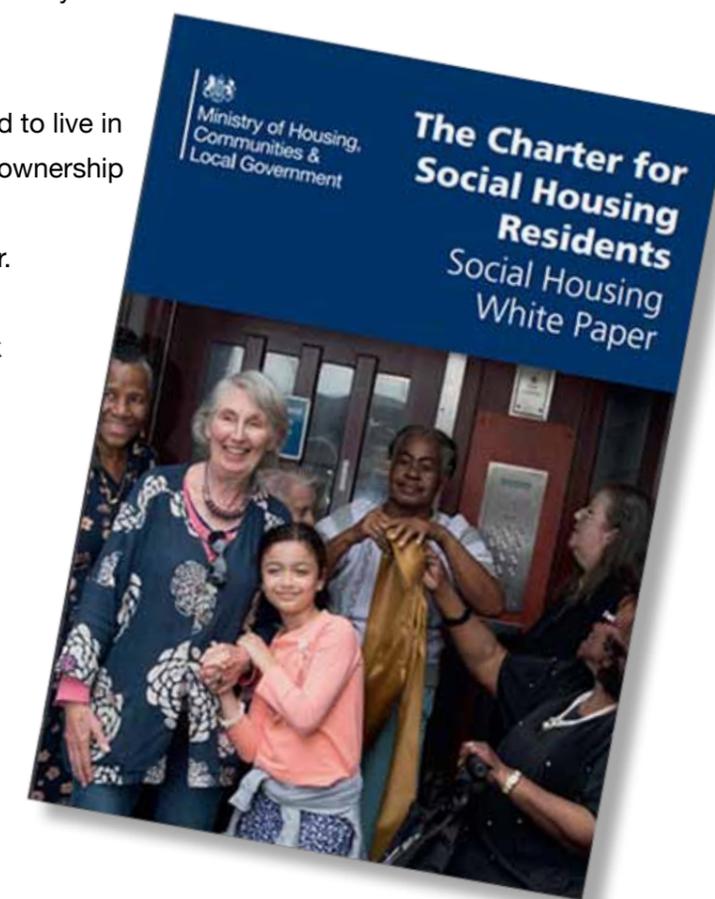
## Housing White paper

The Government published the Social Housing White Paper on 17 November 2020. The paper sets out a Charter for Social Housing Residents and outlines plans for new regulation, a strengthened Housing Ombudsman to speed up complaints and a set of tenant satisfaction measures that social landlords will have to report against.

At the heart of the White Paper is the Charter for Social Housing Residents. The Charter sets out seven commitments that residents should expect from their landlord:

- To be safe in your home
- To know how your landlord is performing
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- To be treated with respect
- To have your voice heard by your landlord
- To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To be supported to take your first step to home ownership

We will work to ensure compliance with the charter. The new Resident Involvement Strategy sets out how we will offer residents the opportunity to work with us to develop and improve our services.



## Service Improvements and Complaints

### Housing Complaints

In the Housing Department we operate our complaints process in line with the Council's corporate two-stage process. We also offer a feedback stage as part of our complaints service, in which we aim to review and resolve your concerns before logging a Corporate Complaint. Housing Services monitor the department's performance by tracking key performance indicators (KPI's) and meeting regularly to discuss outcomes and service improvements.

We welcome complaints, compliments and feedback as it helps us to improve our services. As a result of complaints brought to our attention, we have been able to implement a number of service improvements, resulting in a positive impact on our service delivery. Below are some of the notable changes within Housing Services this year:

#### Internal processes:

- Senior Housing Officers (Estates Department) now review complaints and investigate before passing to the department Lead to review and issue our response
- Lettings Officers now check if translators/interpreters are required when a case is passed from Devon Home Choice
- Central complaint inboxes have been created for Planned Repairs & Estates to ensure timely responses.

#### Complaints process:

- Claims submitted for damaged personal items are now categorised as a claim and do not have to be logged with a complaint.

#### Service level:

- Information sent to tenants about discarded personal items in our standard letter, will be changed from the current term 'fly-tipping' to a more appropriate term, to avoid any confusion.

### Complaints at a glance

- 41 corporate complaints, that's 10 fewer than the previous year
- 89% of complaints were responded to within deadline, which marks a 27% positive difference compared to last year
- Our average response time is 14 working days, this exceeds our policy target of 15 working days, there has been no increase during the pandemic timeframe
- We received 100 non-corporate complaints which is 64 fewer than the previous year.
- 85% of our non-corporate complaints were responded to within deadline which marks a 4% positive difference from the previous year
- Our average response time is 10 working days for non-corporate complaints, which exceeds our policy target of 15 working days. This is an improvement of two working days on average, compared to the previous year

### The Housing Ombudsman Service

If you feel your complaint is unresolved, you are entitled to take it to

The Housing Ombudsman for an independent review. You can contact the Housing Ombudsman at any time while a complaint is going through our process, for advice and to help find a resolution.

Over the last year, we received two Housing Ombudsman reports:

The first case related to facilities within a communal garden. Whilst there was no maladministration with the complaint handling process or the outcome of our decision making, the Housing Ombudsman did recommend that we review our process of notification of work.

The second case related to advice given about the Devon Home Choice service and the handling of reports of anti-social behaviour (ASB). The Housing Ombudsman identified a service failure with respect to Devon Home Choice advice given to the complainant. The Housing Ombudsman found no maladministration relating to how we handled the ASB report and the complaint.

## Introduction of the Housing Ombudsman's Self-Assessment

In 2020 the Housing Ombudsman published their Complaint Handling Code setting out good practice principals that will allow landlords to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. As part of the Code member landlords such as us must complete regular self-assessments in order to benchmark against the Code's requirements and identify areas where improvements can be made.

We completed our first self-assessment in 2020 which is available on our website within the Housing section. Below is an overview of the main learning outcomes of our self-assessment:

- Update the housing complaints leaflet to reflect the policy changes
- Review the housing complaints webpages
- Update the Stage One response letter to include early advice about the Housing Ombudsman's dispute resolution service
- Publish information about this service along with the contact details for the Housing Ombudsman in the next newsletter and Tenant Annual Report
- Increase customer satisfaction monitoring
- Ask the Focus Group to continue to provide feedback and challenge to the service – Completed – Ongoing: A Focus Group is currently has been formed and are undertaking sessions to develop and shape our service

## Housing Ombudsman Contact Details

If you have a complaint you would like to refer to the Housing Ombudsman, the contact details are:

- Online complaint form: [www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/residents/make-a-complaint](http://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/residents/make-a-complaint)

**Phone: 0300 111 3000**

**Email: [info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk)**

**Postal address: Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ**

## Exeter City Council Contact Details

**Online: [exeter.gov.uk](http://exeter.gov.uk) – please navigate to the Housing section**

**Phone: 01392 265759**

**Email: [housing.complaints@exeter.gov.uk](mailto:housing.complaints@exeter.gov.uk)**

**Postal Address: Housing Complaints, Civic Centre, Paris Street, Exeter, EX1 9JN**

## Introduction to the Council Housing & Development Advisory Board

Established at the end of 2020, the aim of the Council Housing & Development Advisory Board is to provide an oversight of the Council's Housing Services. It also reviews our development plans and assesses the viability and sustainability of development programmes, and it provided valuable input into the Resident Involvement Strategy and Action Plan. It is hoped the Board will become an important asset for the Housing Service, so that we can achieve our goals and objectives. Meeting quarterly, the Board includes Councillors as well as external housing industry experts. All participants specialise in different areas so that there is a broad and diverse expertise.

Currently an advisory board, any decisions made during the Board meetings are reported to the Council's Executive meetings for approval and progression. Plans are being discussed to potentially introduce a subcommittee to spend more time focusing on key areas, specifically performance related work.

## Meet Your Tenant Representative: Debbie Croxford

My name is Debbie Croxford, and I have been an Exeter City Council tenant for the last 18 years. I have worked with Exeter City Council as a member of the Performance Scrutiny Partnership (PSP) and I have been involved in the Resident Involvement Focus Groups. As a disabled tenant, I am interested in working to find mutual strategies to improve the living conditions of tenants and leaseholders. I am always looking for situations where I can be the voice of the tenant, and where I can challenge Exeter City Council on how they run their services.



Debbie Croxford



## Accessibility & Contact Information

“In order to meet all our pledges we will involve our residents, and provide services which are fair, equitable and accessible.”

We can provide this information in different languages and formats including braille, large print or electronically.

We welcome your comments and involvement, if you would like to discuss anything to do with this report please let us know:

**[resident.involvement@exeter.gov.uk](mailto:resident.involvement@exeter.gov.uk)**

