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## **HOUSING & COMMUNITIES STATEMENT**

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### **Demand for Homelessness Services**

Demand for homelessness services continues to grow and, in December 2023, the Cabinet declared a housing emergency in Cardiff. The Council is continuing to support high numbers of families and single people turning to us for help. The number of families residing in temporary accommodation is now 701, which is more than double the number in April 2021. The service is having to respond rapidly to these ongoing demands and continues to increase emergency and temporary accommodation to help meet these pressures.

As the weather has become colder, the Council has rapidly increased the provision of emergency accommodation for single people across the city. These spaces are now almost full and additional spaces will be opened if this level of demand continues during the winter. This additional accommodation has encouraged rough sleepers, who have previously not wanted to access support from us, to come forward for assistance. This has resulted in the number of rough sleepers in Cardiff being reduced by 50% and 19 previous rough sleepers are now in emergency accommodation. Teams will be working hard with them to encourage them to continue to access all the support available.

Despite these pressures, a large amount of work has gone into transforming the emergency out-of-hours service for single people. With the number of presentations reducing from 85 to less than 20 a night, the aim is to reduce this further by increasing the managed accommodation offer and creating more move-on capacity.

Working in partnership with United Welsh Housing Association, December saw the opening of the new-build Min Y Coed site in St Mellons. This site provides an additional 18 good-quality, temporary accommodation units for families. In addition, our innovative modular build programme continues to be delivered, with 79 families moving into energy-efficient units at the Gasworks site in Grangetown. The remaining units are due to be ready within the next few months.

Demand for young people facing homelessness remains exceptionally high too. The new Tai Ffres scheme, in partnership with Llamau and United Welsh Housing Association, allocated its first new units to five young people in December. The scheme aims to provide 130 additional units to young people by 2027. Work is ongoing to increase accommodation specifically for young people in Cardiff.

## **Homelessness Prevention**

Whilst the combined Homelessness Teams are continuing to see high numbers presenting to the services each month, the Homeless Prevention Team has recorded the lowest number of open prevention cases since 2022, with 424 people/families being supported. A big contributor to the lower number of open cases is the initial advice and support given to customers through the dedicated Housing Helpline and Community Hub-based Housing Solutions Team, which provides timely and accurate information to stop customers from requiring a Prevention Caseworker. Since April 2023, 80% of prevention cases have been closed due to customers being supported to remain in their homes or supported to find alternative accommodation.

To further support young people, a second Young Person's Prevention Officer is now in post, providing a permanent presence in the Grassroots building on Charles Street in the city centre and the capacity to be able to carry out emergency homeless-on-the-day assessments at locations of the young person's choosing.

## **Addison House Community Living Scheme**

I was delighted to join the Leader of the Council in attending and speaking at the official launch of the Council's first new build community living development for older people, Addison House, on 19 December 2023. This represents an exciting chapter for the Council in delivering homes for people at every stage of their life and the new scheme responds directly to the needs identified in our Older Persons Housing Strategy.

The state-of-the-art community living scheme includes 44 self-contained apartments in a four-storey building, built to the highest standards. These apartments will form part of the wider housing development at Aspen Grove, off Newport Road in Rumney, and like the other homes on the site, the apartments will be highly energy-efficient, making them more affordable to run and kinder to the planet. All of the apartments benefit from the latest technologies to minimise energy use and help to tackle rising fuel costs. The building has also been designed to ensure that residents can retain their independence in a safe and secure environment.

The building is due for completion and handover in the middle of February 2024 and the Older Persons Accommodations Team has been preparing the new residents to move in, with additional support being provided by the Rehousing Solutions Team through the new 'Right-Sizing' scheme, which seeks to ensure a smooth and positive experience. The scheme offers practical and financial support for older people who want to downsize to more manageable accommodation, with dedicated officers supporting them through all aspects of the moving process. The pilot scheme has been welcomed by tenants, with 27 due to move into their new properties shortly. The moving process can be daunting and this additional help and support will assist in removing barriers and providing much-needed reassurance to older tenants.

It is great to see the success of the scheme, which provides good-quality accommodation for older people in the community. It also frees up larger properties in the city that can be offered to families on the housing waiting list who are overcrowded or homeless.

Addison House is the first community living scheme of 10 such schemes that we are delivering across Cardiff as part of our new build housing development programme. Works to develop other new community living schemes at Leckwith Road and Bute Street have commenced on site and are progressing well. When all 10 new community living schemes are completed, we will have invested over £190 million in delivering 620 new older person apartments across the city.

### **Housing Development Update**

The Housing Development & Regeneration Team completed the delivery of 183 new properties during the period from April to end of December 2023. This takes the overall total delivery of new council homes to 1,032 by December 2023.

The Council is continuing to work hard to find new ways to tackle the current Housing Emergency in the city. For example, the highly successful scheme to install 155 new modular homes for families facing homelessness at the former Gasworks site in Grangetown is leading the way in housing innovation in the UK by making a short-term, meanwhile use of what would have been a vacant brownfield site for years to come, and delivering new homes at scale and pace to help prevent homelessness in the city.

I am pleased that the scheme is generating significant interest across the UK, and we have recently hosted visits by representatives from the Welsh, Scottish and Irish Governments, as well as other Welsh local authorities including Swansea and Monmouthshire Councils. The success of this project has resulted in us now working to deliver further meanwhile use modular homes across other vacant sites within our housing development programme. It is important that we are able to make use of these sites in the short-term whilst we are designing and seeking planning approval for our longer-term permanent housing developments.

### **Volunteering in Cardiff**

I am very grateful to all of the people who give up their valuable time to help their own communities and to help us support the people of Cardiff. The Community Volunteer Programme is continuing to grow, with over 70 volunteers donating their time each month. Volunteers are providing a range of activities for communities across Cardiff that people can participate in. These include art exhibitions, peer support groups, craft clubs and exercise classes like Tai Chi, which are attended by over 700 people each month. New links have also been created with Cardiff Metropolitan University and Cardiff University to develop a dedicated volunteer pathway for the many students in the city, which will help to grow community activities even further.

One of the biggest success stories of 2023 was the Ukrainian Film project, which was run in partnership with the BBC. The aim of the project was to create a way for young people to learn about Wales and to meet new people whilst gaining some new skills. Fifty young people who were new to Cardiff engaged with the project and were mentored by industry professionals who taught a range of media skills. The project included visits to the BBC studios and special guest speakers. The project was well received and I know that the Volunteer Cardiff Team is hoping to utilise this partnership for future projects.

In December, Volunteer Cardiff hosted a celebratory thank you event to recognise the support volunteers provided throughout 2023. The event coincided with the annual UN International Volunteer Day, which is 'a day to pay tribute to volunteers' and was based on the theme of 'if everyone did'. Over 25 volunteers attended the event held at Central Library Hub. Volunteers provide a valuable contribution to our Advice Services and Hubs, as well as supporting local communities, and the event provided an opportunity to recognise volunteers' successes and development. Each volunteer in attendance received a Certificate of Appreciation and was presented with an award to thank them for their contribution. I would personally like to thank all volunteers for the help and time that they provide for their community.

### **Hubs Christmas Programme**

The Community Hubs across the city do a great job bringing people together by ensuring that there is something for everyone. I am really pleased that this community engagement continued over the Christmas period, which can be a very difficult time for some people. The Hub Teams all worked hard to put on events, including toy appeals, Christmas lunches, scavenger hunts, Christmas crafts, festive story times and children's crafts, and community craft fairs. It was great to see how many adults and children took part and enjoyed themselves. One example of this was the Christmas Lunch at Lou's Coffee Shop in Llandaff North Hub, which was attended by 85 people. I would like to remind everyone that the Hubs are a source of help to all those who need it. All of our Hubs and libraries are providing a Warm Welcome space this winter. Everyone is welcome to visit and spend time in a warm environment where they can relax and enjoy the free WiFi and activities. There is also advice and support available for those who are experiencing financial difficulties during the Cost-of-Living crisis.

### **Clwb Cwtsh**

The Council is committed to the promotion and development of the Welsh language to realise its vision of Cardiff as a truly bilingual capital city. I was therefore pleased to hear about the collaboration that has been taking place with Mudiad Meithrin, which is a key provider of Welsh-medium early years care and education. Mudiad Meithrin have been rolling out the Clwb Cwtsh taster programme across Hubs and libraries in the city, including in Rhiwbina, Grangetown and Central Library Hubs. Clwb Cwtsh is a fun-filled, seven-week taster programme focussed on speaking Welsh with young children and is aimed at parents-to-be, parents, carers and members of the extended family. Clwb Cwtsh introduces Welsh words and phrases for parents and carers to use at home with their young children.

### **Landlord Enquiry and Tenants Services Team (LETS)**

The Landlord Enquiries & Tenancy Support (LETS) Team has been working closely with landlords across the city over the past few months to encourage sign-up to the Leasing Scheme Wales, the Welsh Government-backed leasing scheme that offers guaranteed rental income for between five and twenty years. I am pleased to say that, as of the beginning of this month, the Council has reached the target of signing up 67 properties to the scheme, which has resulted in additional accommodation being made available for those at risk of homeless and provided help to landlords wanting to support vulnerable people. Of these 67 properties, 27 were previously empty. Over the coming months, the team will be working to extend the scheme to take on additional properties.

The LETS Team has benefited from Empty Homes funding by bringing together the Private Rented Sector Team and Leasing Scheme Wales into one easy-to-access service. The team provides a range of support for private landlords, including a tenancy matching service, free pre-tenancy inspection and rent valuation, support and financial assistance to register with Rent Smart Wales, and a health & safety package, which includes renovation grants of up to £15,000 to assist in bring properties back into use. This will help to increase the number of private rented sector properties that clients within the service can access and provide additional housing solutions. The team also provides resettlement support to tenants when they have moved into their private rented accommodation to ensure that their tenancy succeeds. Since January 2023, the LETS team has supported 208 people into private rented sector properties.

The LETS Team works closely with colleagues from Shared Regulatory Services (SRS) and Housing Development & Regeneration to bring empty properties back into use. Regular meetings between the teams have provided an additional platform for information sharing, effective referral mechanisms and discussion of property specific solutions and updates. The team also hosts and attends bimonthly meetings of the Cardiff Landlord Forum.

### **Empty Homes**

The Council continues to do all it can to bring empty homes back into use across the city. Empty homes are a waste of resources and a missed opportunity during a time of significant housing need.

To ensure all sections of the Council are aware and involved with this work, an Empty Homes Working Group has been established that meets on a quarterly basis, which I chair. This facilitates improved co-ordination between SRS, Council Tax and Housing Development & Regeneration Teams, and the Housing Options Service in particular, by promoting the resources, tools and financial assistance available to tackle empty homes in the city.

The Empty Homes section of the SRS website has recently been redesigned and updated to include improved information, signposting links, an online customer reporting form and an online empty property owner questionnaire. This resource will further increase accessibility of assistance and provide improved contact opportunities for both property owners and the public to highlight or request advice on empty properties.

A small team of officers within the Housing Enforcement Team focuses on tackling private sector empty homes across the city, supported by additional resources provided via income generated through the Council Tax premium. This work includes writing to all known owners of empty properties listed on the Council Tax register to offer advice and assistance on how to bring the property back into use. Owners are invited to complete a questionnaire, which gathers property-specific information and identifies areas for bespoke advice. The team provides assistance through site meetings, advice on property standards and rental requirements, as well as referrals and signposting to other departments and avenues of financial assistance. This proactive approach to engaging with owners of properties listed as empty for more than six months continues to be effective, with an increase in the number of returned questionnaires compared to previous years.

122 properties have been identified as empty for more than five years on the Council Tax register in 2023/24. These properties are individually reviewed and categorised. Owners are contacted with more direct advice and where they fail to respond or engage, then enforcement action is considered.

An action plan, submitted to and agreed by Welsh Government, has identified the most problematic empty properties in the city and prioritised associated actions. Targeted enforcement of these problem properties is yielding positive results, with several properties now occupied, cases progressing with the serving of enforcement notices, and works in default being completed at two properties, with the aim of enforcing sale of the property if the debt is not paid. In addition, two properties previously subject to a Compulsory Purchase Order have now both been fully renovated by the new owners and returned to occupation. This continued progress has enabled the team to select several more problem properties for inclusion in the action plan.

In addition to the above-mentioned proactive work, the team also works reactively, responding to complaints and enquiries specifically relating to empty properties, with 111 complaints and enquires received in 2021/22, 157 received in 2022/23 and 80 received to date in 2023/24.

The Neighbourhood Service Technical Officers have an active caseload of 177 empty properties, which will be visited, categorised and ongoing contact maintained with the owner. Not all the properties dealt with by the team are listed as empty on Council Tax records as they are often unrated or are listed as occupied or second homes.

Through the overall work of the SRS Team, the number of private sector empty properties brought back into use continues to increase year on year, with 84 properties or dwellings brought back into use in 2021/22 and a further 95 dwellings in 2022/23. The target for the current year is 100 properties and, after nine months, 85 dwellings have been returned to occupation so far in 2023/24.

### **Houses into Homes Loan**

The Houses into Homes Loan is a Welsh Government-funded, interest-free loan administered in Cardiff by the Council's Housing Development & Regeneration Team. The key purpose of the scheme is to help bring empty properties back into habitable use for the rental or sales market, thereby increasing housing supply. Upon repayment of the loan monies, the funds are recycled to maximise the number of properties assisted.

To qualify for the scheme, the property must be empty for at least six months. The maximum loan available is £25,000 per unit of accommodation, up to a total of £150,000 per individual or company. If the property is to be let, then the loan is repayable within three years, but if the property is to be sold, then the loan is repayable within two years. The loan is interest-free for the agreed term; however, if there is a breach of the loan agreement, then interest is charged at 6%. The loan covers renovation of residential properties, conversion into multiple dwellings and conversion of commercial properties into domestic dwellings. The loans are secured by a legal charge and the proposed loan amount, plus any existing mortgage or secured lending, cannot exceed 80% of the current property value.

Since 2012, 68 loans have been issued by the Council, the majority of which have been loans to let. The loans covered 83 empty properties (some of the loans applied to multiple properties), 70 of which were residential properties and 13 were commercial properties. The total value of the loans issued is £4.1 million, which includes recycling of previous loan monies.

171 residential units have either been returned to use or created from previously empty properties. A further 10 units are due to be completed shortly and should be ready for occupation by the end of March 2024.

Enquiries about the scheme have increased within the last six months and 11 new applications are currently being processed.

### **Violence Prevention Strategy**

A significant amount of progress has been made with the Community Safety Partnership's Violence Prevention Strategy. An evidence-based profile has been created, which highlights a number of key themes that the strategy will focus on – City Centre and Night-Time Economy; Knife Crime and Possession of Weapons; Violence Involving Children and Young People; Exploitation and Organised Crime; Street Based Lifestyles and Complex Needs; and Violence Against Women and Girls, and Sexual Violence. This Cardiff profile explores what violence we see (when reported to the police and the public perception of violence), where it happens, when it happens and who is involved.

A draft strategy is nearing completion, which sets out the approach, guiding principles, key areas of focus and main objectives/priorities to support a co-ordinated response to violence in Cardiff. This has all been achieved through several partnership meetings and identified best practice and frameworks, which have been developed from Public Health and the Violence Prevention Unit, ensuring that we are building on existing knowledge of what works.

To provide a higher level of detail in how the strategy will be achieved, a delivery plan has also been drafted, which sets out key projects and plans to address the causes of violence. This is currently being finalised with key partners who will lead on its delivery. The Community Safety Partnership will own the delivery plan and it will be monitored via the Violence Prevention Group.

**Councillor Lynda Thorne**  
**Cabinet Member for Housing & Communities**  
**19 January 2024**