

# Housing Services



## Annual Report Annual Report Annual Report



**Karen Dragovic**  
Head of Housing



Welcome to the third edition of the Housing Services Annual Report. It covers information on key achievements during 2007/08 and gives you details of improvement works, new affordable housing schemes and other major projects which will be carried out during 2008/09.

We would very much welcome your feedback on this edition so that future reports can reflect your comments.

# Affordable Housing



**Linda Middleton**



St Albans Council continues to work with Housing Associations to increase the supply of affordable housing throughout the District.

2007/08 was another busy year that saw several schemes either

completed or building works started. Completed schemes include three 3-bedroom houses which were built under the 'Rural Exceptions Scheme' at Colney Heath, designed sensitively to be in keeping with the surrounding area. This is the first 'Rural Exceptions Scheme' in the district. In St Albans, three 3-bedroom houses for rent were completed and are now occupied by families nominated from our housing waiting list. Two bungalows for older people were completed on a former garage site in Wheathampstead.

Shared ownership continues to offer opportunities for low cost home ownership with two 1-bedroom flats in St Albans, and four 1-bedroom and three 2-bedroom flats in Redbourn, being made available to prospective first-time buyers.

In partnership with Aldwyck Housing Association, a flagship project was opened in High Oaks, St Albans that offers 8 studio flats to be used as temporary accommodation for young people. Not only is the scheme a valuable resource in providing temporary housing, it also equips residents with skills to move towards more independent living.

Work is underway on the former KwikSave site in Park Street. Due for completion in December 2008, the development will provide 78 affordable homes, a mixture of rented and shared ownership homes, ranging from 1 to 4 bedroom homes.

Two larger developments have started in St Albans and together will provide a further 202 affordable homes in the City centre. 107 flats will be available on the City Station site by mid-2009, whilst the Oaklands College site on Hatfield Road in St Albans, 95 affordable flats will be completed in a phased development. Both are being developed with our partner Housing Association, Hightown Praetorian and Churches, and will be a mixture of 1 and 2 bedroom properties, available for both rent and low cost home ownership.

Two exciting schemes that will be taking shape over the coming year are the St. Paul's Place and Castle Project schemes. The demolition and rebuilding of a block of bedsits at St Pauls Place will provide eight 1-bedroom flats designated for elderly persons. The Castle Project is unique and due to commence shortly. This scheme will provide 9 properties especially for physically and sensory disabled young persons, an exciting new scheme that will be the first of its kind in the District. *(Continued on page 2)*



**High Oaks, St Albans**



# Affordable Housing Continued




*Sleapshyde Lane, Smallford*

We are still working with North Hertfordshire Homes Housing Association in the street purchase scheme, buying properties on the open market for rent by families nominated from the Council's waiting list. We continue to offer a Cash Incentive Scheme where a grant, ranging from £15 - £30,000, is made available to council tenants purchasing a property on the open market.

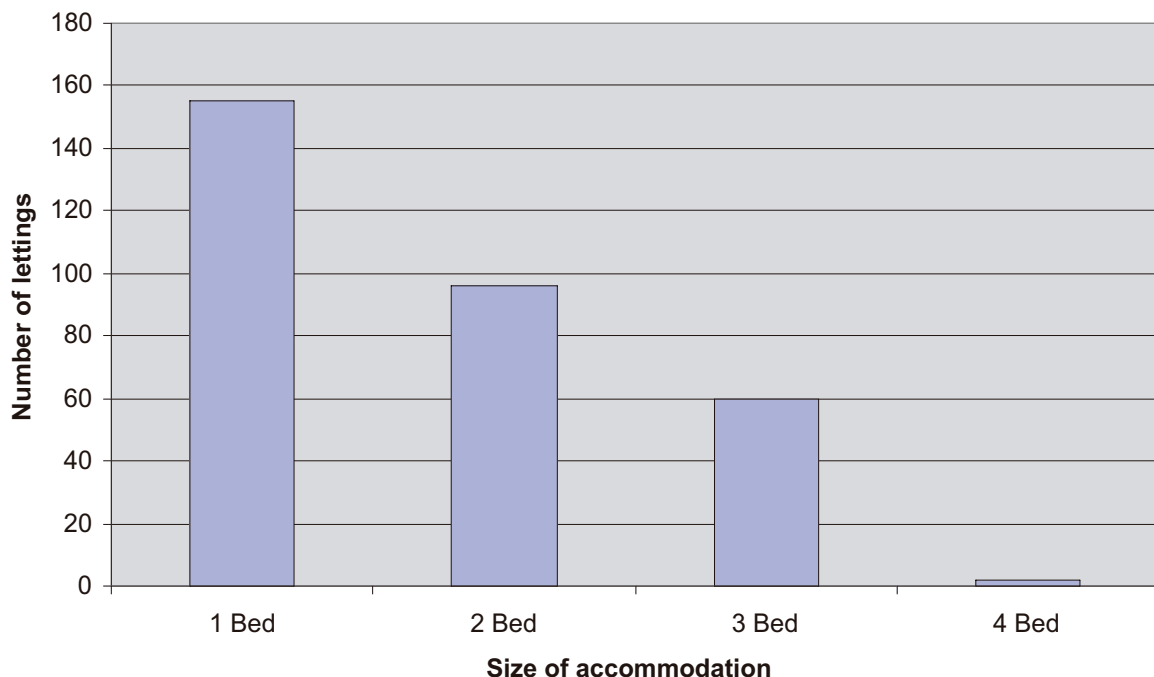
If you are interested in home ownership options or for further information on affordable housing please contact David Reavill, Development Officer, (01727) 819382, email: [d.reavill@stalbans.gov.uk](mailto:d.reavill@stalbans.gov.uk).

## Housing Options

 The Housing Department offers a Housing Options approach to people contacting the council for housing assistance. Housing Advisers provide information on the rent deposit scheme and private renting, home ownership options as well as applying for council and housing association accommodation.

In 2007/08 35 households were housed under the rent deposit scheme, 313 households were housed in rented accommodation, 245 in Council Housing and 68 in Housing Associations. The table shows the amount of accommodation let during the year together with the size of the property allocated.

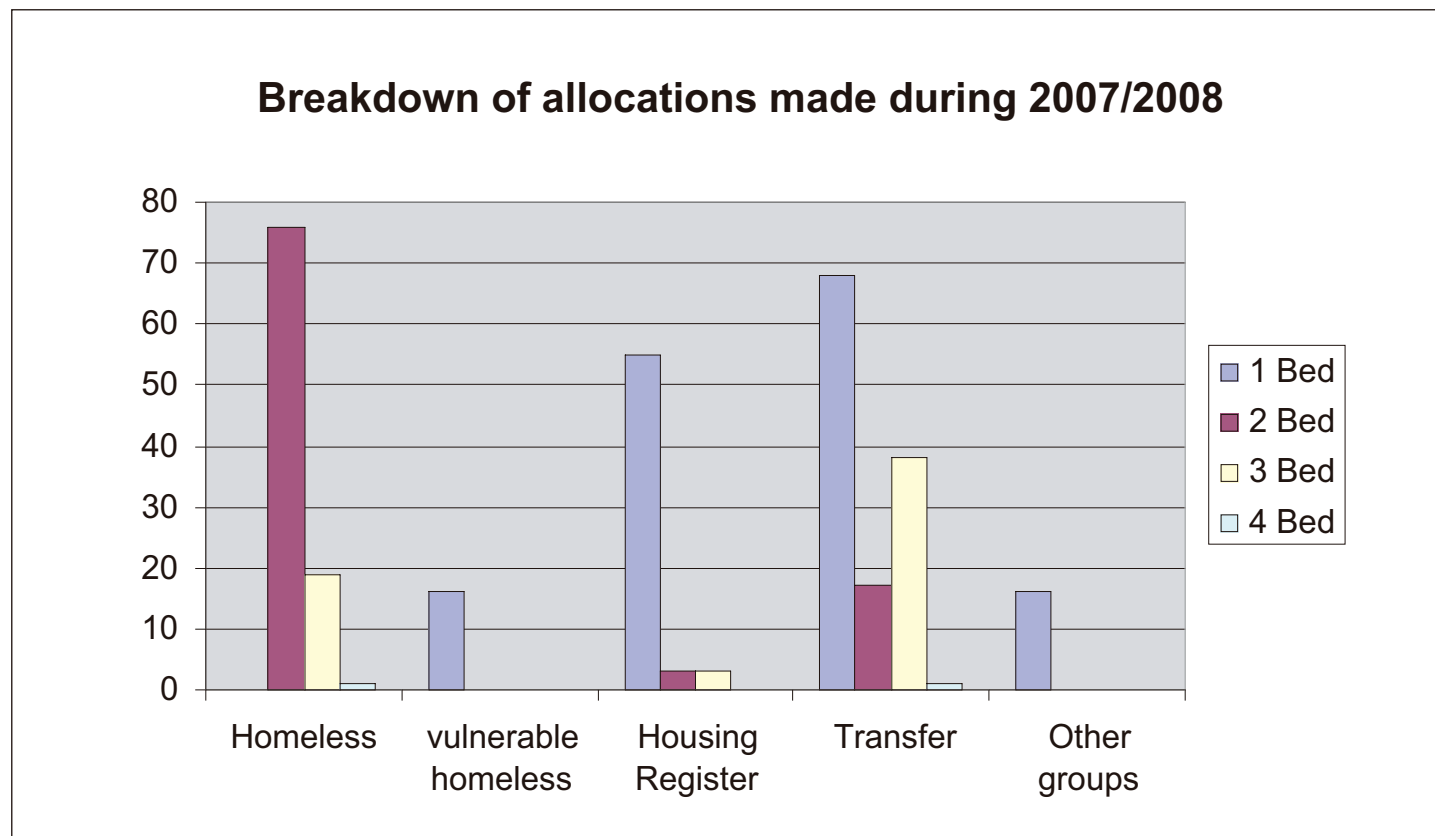
**Council and Housing Association lettings by property size**



At the end of March 2008 there were 1664 applicants on the Housing Register and 753 applicants on the Transfer List. There were 134 households accepted as Homeless by the Council during the year.

Of the 313 allocations - 112 were to Homeless applicants, 61 to Housing Register applicants, 124 to Transfer applicants and 16 to other groups (nominations from other agencies). The chart below shows a breakdown of allocations by property size and category of application.

The length of time that homeless families stay in hostel accommodation has been reduced to 4 weeks and we have not needed to use bed and breakfast accommodation at all this year.



### Choice Based Lettings

At the end of 2007 the Department of Communities and Local Government awarded Herts Choice Homes a grant of £127,500 to support the development of a choice based lettings scheme that will cover five local authority areas - St Albans, Three Rivers, Watford, Welwyn Hatfield and Hertsmere. The consortium was advised that their bid was considered to be sound and to be strong on support for vulnerable people.

The Government wants all local authorities to introduce choice based lettings by 2010 and Herts Choice Homes is programmed to go live in 2009. Choice based lettings schemes take a different approach to letting social housing from the traditional way of allocating housing via the waiting list. They allow applicants for social housing (and tenants who want to transfer) to apply for vacancies which are advertised (e.g. in a newsletter and on a website). More details of the scheme will follow and tenants will be consulted on the new allocations scheme which will be introduced as part of Choice Based Lettings.

### Homelessness Strategy


A new Homelessness Strategy for 2008 - 2013 is currently being compiled and is due for completion in July. A survey regarding homelessness was carried out in April and consultation on the draft strategy will be carried out in June. If you would like further information please contact [I.middleton@stalbens.gov.uk](mailto:I.middleton@stalbens.gov.uk).

# ASSET MANAOC

## Repairs, maintenance and major improvement works



Paola Munns

 I can hardly believe how much work comes through our small but extremely efficient responsive repairs team. Last year we received 46,471 telephone calls from tenants reporting repairs and raised 29,512 jobs with a customer satisfaction rating of 95%.

Looking to improve our service, this year we will be tendering a new schedule of rates contract and will invite tenants and leaseholders to attend focus groups to discuss how they would like the service to develop.

In order to improve our surveyors' efficiency we are going mobile, so don't be surprised if you see our surveyors on your patch with their laptops. The surveyors are also responsible for turning around void properties so that we can re-house people as quickly as possible. 254 void properties were returned to us in varying degrees of disrepair and the team have worked hard with our colleagues in the re-housing section to reduce the void turnaround times by one week from last year.

Updating you on the Eco House at Smallford, the family has now lived there for just over a year. Inevitably there were some teething problems which would be expected with a project of this kind. The family has been very helpful in assisting with the monitoring of the house and we shall be producing a report later on this year.

As a result of all the innovative work done at the Eco House, we are pleased to say that the Housing Department won a Gold in November 2007 at the Green Apple Environment awards presented by Dr David Bellamy at the Houses of Parliament.

On the next page you will see a photo of a project completed in October 2007 for the re-roofing, external wall insulation and solar panels at 18 houses on Marford Road in Wheathampstead. Residents here have reported that they use a lot less gas to heat their homes and benefit from free hot water during the summer.

We continue to improve the energy efficiency of your homes having now completed phase 7 of our cavity wall and loft insulation project in central St Albans. 26 homes had their cavities filled and 112 lofts were insulated last year. We have received funding from British Gas for the forthcoming year and phase 8 will commence this Autumn in Hazelwood Drive, Woodland Drive and Dellfield.

We have two flat roofing renewals projects planned for this Summer at Thirlestane and St Pauls Place. We shall be using the same products used at a successful scheme at Queens Court last year which also upgraded the energy efficiency of the roof. And those who missed the amazing new flat to pitch roofs installed at Riverside Road now have a second chance to catch this fascinating project as phase 2 on the last block there will also be carried out this Summer.

Now in the final year of our 5 year partnering contract for kitchens and bathrooms, 210 properties were completed last year and all properties in Redbourn will be completed by the end of the Summer this year.

Door entry systems are due to be installed at Northfield Road, Jubilee Court, Hill Close, Pickford Hill and Frobisher Road this year and there will be an option to have a video entry system.

# AGEMENT TEAM



*Marford Road, Wheathampstead*

We have now procured a new 3 year partnering contract for double glazed low energy windows and security doors, offering a great choice with the type and colour of doors to be installed. Properties in Cottonmill and Chiltern Road are due for upgrading this year. We will be recycling the old windows and doors where possible.

Electrical rewires are planned for East Lane, Riverside Road and Frobisher Road to include installation of smoke detectors and upgrading of security lighting to external parts.

Annual gas servicing of our boilers is a legal requirement and last year we serviced 99.75% of our boilers. However, we still had to take legal action against 4 residents who denied us access. The implications of not servicing your


boiler could be very dangerous to you and your family and we take this very seriously and would request you provide access. As a result of the servicing we are notified of boilers that are defective and these are then replaced with the latest highly efficient condensing boilers which will save you money on your heating bills. Last year 240 boilers were replaced and 2 new gas central heating systems were installed where previously none existed.

Our disabled adaptations service has been very oversubscribed this year which is leading to some delays for larger works. However, we completed 309 requests from tenants and constructed 2 extensions to allow tenants to remain in their homes despite their disabilities.

# Housing Management



*Joanne Turner*

 The Housing Management Service has continued to develop and identify new initiatives to help improve our tenant's quality of life and ability to enjoy their homes and local community.

Over the last year the major success has been the introduction of Estate Level Agreements. These agreements form the basis of a teamwork approach involving local residents, elected members and Housing staff, who are spending time meeting people in their own communities, walking around streets and estates to identify problems and work out ways of dealing with them.

Many of the problems identified are not housing related and where this occurs, management staff may look into the problem and find out who is the best person to deal with it or may advise the local residents how they can deal with problems themselves.

It is hoped that over the coming year as these agreements are consolidated and developed further, staff from other Council Departments will also join in.

Feedback so far from tenants has been very positive and a number say they prefer this "hands on" way of meeting staff rather than at the council offices or in a local community centre.

In Housing Management, staff spend a considerable amount of their time dealing with rent arrears and recovery of rent arrears. This may include very basic action such as establishing an agreement with a tenant to pay off rent plus a small amount each week to cover arrears, or it could involve Court action and possible eviction.

During 2007/8, we collected 98.27% of the rental income due and rent arrears amounted to 1.78% of annual rental income. Our service performs well in terms of rent collection when compared with other housing departments nationally.

Over the last year, on any one day, there are approximately 25% of our tenants in rent arrears. This could be for a few pounds or a £1,000 or more. Management staff intervene very early and, where tenants don't make payments or keep to agreements, a Notice of Seeking Possession will be served. Over the last year 450 Notices were served on tenants and 70 Court Orders were obtained for non payment of rent. Ultimately 11 tenants were evicted for rent arrears.

Evictions are always a last resort and staff do try to intervene to avoid having to evict anyone. There are a number of services which we use to try to prevent tenants being evicted and these include the Tenancy Support Service (provided in partnership with Hightown Praetorian and Churches HA) The Money Advice Service (Provided in partnership with CAB) and the Housing Benefit Visiting Officer service, part of whose job is dedicated to working with council tenants and ensuring they make correct claims for housing benefits. This officer will visit tenants at home to help complete forms or check information provided to support a claim.


Other initiatives include the review of Retirement Housing which has been ongoing for some time and pre consultation with tenants began in October 2007. There has been some significant feedback from tenants and local Councillors and staff are currently undertaking some further consultation on one particular scheme.

There are a number of initiatives planned for the coming year, these include an estate services monitoring system to monitor the work of caretakers out on estates. This has a facility whereby tenants and leaseholders will be able to check via the internet when the caretaker last visited and what services have been carried out on their estate – it is hoped this scheme will be up and running by the end of the Summer.

In addition, following feedback from tenants, the Tenant Incentive Scheme is under further review and it is hoped that we will have a scheme in place to reward those tenants who pay their rent regularly and who keep their properties in good condition.

Finally, during the Autumn, tenants will have the opportunity to give some feedback on the services we provide. The National Tenants Status Survey is to be carried out in St Albans toward the end of September and 10% of our tenants will be contacted and asked to complete a postal survey giving feedback on the service they receive from the Council as landlord. If you do receive a survey then please do complete it and return it promptly. The survey will be carried out independently of the Council and we will not see individual responses or be told who has responded to any of the questions in the survey.

# Tenant Participation Tenant Participation Tenant Participation

 As always, the highlight in Tenant Participation is the annual Residents Conference and our fifth conference held at Marlborough School in November 2007 was without doubt the best to date. Over 120 tenants attended to enjoy the day with a very good attendance from our Asian community. The guest speakers this year were the Rt. Hon Baroness Uddin and TV presenter Roni Mirza both giving a highly motivating speech on community involvement.

2007 saw the formation of several new tenants groups, The Grounds Maintenance Review Panel, St. Albans Mystery Shoppers and a new working party to review the fourth edition of the Tenants Compact.

The Grounds Maintenance Review Panel, initiated by active tenants, was set up to look at the performance of grounds maintenance on housing land and consists of over 20 tenants and leaseholders from across the district. The Panel meet quarterly with senior staff from John

O'Conner's and officers from the Council who monitor the work of John O'Connors' ground force team.

St Albans Mystery Shoppers are a team of tenants set up to check and monitor tenant satisfaction with the services received from Housing Services. Their findings and recommendations of the group will help improve standards and performance within the department.

Work is well under way for this year's main tenant participation event and in place of the usual conference, Housing will be holding an 'event week'. Event week will consist of a series of half day informal 'drop ins' across the district. Tenants can attend any of the advertised events to suit their busy schedule. These will be held weekday mornings, afternoon and a Saturday. Some events will have children friendly activities. Event week is designed to work on a one to one basis giving tenants the opportunity to meet and speak to officers and other representatives from other local services (eg Police, Fire Safety, Shelter and more).

We welcome your comments on this edition of Housing Services Annual Report.

Would you like more information? If so, about which area of the Housing Service?  
Please send in your views and suggestions for future reports.

You can contact can us on 01727 819494 or 01727 819411 or

by Freepost No. SB234  
City and District St. Albans, Housing Services, District Council Offices,  
Civic Centre, St Peters Street, St Albans, Herts AL1 3 BR

This report can be obtained in alternative formats, e.g. in braille, large print, and on audio tape by contacting the Council on telephone: 01727 819494 or 819411.