



# **THAME AND DISTRICT HOUSING ASSOCIATION**

## **Business Plan**

**2023 - 2028**

## HISTORY

Thame and District Housing was formed in 1964 by a group of local business people to provide low cost accommodation for the less well off elderly population of Thame and the surrounding area. The Association is incorporated as a Cooperative and Community Benefit Society number MS16683R and is registered with the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), number L1537.



The first development was at Croft Court with the construction of eight bed-sit flats. These bed-sits were developed with the assistance of Thame Town (then Urban District) Council.

It was common practice, prior to the formation by the government of The Housing Corporation (a predecessor of the RSH), for the association to work with the local or district councils in developing sites. No further construction other than refurbishment has been carried out on this site and it is now recognised that bed-sits are not a satisfactory solution for the elderly at the current time.

1968 saw the first development outside Thame, at Anstey Court, Waddesdon, which was carried out in conjunction with Aylesbury Vale District Council. This first phase consisted of ten one bedroom flats, a warden's flat, common



room and guest room and was on the outskirts of the village which made the availability of land adjoining the site much more accessible. The disadvantage of this site is the distance from a

reasonable shopping centre and town facilities which the elderly might require. However the site has always proved popular and this led to further expansion of the site at a later date.

The first building at Pearce Court, which is now the largest development, began in 1977 with the construction of 13 one bedroom flats and 6 bed-sits together with a Warden's flat. This was the first time the association had worked with South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) but proved successful as a development at Playford Court in Thame followed in 1979 consisting of 8 one bed flats. A further four one bedroom flats were added at Playford Court in 1991, these being funded from our own resources.



With Housing Corporation funding the association then proceeded to build its biggest venture as an addition to Pearce Court. This was to add thirty two, one bedroom flats giving a total of forty six flats and six bed sits on the one site, at the same time a small office section was added so that the administration

staff were also on this major site. This site has proved to be very popular as shopping, banks, transport links and other local facilities are within easy reach, approximately 300 yards away.

Twelve one bedroom flats and a new common room were added to Anstey Court in 1987 again with the help of the Housing Corporation. The block containing the warden's flat and small common room and guest room was converted to a new two



bedroom warden's flat and another rental flat. The site at Anstey Court was extended in 1991/92 with the purchase of an adjoining plot of land for which we gained planning permission to build 12 flats. This plot was then sold to Fairhive housing association, as we were concerned about the issues of having too many flats in this small village with limited



facilities, and overstretching ourselves financially during the build. Fairhive built 12 flats for older people during 2021-2023.

In 2007 Summersbee Court was completed, comprising 14 two bedrooled leasehold flats. The flats sit on land where an army and air force cadet building stood.

Negotiations enabled us to reach agreement to demolish their old and run-down building and provide a new cadet facility. The cadet building is at one end of Summersbee Court, by the entrance to the site.



In March 2007 a neighbouring semi-detached property came to market and was purchased by the association, using its cash reserves, with a view to, purchasing the adjoining property in the future. The two houses sit in the middle of a run of our properties along Windmill Road and ultimately we plan to develop them. In the meantime the house is let on an assured shorthold tenancy.

In 2018, a former religious building next to the site of Pearce Court became available and was purchased by the Association. Following delays due to the pandemic, we successfully gained planning permission and funding from Homes England and South Oxfordshire District Council, and developed 3 new flats within the former religious building (thus reducing environmental harm by not demolishing it) and will build 2 new flats in the former car park, fronting up to the road. All 5 flats will be powered by renewable energy.

All properties were the subject of a stock condition survey in 2014 and the proposals were fed into our budgets for the coming years to ensure our stock remains at the highest standard. We will undertake a new stock condition survey in 2024.

## **LOCATIONS**

### **Croft Court**

Croft Court consists of one block of eight bed sits with limited parking towards the end of Thame High Street. Bedsits are not preferable accommodation to many people, and we reviewed the potential of re-developing the site totally or converting these into 1 bed flats. However, for various planning and

practical reasons, this was not viable, and in 2020 we decided to refurbish these flats.

This refurbishment was completed in 2022 and the properties are now in much better condition and more attractive. Letting them does not usually cause a problem, though we are aware that the long term future of such accommodation is questionable. For the life of the business plan, we expect the scheme to be an ongoing and viable operation.

### **Playford Court**

Playford Court is situated in central Thame, just behind the High Street. The scheme is in good condition and was the site of our first new digital telecare system to comply with the changes to the national telephone network.

### **Anstey Court**

Anstey Court is situated in Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire. Facilities within the village are limited, as is public transport, although interest from applicants in the scheme remains strong.

Planning applications have been put to the local authority for several hundred houses on the fields behind Anstey Court although to date none has progressed.

Fairhive have built twelve one bed flats for older people on land we sold them a few years ago and these are also called 'Anstey Court', albeit managed by Fairhive.

We refurbished two flats at the entrance to the scheme in 2022/3 which needed significant structural work to make them suitable for older people. These are now fully occupied. The lift in the main block at Anstey Court is getting towards the end of its useful life and will need to be replaced in the next few years.

### **Pearce Court**

Pearce Court is a couple of hundred yards from Thame High Street and is in an ideal location, with easy access to shops, council offices, library, and transport, as well as being the central site for the Housing Association.

With the five new flats being built currently, the scheme will have 57 flats, by far our largest scheme. A new fire alarm system was fitted in 2021, and we will install a new telecare system in 2023. Once that is complete, a number of the common areas will need to be repainted, which we will do gradually, as they are quite extensive.

### **Summersbee Court**

Summersbee Court was built in 2007 and consists of fourteen leasehold flats, each with two bedrooms. It is on the same site as Pearce Court. In order to build these flats the association agreed to provide the local army and air

cadets with a new building thus enabling the block to be built on land where the cadet building had previously stood. The cadet building adjoins Summersbee Court. The Association provides a management service to the scheme, and the flats are sold and bought on the open market.

### **Stock Condition**

The annual contribution to the maintenance of the present stock based on the stock survey report completed in 2014 was projected at £250k per annum, however much of the work was front loaded and there is consequently a reduction in the budget going forward. There are always variations year by year depending on demand and urgency. Wherever possible we undertake major works when flats are empty, between lettings.

We will undertake a new stock condition survey in 2024 to establish our maintenance and accompanying financial plan for future years.

Our overall stock condition is good, with all meeting Decent Homes standards (though this standard is likely to be raised following a current government review) and most being EPC C or above. We have reviewed those flats not meeting EPC C and decided it was not economical to apply for government funding for this work. The majority of the issues in this area are at Croft Court, our oldest property and, whilst it has recently been refurbished, the property is still made up of bedsits, and the long term future of this property will be periodically reviewed.

We are gradually updating our heating systems to more efficient systems and enabling them to be more easily upgraded to zero carbon emissions systems in due course. Other than our newly developed five flats, we have not implemented non-gas fired systems elsewhere as of yet. We await further certainty on their effectiveness with our client group and the ability to service them.

We are aware that water pipes and systems in many of our schemes are increasingly problematic, and we will plan works on these as part of the new planned programme following the upcoming stock condition survey.

During 2022 we completed refurbishment of Croft Court and in 2023 the refurbishment of 23 and 24 Anstey Court, a standalone block of two flats at Anstey Court. Both these projects had necessitated holding properties void for some time.

### **Health and Safety**

The requirements and issues around health and safety, including fire safety, and the requisite assurance of compliance have increased exponentially over recent years. We have introduced a range of communication, mobile working and recording systems to aid our performance in this area.

We retain consultants for advice in the areas of fire safety, health and safety and internal audit, and retain contractors to advise and perform duties in relation to our water safety (legionella testing etc.), telecare alarms systems, fire alarms and lifts.

In 2022 we completed installation of a complete new fire detection system at Pearce and Summersbee Courts, installed a new, digital enabled telecare system at Pearce Court and have our second scheduled installation for Pearce Court in 2024.

We retain the services of PCMS consulting for advice on building construction, refurbishment and general building safety issues.

Our staff inspect all properties at least three times a year when we test the telecare alarm systems and check the general condition of all properties. Our water testing specialists visit monthly and test samples of flats, ensuring they visit all at least quarterly and our own maintenance team carry out the majority of responsive repairs, and so visit properties regularly. These activities, combined with our quarterly formal Health and Safety inspections of all communal areas means we have a high level of knowledge and insight into our property condition and the living environment of our residents.

We need to integrate our information more fully, ensure it is electronically stored and easily accessible off site as well as on.

### **Market information**

In Thame demand is high and flats do not remain void for long. The local authority nominates people for tenancies and there are often several people bidding for one property. Our own waiting list provides a further supply of potential tenants and void losses are low. Whilst Waddesdon is more remote and with less facilities in the area, we have found that we are able to let these flats swiftly too, and there is no lack of demand.

With the refurbishment of the bedsits at Croft Court, they are now much more attractive. We also have a small number of bedsits at Pearce court. Bedsits at both sites are reasonably popular, but always more difficult to let than our one bed flats, and we will carry out periodic reviews of these flats and their future viability.

Demand for leasehold sheltered housing is also high and many people contact the association directly seeking such housing. These interested parties are referred to local estate agents who handle any sales. Under the terms of the lease all prospective occupants must be approved by the association.

### **DEVELOPMENT**

In November 2018 the association purchased the former religious hall adjacent to Pearce Court. This was a unique opportunity and with the help of a loan from our bankers the association was able to secure the property.

Planning permission was subsequently gained and we have now converted the former hall into three flats, and will build two new flats at the front of the site adjoining 21-24 Pearce Court, in the former hall car park.

We were fortunate in gaining funding from both Homes England and South Oxfordshire District Council to undertake this. These flats will have carbon neutral heating systems.

### **30 Windmill Road**

This two bedroomed semi-detached house was purchased as an investment, pending the future purchase of the adjoining property. The adjoining house is owned by South Oxfordshire Housing Association (SOHA) who have indicated their willingness to sell the property to us in the past, but not while the current tenant is in situ. They have indicated that they would offer us first refusal on the property, and let us know should it become vacant. In the meantime number 30 is let on a market tenancy.

## **FINANCE**

The Association has ample financial reserves, given its size, though recent years have led to more modest surpluses than we would like, mainly due to high maintenance costs. With the completion of the development of the five new flats and the completion of our long term refurbishments at Croft Court and Anstey Court we will be in receipt of increased rent income over the coming years. This should make our general financial situation more robust, though our ongoing need to update heating and water systems means that the benefit of this may take a few years to materialise.

When the current development is complete, and we have received the full grants from Homes England and SODC, we will be able to pay off the CAF loan (thus reducing our expenditure on repayment and interest costs, which have increased significantly since the loan was drawn down). This will also increase our reserves as the grants will replenish funds used through the land purchase, planning and build process.

As a small Association, we are aware of the relative volatility of our finances in light of the issues of managing social housing property built around 50 years ago alongside increasingly stringent and complex requirements around safety and compliance.

We maintain multiple bank accounts with different providers to mitigate the risk and impact of bank failure and fraud and maximise interest rate returns.

### **Borrowing and Property charges**

CAF Bank has a charge over Playford Court with respect to the loan for the purchase of 25 Windmill Road. This is steadily being paid off, though with increasing interest rates, is costing more to service. Once we have completed the development of the five new flats and no longer have a need for such a



high level of working capital, we will repay the loan early as we should have sufficient funds to do this.

## **FUTURE**

Our first priority is to successfully complete the current development of five new flats and embed these into our services and systems, which should be complete in 2024.

The aims of the Association have not changed since it was first founded and this remains the same for the foreseeable future. The difference in today's economic and political climate is that there are many older people in desperate need of housing but not necessarily in need of sheltered housing. Increasingly nominations from the local authorities are for people eligible by age for our schemes but having little or no need of support in the short term.

However an increasing number of older people find themselves isolated and lonely as life expectancy increases, and wish to have accommodation where many of the day to day maintenance and running issues can be dealt with by someone else and have the knowledge there is someone 'keeping an eye on them'. We also find that the needs of many residents are more around claiming and maintaining their welfare benefits and managing finance than general welfare, and so our scheme managers need to be fully trained in these areas.

We will need to review aspects of our services, such as the weekly meals and morning welfare checks to see if these are still the best use of our resources, or whether technology can undertake some of these tasks more efficiently. The majority of our residents do not use these services, though a significant minority need, want and value these services greatly. Delivering an efficient service to balance these demands will involve further evaluation of our direction.

We have started the upgrade of our telecare to cope with the digital changeover by BT. Once complete, and when the digital systems are enabled by BT, we may have further opportunities to expand the type of facilities and services we can offer to residents, and increase efficiency.

In due course, we would hope to utilise 30 Windmill Road and the neighbouring property to enable a further small expansion of around 4 flats at Pearce Court and possibly a small workshop for our grounds maintenance team.

With our aging stock we expect the 2024 stock condition survey to be crucial to guiding us in our maintenance for the coming years, and our cashflow planning. Directly influencing this is also the move towards carbon neutral and associated disruption and expenditure this entails. The organisation signed up to 'COP Thame' as a commitment to decreasing our carbon use, but the

demands on a relatively small organisation are high in terms of financial and personnel and expertise resources.

Increasing regulation in the Registered Provider sector following issues such as the Grenfell fire, and poor service by some RP's in the area of mould and damp control and customer service mean that this aspect of our service consumes more resources. Around all this increasing regulation is a great deal of uncertainty as legislation is muted but taking significant time to be passed, or is then changed along the way. Some of this legislation does not apply fully (or applies in a different way) to small RP's (those below 1000 units such as ourselves) and this is not always fully agreed or explained during this process. Fortunately, our size means we can know our properties well, inspect them regularly and know our residents personally. However, we do need to improve our formal recording of property issues and ensure this is maintained across a range of compliance areas.