

**Notes of the Meeting of the Tenant Operational Group held on 14 October 2019 at 11am in the Conference Room, Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton**

**Present:** Mr W Hobson, Mr J Beaman, Mr R Fenge, Ms S Betts, Ms M Bird, Mr M Halliday, Ms G Grehan, Ms A Heath

**Officers:** Christine Fraser (Head of Performance and Governance), Stephen Boland (Housing Specialist), Fiona Davis (Housing Specialist), Julie Sabey (Case Manager Lead), Paul Morgan (Manager – Landlord Health and Safety compliance), Simon Lewis (Head of Customer), Tracey Meadows (Governance and Democracy Case Manager)

(The meeting commenced at 11am)

**1. Changes to processes for tenants (rent collection, arrears recovery) (S. Lewis)**

The Powerpoint presentation presented by The Head of Customer, Simon Lewis provided an overview to the group on “Lean” thinking in Arrears Management for our tenants. We needed to look at what we were doing now to utilise a “lean” approach. This would cut out the process waste which was not adding value to services from the point of view of the customer. The benefits would mean that tenants had more certainty and lower housing debt as the rent would be collected in advance resulting in less or no evictions. These major changes will be taking place 31 March 2020.

During the discussion of this presentation the following comments were made by the board (responses are in italic);

- If a tenant has payments and it alters, will the information be relayed to the rent department? We do recognise that we have had all these different hand offs and stuff is getting lost and not working effectively. A new system of approach where process will be put in place so that we are clear when information comes in we know who is holding and auctioning that information in a timely manner, which I don't think that we have always been doing. This emphasises that this processes needs modernisation and a review;
- Concerns that rent has been taken out of a resident's bank account but not being paid to the Council. This scared an 80 year old tenant in sheltered housing; this is why we are trying to lean the process. There has probably been a hic up with the Academy prompt letters, unless I know the case I cannot look into it. Daily we are looking at problems and trying to put them right. We will continually improve on this;
- The number of tenants in arrears is one in four, we need to jump on it a lot quicker. We are not in a strong place so that is why we need to do something different here;
- Have we any evidence that this is tenants that have moved onto Universal Credit? We have evidence that year on year since this was implemented tenants arrears had worsened. What is interesting is that when we look at homes in Sedgemoor who introduced this despite Universal Credit ramping up they had managed to flat line and managed to reduce their arrears. The trend across the country is that as Universal Credit ramps up so does tenant arrears. We have set a target to address our arrears from £700,000 down to £60,000 by the end of this financial year and the following year will be even better with the end goal of the average arrears being far lower for a tenant and the number of tenants that have arrears are lower and also evictions start to decline rapidly;

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- Would it be possible to know who the three new officers are on our patch? We are going to have local surgeries where the three officer will be present, they may not be present together. We are then going to send out flyers and leaflets to say these are your three officers. One will be responsible for arrears management, one for tenancy and one is for tenancy sustainment so if people need that extra bit of help to sustain their tenancy then that is the person that they can contact;
- It has been 7 months and tenants still do not know who is doing what no one has told residents, tenants anything. People don't know who is doing what job, it's a disgrace;

**2. Housing team structure, including Supported Housing service and priorities (F. Davies/J. Sabey)**

The Powerpoint presentation presented by the Housing Specialist Fiona Davies provided an overview to the group on the Housing Team structure and included Supported Housing service and priorities. Somerset West and Taunton Council had gone through the transformation process and the offer of sheltered accommodation remained the same. Some staff structures had changed, Lettings, Arrears, Tenancy Sustainment, Anti-Social Behaviour Case Managers) and some actions are now done by different departments. (Meeting rooms, estate checks H&S) Somerset County Council were now using Community Connect/Village Agents and 2<sup>nd</sup> step to provide some housing related support. People can self-refer, through the 'Talking cares' and also be referred by Somerset West and Taunton Council staff. More services and help was available online, so tenants/residents could report repairs, concerns and request help, 24/7.

During the discussion of this presentation the following comments were made by the board members (replies are in italic)

- Would the Welfare Officer still be in the new structure? This is now the Tenancy Sustainment Officer who will be in the new structure. If you are in sheltered housing and wanted a weekly/ monthly visit this will be her role; this needs to be relayed to the tenants as we have been told that you are no longer going to provide this service as some people have been let down by her; we meet on a weekly basis and we go through their roles, as this is new roles for the Officers, they do know that this is a task for them. We still need to do work on the language, making sure that the Customer Champions put through to the correct department;
- We paid £12 per week extra for a general needs person, why are we paying for something that we are not getting? All I can do is apologise. We have tried to make it clear that within their roles their responsibilities was to continue visit vulnerable elderly customers. Now that I am hearing it from a customer I will take that up with that Officer. Emails were also sent from the Deane Helpline that they had to monitor;
- How would the office know if a tenant was vulnerable if they do not visit? Most sheltered housing has the piper system and you would just phone through; not everybody would do this, if you are vulnerable and do not know who you are phoning will not phone. Trust is built when you know the person on the end of the phone as you have dealt with then for a while. You have said that tenants should have a voice, well we are giving you a voice, we are saying this is what we want so what are you going to do to provide that, we were not asked about these changes, you just dumped them on us; Somerset County Council sent everyone letters, they also went around meeting halls, everyone had a voice then to speak to SCC who withdrew monies for sheltered housing; our contract was not with SCC, I don't care whether they give you money or not, what I care about is my contract with you; in April 2016 the contract

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and base line services were set in place and approved was by the Council. All support that was funded by SCC has ceased, this is why you are seeing a different service; the tenants saw this coming and no one on this Council took any notice of our concerns; from next month the offices will be available through coffee mornings or just meeting in the meeting halls to build up trust;

- Why can't you bring back the local wardens to bring back the trust between the people and the people in the Council? If the phones are down we cannot contact anyone to tell them about a vulnerable tenant; the piper line generally does work very well;
- When will the roofs be repaired in Derby Way? *This will be followed up and reported back to the group;*
- Concerns that the codes to the key safe was so well known that people were using the facilities;
- Concerns that the Localities Officers would not turn up for the planned monthly visits; myself and Julie will do checks to make sure that this is happening and to get your feedback;
- Who will be dealing with maintenance issues regarding windows and door frames as contracts have been handed down and down to save money and the workmanship is appalling; This will be raised with the Localities team;

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr Fran Smith indicated that she was hearing a few comments from tenants that she surprised her. She stated that tenants needed to realise that the Council was different from what we had for the previous 10 years and the changes that had been implemented in the previous couple of years and had not worked as well as the administration had hoped. I hope that moving forward things will sort themselves out, tenants will have to be patient with us as it has only been 5 months since the new Council. There has been a huge cut in resources a huge cut in funding and we are trying our best to move forward not bring it back to how it was before because I don't think we will be able to sustain that, moving forward was what we wanted to achieve. I really want to be supportive of tenants and Council homes. I was also shocked at the amount of evictions that were coming forward and the reasons behind that. Hopefully this will not happen in the future, so I am hoping that you will be supportive in the new ways of working and if we can get more money back into the Council then that enables us to provide more services for you. My goal is also to build far more social homes, so that is a positive. Please contact Officers if you have other issues to raise.

## **5. Issues around clear hallways (P. Morgan)**

The interim compliance Manager updated the group on the clear hallways policy that was drive by the Local Fire Authority. This policy was to stop residents from storing personal items in communal hallways which could be combustible or cause them to slip or trip whilst they were attending.

Two new Building Safety Managers would be recruited to be visible to the residents and to police the clear hallway policy. They would also test the fire alarm and emergency lighting systems on a regular basis.

During the discussion the following points were raised; responses in italic

- You need to be consistent on this as it varies in different areas. You need to let everyone know and make sure that it is complied with;

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- Our previous Housing Supported Housing Office used to perform these checks once a month;
- Concerns that tenants combustible recycling boxes were stored underneath the stairwells as there was no other storage areas. This had been reported but nothing was being done about it; as officers were visiting properties this would be picked up;
- Specialist storage for Mobility Scooters was also needed; a Policy on Mobility Scooters was needed as these were highly combustible.

The meeting ended 12:35pm