



Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 23rd September 2024

Directorate Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Communities

Report Authors: Heads of Service

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group (TSG) on work being undertaken and progress made by the Housing Directorate since the last TSG meeting in July 2024

2. Recommendations

The Tenants' Strategic Group is asked to note this report and are invited to ask questions.

3. Background and Full details of the Report

HRA Growth and Business Function

- The Service continues to work hard to recruit and populate the structures. However, there remains quite a few vacancies in the service leading to pressures on staff and additional work by managers progressing recruitments. We have seen several resignations from the service at a senior level which the service is working hard to replace. The Council's job evaluation process is also incomplete for several posts including the HRA business function.
- Demolition is nearing completion for Phase B and Ci at North Taunton Woolaway Project. The Council have appointed Classic Builders as the main contractor who will take possession of the site on 30th September 2024.
- Demolition at Wordsworth Drive/Coleridge Crescent is substantially complete. This site will then be landscaped and retained by the HRA as a future development site when budget is available, estimated 2026/2027 to enable planning and tender to be completed.
- At Seaward Way/Rainbow Way, the first 6 houses are now completed and advertised on Homefinder. Allocations are imminent and move ins start in the next couple of weeks. This will be followed in batches with the other 15 houses, finishing with the two chalet bungalows with disabled ground floor facilities. The apartment blocks will follow, and the whole scheme is programmed to be completed by December 2024. Another open event is planned, to view a completed apartment, subject to safe access being available at a suitable time. At the previous open house event over 100 residents attended. The properties are net zero, EPC A rated and with new technology to monitor the energy performance of the homes.
- The scheme at Oxford Inn is now in contract with Classic Builders. The scheme is anticipated to start with demolition of the existing buildings beginning on September the 19th. Construction is likely to take 14 months to complete.
- 24 units of modular construction are planned. The planning process will require phosphate and biodiversity net gain mitigation plans. These issues are causing challenges for developers progressing schemes including the HRA. The scheme also has a challenge in relation to funding.

Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- There is ongoing recruitment for the trades area to ensure we continue to meet target completion dates. Also, within the management team we are still undergoing recruitment for a Repairs Surveyor and a Maintenance Manager. The vacancy for the Maintenance Manager is a challenge and we have had one failed recruitment round already. We are now investigating options for putting in place interim agency provisions, as well as consideration of alternative permanent recruitment mechanisms.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, July 2024, demonstrates on target performance for both emergency responsive repairs (100%) and non-emergency responsive repairs (96%).

- Implementation of the tasks within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP) are being hampered by the recent loss of key staff, particularly the Maintenance Manager, as noted above.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to successfully meet our Lettable Standard. Procurement activities for external contractor support for void repairs are ongoing, with engaged tenants supporting the process.
- Our materials supply chain process continues to operate well, with regular review of the Core list of supplies. The delivery of further logistical efficiencies is being progressed.

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken. These include gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works, fire safety checks, lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works, and radon monitoring.
- Our Electrical Inspection testing programme continues as a focussed area of activity, with the latest data, July 2024, showing 96.17%. It should be noted that, as each month ends, there are more properties that would fall into non-compliance if testing (and any necessary works being undertaken) are not completed. These properties vary in number each month and therefore a 'straight line' increase in compliance will not be seen. Nevertheless, the ongoing programme of consumer unit replacements and contractor switches will facilitate an improvement in compliance during the financial year (see Capital Programme section below for further details).
- Procurement exercises for fire doors (currently out to tender), compartmentalisation, and fire safety works (following Fire Risk Assessment recommended actions) are being undertaken.
- Weekly compliance meetings, together with monthly reports to the Executive team, are ongoing to carefully monitor and manage housing property safety.
- We are recruiting for several vacant roles within the Property Safety Compliance team, including the Compliance Manager and specialist roles. Again, following one failed recruitment round, we are now investigating options for putting in place interim agency provisions, as well as consideration of alternative permanent recruitment mechanisms.

Capital Programme

- Our Capital Programme team continues to deliver our electrical inspection testing programme (including both consumer unit replacement and contractor switches) using external contractors.
- The 2024/25 programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements is also progressing well, with the remaining two contractors meeting the required programme.
- We have a roofing programme on site which is progressing well.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating our Retrofit aspiration.

- We are recruiting for vacant roles within the Capital Programme team, including for Contract Managers. We have recently successfully recruited two permanent Resident Liaison Officers.

Asset Management

- We have undertaken an inspection review of our properties that potentially contain Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC). Only one block has been identified requiring further investigations and this is being undertaken by a specialist consultant.
- The service continues to carry out energy surveys which are required to understand pathways to Zero Carbon and which low energy funding regime properties are best placed in. These surveys are influencing the capital investment programme.
- The annual review of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and 30-year investment plan is underway.
- We are undertaking option appraisals for potential disposal of existing properties in the HRA which no longer serve as appropriate homes for our tenants.
- Stock condition surveys, and validation surveys (i.e. checking that works identified for programmes of replacement in the near future require the works to be undertaken now) are progressing, which enable us to prioritise those most in need of upgrading, smooth the programmes to improve our financial planning, reduce the number of remedial repairs required and meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS).
- We are recruiting for several vacant roles within the Asset Management team, including the Asset Manager. We have successfully recruited to the Housing Data Analyst role.

Income and Tenancy Management Team

Shelter and extra care housing

- Internal officer discussions continue to be developed in response to change proposals that will affect the delivery of extra care support services. From April 2025 the current change proposals will see housing related support services currently delivered by Wayahead Care, being delivered directly by Somerset Council's in-house landlord service. Personal care will continue to be provided by Wayahead Care.
- Officers continue to work closely with members of the Tenants' Action Group and have recently benefited from an award of grant funding at Wille Gill Court for a garden project.
- Officers within the team continue to carry out a range of daily tasks for example: casework; estate as well as flat block inspections; individual supported housing reviews; commencing and ending tenancies; investigating

low level anti-social behaviour complaints; assessing the need for adaptations within a property. They also respond to daily welfare concerns requested by Somerset Lifeline where a well-being concern has been flagged.

Lettings

- Rainbow Way, Minehead - The team have now advertised on Homefinder Somerset a total 8 new build houses that they have received 'handover notice' for. Interest in the houses from applicants has been strong with arrangements now made for the shortlisted applicants to undertake an internal viewing. The team expect more properties on this new build housing scheme to be 'handed over' during September 2024.
- Over the last 3 weeks officers have reported a reduction in the number of new tenancy terminations being received i.e. A total of 6 tenancy terminations during the last 3-week period (normally the team would expect to receive an average of up to 8 or 9 per week). Tenancy terminations are monitored weekly.
- Over recent weeks officers have reported more than usual interest from tenants wanting to downsize to a smaller property. Some of the reasons given by tenants are a need to reduce their spend on 'running their home' and needing their accommodation to be all on one level because of, for example, difficulties with climbing stairs.

Income

- As Universal Credit Managed Migration continues to roll out, both the Debt and Benefit and the Rent Recovery Officers are continuing to support our tenants with this change and helping them to understand their new benefits.
- The Debt and Benefit Officers are dealing with a few complex cases which can be very time consuming.
- The Voicescape system which we implemented earlier this year, is working well for the team, and helping them to contact tenants and has a positive impact on tenants making payments on their rent accounts. On our last reporting period, 46% of tenants transferred straight through to an Officer, 71% listened to the message and out of that 58% then connected back to us.

Tenancy Management

- As we move into autumn, we can now reflect that this summer was by far quieter than the previous one, although we had a few serious ASB incidents; there was no known issues with youths/gangs which we had previously experienced in the Halcon/Priorswood area.
- The team are now preparing for the first viewings and the letting of our new development in Minehead, West Somerset. The viewings are being scheduled in for mid-September with handovers taking place soon after. The mix of properties are 2, 3 and 4 bedroomed houses (which include 3 three storey

houses). As the properties are out of our normal catchment area, we have undertaken home visits to really get to the know the tenants before the they move in. These home visits have gone well.

- Estates have worked with colleagues to see the completion of a major project to enhance parking provision in Leycroft Grove area, with new recycling stations throughout. Further improvements are planned over the next few months, to work with the Tenants Action Group to improve landscaping.
- Over the last few months, we have had to undertake several urgent temporary moves, for either damp/mould, extensive repairs or ASB reasons. This is really challenging for tenants and their families and can be very time consuming for staff.

Housing Performance Team

Tenant Engagement

- Supporting and enabling the work of the Tenants Strategic Group (TSG) and Tenants' Action Group (TAG) and the subgroups is a key focus for our team. We have agreed a comprehensive training plan for TSG group members and membership of ARCH (Association of Retained Council Housing) as well as TPAS. Our engaged tenants have already attended 10 training sessions, and a new training plan will be put in place for the new Tenants Strategic Group.
- Our new TSG group had their first meeting on 29th July 2024.
- The Tenants Action Group meet regularly to scrutinise capital programme communication. 2 members of the group are attending a TPAS scrutiny course to help them with this project.
- A couple of tenants will be attending the ARCH conference in October.
- We have started working with our procured contractors to monitor and spend the social value elements of the contracts. The Social Fund group had their first meeting in August, they have already successfully spent some of the Social Fund money.
- Our engaged tenants attended a face-to-face TPAS training session about Resident Building Safety, the new group also met for the first time to agree the Terms of Reference.
- There were 8 tenant engagement activities in August and 8 in September 2024.

Complaint Handling and Performance

- Complaint handling response times have declined over the past quarter. We are currently achieving a third quartile performance rate benchmarked against our sector peers. We know this is because resource within the service areas continues to be a challenge. We are consequently reviewing how the service approaches complaint investigation and handling and will be able to provide a

further update on how we are going to remedy this and provide a better service in due course.

- In the meantime, where we need longer to investigate and respond to a complaint, we are ensuring we communicate with our residents to manage their expectations and be transparent in our complaint handling. Details for the Housing Ombudsman are provided at all stages of the complaints process.
- We are awaiting determinations on four complaints escalated to the Housing Ombudsman since January 2024. We will update TSG with outcomes of these determinations when we have them.
- We are working on a new Performance Scorecard for the service which better aligns with the performance data returns we submit annually to the Housing Regulator and Housemark. This will help us be able to assess where we sit amongst our peers and create better data to be able to bring stronger reporting of the department's performance to TSG and our residents in the future.
- We have started to develop a Housing Performance page on the council's website where we can publish our performance data and annual returns statistics.

Housing Comms

- Tour videos of new builds at Rainbow Way have been filmed and will be launched shortly.
- Videos and associated promotional materials completed for sheltered schemes at Kilkenny and Lodge close.
- The Great Somerset Grow-off was a success and, funding allowing, should be improved next year.

.4. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

5. Are there any Finance / Resource, Legal implications directly to do with this report?

There are no financial implications directly to do with the recommendations in this report.

6: Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report.

7. Are there any Data Protection Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report.

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