

SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 26 October 2022

Present:

Councillors Dave Mansell (Vice Chair in the Chair), Simon Coles, Tom Deakin, Andrew Govier, Steve Griffiths, Roger Habgood, Dawn Johnson, Janet Lloyd, Martin Peters, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Andy Pritchard, Ray Tully and Vivienne Stock-Williams

Officers: Samantha Murrell, Marcus Prouse, James Barraah and Chris Brown

Also Councillors Francesca Smith and Chris Booth

Present:

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

44. Apologies

Cllrs Libby Lisgo (subs Andy Govier), Andy Milne, Mark Lithgow and Richard Lees (subs Hazel Prior Sankey).

In attendance via zoom,

Cllrs Lisgo, Wakefield and Whetlor.

45. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee

The Minutes of the previous meeting of Community Scrutiny held on the 31 August were confirmed as a true record.

Prop: Lloyd / Sec: Stock Williams (Unanimous)

46. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr T Deakin	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Govier	All Items	SCC & Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Johnson	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington & Sampford Arundel	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr D Mansell	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Peters	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr H Prior-Sankey	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Tully	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted

47. **Public Participation**

There were no statements or questions brought before the committee.

48. **Community Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

The Committee noted and approved the Trackers.

49. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The Committee noted the Forward Plan.

50. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plans**

The Committee noted the forward plans for both the Executive and Full Council. There were no matters arising.

51. **Low Carbon Retrofit Strategy and Action Plan**

Low Carbon Retrofit Strategy and Action Plan

This matter was introduced to the Committee by Executive Councillor Francesca Smith, Portfolio Holder for Housing.

The report was presented by Chris Brown, Assistant Director for Housing Development and Regeneration.

A copy of the slide pack presentation can be found [here in the web library](#).

Following the presentation there were a number of questions arising: -

- Cllr Mansell, as Chair of the Carbon Retrofit working group was pleased with the findings, and in agreement with the strategy of a fabric first approach. The policy will be built around insulating existing homes, to try and reduce heat output. It was also pleasing to note that SWT was performing better than first anticipated in its EPCC rate.
- Single houses would be the first to be retrofitted as these were the easiest units to modify. Then the process would evolve as we moved into the unitary council. The HRA capital would incorporate some of the work (such as new doors and windows) into the cyclical maintenance programme.
- It was recognised that tenants and leaseholders must be at the heart of the process to ensure active engagement and allow the retrofit programme

to go ahead. If they were not on-board with the retrofit programme this could inhibit the improvements on their property, and in flat blocks and apartments in the wider neighbourhood. Cllr Lloyd reported that tenants are fully supportive of the options and have engaged via consultation. This has been reported back via the Tenants Strategic Group.

- It was recognised that Leaseholders would also have to be involved, especially in flat blocks, where they were living alongside SWT tenants. Chris Brown said SWT are working towards setting up a leaseholder panel to improve communications between all parties. As part of this, it was also important that tenants and leaseholders were fully supported and had access to good communications.
- Although there would be disruption to tenants whilst the retrofit was implemented, it should be minimal as it would be on the exterior of the property. It was anticipated that the works would take about a day and would not usually require a tenant to vacate/decant. In instances where the work required significant internal disruption, it was hoped to do this around void periods. (The main properties likely to be affected are bungalows with concrete floors – where ground floor insulation needs to be done).
- Some of the upgraded properties would inevitably be lost to the Right To Buy scheme. In this situation, SWT was unlikely to get a return on the investment into the retrofit, but this was unavoidable.
- The biggest threat to implementing the retrofit programme was Central Government imposing a 5% rent cap. The HRA is currently set at 11% to ensure there is enough money to fund the capital programme within the budget. If the cap is imposed, then capital works will be at risk of delivery, and savings will have to be made.
- The current cost of living crisis was also an identified risk. Inflation and lack of skills in the workforce was pushing prices up, especially in niche markets. It would be more sensible to improve standard items such as replacement windows and doors, rather than invest in specialist products like solar panels. The costs of such items is being driven up due to low supply but high demand.
- Various questions were raised around affordability. Would rents be increased to fund the improvements. What if leaseholders couldn't afford the upgrades?
 - *Existing tenants will not pay more rent, on their current home. On new build schemes, the rent is increased by 20%, but the tenant would be aware of this before accepting the property. Repayment schemes would be negotiated with leaseholders on a case-by-case basis. It was accepted that this was an area that needed to be worked on, and case-workers would need to support tenants and leaseholders. It was hoped that satisfied customers/tenants would be the best form of promotion for the retrofit programme.*
- It was asked what schemes are in place to assist other homeowners with retrofit and what was SWT doing to promote grants and funding in these areas. *Chris Brown said that his frame of reference was to work within the Housing Revenue Account, which was ring-fenced to improve and develop the SWT housing stock. National funding and grant schemes were few and*

far between, and very often the same organisations were vying for the same funding pots.

- It was requested that if SWT was made aware of funding and grant schemes to help private homeowners with improvements, (especially in low cost housing) these were publicised and promoted. Likewise in the commercial sector. *The best advice is to ensure that all surveys are undertaken before purchasing so that there are no unpleasant surprises later. If SWT becomes aware of schemes or grants we will promote them via the usual channels, i.e. social media, newsletters etc.*
- Questions were also asked around who would be undertaking the work, and whether it would be done in-house or through contractors. *Initially it would be carried out by sub-contractors as SWT does not have expertise in this area, but there would definitely be a move towards employing apprentices and upskilling our own workforce. This was one of many positive outcomes within the retrofit strategy and would increase our reputation as a registered social housing provider.*
- It was asked how many properties would require cladding? *Will depend on the type of property. Parity software is available but the type of retrofit will be determined by the age and structure of the dwelling.*
- How do we deal with the waste products as a result of the retrofit programme? *New builds will be using electric and not gas so this will be cleaner energy from the outset. Waste products will be recycled as much as possible, but demolition results in high wastage – 90%. The retrofit programme is more eco-friendly because nothing is destroyed and the existing structure is enhanced.*
- Cllr Mansell asked for further detail on the KPIs for gas boilers within the council housing stock. This was not immediately available so will be followed up on the [Written Answer Tracker](#). It was also asked when the replacement of gas boilers within the stock would cease, and this too will be followed up on the tracker.

The closing comments from the Chair were that the report was well received, and there were many positive outcomes to take forward. The Chair moved to note the recommendations as listed in Point 2 of the report and was supported unanimously by the Committee.

52. **Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities - Cllr Chris Booth**

Executive Councillor Chris Booth, portfolio holder for Communities, provided a verbal update to the Committee on matters relating to the CoL motion. Cllr Booth advised that since the CoL motion was adopted by Full Council in July, a number of measures had been implemented.

- SWT had created a Hardship Fund of £50K which had been passed to Citizens Advice in Taunton and West Somerset to administer. This money had been spent very quickly and was no longer available. Cllr Booth provided some statistics, to show who had accessed the fund and the geographical split.

A copy of the slide is available to [here in the web library](#).

This money was not allowed to be spent on arrears or debt and only one claim could be made per household. A number of questions arose around the statistics and these have been picked up in the [Written Answer Tracker](#). (Officers will be following up with the Citizens Advice Bureau).

- Somerset County Council had recently implemented the Household Support Fund which would be a way for residents to access additional help.
- £50k has also been sent to the Somerset Community Foundation as part of the Cost-of-Living Crisis Fund. This was SWT's contribution, but all 5 councils in Somerset had paid into it.
- A request was made for the new unitary administration to honour the agreement made to support the VCSE sector through the first year of the new council. It was vitally important that the good work that is being done, does not come under threat due to funding being withdrawn.
- Cllr Tom Deakin said that the key themes that seemed to be coming out of SCC to support households this winter were around warm spaces and food resilience. All councils need to be working together, because there was just not enough money to go around to help everyone!
- Cllr Booth also highlighted the work of the Community Employment hubs and Job Fairs that were taking place. These had been well attended, and there were lots of agencies and organisations on hand to offer advice and information. These were advertised in the local press, social media and in the SWT newsletter. It would be good to share this information as widely as possible. The next one is due to take place at West Somerset House, Williton.
- Cllr Habgood praised the work of the community resilience team, and in particular the work in food resilience being undertaken by Helen Philips. The Local Pantries are a good way of building food resilience and a move away from heavy dependency and reliance on food banks. Ongoing sustainability is key.
- Cllr Tully stated that there is a local pantry in West Monkton that has already seen an increase in users, despite the fact that we are not in the hardest months of the year yet. People are also asking for help with the purchase of white goods and other items, because they are already struggling.
- In summation, it was recognised that all the councils need to pull together this winter to work together, share resources and support and thus maximise the offer to residents.

(The Meeting ended at 8.37 pm)