

Housing Directorate Report to Housing Strategic Board

21st September 2020

Director of Housing and Communities Introduction

Unitary Authority

Somerset West and Taunton Council has given its support to the Stronger Somerset Business Case, which proposes two new unitary Councils and a combined authority. The Full Council met on Thursday 10 September to debate the proposal which was approved following its endorsement by the Scrutiny Committee. The proposal has also been supported at Full Council meetings at Mendip, Sedgemoor and South Somerset District Councils.

The district authorities worked together on the Stronger Somerset plan which focuses on extensive reform of way councils work and an end to the current two-tier system of local government with county and district councils.

Councils are expected to receive a formal invitation from the Government to submit their business cases. There will be an eight-week Government-run consultation later in the year and councils have been advised that new organisations will be in place by April 2022.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

Housing Strategy

- Members have approved the Hinkley Point C Housing Strategy and the implementation stage of the various projects will now progress.
- Work is progressing across partners across the County to adopt a health, care and housing memorandum of understanding as are discussions regarding the establishment of a Homelessness Reduction Board.
- Eco Flex scheme is now being adopted in SWT which provides access to fuel poor private households for energy saving measures such as insulation, fuel switch, etc.

Housing Enabling

- A programme aimed at increasing affordable homes in the most difficult parts of the district through a community led approach is commencing with the recruitment of a part time specialist officer to work primarily in the Exmoor National Park with communities including Parish Councils. The Programme

aims to unlock rare development opportunities through community awareness and activity.

- Work is taking place with planning to understand the implications of the planning white paper on affordable housing supply in Somerset.

HRA New Homes

- There are 309 HRA homes at various stages of delivery. Laxton Road (8 units) will be ready to let around Christmas followed by NTWP phase A homes (47) and zero carbon homes with five sites prioritised for early delivery (43 units)
- Plans are progressing well for other schemes at Seaward Way (53 units in the west of Somerset) and Oxford Inn (11 units in Taunton). Both these schemes will follow the Council's approval route with the aim of achieving executive support and member approval in December 2020. Seaward Way has the benefit of an allocation of funds from the Hinckley Point C Housing Strategy.
- The hope is to have an approved pipeline of 373 units which will front load the Council's and HRA business plans ambition of 1000 units over 30 years.
- Many of these homes will create or adopt the SWT low carbon standard which is emerging as a standard that provides close to zero carbon in occupation (very low energy use by the customer based on a fabric first approach) and reduced energy and carbon use in the construction and maintenance of the homes in line with the London Energy Transformation Initiative (LETI) approach
- The Council is working with our contractor Engie to improve the low carbon qualities of the NTWP new homes and the refurbished homes. SWT is looking to improve the fabric of the homes over the tendered requirements and current building regulation requirements.

Housing Property Team

Responsive and Void Repairs

- All responsive repairs (both emergency and non-emergency) are now being undertaken, with measures in place to keep both residents and staff safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out.
- During lockdown only emergency repairs were undertaken and this has led to a backlog of non-emergency repairs. This backlog is reducing but it will nevertheless take some time to return to normal levels of service delivery in all areas of repairs work.
- Void repairs were undertaken during lockdown but reduced capacity and a need for social distancing in properties led to delays in completion and a backlog occurring. This backlog has now been resolved.

Property Safety Compliance

Progress on property safety compliance includes:

- A review of all compliance areas against every property.

- Recruitment to two new posts within the Property Compliance team - a Compliance Manager and a Landlord and Compliance Specialist.
- Additional asbestos management surveys.
- New Asbestos Management and Fire Safety policies and procedures.
- Further programme of Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Visits to advise residents on fire safety and enforce clearance of communal areas.
- Undertaking FRA recommended remedial actions and maintenance inspections.
- Continuing with Gas Safety checks.
- Undertaking a programme of Water Risk Assessments.
- Carrying out electrical checks to communal areas.
- A comprehensive update report was recently provided to the Audit and Governance and Audit committee.

Housing Asset Management

- Stock condition surveys recommenced.
- Procurement of external resource to undertake additional energy surveys.

Capital Programmes

- All capital programmes ceased during lockdown. However, procurement was undertaken and contracts are now recommencing.
- External painting and replacement soffits and gutters being undertaken.
- Kitchen, bathroom, window, insulation and heating programmes to recommence shortly.
- Contractor availability likely to be a challenge in completing all programmes planned for 2020/21.

Housing and Communities Teams

Supported Housing

- Staff capacity has continued to be reduced, due to Covid related absences (sickness and childcare).
- A reduced, phone based service has continued to be provided for all sheltered and extra care tenants, with home visits only being completed where necessary.
- Many of our older tenants have continued to shield, or live in a similar way to how they were during the lockdown, to reduce Coronavirus risks to themselves and others.
- Many tenants have reported that they are happy to be receiving welfare checks and support by phone, as they are feeling anxious about having visitors and using PPE/not having access to much PPE.

- Tenants have been reassured by staff who are visiting using the appropriate PPE.
- Staff have been able to complete aids and adaptations assessments within tenant's homes, to enable them to have the support they need to remain independent within their home.
- Staff are offering Deane Helpline welfare calls and other useful helpline numbers for tenants to access support and feel less isolated.
- Our Extra Care sites have remained Covid-free, thanks to tenants and Care staff following the government guidance and precautions. Staff have been on-site every week, to complete maintenance, gardening and health and safety checks.
- Some temporary housing placements within Extra Care (from hospital discharges) have been able to remain within the schemes, on a permanent tenancy, with the care support they require.

Lettings

- At the beginning of lockdown we suspended the advertising and letting of properties whilst the voids team concentrated on properties to be used as emergency accommodation for homeless applicants due to the closure of commercial Bed and Breakfasts.
- Government guidance was issued advising only essential home moves would happen, in line with this we direct matched 13 properties that had been held during lockdown that the voids team were then able to turn around to those tenants in our temporary accommodation who were owed a Homeless duty which also freed up some of this much needed accommodation.
- Procedures for the team were amended to comply with Covid risk assessments, verifications were carried out remotely and viewings were still carried out but with the Officers allowing the prospective tenant to view the property independently.
- The 17 properties at Pyrlands Fields were successfully let, some to North Taunton decant residents and the team are now up to date with any backlogged properties and are getting back to normal timescales.
- SWT has been successful in securing Hinkley C funding to create the role of a Home Moves Plus Officer Full time for 2 years. This post will work within the Lettings team to work with tenants to encourage and facilitate moves for those currently under-occupying properties and allowing SWT to make best use of its stock for the benefit of all those on the Housing Register. The Officer will promote their service to existing tenants and develop an excellent knowledge of our stock and identify those who are under-occupying. The Officer will provide assistance with joining Homefinder Somerset to encourage a move via the Housing Register, especially those in 4 bed plus properties who will be awarded a priority on Homefinder for downsizing, they will also explore the option of mutual exchange and also promote the Transfer Removal Grant that financially incentivises a move for those who qualify. This role is important in promoting the best use of our stock and

ensure that tenants are in the most suitable and sustainable properties for their needs.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

- As we have moved out of lockdown, the hard work of the team is paying off as contractors return to site to full capacity. There were a few minor hiccups but I'm glad to report the supply chain and contractor availability has held up with no major incidents.
- All technical staff are undertaking full site visits since the middle of July conscious and adhering to the Covid19 risk assessments that are in place to protect both clients and staff. SIP have just launched a new service to tackle hoarding. Designed to assist clients who have extensive problems with clutter in their home.
- The Independent Living Officers' will centre their level of intervention based upon the clutter scale. Besides working with the client to clear the property, they will also put in place an agreed plan with the client to prevent hoarding in the future. Besides hoarding the ILO's also undertake Homes Safety Checks and low level mental health advice. Home Safety checks through a detailed survey of the home to identify any hazards and suggest mitigation measures to eliminate or reduce the risk, such as sign posting to the fire service or remedial works through the technical team. Low level mental health advice which is fundamentally a service to identify clients with mental health issues and provide a sign posting service to the appropriate mental health teams. Working alongside them in finding solutions to support their mental health and resume independent living.
- SIP has successfully recruited a Hospital Resettlement Coordinator. Working out of Musgrove Park Hospital and surrounding NHS Community Hospitals, the post will be responsible for assisting patients with a smooth discharge from hospital into their home setting. The post will be jointly managed by Health and Somerset Independence Plus. It is an 18 month post, funding will be from the Better Care Fund. Historically there has been a national problem in the hospitals with bed blocking and failed discharges. Delays where the patient was awaiting a care package in their own home made up 20.8% of all delays in 2018/19. On a daily basis 10 in every 100,000 of the population of Somerset were delayed from leaving hospital during that year. In March 2019, 1,065 hospital days were lost due to bed blocking which equates to 34 beds at a cost of £1,810,500 in one month. The post will plan home based solutions ahead of the point of discharge avoiding the common issue of overstatement of need which slows down release from hospital. The post will be actively involved in attending discharge plans and preoperative meetings, facilitating and coordinating services both inside and outside in the wider community with agencies and SIP ILO's to ease patients out of hospital and into their home setting.

Homefinder

- Homefinder continues to carry a backlog, in part this is due to an increased demand on the service and a renewed interest in people updating their applications due to changes in personal circumstances due to Covid-19. The team also provide telephone support to the wider Homeless team who have also seen an increased demand on their service. In addition we have started to run renewals and are sending out a couple of hundred a week as we need to ensure we hold up to date data, this also encourages applicants to contact the service and increases demand. It is an important process to complete as Homefinder Somerset will influence decisions in other areas of work and we need to ensure that if we choose to transfer data to a newly procured system next year that we are only paying to transfer the data we need to. The timetable for the procurement of the new system is still as planned and the partnership is looking to issue the invitation to tender in the next couple of weeks. Homefinder will be included in the review of the Homeless Service by the newly appointed Managers.

Income

- The Rent Recovery team continues to work to support our tenants through the effects of having a reduced income or in some cases redundancy due to COVID-19. They continue to embrace the "LEAN" approach to rent recovery and the rent arrears are showing the benefit of this (£670K).
- The team have now started to make appointments in Deane House for those vulnerable tenants who cannot manage their accounts or benefits claims over the phone or digitally, and are referring tenants to I2A to help them back into work.
- Conversations are now being held with Taunton Citizen Advice on restarting the Money Matters drop in surgeries. We are also in the process of recruitment for a second Debt and Benefit Officer which will mean we are a full team.

Anti-Social Behaviour

- In the last quarter we have been reviewing the existing ASB policy, with the team now working on processes to work alongside this. Although we had an increase in serious ASB cases during Covid this is now starting to slow down a little and the team have seen the number of new cases declining. The two dedicated officers have a caseload of 38 open cases which is around average. It should be noted that these are the more complex cases and lower level ASB and nuisance are handled by Tenancy Management or Supported Housing Officers.

Tenancy/Estate Team

- The team are now preparing schedules for re-introducing Estate Walkabouts, Community skip days and block inspections, We are hoping to get this back up and running by end September/early October and in a way that keeps staff and our customers safe.

- We have worked on a process for delivering Annual Tenancy Checks with an officer visiting households to assess the condition of the tenancy and property. This process includes an inspection of the property/garden and for the officer to work on any issues that arise. This has involved chasing outstanding repairs, making referrals to other services such as MIND and a befriending service; carrying out property and garden inspections; assisting the tenant to get furniture and giving them support and advice. As working on minor hoarding issues. This trial period has already proved to be adding value to both the customer and us.
- Recruitment for two full time tenancy/estate offices is currently ongoing to give a full complement of staff.

Housing Performance Team

- The Housing Performance Team has been created to drive service improvements in our customer experience and service delivery as well as oversee housing governance.
- A series of governance meetings and activities are already underway.
- Recruitment of the team of seven is also underway and work has already started on our complaints responses. By December we will self-assess our performance against the new Housing Ombudsman code.
- Engagement and communication with our tenants will be key activities. This month a newsletter will be sent to around 6000 tenants and work will commence on our engagement plans.
- We have been focussing efforts on our complaints performance, understanding our complaints process and closing off any open complaints. On the 4th September we were showing 44 open complaints and 20 (45%) were closed during that week and work has been ongoing to close the remaining complaints as soon as possible. Customers have been contacted and the process of investigation and resolution started, it is the "official" closure that has taken longer than the 10 days targeted. We are looking at how we can improve this performance within our directorate.