

SWT Tenants Strategic Group - 20 July 2020 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Alex Akhigbemen, Cram, Dennis Galpin, Hellier, Ivor Hussey, Corrine McMyler, Livi Mongare, Francesca Smith and Janet Lloyd

Officers: James Barrah, Stephen Boland, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Simon Lewis and Shari Hallett (Housing Performance Manager) and Tracey Meadows (Democracy and Governance)

Also Present: Councillor Weston

(The meeting commenced at 4.00 pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Jessie Bunn

2. Notes from previous meetings

(Minutes of meetings 16 December 2019 and 15 January 2020 circulated with the agenda)

Resolved that the minutes of the Strategic Board held on 16 December 2019 and 15 January we confirmed as a correct record.

3. Tenants Strategic Group - Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference

The proposed Terms of Reference describe the role, aims, objectives and expected conduct of the Tenants' Strategic Group and are to be adopted at the start of the Tenants' Strategic Group's formal existence. The Terms of Reference state that all tenant representatives will be appointed to the Group following election by all direct tenants of the Council. It is proposed that the election process will be carried out during the period from July 2020 and ending with the appointment of a new group in January 2021. More details are to follow on this.

Members were asked to support the recommendation to approve the Terms of Reference for the Strategic Group.

Comments made by board members included (responses in italic):

- Item 1.7 states that group members will be expected to maintain close links with other elements of the tenant engagement structure at the Council, can you please explain? *We have a Tenant's Action Group,*

currently the acting Chair of the group is Wayne Hobson. They come together to look at the day to day operations. They provide us with feedback on how we are doing on the ground on a daily basis. The Chair has an opportunity to come and speak to the Strategic group to discuss their observations that they have made as there may be issues that are common across our service area that they are seeing routinely and may have views on raising them with the Strategic Group to get those matters addressed.

Resolved that the group accepted the recommendation.

4. **Director of Housing and Communities update report**

Director of Housing and Communities update report

The Director of Housing and Communities, James Barraah along with Simon Lewis (Assistant Director, Housing and Communities), Chris Brown (Assistant Director, Redevelopment and Regeneration) and Ian Candlish (Assistant Director of, Housing properties) updated the Tenants Strategic Group on key issues across the Housing and Communities Directorate since the last meeting and in particular to reflect on the Directorate response to the Corona virus pandemic. The report also raises some key issues forming the work plan of the Directorate over the coming weeks and months.

Comments made by board members included; (responses in italic)

- Regarding the reviewing of anti-social behaviour policies, what sort of urgency are you looking into this as I have an existing problem that has been made worse than it needs to be by existing policies? *We are looking into these policies right now, we need to make sure that our internal processes are efficient, we have a number of tools that we can use and probably need to be a bit quicker than we have done in the past. We need to make sure that when we have cases we need to have clear evidence to ascertain who is at fault. The policy will be updated over the next month;*
- Can you tell me when the emergency call line for repairs will be switched off? *This issue has been picked today so we will rectify this;*
- If there is another flare up in the South West of Covid 19, will we have to renew our processes or are we ready for another local flare up? *The situation in the South West is something that all parties have been watching quite carefully, you saw the reports of people hitting the beaches in high numbers which was not ideal in the circumstances and then just last week an illegal rave in Bath. Our location has meant that firstly our incident rate has been low compared to the National picture, also our location means that we will see an increasing number of people looking to travel to the area for a break, holiday or recreational purposes and second homes is another feature. The surveillance that is underway is keeping a careful eye on that. Our R rate was slow in coming down. The response to any local incident is driven by the County Councillors as a public health responsibility and all partners contribute to that, there is a local outbreak control plan in place it really depends on what happens, what the outbreak*

might be, what premises are involved and the impact on Somerset West and Taunton Council and depends on the local flare up or outbreak. A lot of these arrangements will be tested when there are local incidents. Information sharing nationally on outbreaks is continuous where we get information fed back to us from Government agencies and responsibility has now been handed to Localities to better manage local outbreaks which is a good thing as local mechanisms are closer to those communities so can respond quicker. We need to remain vigilant and adhere to our own processes in protection for our own staff and just remain a vigilant as possible;

- I do not believe that buy backs are a good use of our funds, so I am happy that we are not buying back so many this year. Will the 365 new properties that we will be building in the future will these consist of new or redevelopment or is this purely new properties?

The Council has a strong commitment to building its own stock so you will see at least 95% of those 364 units over the next 7 years will be Council new build Council led homes so that is a very positive statement. Previously we have had to gear up for a development programme and this takes time so those 364 units will be over 7 sites. The use of buy backs and acquisitions have been a very useful filler because whilst we haven't had a development programme of the scale that we have now and that will increase further we still have Right to Buy receipts coming in that we have had to use and if we don't use them we either offer them as grants to Housing Associations or we give that money back to Government so the use of buy backs and acquisitions has been a necessary strategy to enable money to go out of the door but going forward we are trying to spend as much as 100% as possible of the Right to Buy receipts on new build Council homes. The only buy back that we are likely to buy are the odd properties to help development progress and ex Council flats will be beneficial from a management point of view.

We are working very closely with Engie at North Taunton. This week we are signing a PCSA agreement which is a pre contract agreement for them to development all their ideas in detail, so money is invested up front to make sure that we get a clear picture of what Engie are promising. We will work very closely with Engie to develop a full contract to be signed in November. We have a lot of lessons to learn, our Zero Carbon project, Seawood Way project, these will all bring forward challenges. Somerset West and Taunton Council is not the most experienced Council when it comes to new development but there are some Officers within the team who have got a lot of experience and we need to make sure that experience is shared amongst the team as we have a large programme ahead of us;

- Are the homes that Engie are building energy efficient? We will be having discussions with Engie on low carbon homes. our specifications were quite good since they were written down for the tender, this is one area that we have asked Engie refine the bid to make a better proposal to make the properties more energy efficient on phase A, B through to E will be a better standard;

- Do we sign post customers to other agencies to deal with Anti-Social Behaviour issues? *We have a team who deal with these issues if it is more serious and we do use mediation to try to resolve tenant minor issues. We can use other tools if it gets more serious. We use MIND for Mental Health needs ;*
- Is there a refurbishment programme for the replacement of windows? *We performed some procurement work during the lock down period and windows was one of those. We have got down to two different suppliers that we are doing bench marking and costings against. Due to the lockdown we were unable engage with these suppliers as they were shut down so that slowed engagement with them. This is on our active procurement works at the moment. No start date at present but we are eager to get this work done this financial year;*
- When will the Deane House be open to tenants? *We are in the process of looking at our reception re-opening by appointment. With the Police in the building there has been more activity in the building. A more structured response will be given to you with regards to time scales. As for staff, this will take longer as we need to be confident that we can protect our team in the building;*
- Although we are building new homes we need to keep our eye on the ball with our existing stock, have you plans to bring our existing stock up to standard? *There are challenges in making sure that we have investment for both parts. In the business plan review we spoke about new objectives, one of those objectives was investing in our existing homes and neighbourhoods alongside new homes to make sure that it was a key strategic objective for us. We also did a refresh of our stock data that give us our 30 year projections of investment cost for the replacement costs for bathrooms and Kitchens etc. We also need to make sure that we have sufficient budgets to undergo our repairs. We are always looking to improve our data and at present we are conducting surveys to look at the energy performance of our stock and Carbon neutral homes;*

Resolved that the Tenants Strategic Group note the report.

5. **Zero Carbon Affordable Homes Pilot Project**

Zero Carbon Affordable Homes Pilot Project

Assistant Director Housing Development and Regeneration, Chris Brown inform the group of the Zero Carbon Affordable Homes Pilot Project;

Stated that in 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency and committed to working towards achieving carbon neutrality and climate resilience by 2030. As a result SWT is developing policies and delivering actions to reduce the pace of climate change. In 2020 the Council agreed a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30 year Business Plan. This plan included an ambition to develop 1000 new affordable homes for the HRA over 30 years. These ambitions have been joined in this proposed pilot scheme to build up to fifty (50) zero carbon council homes and create a blueprint for future affordable housing developments in the District.

Comments made by Board Members included (responses in italic);

- Concerns with the displacement of existing parking provisions on garage sites that have been identified for housing; *there are going to be displacement of vehicles parking on the streets. We have not yet had planning approval on each site and this may have a big impact on how many sites can be built out. Alternative garage space may be offered but may not be convenient to some of the users. The wider question is the car use, rural areas usage would be essential for a long time to come and many of us think that our cars are essential where ever we live. We need to think if parking is a requirement in the future. We need to challenge this and push more public transport. Planning permission will force us to address that point;*
- Good report and very ambitious and I am looking forward to it. What are the risks with this project once it is finished? We do not want tenants knocking the properties about. I suggest that a tenancy agreement is drawn up to stipulate to the tenant that no internal structural alterations are to take place in the properties. If we have that in our tenancy agreement that will safe guard our investment; *there will be risks with the sites themselves, so achieving 50 homes is a risk after we look at all the services the parking challenges, the existing access and any ownership, these might whittle down a bit and we may not achieve the 50. There are risks with the procurement process, we need to make sure that contractors deliver our high standards. Speed is another risk with challenges on time and the planning process, change of blend of units, more 2/3 in bedroom sizes. And risk to Right to Buy, we need to make sure that we spend the money;*
- With difficulties in the planning process, is our planning department on board with what we want to achieve? *We expect them to be positive about this as many of the things that they want we are proposing. The design guide talks about good space standard, good quality design and low carbon homes. This will be an area of learning because for the first time we are putting a lot of schemes through planning.*
- We are happy to have Cllr Fran Smith backing these schemes and you also have the boards backing;

Resolved that the report is noted.

6. Forward Plan including future dates

Forward Plan and future meeting dates;

Future dates for 2020/21 will be as follows (all meetings will commence at 6pm);

21 September
23 November
25 January 2021
22 March 2021
24 May 2021
19 July 2021

Areas for discussion for future meetings;

- Housing performance
- New build council housing
- Government White Paper - a new deal for Social Housing
- Compliance, with a particular focus on Fire Safety

(The Meeting ended at 6.17 pm)