

Housing Directorate Report to Housing Tenants' Strategic Board

23rd November 2020

Director of Housing and Communities Introduction

Unitary Authority

As reported at the last meeting 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.

We have now received the formal invitation from the Government to submit a business case. This is currently being finalised for submission in December. We have produced and sent to all tenants and leaseholders a newsletter to inform everyone about this issue and to signpost to more information and the way in which tenants can comment on both the Stronger Somerset and the One Somerset proposals.

Brexit

Work is underway to prepare for Brexit, the main activity relates to the potential impact on our supply chain for building materials, we are working closely with our suppliers to understand their level of preparedness and contingency and to ensure we are aware of pressures as quickly as possible.

COVID-19

The team continue to adjust to the latest period of "lockdown" with reception at Deane House being closed again. However we continue to deliver most services, some remotely as we have been for some time, all following our risk assessments and relevant public health guidance. We have paused a few non-essential activities involving extensive time required in people's homes such as stock condition surveys and home energy assessments.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

HRA New Homes

- Laxton Road Development competition date expected late December

- Zero Carbon Pilot – Procurement of modular contractor has formally started, planning pre-app discussions commenced with 39 units likely to be possible through the first five sites.
- New Low Carbon Employers Requirements (ER) have been developed to support all future developments
- NTWP – Final designs issued for phase A, PSCA to conclude in December with a fixed works cost and specification agreed for phase A. Next steps report with council for consideration in December
- Seaward way and Oxford Inn reports to be considered by members in December
- Canonsgrove option appraisal underway
- Up to four new market acquisitions for HRA to support Right to Buy 1:4:1 spend and provide new affordable council owned homes

Housing Property Team

Responsive and Void Repairs

- All responsive repairs (both emergency and non-emergency) are being undertaken, with measures in place to keep both residents and staff safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out.
- The backlog of non-emergency repairs following the previous lockdown is still being addressed and, whilst reducing, it is challenging to eliminate due to both difficulties in recruiting additional competent trade people and access problems.
- Void repairs are continuing, although again undertaking the required works to bring up to the Lettable Standard within agreed timescales whilst at the same time keeping staff safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out poses additional challenges.

Property Safety Compliance

Ongoing progress on property safety compliance includes:

- A review of all common areas for flat blocks being undertaken to validate existing safety actions.
- Recruitment to a new post within the Property Compliance team - a Mechanical and Electrical Manager.
- Asbestos management survey programme to flat blocks completed, and dwelling asbestos management surveys and re-inspections being undertaken.
- Procurement and commencement of an additional programme of Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Continuing to undertake recommended remedial actions from previous FRAs, and maintenance inspections.
- Continuing with Gas Safety checks.
- Undertaking a programme of Water Risk assessments.
- Carrying out electrical checks to communal areas, and checks to dwellings procured and due to start shortly.
- New stairlift safety check and service contract procured and started.

Housing Asset Management

- Stock condition surveys due to recommence have been put on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions in the new lockdown period.
- Procurement of external resource to undertake additional energy surveys has been undertaken, but again this work has been put on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions in the new lockdown period.

Capital Programmes

- All capital programmes currently continuing during this lockdown period following government guidance. Measures in place to keep both residents, SWT staff and contractors safe from COVID-19 whilst work is carried out.
- Additional procurement for future capital programmes being undertaken.
- Existing external painting and replacement soffits and gutters contract completed.
- Kitchen, bathroom, window, insulation and door entry programmes on site.
- Heating programme to commence shortly.
- Condensed timeframe to complete all planned capital works programmes likely to be a challenge by end of March 2021.

Housing and Communities Teams

Extra Care Housing

- SWT has 2 Extra Care Housing sites. Both have an on-site care provider, Way Ahead Care, who are commissioned by SCC. SWT staff sit on the Extra Care Housing panel meetings, which consider all extra care housing applications. These meetings have continued to take place online. SWT has noticed that there is a higher level of need and care being referred for extra care housing, than previously and are monitoring the impact of this on the schemes.
- SWT staff have worked alongside Way Ahead Care throughout the pandemic, to ensure that all maintenance and gardening works can be safely undertaken and have continued to be available to meet with tenants, regarding any tenancy or neighbour concerns. The care teams have done a great job of keeping both sites COVID free, adapting the care and support they offer to tenants, to ensure all concerned are kept safe.

Sheltered Housing

- The Sheltered Housing Team have continued to be affected by long term staff sickness and reduced working hours. The remaining team have been working across the whole of sheltered housing, making welfare calls to tenants, updating their personal and health information and making home visits where necessary, to complete aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, install Lifelines and support tenants who find using the phone challenging (due to hearing impairment, ASD etc).
- During any visits all staff wear PPE and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance for these visits. Although tenants have appreciated the phone contact and visits, many remain very anxious and nervous about having

anyone in their home, due to concerns about COVID-19. Tenants have also reported concerns for cancelled hospital appointments and fears around attending hospital. Staff offer reassurance and remind tenants of the precautions hospitals are taking, in addition to the importance of having their health needs met.

- Many tenants have also continued to have less contact with family and friends. In some cases, this has left them feeling lonely and isolated. Where appropriate and helpful, we have encouraged the tenants to have regular welfare calls from Deane Helpline, which allows tenants to have regular calls and a check on their welfare and a brief chat. Deane Helpline report any concerns for a tenants welfare or health back to the team, and a member of staff calls the tenant, to find out more and complete relevant referrals etc. In many cases, this includes liaising with family members and next of kin, who have also been appreciative of the follow up we have provided.
- The team has continued to respond to crisis and emergencies, as they arise. There have been several tenants who have needed to be admitted to hospital and we have working with Adult Social Care and hospital staff, to ensure that their capacity is fully assessed and any additional needs identified. In some cases, tenants have been successfully returned home, with some aids and adaptations a care package of daily support, which allows them to maintain their independence.
- We have also had some cases where tenants' health and capacity has declined to the point where they are requiring ongoing support within a different type of housing setting, due to brain injury, dementia, confusion etc. We have worked alongside family members and other professionals to support referrals to more suitable housing and end their SWT tenancies. Staff have supported and advised family members during these processes, which is often a challenging and upsetting time for them.
- We had planned to have a partial reopening of the meeting halls within the sheltered schemes, for staff to be on-site for one day a week, to complete pre-arranged meetings with tenants and complete home visits. Unfortunately, the ongoing staffing constraints meant that we haven't had capacity to sustain this. We have reviewed this each month and will do so again after the current lock down. The meeting halls continue to have weekly health and safety checks, completed by the Facilities team.

Lettings

- Property advertising and lettings that were suspended at the beginning of the first lockdown have now resumed. Properties are now being advertised on Home Finder Somerset on the weekly cycles. For example in the week commencing 26th October we advertised 7 properties in the week commencing 9th November(this week) we have placed 12 adverts which equates to 16 properties including the New build flats in Laxton Road.
- The Lettings team are still working to COVID-19 risk assessments and procedures, ensuring they are in line with the SWT safe working practices. Verifications are carried out remotely, and viewings take place by the prospective tenant independently, in a COVID-19 compliant manner. Enabling the viewings not only to be able to take place but in the safest possible way for all concerned staff and tenants alike.
- The Home Moves plus officer (HMP) started on 2/11/2020. The officer has already commenced working with both internal and external partners to collect data on those SWT tenants that fall within the downsizing remit for the role. To

date there are a potential 64 cases that he will be working on in the coming weeks. Letters have already been sent to some of those tenants.

- Laxton Road Flats: The Lettings team have carried out a site visit with the project manager and the builders. There were some concerns over the potential delay with builders caused by one of their suppliers not being able to supply the doors. This has been overcome and no longer appears to be an issue. The flats were advertised on Home Finder Somerset (HFS) in the advertising cycle on 11/11/2020. This closes on 16/11/2020. A meeting has been arranged for the 18/11/2020 to carry out the shortlisting of those properties in line with the local lettings plan which has been agreed.

Income

- The Rent Recovery team are still working continually to help and support those tenants who are effected by a reduction in income due to COVID-19. Rent arrears have reduced to 586k (as of 06/11/20) which is a fantastic result for the team and show the hard work and dedication they have all committed through the pandemic
- The Team will soon be working on a Christmas Rent Campaign which will include sending text messages, providing information on paying rent on the website and also taking part in the Talking Café held by the Village Agents to promote priority payments over the Christmas period.
- We have recruited a second Debt and Benefit Officer who will be joining us in November, this will strengthen the support we can give to our tenants and will mean we can help a larger number of tenants quicker. We want to ensure that our tenants are claiming all the benefits they are entitled to and maximising their income.

Anti-Social Behaviour

- Serious ASB/neighbour nuisance is still high on the team's agenda in particular we are currently dealing with a hate crime (racially aggravated) and a serious incident of harassment and intimidation. These cases will need to have enforcement action taken against them and this in turn is extremely work intensive.
- The lockdown again has caused minor nuisance cases coming to our attention; and we will utilise our COVID-19 nuisance letters from the last lockdown to try to deal with this. If these does not settle down then we will work with the Police to carry out joint visits and take any necessary action to get the perpetrators to amend their behaviour.
- Many of our low level complaints are about noise nuisance and we have been exploring a mobile noise app. We have researched with other registered housing providers who have been using the noise app successfully for some time and have had good success when cases have been presented into court. Our trial period will be coming to end in the next few weeks so we will be able to provide more details on whether we are going to be buying into this service.

Tenancy/Estate Team

- The team have now prepared schedules for re-introducing Estate Walkabouts, and block inspections and these have now been published on our website, We

have prepared a process and monitoring sheets and managers will work closely with officers to ensure that we have consistency in all areas across the borough. During a recent inspection of the area within North Taunton we have picked up that a number of pathways need to be made safe; moss to be cleared from some pathways; trees need cutting back from flats; new street signage is needed; pot holes in garage areas need to be repaired. Once the orders have been raised we will be providing feedback to residents of our findings.

- We will continue to work on completing Annual Tenancy Checks with an officer visiting households to assess the condition of the tenancy and property. Various addresses are now coming to our attention from estates walkabouts.
- Staff are also working on improving our sign up pack for new tenancies and we hope to be able to roll this out in the next couple of weeks.
- We have successfully recruited one member of staff; and her induction period has now ended and I am confident that she will be very successful in her role covering the Wellington patch. Sadly, on the start date the other person recruited declined the offer. We have still retained two temporary officers so we can still provide a full service in all areas.
- We are also going to introduce a rota system for the tenancy team. This system will ensure that someone is available to take any emergency calls as they happen and to work on our Firmstep cases as they come in. Firmstep is an area where we are behind in dealing with general enquiries. We are hoping that this will help us see an improvement in this area during November and December.

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, risk and performance. Recruitment of the team is almost complete and six staff are now in post.
- Directorate performance and governance meetings are underway.
- Key pieces of work to be completed by Christmas are:
 - Christmas Newsletter to tenants and leaseholders
 - STAR survey council tenants and leaseholders. This is a comprehensive satisfaction survey completed every two years by an independent company. Results will be published in the new year.
 - 2019-20 Annual Report to tenants
 - Restarting meetings of our Tenants' Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group.
 - Review of our complaints process including self-assessing our performance against the new Housing Ombudsman code.