

SWT Tenants Strategic Group - 23 November 2020 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Councillor Alex Akhigbemen (Chair)

Paul Cram, Kevin Hellier, Ivor Hussey, Corrine McMylor and Livi Mongare

Officers: James Barrah, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Bryony Cole, Shari Hallett (Housing Performance Manager), Simon Lewis, Sharon Yarde (Housing), Amy Maggs (Housing) and Tracey Meadows (Democracy and Governance)

Also Present: Councillors Lloyd and Lithgow

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm)

14. Apologies

Apologies were received from Jessie Bunn and Dennis Galpin.

15. Notes from previous meeting

The notes from the previous meeting on the 21 September 2020 were agreed.

16. Directorate Update Report - James Barrah, Simon Lewis, Ian Candlish, Chris Brown and Shari Hallett

Director of Housing and Communities Introduction

Unitary Authority

The Assistant Director updated the group on the Unitary Authority progress so far. Reported that a business case would be submitted in December. A letter to all tenants and leaseholders had been sent to inform everyone about the issues and to signpost where tenants can comment on both the Stronger Somerset and One Somerset proposals;

Brexit

Reported that the main impact of Brexit related to the supply chain for building materials. Work with suppliers was ongoing to ensure that we were aware of pressures as quickly as possible;

Covid -19

Reported that due to the second "lockdown" reception at the Deane House was again closed. Most services were still being delivered remotely with staff still working at home. A few non-essential activities involving extensive time required in people's homes had been paused;

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

Reported that the Laxton Road developments would be ready to handover to the housing team in late December;

The Zero Carbon Pilot had formally started with pre-app planning discussion commencing with 39 units likely through the first five sites;

Housing and Communities Teams

Reported that SWT had 2 Extra Care Housing sites, Kilkenny and Wellington with on-site care provided by Way Ahead Care who were commissioned by Somerset County Council;

Sheltered Housing update

The Sheltered Housing team had continued to be affected by long term staff sickness and reduced work hours. Additional staff have been recruited to make sure that we can give a good level of services to our tenants. We are also utilising the Deane helpline for welfare checks;

The usage of meeting hall will be revisited in early December;

Lettings have now resumed with properties being advertised on Home Finder Somerset. The team are working to COVID-19 risk assessments and procedures ensuring that they are in line with safe working practices;

A Homeless Plus Officer funded from Hinkley had now been put in post who will help support tenants who want to downsize, exchange their properties;

Income

Our Christmas Rent Campaign will be starting soon which will include sending text messages and providing information on paying rent on the website and also taking part in the Talking Café held by Village Agents to promote priority payments over the Christmas period;

Anti-Social Behaviour

ASB/neighbour nuisance was still high on the team's agenda. The lockdown has again caused minor nuisance cases coming to our attention. COVID-19 nuisance letters will be sent out to try to deal with this;

Tenancy/Estates

The team were now preparing scheduled walkabouts to identify areas that need attention on the estates. Work to continue Annual Tenancy checks were ongoing;

Housing Performance

This team has been created to drive service improvements to our customer experience and service delivery as well as overseeing housing governance, risk and performance. 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;

Comments made by members of the group included, responses are in italic;

What is the general feeling of tenants, members of staff under a unitary authority? *The government has put back the devolution white paper which would have potentially suggested wider scale change across the public sector, however they have still said that they would still welcome three county areas to submit bids for the changes to the structure of Local Government and Somerset is one of those so therefore we become proactive in that issue and working with the other districts on the strongest Somerset bid. So far in terms of staff's views it is a mixed bag in terms of some wariness around change as staff have already gone through a fundamental change with the creation of Somerset West and Taunton. Having to go through further change is not ideal for many people. My main objective is that we give good service to tenants;*

Resolved that the report be noted.

17. **Fees and Charges Briefing Note - Bryony Cole**

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) –Rents Setting and Service Fees and Charges 2021-22

Reported that some Council Fees and Charges would no longer be required to go to Full Council for approval under the new delegated powers contained within the Financial Procedure Rules adopted by SWT from April 2020, instead the fees and charges for the HRA would be approved by the Section 151 Officer. The exception would be the setting of Dwelling Rents which will still be submitted to Full Council for approval;

The Regulator of Social Housing issued a new Rent Standard for 2020 under the direction of the Government. This new Rent Standard will now apply to all social housing providers, whereas previously Local Authorities were excluded from such standards, although relevant Government Guidance and Direction applied;

The proposed Policy Statement recommends registered providers should endeavour to keep increases for service charges within the limit on rent changes, of CPI+1%, to help keep charges affordable;

The proposal was also to increase garage rents by the same CPI += 1% figure so that they are in line with the Dwelling Rental and Service Charges increase for 2021/22;

The fees levied for 2021/22 for meeting room hire would be increased by CPI + 1 and then rounded to the nearest 10p as requested by tenants during feedback in 2017/18;

The fees levied for 2021/22 for meeting room hire will be increased by CPI+1% and then rounded to the nearest 50p as requested by tenants during feedback provided in 2017/18;

The fee for temporary accommodation is broken down into two elements: the licence fee and the service charge;

The proposal for 2021/22 is to continue setting the temporary accommodation licence fee in line with the permitted Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate, as done in previous years, and to increase services charges by CPI+1%;

Charges for properties not on mains sewerage and shared ownership.

These properties charges for sewerage will be increased in line with the Wessex Water increases for 2021/22 once known. Wessex Water rates for sewerage standing charge per annum and poundage charges are used in the system calculation;

For 2020-21 these are £7.00 per annum for unmetered sewerage standing charge and £1.68 for the poundage charge payable per £ of rateable value of the property;

Wessex Water will publish their new charges in February 2021 (available from their website) for 2021/22;

Shared ownership rental charges will be in accordance with the lease agreement;

Resolved that the report be noted.

18. **Access to Information - Exclusion of the Press and Public**

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RESOLVED that under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the next item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 respectively of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, namely information relating to the financial

or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

19. **Development Report, Seaward Way - Chris Brown**

Seaward Way, Minehead - New Build HRA Low Carbon Homes

Reported that the site located to the east of Minehead town centre close to the A39 and Butlins holiday camp was to be developed for 54 new homes for the Council to showcase an innovative approach to house building and its commitment to affordable housing throughout the district and addressing climate change. The London Energy Transformation Initiative (LETI) standards were being applied to achieve this;

The scheme will re-purpose an existing Council asset into much needed housing stock for the residents in the former West Somerset area, together with community benefit from high performing houses that are cost efficient to maintain. It will also result in the improved general appearance of the area and the gateway to Minehead;

The District had significant demand for affordable homes with a current target of 264 units per year. SWT new build through the HRA complements the affordable homes delivered through housing association partners and planning gain;

Members were being asked to approve a capital budget to fund the delivery 54 new zero carbon homes to be let at an affordable rent on the Seaward Way Site, Minehead. This scheme would support the aspiration to deliver new homes into the community over the next 30 years as per the approved HRA 2020 Business Plan;

Comments made by members of the group included;

The planned new homes look like they are on different orientations, how will this work with the photovoltaic roof panels? *The panels will work on these orientations but will be packed up with batteries will store the energy and then help release it when it is needed so we hope that the combination of PV and battery power will help make sure that people's energy bills are low;*

As part of the Government Climate Change agenda does every new Council development have to electric charging points in their homes? *In the future the Government well insist on that. We will also have our local policies for this. The council has already set aside a fund for electric charging points. We are also keen to look at communal charging points in the future;*

Resolved that the group supported this project.

20. **Development Report, Oxford Inn - Chris Brown**

Oxford Inn New Build HRA Zero Carbon Homes, Taunton

Reported that the repurposing scheme would see the existing building, the Oxford Inn in the Halcon and Lane Estate area demolished with 11 affordable homes built to standards emerging from Zero Carbon Affordable Homes Pilot, subject to planning approval. The site was owned by SWT and fell under the HRA and was formerly operated as a public house.

The home would be built to SWT adopted space standards, which are between 5% and 14% larger than many developer house types. The mix will consist to 9 x 1 bedroom flats and 2 x 2 bedroom houses. The build would be completed by Spring 2023.

Resolved that the group supported this project.

21. **Development Report, North Taunton - Chris Brown**

North Taunton Woolaway Project

Reported that this project was a flagship regeneration project of the SWT's housing development programme and tackled some of the Council's worse performing homes in one of the most socially deprived areas in our County.

The project would see the demolition of 26 homes in Phase A and would start building 47 new homes with the first of these properties completed by August 2020. Phase A was estimated to be completed by September 2022 with the overall project delivering 229 new Council homes and refurbishment of 27 properties over an 8.5 year period rather than the original 10-12 years period.

This was an essential part of the Council's commitment to offer a choice of good quality homes for our residents whatever their age and income, in communities where support was available for those in need.

Comments made by members of the group included:

Concerns with the noise disruption and traffic during the building works were raised, we need to be prepared for residents' complaints; *customer liaison was very good with the demolition process.*

Will Brexit impact this development? *At the moment Covid is the most significant risk to this development. Concrete and timber has now increased in price due to factories not working to full capacity due to this pandemic;*

Resolved that the group supported this project.

22. **Tenant Strategic Group Election Revised Timeline - Sharon Yarde**

Election revised timeline

Reported that the timeline for elections would now be held in April 2021. If 10 or less applications are received the election will not go ahead.

Currently we are looking to use a third party for the ballot due to our Electoral Services being unavailable in May.

An update on the progress will be given at the next meeting in January 2021.

23. **STAR survey update - Sharon Yarde**

Star survey update

Reported that the Star Survey was running to schedule with the paper survey sent to Leaseholders on the 30th October.

The telephone questionnaire commenced on the 10 November and both surveys would run until the end of the month.

The report responses would be published on the website.

Comments from members included;

We have not received performance statistics for a while. Please can this be implemented for next year.

Resolved that the report be noted.

(The Meeting ended at 7.50 pm)