

## **Housing Directorate Report to Housing Tenants' Strategic Group**

**22<sup>nd</sup> March 2021**

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### **Director of Housing and Communities Introduction**

Fortunately since the last report in January, the community position regarding COVID-19 has started to improve, with case numbers reducing dramatically and vaccinations progressing rapidly. Our focus in the next few weeks will be about a return to full service delivery, and some of these issues are set out in this report. We will continue to closely monitor issues.

I have previously reported on the plans for changes to our local government structures with the implementation of a unitary model of Council delivery. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is currently inviting residents, businesses and service providers to have their say on what model of local Government will work best for the county through an online questionnaire.

The District Councils in Somerset are proposing that the five Councils in Somerset are replaced by two Unitary Councils – one in the West and one in the East of Somerset. Somerset County Council is proposing one Unitary Council for Somerset.

The Local Government Secretary will consider both the districts' Stronger Somerset proposal and the alternative single unitary proposal following the consultation before making a decision about which option, if any, to implement. This would be subject to Parliamentary approval.

The consultation period will run for 8 weeks until Monday 19 April. This is a significant decision that will impact on the provision of Council services to all residents in Somerset.

A decision by government is likely to be reached in June 2021. Full details about this are included in the next Housing Newsletter which is due to be issued shortly.

Lastly, in February Council approved our budgets for 21/22 and this included the proposed rent increase which was set out at the last meeting of the Tenants Strategic Group, and so the rent increase will be 1.5%. All tenants have now received written confirmation of this and the rent they will pay for the year to come.

### **Housing Development and Regeneration Team**

The team are working hard to deliver new affordable homes directly by the Council or through partnerships. The team have also been progressing opportunities to support the most vulnerable. In particular we have been working with the

directorate's homeless service to develop the Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy and the contribution that Canonsgrove should provide. Work promoting community led housing in Exmoor is progressing well and the new development at Laxton Road is now complete and fully let.

## **Housing Strategy**

- Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy - The service has produced a draft strategy to respond to the Council's and Government aspiration to maintain accommodation support to reduce or end rough sleeping by 2027. The strategy will help inform the Council's partnership and investment decisions. The Executive are being asked to consider the draft strategy at its March meeting.
- Housing Demand Study – The housing strategy team will shortly conclude its study on housing demand including general need, special need and homelessness. This will be shared for discussion and then inform a supply delivery strategy.

## **HRA New Homes**

- Zero Carbon Pilot – The procurement of a volumetric modular contractor was not successful. The Development Team are progressing zero carbon through a more traditional approach and have appointed architects to progress the five sites through planning. Although some time has been lost, the specification and approach to be adopted is established and the lessons learned have already been adopted on this and other projects. Lessons are also being shared with other local authorities, community led housing and registered provider partners.
- Seaward Way, Minehead – The community has been consulted on this scheme of 54 units, through social media and other formats. The scheme has been submitted to planning and the procurement of a contractor commenced in March. This scheme will be zero carbon and delivered by Autumn 2023. Here are some images of how the site will look:





*Seaward Way, Minehead*

- North Taunton Woolaway Project – The final designs for phase A are complete and contract costs are being finalised through the Pre Construction Services Agreement (PCSA). Members supported the scheme at Full Council in December and a cross party working group is being formed to ensure the Council’s new build housing programme has the focus and support which its scale merits.

An approach is being adopted initially for phase A to achieve 80% zero carbon at first letting and 100% zero carbon when the grid decarbonises (subject to cost negotiations as mentioned above). This approach means a moderate investment in fabric and a larger investment in technology will reduce by nine times the carbon produced by the new homes compared to a standard (part L) new build homes; and by twelve times compared to a Woolaway home. Fuel savings to the customers are calculated to be 70%-80% of current costs and the project is seeking to work with customers to record current costs to provide better analysis against future costs. A report has been placed in the member library on the approach and assumptions.

- Laxton Road – as mentioned above, the properties have now all been successfully let.

### **Housing Property Team**

At the previous meeting in January we advised that following the government’s lockdown/Tier 5 announcements and in particular, the high number of positive COVID cases in Taunton and Wellington at the time, we had reduced service levels to only provide those deemed essential to our customers.

In the light of a reduction in the level of positive COVID cases in the local area, we are now working to move back to a full service delivery. In order to ensure the ongoing safety of our staff and residents when these works are undertaken, we are

reviewing our Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) and prioritising responsive repairs previously placed on hold.

### **Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- The hold placed on non-emergency internal responsive repairs has led to a backlog of these works. We continued to log all requests for these repairs during the COVID service restrictions period, and will be making contact with residents to arrange appointments when available. Plans for tackling the backlog are being implemented, including additional resources for the in-house trade team, and investigating whether external contractors can assist.
- Void repairs continued during the service reduction period, albeit with revised working practices to ensure staff were kept safe. We are implementing plans to improve void repair turnaround times and are reviewing Risk Assessments in line with this objective.

### **Property Safety Compliance**

- We continued to progress with property safety compliance checks and works during the COVID service reduction period, including gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works & fire safety checks, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works. These works are continuing.

### **Capital Programmes**

- All internal capital programme works were placed on hold during the COVID service reduction period. We are working with the relevant contractors to recommence these programmes as soon as possible and are reviewing their risk assessments to ensure the works can be undertaken safely.
- It should be noted that not all capital works programmes planned to be undertaken during 2020/21 will have been completed. We are reviewing the contractual and financial impact of the situation, and developing plans to increase the level of capital programmes to be delivered in 2021/22. Delivering this volume of works will be very challenging, and additional support is likely to be required to achieve this.

### **Asset Management**

- Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments were placed on hold during the COVID service reduction period. These surveys are due to be restarted following a review of the relevant RAMS, and additional external resources will be utilised to accelerate the programmes to improve data in these areas.

## **Housing and Communities Teams**

### **Extra Care Housing**

- SWT continue to work with Way Ahead Care (commissioned by Somerset County Council) in our Extra Care Housing sites. Many of the tenants have now received their 1<sup>st</sup> vaccinations and the schemes are encouraging only essential visits from family and friends, to minimise Covid-19 risks.
- Lettings are still being undertaken. SWT staff continue to complete the weekly on-site Health and Safety checks and some gardening work has still been able to take place.

### **Sheltered Housing**

- The Sheltered Housing team have continued to make welfare calls to tenants, offering support and advice and updating tenants' personal and health information.
- Staff have been undertaking home visits where necessary; for example, for tenants who have partial hearing, learning disabilities or where using the phone presents an additional challenge. Aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, installation of Lifelines and responding to neighbour disputes is all taking place, to maintain business as usual.
- The most recent lockdown has proved challenging for many sheltered tenants, as the weather and limited hours of light have reduced people's opportunities to get out and about and have safe social contact with each other.
- During all visits, staff wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance, which has been regularly updated and reviewed.
- A member of the Sheltered Housing team is available each day to follow up on concerns arising from calls made to sheltered tenants by Deane Helpline. This has enabled staff to check a tenant's welfare, provide support, make referrals and provide help for tenants' families during hospital admissions, and when the tenant has sadly died.
- Gardening works have been able to continue to take place and emergency repairs have also been completed.
- We have been unable to have the planned partial reopening of the meeting halls within the sheltered schemes. However, we are hopeful that this will be possible in the next few months.

### **Lettings**

- Property advertising, shortlisting and verification processes are being carried out in line with the "lean" process. Viewings are still more of a challenge due to the COVID

restrictions and concerns around viewing properties that are still tenanted or are “void” but being worked on by SWT staff.

- The Lettings team are still working to COVID-19 risk assessments and procedures, ensuring they are in line with the SWT safe working practices. “ Virtual” Viewings have taken place and have received positive feedback from tenants.
- As you are aware, the Home Moves Plus Officer (HMP) started in November. The Officer is currently working with thirty households who are either overcrowding or under occupying. So far, we have successfully helped seven tenants to downsize. This ensures that we are making the best use of our stock and that the tenants are adequately housed. An example of the feedback received:

*“Just wanted to take a minute to properly thank you for all the hard work and time you put in for mum and dad to get the bungalow. We started moving them in over the weekend and they couldn't be any happier. Knowing they will live the last years of their lives in such a lovely home and in a lovely safe area means the world to us all as a family. It's the perfect location for them, busy enough but not too busy. Thank you again we are more than grateful and appreciate everything you have done”.*

- Laxton Road Flats: The new properties are now all fully occupied. Positive feedback has been received from the new tenants in relation to the standard of the accommodation. 7 out of the 8 new tenants have been contacted all of whom marked their satisfaction at 8 or above out of 10 giving a satisfaction of around 85%. One tenant commented on how she “Loved” her flat.
- Work continues on the Lettable standard.

## **Income**

- The Rent Recovery team have achieved fantastic results in reducing the rent arrears over this last year. The arrears figure as of 03/03/21 is £542k against a yearly target of £566k. The team continue to follow the Lean Process for rent collection and will continue to offer support to our tenants; both those affected by COVID and those who continue to struggle with their finances.
- We are currently in the process of reviewing our Garage rent recovery process with a view to “Lean” the current process. We plan to follow the same template we used for the tenant rent arrears and strive to make positive change within this service.
- Our Debt and Benefit service continues to help and support our tenants with claiming all the benefits they are entitled to. We are preparing to face an increase with support needed around the updating of UC claims which will be needed at the start of the new financial year to reflect the rent increase.

## **Anti-Social Behaviour**

- The ASB team are keeping busy with at least 45 open cases. Two of these cases have been served with a Notice of Seeking Possession but currently we have

chosen not to proceed into court as the notice has helped to contain the nuisance. The team are closely monitoring the situation in both cases.

- Along with the heavy case work, the team are working hard on pulling together procedures and processes which will be linked to the ASB Policy. In preparation for completing the work over the next two to three months; both Case Managers will be attending external training events to ensure that they are keeping updated on how others are tackling ASB and to gain an insight into good practice in the sector.
- We are working closely with SHAPE solicitors to ensure that there is a good understanding from both sides should a case need to go to court.
- The team are currently exploring the use of a Community Protection Notice (CPN) on a noise nuisance case which has been on-going for some considerable time.
- A CPN can be served if satisfied on reasonable grounds that :
  - (i) the conduct of the individual or body is having a detrimental effect, of a persistent or continuing nature, on the quality of life of those in the locality; and
  - (ii) the conduct is unreasonable.
- The formal steps for this approach is to first serve a Community Protection Warning. If the nuisance continues then this is followed by the CPN and may then lead to SW&T taking court action.
- Feedback nationally from other social housing providers is that they have found that just serving a Community Protection Warning is proving extremely effective in its own right, with very few leading to issue of the formal Community Protection Notice.

### **Tenancy/Estate Team**

- We are currently working on our first tenancy and estate management policy. This will help us to understand the gaps in our service area and ensure that processes are then put in place to provide transparency and consistency from the Case Managers.
- The team are actively working on block and estates inspections. From this, a number of the Case Managers are pulling together project plans for holding skip days on their estate. This will coincide with the Spring Clean Campaign that the organisation is leading on.
- The process we have adopted for notifying tenants about estate inspections initially prompted some comments from our tenants. We reacted quickly to our tenants' feedback by contacting the concerned tenants to explain and embedded some changes as a result. We have since received compliments on how we handled the situation. We continually look at how we can improve our processes to make things better for our tenants.

### **Housing Performance Team**

Since our last report in January we have completed the following key pieces of work:

- The STAR survey is a comprehensive satisfaction survey completed every two years by an independent company (Acuity). The survey was concluded at the time of the last report but since then our Managers have been briefed on the survey results and a tenant friendly summary of our STAR survey has been posted to the website. Work has begun on analysing comments in detail and responding to the points raised.
- We have commenced a self-assessment against the consumer standards.
- We have concluded the elections to the Tenants' Strategic Group.
- £12,000 in grant funding has been issued by our Tenants' Action Group towards initiatives helping young people in housing communities (despite severe disruption to their meeting schedule due to COVID, Tenants' Action Group were supported to hold a special meeting to ensure grants could be awarded).
- Internally we have ensured that regular governance meetings are held to oversee and manage the activities of the housing directorate e.g. programme management meetings, finance and performance and risk meetings.
- Produced internal newsletters for staff allowing us to share housing news.

During the next two months we will:

- Formally complete an induction for Tenants' Strategic Group candidates.
- Create a response and action plan for the results of the STAR survey.
- Continue to support online meetings of our tenants' groups.
- Continue to develop webpages and electronic contact forms.
- Continue to consult on our housing policy documents.
- Continue to strengthen our internal governance through our meetings and reporting.
- Continue self-assessment against the government white paper.