

Housing Directorate Report to Housing Tenants' Strategic Group

24th May 2021

Director of Housing and Communities Introduction

Since the last report, the team have been busy undertaking our end of financial year processes to close our accounts. It has been a challenging year financially with some significant swings due to the impact of Covid but we are broadly on budget for the year which is good.

Our substantial project to replace our current Housing Management ICT system is now in full swing with project team in place, kick off meeting taking place and system configuration work underway to prepare for implantation. There is a long way to go on this project and it will require significant input from people across the service but we are taking steps to backfill gaps as they arise. The project will last well over a year and an exact go live date will be established in due course.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

The team continues to deliver new affordable homes directly by the Council or through partnerships. The team through its direct delivery, enabling and strategic work have been identifying and progressing opportunities to support the most vulnerable in the district, in relation to their housing and support needs.

Housing Strategy

- Somerset Homeless Reduction Board – A successful first meeting of this County wide strategic group was held in April. The group will meet regularly to identify how best to bring about better futures for some of the County's most vulnerable customers. This will include opportunities to introduce new commissioning arrangements for support services.

- Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy - The Executive supported a draft strategy in March. The strategy included the following vision: *'Rough sleeping in SWT will end by 2027, and all single homeless people shall have access to a client centred service that will provide excellent coordinated support within a range of appropriate self-contained accommodation options that can flex according to changing demand'*. The Housing Regeneration and Development function and Homeless service are working closely with partners to deliver the accommodation to support the strategy.
- Hinkley Point C Housing Strategy – The delivery of the strategy is progressing and the current programme will continue until Autumn 2022. The programme contains 13 Housing projects designed to support vulnerable customers and their housing needs and help mitigate some of the housing market pressures caused by a large temporary workforce working within the district.
- 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 it will then inform a supply delivery strategy.

HRA New Homes

- Zero Carbon Pilot including the Oxford Inn – The Development team are progressing zero carbon through a more traditional approach and have appointed architects to progress the five sites through planning. The planning process requires phosphate mitigation to be identified which will delay the progress of the schemes.
- Seaward Way, Minehead – The scheme has submitted its planning application which will be considered by the Planning Committee shortly. The procurement of a contractor commenced in March and bids will be received in May for assessment. This scheme will be zero carbon and delivered by Autumn 2023.
- North Taunton Woolaway Project – The contract documentation for phase A works is nearing completion. Engie are the main contractors and the time scales reflect the complexity of design, the need to ensure value for money in a very uncertain and risk averse development market and the due diligence required for this large contract. The contract also includes a commitment to build low carbon homes. The team and Engie are simultaneously progressing the design and costings for future phases. Tenants and owners in phase B of the project continue to be supported in looking at their rehousing options.

Housing Enabling

- The Gascony Hotel Minehead - The team successfully worked with YMCA Dulverton Group to provide 18 new units for homeless customers in Minehead. These new homes will replace some of the temporary accommodation provided as part of the 'everyone in' government directive. It provides a significant contribution towards the Council's

ambition to end rough sleeping. The team have worked with a number of colleagues to submit a new grant funding request to government for an additional 15 units of accommodation.

- New Affordable Housing Supply – We continue to work with Housing Association partners and developers to maximise affordable homes in the district. It is expected that 2021/2022 will see a peak in new affordable home completions, with over 300 units predicted.
- The team continue to track and consider Government announcements in relation to affordable homes including considering the Government's statement in relation to a new low-cost affordable housing product called 'First Homes'.

Housing Property Team

Following the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, we have resumed services to all areas of activity in the Housing Property team. We have reviewed our Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) to ensure the ongoing safety of our staff and residents as these works recommence. Specific updates on each of these work areas are as follows:

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Both emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are now being undertaken, although the hold placed on non-emergency internal responsive repairs during the lockdown period has led to a backlog of these works. We continued to log all requests for these repairs during COVID and are now making contact with residents to arrange appointments. Plans for tackling the backlog are being implemented, including both additional resources for the in-house trade team and the use of an external contractor. MD Group have been engaged as the external contractor and will start completing backlog repairs during May 2021. We have updated our website, Facebook, sent an electronic email to housing subscribers, and will include an article in our next tenants' newsletter.
- Void repairs continued during the service reduction period, albeit with revised working practices to ensure staff were kept safe. These works continue in line with the appropriate RAMS.

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continued during the COVID service reduction period, including gas safety checks (LGSR), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works & fire safety checks, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works. Again, these works continue in line with the appropriate RAMS.
- An internal audit on housing compliance governance and reporting processes has recently been carried out. This had an objective '*To provide assurance that housing compliance governance and reporting processes are adequately designed and operating effectively*'. This provided an assurance opinion of 'reasonable', with seven priority actions to be completed. We are developing a plan to undertake these actions.

Capital Programmes

- All internal capital programme works were placed on hold during the COVID service reduction period. We have now recommenced these programmes and are looking to complete the works as soon as possible. The contractual and financial impact of the situation has been evaluated, and we are making the necessary arrangements to deal with this situation.
- Many of the capital works programmes planned to be undertaken during 2020/21 have not been completed. We have therefore put plans in place to increase the level of capital programmes to be delivered in 2021/22, although it should be noted that delivering this volume of works will be very challenging. We are looking to recruit additional capital programme staff resources to assist with delivery of these programmes.
- The 2021/22 capital programme, combined with slippage from the 2020/21 programme, will total over £14m. All these works will need to be delivered in 2021/22 and will include major programmes such as:
 - Kitchens – c. £2.1m
 - Bathrooms – c. £1m
 - ASHP's – c. £1.4m
 - Heating improvements – c. £1.9m
 - Insulation and ventilation – c. £0.6m
 - Door entry systems – c. £0.4m
 - External doors – c. £0.2m
 - Fascias and soffits – c. £0.3m
 - Environmental improvements – c. £0.1m
 - Water main replacement works – c. £0.1m
 - Roofing – c. £0.5m
 - Windows – c. £1.4m
 - Property Health and Safety works (Inc. fire safety) – c. £2.0m
 - Special Projects (e.g., major refurbishment, external works, structural works, etc.) – c. £0.9m
- Additional procurement for a range of new capital contracts is also being undertaken, including for a number of the above list of work-streams.

Asset Management

- Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments were placed on hold during the COVID service reduction periods. These surveys have now restarted, including use of additional external resources to accelerate these programmes to improve data in these areas. This will facilitate future capital work programme planning and help us to develop our energy efficiency/affordable warmth programmes of work.
- We are also working to implement the Open Assets module of our Capita software system. We are currently configuring the underlying tables, data cleansing and undertaking user acceptance testing (UAT). We anticipate this module will go live by August 2021.

Housing and Communities Teams

Extra Care Housing

- Way Ahead Care (commissioned by Somerset County Council) staff and Extra Care tenants have been a priority for COVID vaccinations, with many having now had their 2nd injection. All staff continue to work in COVID-safe ways, to minimise risks.
- Lettings are still being undertaken.
- SWT staff continue to complete the weekly on-site Health and Safety checks.
- Gardening and maintenance work has been taking place.
- SWT staff can meet tenants within the communal areas, or visit them in their home where essential.

Sheltered Housing

- The Sheltered Housing team continue to make welfare calls to tenants, updating the annual reviews.
- Staff have been undertaking home visits where necessary; for example, for tenants who have partial hearing, learning disabilities or where using the telephone 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.

- Many sheltered tenants have reported that they have had their first vaccination, with a second planned. Some tenants are keen to return to 'normal' life and others are reporting feeling anxious about getting back out and about. Staff are supporting tenants to have phased returns to build their confidence, involving family and friends for support.
- 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.
- The Sheltered Housing team continue to run the Deane Helpline rota, to follow up on concerns arising from calls made to sheltered tenants by the helpline.
- Gardening works have been able to continue to take place and emergency repairs have also been completed.
- We are planning for the meeting halls to start to re-open in mid-June as the lockdown ends. Preparations will be taking place in the coming weeks.

Lettings

- The Home Move Plus project continues to develop well.
- Paul Hadley the Homeless Plus Officer is currently working with 60 households which is a 100% increase on the March report. He has now helped 18 households to downsize. This is a further 11 since we reported in March.
- We are halfway to the project target of 100 bed spaces released in the 18-month project. We have already achieved 46 bed spaces within a seven-month period.
- The recent housing newsletter article produced positive responses. An article in the next housing newsletter will focus on our more mature service users (the 60+ age group) to consider contacting the Homeless Plus officer.
- Some great feedback that we received from one service user was *"I have given your details to my neighbour as she was very interested in downsizing after I told her how smooth the process was, she told me she has been waiting years to downsize but can never get any help."*
- The Lettings team are working more closely with occupational therapists to assist families who are in need of adapted properties or require adaptations to their existing home. We are currently working with a family who we have helped to move from a four-bed property into smaller, more appropriate accommodation. This has allowed us to market the four-bed, adapted property and enabled those in desperate need to achieve a more fulfilling existence.
- The Lettings team are looking to work in a more normal pre-COVID way, taking a more non-pandemic approach to work. We have reinstated the weekly voids meetings where we work closely with the Voids team to plan works and reduce turnaround times.
- Pre-void inspections have been reinstated, which in turn will help in the marketing and advertising of SWT properties on the Homefinder Somerset website.
- Since the last report in March, we have relet 64 properties in a six-week period. Of those tenants that have responded we are averaging a 91% satisfaction rate of the standard of the property let to them.

Income

- Our Debt and Benefit Team have worked hard to support our tenants at the start of the financial year to update Universal Credit claims with the new rent figures for the year ahead. They continue to support our tenants with benefit claims of all types to maximise their incomes.
- Due to the work needed on the new Open Housing project, we have some reduced capacity within the Rent Recovery team. We are working hard to mitigate the effects this will have on the performance of the team and we are committed to ensuring that the new system works correctly for us. This will enable us to manage rent recovery in a positive way.
- The review of the garage rent recovery process has been delayed slightly, however this will be concluded within the next couple of months. The new process will be set up in Open Housing ready for the go live date.
- We continue to review our “Lean” rent recovery process and make any changes as necessary to help and support our tenants. This includes changes which are made to the court process.
- Over the forthcoming months we have several policies to complete, these include:
 - Debt and Benefit Policy
 - Rent Recovery Policy
 - Garage Rent Recovery Policy.

Tenancy and Anti-Social Behaviour Teams

- The teams are currently facing unusually high sickness which has caused delays to the ongoing projects whilst we prioritise the most urgent cases and attempt to keep the day-to-day customer service running.
- We will recruit temporary cover to help manage workloads in ASB where we have several cases that we are progressing to court.
- There had been a dip in the number of complaints coming into the service, however this has once again increased. Although this is disappointing, in the sector generally tenant’s expectations have increased and this increase is largely due to the temporary reduction in staffing which we will address.

ASB Team

- The ASB team are keeping busy with a high caseload. Several of these cases have been served with a Notice of Seeking Possession and we are now reviewing them as further complaints have been received. We will be looking to review this with our legal representative with possible court action being taken.
- The team are working on streamlining workflows over the coming months to improve efficiency. We have now drafted satisfaction standards and will be looking at tenant's feedback on all closed cases.
- We are also going to record low level nuisance/ASB that is dealt with by the Estate Team so that we can accurately record the levels that we are dealing with across the borough.
- External training events need to be rearranged due to COVID and some sickness. These will be rearranged. The team will be researching further training as this will be required for their own personal development and to enable the organisation to regain a strong insight in good practice across the sector.
- We are moving forward with getting delegated powers to use Community Protection Notices (CPN) for persistent noise nuisance cases and will pilot this on one of our current cases.

Tenancy/Estate Team

- We continue to work on developing a new Tenancy and Estate Management Policy. The team have been working on understanding the gaps in our service area which will put them in a better position to ensure that processes are put in place, providing transparency and consistency from all the Case Managers.
- A proposal for the 'skip days' has now been developed and we are looking to finalise this shortly. We will ensure that we have enough help and support for these days and that Link Power are available to make certain that the event is successful.
- We have developed a backlog of mutual exchanges due to Covid and the recent lockdowns. Following the lifting of lockdown we have made the decision to prioritise the work of surveyors and repairs officers on catching up on repairs work that was also affected by lockdown, but plan to restart mutual exchanges soon. We currently have 26 applications which we need to progress.

Housing Performance Team

Since our last report in March 2021 we have completed the following key pieces of work:

- We have analysed over 1000 comments from the STAR survey along with the results. We have produced an action plan which will be presented to Tenants' Strategic Group during this meeting.

- Attended kick off and board meetings connected with the new housing software implementation (Open Housing).
- Inducted new members of the Tenants' Strategic Group prior to their first meeting at the end of May, supporting use of online technology where needed.
- Produced the draft forward plan for Tenants' Strategic Group.
- Supported our managers to consult our Tenants' Strategic Group on policy documents.
- Supported our Tenants' Action Group to assess grant applications for Youth Initiative Fund and award £12k of funding (activities were delayed due to Covid temporarily halting meetings).
- Supported the responses to complaints within the 10 working day deadline.
- Collated a detailed complaint report based on the first three months of data.
- Started to review how we can improve our complaints process. There is a corporate review planned for June.
- Continued our development of website forms and pages, which we will report upon during this meeting.
- Started an in-depth assessment against the consumer standards part of the white paper.
- Internally we continue to ensure that regular governance meetings are held to oversee and manage the activities of the housing directorate e.g., programme management, finance, performance and risk meetings.
- Started work on spring newsletter content to tenants and leaseholders.
- Set up and held first meeting of internal Engagement Focus Group within SWT to establish best practice.