

## **Somerset West and Taunton Council**

**Tenants' Strategic Group – 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

### **Directorate Report**

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Housing.

Report Authors: Assistant Directors and Housing Performance Manager

#### **1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report**

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group on work being undertaken and progress made by the Housing Directorate since the last TSG meeting in September 2021.

#### **2. Recommendations**

The Tenants' Strategic Group is asked to note this report and are invited to ask questions.

#### **3. Background and Full details of the Report**

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

##### **HRA New Homes, Housing Strategy and Housing Enabling**

- North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) Phase A is progressing with progress on blockwork up to first floor. Equans/Engie continue to

reprofile works to minimise delays caused because of disruption to the material supplies. Immediate highway permissions have been resolved allowing progress on one subphase and permit a road closure. Phase B and Ci decant and buy backs are progressing and the team have successfully purchased the last private dwelling in phase B. The contract for phases B and Ci is being finalised over the next quarter and demolition is timetabled to commence in May. A planning application has been submitted for Phase E, which is the refurbishment phase, and a Social Housing Decarbonisation

Fund grant application has been awarded to help support the cost of these low carbon retrofit homes. It is hoped to appoint contractors for phase E in Spring and for works to start in late Spring.

- The 54 home zero-carbon development at Seaward Way, Minehead, commenced in January. The zero-carbon exemplar scheme which has been featured as a case study in the Good Homes Alliance good practice guide will be complete by October 2024.
- Planning applications for the zero carbon affordable housing schemes, on various sites in Taunton, have been submitted to the local planning authority. These schemes include a phosphate mitigation strategy which is supported by Natural England and the Environment Agency. If the mitigation strategy is approved by the local planning authority the approach could be repeated and create sufficient phosphate credits to support 1000 new homes.
- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit strategy and delivery plan. The strategy will be considered by the Council late 2022/2023 however the principles will influence a significant SWT Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund Wave 2 grant application. SWT has been awarded SHDF Wave 1 funding to support a low carbon retrofit of council homes. The three pillars of the emerging strategy are engaging and supporting our customers, fabric first and then, over time, replacing fossil fuels with renewable heat and power provided via onsite, communal, or grid-based systems. The relationship between fuel poverty and low carbon retrofit will be explicitly considered within the strategy.
- New affordable housing in the district is set to see a higher-than-average number of properties completed this financial year. The pipeline of new units is currently at its strongest in the west of the district, which is unaffected by the phosphate mitigation planning requirements.
- The Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Strategy and delivery plan was approved by Full Council in October and Officers are supporting the delivery of new homeless bedspaces through several partners and direct council supply. The council has been awarded £750k through the government Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme to accelerate the new provision.
- The Housing Enabling team are preparing the district for the impact of First Homes which is a government initiative to increase low-cost home ownership.
- We continue to deliver the Hinkley Point C Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work. This programme is providing new bed space in the district and support to vulnerable customers affected by the change in the housing market because of the uplift of workforce at HPC. A housing needs assessment has recently concluded and discussed with Stogursey Parish Council. SWT is facilitating the Council develop a plan to address the affordable housing need. The service has appointed the Citizens Advice Service to extend its debt and money management service throughout the district and increase its outreach work.

## **Housing Property Team**

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

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken.
- Emergency jobs are being delivered within our defined timescale (24 hours from logging).
- There remains a backlog of non-emergency jobs. This is reducing following the use of external contractors, and we are continuing with procurement of further external support.
- Void repairs are also being undertaken, although returning the properties back to our Lettings team promptly remains a challenge. This is primarily due to delays in asbestos surveys and works, and the availability of electricians.
- We are also investigating software options to schedule and plan void works to help us improve efficiency in this area.

### **Property Safety Compliance**

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken, despite resource challenges. These include 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.
- Additional contractors have been engaged to undertake further electrical inspections (EICR's) and associated remedial works continues.
- Property safety compliance procurement activities also continue, with recent tenders including further electrical inspections (EICR's), and additional asbestos management surveys and extending renewing contracts for the coming financial year taking us forward to unitary.
- Weekly compliance and additional review meetings are being held to carefully monitor and manage all these safety critical areas.

### **Capital Programmes**

- Capital Work programmes continue to be undertaken, with recent contracts commencing including roofing and ventilation.
- Procurement activities also continue with recent tenders including fire-safe flooring to flat block communal areas.
- Recruitment for vacant staff positions is underway, with one role now recruited to and shortlisting undertaken for another.

### **Asset Management**

- Following the Open Assets module of our Capita software system going live, post go live work is now underway, including the further development of a suite of bespoke reports and testing of data and functionality following additional data-loading from stock condition and energy surveys.
- Accelerated programmes of Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments continue to take place.
- Capital work programme planning (for both the 2022/23 financial year and forward plans) is being undertaken in conjunction with the Capital programme team.

## **Housing and Communities Team**

### **Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)**

The officer team has been impacted by Covid, so delivery is concentrating on key tasks:

- The sign-up of new tenants.
- Supporting tenants who are returning home from hospital.
- Health and safety compliance checks at our two extra care schemes including: Kilkenny Court and Lodge Close.
- Carrying out “trusted assessor” visits for those vulnerable tenants who are in urgent need of aids and adaptations to support them within their home.
- Carrying out health and safety checks at sheltered housing schemes.
- Responding to general customer enquiries reported via the service’s Firmstep computer system; and
- Responding to Deane Helpline issues where the tenants have not responded to their usual monitoring call out.

### **Lettings**

- The Lettable Standard document has now been to HMST and was discussed with Tenants Action Group on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020. Work continues to develop the TAG voids viewing properties when they are returned to SWT (Somerset West & Taunton), prior to them being relet. Training will be required for Tenants Action Group members on health and safety. Next meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> March
- 304 properties have been re-let year to date (April to January).
- Customer satisfaction (year to date) is running at 98%. Monthly figure of 93% 31 properties were re-let in January.

## **Income**

- We now have a full team of Rent Recovery case managers. The team continue to work in accordance with the Lean Process and are engaging with tenants to reduce their arrears.
- The Debt and Benefit Officers are now holding surgeries again. They are held in Priorswood Resource Centre every other Tuesday and The Link Centre every Thursday. We will be monitoring how well these are used and will be looking for other venues in the future.
- We are discussing a plan to engage with our tenants for the updating of their rent in Universal Credit in April, it is likely we will send text messages and put information on social media as well as supporting our vulnerable tenants on a 1-2-1 basis.

## **Tenancy/Estates & ASB**

- We have been successful with our recruitment in January and have offered three candidates positions within our Tenancy and Estate Teams. We anticipate all three will be in post by the middle/end of March. This will be the first time since transformation that we have a full permanent team in place and will give us the best possible start for the new financial year.
- Due to the recent extreme weather, we have dealt with a family whose property was damaged by a large tree that was on neighbouring land; we co-ordinated our efforts with our other colleagues in repairs and open spaces and the landowner and within four days the property was deemed to be structurally sound for the family to return.
- The team are also noticing that as we are moving out of Covid that several vulnerable tenants are having to be safeguarded, due to self-neglect and serious mental health issues. This work does take time as we must work closely with a range of multi agencies partners to ensure that we get the right support plans in place for the tenant to continue to sustain their tenancies.
- The team are now working to being 100% compliant with sterile blocks.
- As a team we have now seen a dramatic drop in complaints about the service and we hope to continue making improvements for this to continue to be the case.
- ASB - In January, the team closed over 30 outstanding cases; and currently working with 39 open cases – 10 of which have been ongoing for longer than 12 months. One of the cases is being progressed into Court and the ASB Case Manager is working closely with SHAPE legal. The others are complex neighbour nuisances' cases with two or more households involved.

- The team are also actively working with our multi-agency partners to address the youth gang culture that has been ongoing in Taunton for several months. We are engaging with our families and the children social services getting the tenants and the youths involved to sign up to acceptable behaviour contracts which is a non-legal method of getting them to change their behaviour. These contracts are then monitored closely by the multi-agency partners.

### **Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team (Shari Hallett)**

- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group.
- The Tenants' Action Group met to consider grant applications and will be making their awards shortly from their Child and Youth Initiative Fund.
- Posters have been designed and distributed inviting new members to join the Tenants' Action Group, articles also appear in every newsletter.
- A "kiosk" (screen with internet access) has been funded for the Priorswood Community Centre; installation date scheduled for March 2022.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and make progress.
- The tenants' spring newsletter is being designed ready to print and arrive on doorsteps in March.
- Internally we continue to support the meetings that provide us good governance of our activities e.g., programme meeting, performance meeting, risk meeting, etc.
- Our assessment against the white paper has commenced
- Monthly House mark Pulse data is submitted so that we can benchmark with other housing providers.
- We are working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- The policy review work with the HQN (Housing Quality Network) has commenced.
- We have received the final report from Abri Employment Support Services (formerly known as Inspired to Achieve) who have provided employment support to Somerset West and Taunton tenants from February 2016 until January 31st, 2022. They have received 668 referrals to the scheme over 6 years and have engaged with 440 tenants. Over the six years there have been 135 employment outcomes for SWT tenants.
- The Somerset West and Taunton Community employment hubs offer bespoke individual support towards work for anyone whether employed, unemployed or facing redundancy or those who wish to upskill or thinking about a career change. The scheme that Abri was running has now been passed to the SWT Community Employment Hubs which are coordinated up by Georgie Bowden and Lolanda Tocco and supported by a team of trained volunteers. We are planning to have 5 new hubs open for face-to-face appointments in Wellington, Taunton, Priorswood and Halcon by the 17<sup>th</sup> April. The Youth Hub is already operational in Minehead (16-25 yr. olds). Throughout covid the

Hubs have been providing support via online and telephone and this will continue in addition to the face to face (appointment) sessions

**4. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)**

A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

**5. Are there any Finance / Resource, Legal implications directly to do with this report?**

There are no financial implications directly to do with the recommendations in this report

**6: Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?**

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

**7. Are there any Data Protection Implications?**

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

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