

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – 26th September 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

- North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) Phase A is progressing with the first couple of completions due and visits are being arranged for members of the Tenants Strategic Group, Tenants Low Carbon Retrofit Working Group and members in September. These will be the first 2050 zero carbon compliant new build council homes. Equans/Engie continue to work well on site and the contract for demolition and new build of phase B and Ci is being drawn up. Unfortunately, inflation is creating problems throughout the economy and building homes is affected as significantly as any other sector. We recognise that the increase cost of building homes is no longer a risk but

a reality. The housing service will continue to review its capital programmes with finance colleagues to manage inflationary pressures as best as possible.

- The 54 home zero-carbon development at Seaward Way, Minehead, commenced in January. The zero-carbon exemplar scheme will shortly commence piling works. Discussions on the schemes Electric Vehicle Charging Points and technology to monitor carbon efficiency are well advanced.
- The service had six planning applications for the zero-carbon affordable housing awaiting presentation to planning committee. The service is progressing one and withdrawing one application. Four applications will remain in the planning pipeline until agree phosphate mitigation approaches are confirmed.
- Full Council approved in September investment in ten woolaway homes in Oake. These homes will have comprehensive 'all walls out' refurbishment and will achieve a zero-carbon standard. SWT calculation believe the energy required to heat these improved homes will reduce by three quarters.
- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit strategy and delivery plan. A new tenants' low carbon retrofit group has met and is influencing the strategy and delivery plan. The strategy will be presented at a Members Briefing in September and progress to Full Council in December 2022. SWT has been awarded SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund) Wave 1 and is bidding for Wave 2 funds. In addition, a significant Energy Company Obligation fund has been reserved by a large energy provider for a neighbourhood based ECO4 programme.
- The Asset management team is refining how they handover capital investment programmes to the capital programme team including greater detail on the properties included in the five-year medium term financial plan (MTFP), alignment of retrofit and decent homes programmes, alignment of component specifications to ensure retrofit, decent homes, compliance and repair service needs.
- Capital programme verification and low carbon retrofit surveys are being prioritised to support capital programme delivery 2022-2025
- New affordable housing in the district has seen 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. Future supply in the district is at risk due to the inability of private and social housing developers to progress developments without a phosphate mitigation strategy. As time passes this will place greater demand on existing supply and home finder.
- 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 Round three and a further £80k in Round 4.
- 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. The service has submitted a request to EDF for a further wave of funding

(£390k) to continue many projects up to December 2023 and discussions continue by the council in relation to additional funding as significant housing demand pressure continues to create problems for the housing market.

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).
- The backlog of non-emergency responsive repairs has now been eliminated, following the use of external contractors. MD Group are providing ongoing support to a small proportion of repairs where required to cover internal staff resource shortfalls.
- Undertaking void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard remains a challenge, although performance continues to improve in this area. Again, we are working with MD Group to support on undertaking some of our Major Voids (those with two or more key elements required).
- We are undertaking a recruitment process for a Maintenance Manager, following the previous postholder leaving SWT.
-

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken. 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.
- An accelerated programme, using further additional contractors, to undertake outstanding electrical inspections (EICR's) and associated remedial works continues.
- Weekly compliance and additional review meetings are being held to carefully monitor and manage all these safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- Several capital work programmes are on-site, including kitchen and bathroom replacements and fire safety works (replacement fire doors and emergency lighting). Progress on these programmes is slower than desired however, and we are working with the relevant contractors to seek improvements on output.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), as well as our Retrofit aspiration.
- A new Interim Capital Programme Manager has been recruited.

Asset Management

- Post 'go-live' work on the Open Assets module of our Capita software system is now underway, following the Open Housing implementation.
- Programmes of Stock Condition Surveys continue to take place.
- Capital work future programme planning is being undertaken, including for both DHS requirements, and retrofit aspirations.

Housing and Communities Team

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- The officer team is now almost back to capacity, although there are the usual absences for summer leave, so a more normal service has returned to tenants.
- The team continue to complete; sign ups; enrol tenants with Deane Helpline; fit lifelines; annual reviews; aids and adaptations assessments; manage 'ending well' when a tenant dies.
- A temporary member of staff has started, for a 3-month period, to enable the team to catch up on the overdue annual reviews.

- The team are now completing the bi-monthly estates and block checks within their patches, following up with tenants, as needed.
- The team continue to work hard to promptly respond to general customer enquiries, reported via Firmstep.
- The DHL daily rota continues to be staffed Responding to Deane Helpline issues where the tenants have not responded to their usual monitoring call out.
- Some new furniture is being purchased for the meeting halls at Creedwell Orchard and Heathfield.
- Staff are facing some challenges when a tenant dies and there are no next of kin available to end the tenancy, and where tenant (with no next of kin) no longer has the capacity to live independently, and is moved into Nursing care, by Adult Social Care. The challenges are re: how the tenancy is ended, as this can happen in different ways, which can take a varied amount of time to complete.
- A successful skip day and community BBQ was held at Creedwell Orchard in partnership with local PCSO's, to enable people to get rid of unwanted belongings.
- We have supported some tenants living in upper floor flats to move to ground floor flats and bungalows, as their needs have changed, and they have no longer been able to manage the stairs safely, or easily exit if there was a fire emergency.
- We have been working with the RSI Team, to support Housing First clients to move into sheltered housing and co-working to ensure that this can be successful for these tenants. There have been some challenges regarding this, in terms of individuals not being able to access care in their homes, due to the lack of available carers.

Lettings

- Satisfaction surveys are now being sent out via email. Uptake has not been high at this stage- The previously report IT issue has been resolved however uptake remains low so a hybrid approach is being adopted. Any feedback that can be used to improve services is being responded to. Current satisfaction is 80%.
- Since the last report in June a further 83 properties have been re-let.
- The average turnaround times were 49 days in June 40 days in July and 50 days in August.
- In that period there has been the implementation of the "Open Housing" software and significant annual leave within the lettings team in August.

Income Team

- Following interviews, a new case manager has been recruited into the team. The appointed person will join the team early in October 2022 and brings a wealth of previous experience after having carried out a similar role with another local authority housing provider;
- The team's two debt and benefit advisors have been working alongside the Department for Work and Pensions and our local community employment hubs, as well as a range of other organisations to deliver a community event on the 14th September 2022 in Taunton. Support and advice will be available to those attending, including Citizen Advice, Christians Against Poverty, the DWP, Credit Union, SPARK, Navigate, Somerset Waste Mr Fixy and the Repair Café, Somerset Independence Plus, Libraries and the Centre for Sustainable Energy;
- Following a backlog of court hearings, Taunton County Court are getting back to normal in terms of the administration of court applications.
- The team have successfully implemented their new rent accounting modules within the Open Housing system with all officers receiving comprehensive training. The team are now looking into utilising automation software that encourages customers to get in touch. If successful, this will provide the team with more capacity to focus on the most complex rent recovery cases.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- After a period of stability within the team we now hold a vacancy for a tenancy/estate Case Manager. One of our temporary case managers has moved out of the area. We are now waiting for authorisation to recruit to this position as soon as possible as the team continue to be very busy.
- The Skip day events are now coming to an end; these events have continued to be very popular and have been well utilised by our tenants. This year, we did experience ongoing problems with the skip provider, and we will be looking to avoid these issues in future or seeking an alternative skip provider.
- The team are now getting familiar with Open Housing, and this appears to be going well. As we move away from tenants' enquiries going into Firmstep and utilising Open Housing; we are noticing that the triaging of these enquiries needs to improve, we will be working with our customer champions to get this right.
- The ASB team have had a busy Summer with ASB; with several cases now moving to legal action or due to enter court stage imminently.
- We have recently received good news from our specialists' contractor dealing with the severe infestation of bed bugs to two neighbouring properties. Terminix have confirmed that one property is now officially bed bug free; the sniffer dog has now thoroughly checked the property; after three months of extensive treatments. We will shortly be having the property thoroughly cleaned before the tenants moves back in. Next week we hope to have similar feedback from the adjoining property. Once work is completed, we have a six

month guarantee but we are hopeful that the bed bugs have been finally eradicated.

Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team (Shari Hallett)

- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. On the 23rd August 2022 we held our second joint tenant meeting with Homes in Sedgemoor, specifically to engage tenants on LGR. As a result of these meetings a set of Frequently Asked Questions has been produced for tenants in SWT and HiS. This is now live on our website and will be published in the next newsletter. The date of the next meeting has been provisionally set as 24th November 2022.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and has agreed a set of actions including several new webpages which are being worked on and will be live shortly.
- A new Low Carbon Working group for tenants has their first meeting in July and had meetings in August and September.
- The tenants' autumn newsletter is being produced ready to land on doorsteps in October.
- We are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- The policy review work with the HQN (Housing Quality Network) continues and TSG members will receive revised policy documents.
- Our headline Tenant Satisfaction Survey results (completed in May 2022) have been received and were reported at the last meeting in this report. This month we are bringing a more detailed report.
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. We are now finalising the tenant portal which we hope to be live in October. The portal will give tenants direct access to rent balances, tenancy and personal details, repair history, view communication, view housing officers. It will also give links to make payments and raise repairs and other communications.
- We have published our assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (which was reported to the July meeting) on our website.

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

Name of Contact Officers: Shari Hallett

Telephone number: 07557 003944

Email address: s.hallett@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk