

Public Agenda Pack



Notice of Meeting of

TENANTS' STRATEGIC GROUP

Monday, 24 July 2023 at 6.00 pm

John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE

To: The members of the Tenants' Strategic Group

Chair: Luke Manning

Vice-chair: Colin England

Alex Akhigbemen

Councillor Marcus Barr

Jessie Bunn

Paul Cram

Kevin Hellier

Ivor Hussey

Samantha Rickward

Councillor Federica Smith-
Roberts

Councillor Fran Smith

For further information about the meeting, including how to join the meeting virtually, please contact democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk.

All members of the public are welcome to attend our meetings and ask questions or make a statement **by giving advance notice** in writing or by e-mail to the Monitoring Officer at email: democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk by **5pm**

This meeting will be open to the public and press, subject to the passing of any resolution under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A: Access to Information.

The meeting will be webcast and an audio recording made.

Issued by (the Proper Officer) on 13 July 2023

AGENDA

Tenants' Strategic Group - 6.00 pm Monday, 24 July 2023

1 Apologies for absence

To receive apologies.

2 Welcome from the Chair

To receive a welcome from the Chair.

3 Minutes from the previous meeting (Pages 5 - 10)

To approve the minutes of the previous meeting of the Somerset West and Taunton Council Tenants' Strategic Group held on 22 May 2023.

4 Engagement Group Updates (Pages 11 - 16)

To receive an update.

5 Finance Out-turn Report (Pages 17 - 28)

To note the report.

6 Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code self-assessment (Pages 29 - 52)

To note the report.

7 Communication Plan (Pages 53 - 56)

To note the report.

8 Directorate Report- Senior Management (Pages 57 - 64)

To note the report.

9 Any other Business

The Chair to consider any other business.

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Minutes of a Meeting of the Tenants' Strategic Group held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Monday, 22 May 2023 at 6.00 pm

Present:

Luke Manning (Chair)
Colin England (Vice-Chair)

Alex Akhigbemen
Paul Cram
Samantha Rickward
Cllr Fran Smith

Jessie Bunn
Ivor Hussey
Cllr Marcus Barr
Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

In attendance:

Other Members present remotely:

1 Apologies - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Mr Kevin Hellier.

2 Welcome from the Chair - Agenda Item 2

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked the clerk to read out the housekeeping announcement.

3 Minutes from the previous meeting - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27th March 2023 were circulated with the Agenda.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the previous meeting of 27th March 2023 were approved nem con.

4 Engagement Groups Update - Agenda Item 4

The Chair gave an overview of the various engagement groups and their activities which were noted.

5 Introduction to the Housing Directorate (verbal report) - Agenda Item 5

The Service Director gave an overview with a set of slides. The Housing side of the Council was a cohort of circa 399 staff with an annual budget of £80m. The service was split into Landlord Services and General Fund Services, alongside the Business Plan, Finance and Growth. An overview of the Directorate Plan for 2023-24 was given. Embedding the housing service within Somerset Council was a key aim. There would be a focus on core services. There would be a new approach to communication with tenants. The Council would deliver its capital programme including grant funded works. There was an increased opportunity to measure in-house service against Homes in Sedgemoor.

During discussion of this item the following comments/questions were raised (summarised):

- The encouragement of apprenticeships and grants was supported with the potential for government grants.
- Discussion took place on the change to a tenancy agreement and the consultation process. Legal input would be sought.
- Concern was raised around the need to build more single occupier properties.
- *There was a desire to build more properties as part of the Business Plan which was a challenge. The Council followed the demand surveys undertaken.*

The update was noted and the Chair thanked the Service Director for his report.

6 Performance Report for Quarter 4 2022/23 - Agenda Item 6

The Housing Performance Lead gave a brief overview of the Performance Report which had been circulated beforehand. The report provided an update on the

housing performance through key performance measures and financial information for the fourth quarter of 22/23 (January-March 2023) and included the end of year position

RESOLVED that the housing scorecard for quarter 4 (January – March 2023) and the end of year position were noted.

7 Tenants' Strategic Group Annual Meeting Plan - Agenda Item 7

This report was to update the Tenants Strategic Group on the agendas for meetings for the forthcoming year.

During discussion of this item the following comments/questions were raised (summarised):

- A request was made for an Agenda Item on the 30 year business plan at a future meeting.

RESOLVED that the Group noted the plan and made comments/suggestions to the forward plan.

8 Annual Complaints Report for 2022/23 including communications complaints deep dive report - Agenda Item 8

The Senior Case Manager gave an overview of the Annual Complaints Report which had been circulated. The key point to recognise was the operation of the new Somerset Council's complaints policy and works alongside the Ombudsman's Code. All complainants are contacted now as part of the process at Stage 1 and 2. There had been 111 compliments over the year which was considered positive.

During discussion of this item the following comments/questions were raised (summarised):

- Queries were raised around the specifications of bins to ensure compliance with Fire Regulations.
- Further information was sought on I-Casework monitoring.
- *This provided a better Audit within the system itself, e.g. time spent on complaints and allowed Customers to view them themselves.*
- Concern was raised over the volume of over-turned Stage 2 complaints and who was involved in assessing these.
- *The benefits of the two stage policy were to allow the Council to review and to take a second look. A different person in the service area works with the Housing Performance team to review.*
- The breakdown of Housing and Communities and what area of the business

referred to was sought.

- It was raised that Communication seemed to be a large issue in the number of complaints. The report did not set out what mitigation was to do in detail to address these communication problems?
- *The Low Carbon and Communication Group had majored on this issue over the last five months. More Tenant Liaison and communication officers were needed. A plan was being brought forward and would be shared as an action point.*

The report was noted.

9 Housing Directorate Report - Agenda Item 9

The report updated the Tenants' Strategic Group on work being undertaken and progress made by the Housing Directorate since the last TSG meeting in March 2023.

During discussion of this item the following comments/questions were raised (summarised):

- Further detail was sought on the pilot mentioned in relation to procurement and supply chains, new building and resident health and safety strategy.
- *Traditionally the Council had used the Direct Labour Organisation and from a variety of local merchants. The operation had been reviewed for Best Value and to look at from a logistical perspective.*
- *The Government had increased requirements on landlords as part of the Health and Safety issue. The responsibilities lay with the Senior Management and Executive of the Council. The relevant statute requires competence at all levels, including from the Tenants Strategic Group, who had recently received training.*
- Praise was given on the partnership working with Adult Mental Health Services.
- Clarity was sought on potential overcrowding where relatives are fleeing certain situations, which offered the Council opportunities to offer interventions.
- A new contractor was being sought for major surplus voids and why do these exist in the first place?
- *The resources of the team were insufficient to deal with the demand.*

The report was noted.

10 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 10

None was discussed.

(The meeting ended at Time Not Specified)

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CHAIR

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Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group –24th July 2023

Engaged Tenant Group Update -July 2023

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

Report Authors: Sharon Yarde

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

To inform the Tenants Strategic Group of the work being carried out by the tenant engagement groups within Somerset Council.

2. Recommendations

For the group to acknowledge for reference

3. Update from our Engagement Groups

TENANTS' ACTION GROUP (TAG)

Purpose

To encourage a strong partnership between Council staff, the Tenants' Strategic Group, Councillors (particularly the Portfolio Holder and Shadow Portfolio Holder), and Tenant Representatives To support the Council to engage and empower tenants

and to represent the interests of tenants of the Council. To focus on community and neighbourhood issues and give the Council feedback on how it can improve its services. Consult with housing services and make recommendations for improvement. Provide feedback to the Tenants' Strategic Board on issues arising from meetings and to allocate funds to appropriate community projects.

Update

TAG have recently had a resignation from a long-standing member due to ill health and recruited a new member and one more member will be joining in August, this will take the Group to (9). They have agreed to move meetings to various meeting halls across the district and to meet with tenancy case managers, so that together they can identify possible uses of the Estate Improvement Fund to enhance our estates.

Leycroft Grove continues to be on the agenda and appears to be moving in the right direction now, hoping that work will commence shortly.

The group visited Trinity Road flats in connection with an application for funding, whilst visiting it was noted that the gardens had not been done in line with sheltered housing specification, this matter was raised with the Grounds Maintenance Team who have visited and carried out the necessary work.

In the last meeting two applications for funding from the Estate Improvement fund were considered by the group.

Agreed to fund a Patio at Trinity Road flats so that the residents can enjoy their garden. Also agreed funding for bench and outside tap at Lane Estate.

The group also assessed 2 applications for the Child Youth Initiative Fund:

Neroche Woodlanders and Escape, both applications were passed.

VOIDS

Purpose

To review the turnaround times for VOIDS, to understand the challenges and to ensure that our homes are meeting the lettable standard.

Update

This Group was set up on 6 September 2022 for six months, completion of the group has been delayed due to some of the void properties not being ready for inspection due to the extent of work needed to turn them around.

This Group was set up on 6 September 2022 for six months, completion of the group has been delayed due to some of the void properties not being ready for inspection due to the extent of work needed to turn them around.

This group has looked at 9 properties, including flats and houses that have been passed back to the council in varying states, from very good to appalling. The group has re-visited each property before being re-let to check against the lettable standard. To date all properties have met the standard and the group will provide a full report in the next TSG meeting.

GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

Purpose

To work with the grounds maintenance team and Stephen Boland to ensure that the service provided complies with the Grounds Maintenance Schedule. To address the comments about grounds maintenance made in the last Tenant Satisfaction Measures and to make grounds improvements in our communities.

Update

Members met and looked around Lane Estate, photos were taken and then a meeting held with Darren Hill, Nick Watkins, Stephen Boland, Alan Carlton, John Beaman and Sharon Sloan. Pictures and areas were discussed, and a plan put in place to rectify the issues identified. The slope for disabled access has been cordoned off as it does not meet H&S legislation and is too steep, Ian Candlish is looking at how this can be rectified. The park has now been cut leaving longer grass in areas with trees and the tenants are happy with the 'new look.' A bench in the park was also replaced as it was dangerous. The group have now looked at Hope Corner Lane and have held a subsequent meeting to discuss the area with Jack Mount. This group have already made a difference to areas and are going to continue.

DAMP AND MOULD (Members from both TAG and TSG)

Purpose

To monitor the implementation of the Damp and Mould Action Plan. To ensure that it is delivered as promised within a reasonable time scale.

Update

The group meets every 2 months to review the Damp & Mould Action Plan and to ensure that it is on track for delivery. In the last meeting the group helped create the questions that all visiting officers will ask tenants when they visit their homes as part

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of the Damp and Mould procedure. They are also looking into arranging a Damp and Mould event.

LOW CARBON/COMMS (Members from TAG and TSG and new tenant representatives)

Purpose

To help create the Low Carbon strategy and a communication strategy. Understand retrofit and how it is achieved.

Update

The Low Carbon strategy was taken to full council and agreed in December 2022. A draft of the Communication strategy was reviewed by the group on 24th May and their approval was given. This group is due to end in September 2023.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING

Purpose

To ensure that the Capital Programme is on track to deliver.

Update

At the time of writing this report Sam Rickward hadn't met with Nigel Loxton yet.

TENANCY AGREEMENT MEETING

Purpose

To look at the tenancy agreement in conjunction with Homes in Sedgemoor (HiS) and change where necessary.

Update

Paul Cram from Somerset Council and Craig Green from HiS are meeting with Simon Lewis and a core group of managers to 'walk through' their current Tenancy Agreement and suggest constructive changes.

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4. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

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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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Tenants' Strategic Group: 24th July 2023

Name of Report: Somerset West and Taunton Council - Housing Revenue Account Financial Monitoring - Outturn Position 2022/23

Report Author: Kerry Prisco (Management Accounting and Reporting Lead)

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report contains information related to Somerset West and Taunton Council's (SWT) Housing Revenue Account's (HRA) financial performance for the 2022/23 financial year. The outturn figures included are provisional subject to the completion of the external audit of the statutory financial statements. The audit is due to be completed between July and September with the findings due to be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee on 27th September this year.
- 1.2 The **revenue outturn position** for the financial year 2022/23 is as follows:
- 1.3 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue Outturn position for 2022/23 is a net overspend of £227k (0.8% of gross income).
- 1.2 The significant reasons for the variance being reported include:
- 1.3 **Depreciation:** the overspend of £1.420m relates to a combination of a technical accounting update requiring components to have a maximum useful life of 70 years, as well as an increase in year-end 'existing use' valuations driven by the effects of economic conditions impacting upon house price inflation.
- 1.4 **Capital Debt Repayment:** the underspend of £1.021m was a strategic financial decision to offset the adverse variation on depreciation described above. The Council still made a voluntary repayment provision using existing capital receipts.
- 1.5 **Maintenance:** the overspend of £455k relates to the ongoing repairs and maintenance of the housing stock through void activity undertaken to ensure our Lettable Standard is met before reletting. Whilst this is a very demand led and reactive service based on the condition of the properties being returned this service is experiencing an increase in cost pressures as inflation drives up the cost of materials (as seen nationally).
- 1.6 **Tenancy Management:** the overspend of £339k relates to an increase in staffing costs due to additional resources required to manage the increasing number of cases raised by tenants following the aftermath of COVID.
- 1.7 **Net Interest Receivable:** due to the reduction in estimated spend on the capital programme and favourable treasury management activities, the HRA received net interest on reserves in excess of the capital financing requirement of £317k.

- 1.6 The **reserves position** for 2022/23 is as follows:
- 1.7 The **unearmarked reserves** are projected to be £2.986m which is £986k above the recommended minimum balance of £2m.
- 1.8 The **earmarked reserves** are projected to be £258k.
- 1.8 The **capital outturn position** for 2022/23 is as follows:
- 1.9 The **actual spend** on the HRA Capital Programme during 2022/23 was £18.520m (see **Appendix D**).
- 1.10 A **budget return** of £8.814m is being proposed across the HRA Capital Programme. Section 10 and **Appendix D** provides more information.
- 1.11 A **carry forward** of £85.861m is being proposed for schemes in 2022/23 and future years (see **Appendix D**).

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Tenants' Strategic Group is asked to note this report and are invited to ask questions.
- 2.2 The Executive is recommended to:
- 2.3 Note the reported Housing Revenue Account Budget overspend of £227k in 2022/23 to be funded from Unearmarked Reserves.
- 2.4 Note the reported HRA Unearmarked Reserves Balance of £2.986m as at 31 March 2023.
- 2.5 Note the Capital Outturn position.
- 2.6 Approve the proposed reductions to the Capital Programme Budget of net £8.814m for underspends on schemes where budget is no longer required, and the continuation of £97.809m approved budget rolled forward for the 2023/24 Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme (as per **Appendix A**).

3 Background and Full details of the Report

- 3.1 This report informs Members of SWT's financial outturn (a comparison of net spending against the budget for the year) for revenue and capital budgets in 2022/23 for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

- 3.2 Community Scrutiny and the Executive have received quarterly budget monitoring reports throughout the year which have highlighted variances from budgets and comments from the budget holders, as well as summarising the main risks and uncertainties as explained above.
- 3.3 The outturn figures contained in this report are provisional at this stage. The financial outturn has been taken into account when preparing the Council's Draft Statement of Accounts, which is due to be approved by the Assistant Director – Finance (S151 Officer) at the end of June, and is now subject to review by the Council's External Auditor. Should the External Auditor identify the need for any changes to the Accounts these will be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee on 27th September this year.

HRA Revenue Outturn Position

- 4.1 The HRA is a ring-fenced, self-financing, account used to manage the Council's housing stock of 5,652 properties during the year, with the Council acting as the Landlord.
- 4.2 The Council retains all rental income to meet the costs of managing and maintaining the housing stock, as well as meeting the interest payments and repayment of capital debt.
- 4.3 **Revenue Outturn Position:** The revenue outturn position for the financial year 2022/23 for the HRA is a net overspend of £227k (0.8% of gross income). Table 1 below shows a high level summary of the revenue outturn against budget.

Table 1: HRA Revenue Outturn Summary

	Current Budget	Outturn	Variance	
	£000	£000	£000	%
Gross Income	-28,282	-27,944	338	1.2%
Service Expenditure	16,611	16,716	106	0.4%
Other Operating Expenditure & Income	11,672	11,454	-217	-0.8%
Variance	0	227	227	0.8%

- 4.4 The variances to budget are shown in more detail in Table 2 and further explanations for variances over £50k below.

Table 2: Summary of Outturn Variances

	Current Budget	Outturn	Outturn	Q3	Q2	Q1
	£000	£000				
			Variance £000			
Dwelling Rents	-25,581	-25,430	150	-46	-54	-139
Non-Dwelling Rents	-767	-703	64	58	16	49
Charges for Services / Facilities	-1,649	-1,537	111	93	106	-2

Other Income	-286	-274	13	-43	16	14
Sub-Total Gross Income	-28,282	-27,944	338	60	84	-78
Service Expenditure:						
Development & Regeneration	60	-16	-76	27	-15	-5
Community Resilience	158	143	-15	0	0	-6
Tenancy Management	2,985	3,324	339	212	248	186
Maintenance	5,640	6,085	445	442	320	496
Assets	420	342	-79	-78	-24	-1
Capital Investment	563	333	-230	-196	-262	14
Compliance	1,829	1,695	-134	-127	-115	-150
Performance	4,954	4,810	-144	-286	-236	31
Pay Award Shortfall	0	0	0	0	0	269
Sub-Total Service Expenditure	16,611	16,716	106	-7	-82	834
Central Costs / Movement in Reserves:						
Revenue Contribution to Capital	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interest Payable	2,883	2,714	-69	-95	-88	-94
Interest Receivable	-83	-330	-248	-348	11	83
Change in Provision for Bad Debt	180	-120	-300	0	0	0
Depreciation	7,800	9,220	1,420	1,322	1,427	0
Capital Debt Repayment	1,021	0	-1,021	-1,021	-1,021	0
Movement In Reserves	-129	-129	0	0	0	0
Sub-Total Central Costs / Movement in Reserves:	11,672	11,454	-217	-144	329	-12
Net Surplus(-) / Deficit for the Year	0	227	227	-91	330	745

Income

- 4.5 **Dwelling Rent Income:** The budgeted income for 2022/23 is £25.581m, which reflects an assumption of 2% void losses and applying a 52-week year. The outturn position for dwelling rent income is an under recovery against budget of £150k which is in part due to timings of RTB sales and higher levels of voids especially in temporary accommodation stock. This includes £69.4k of write offs during the year (see section 5).
- 4.6 **Non-Dwelling Rents:** the budgeted income for 2022/23 is £767k. The outturn position is an under recovery of 64k mainly due to the service being unable to reduce void levels

as anticipated within the budget. The budget for 2023/24 has removed this expectation and is set based on current occupancy levels.

- 4.7 **Charges for Services / Facilities:** The budgeted income of £1.649m for 2022/23 includes (a) £1.406m for the Service Charge Income for Dwellings (after discounts have been applied to tenants such as Piper Charge to Sheltered Housing and Extra Care) less an average 2% void loss and applying a 52-week year, (b) £233k for Leaseholder Charges for Services, and (c) £10k for Meeting Halls.
- 4.8 The Leaseholder Charges for Services is forecasting an under recovery of income of £109k. The leaseholds are invoiced a year in arrears. The routine repairs continued to be low again last year due to COVID and lockdown. The major repairs were also lower and capped at £250 again.

Expenditure

- 4.9 **Development & Regeneration:** A new budget was added for 2022/23 to support the Social Housing Development Fund bids and production of the Retrofit Strategy. The bid, if successful, will provide significant subsidy to support the delivery of the zero carbon retrofit programme. These funds were, in the end, not required, and the budget has since been removed from the budget for 2023/24.
- 4.10 **Tenancy Management:** This area covers lettings, supported housing, rent recovery, leaseholders and other tenancy management support activities. The total current budget is £2.985m and it is forecasting an overspend of £339k. This mainly relates to an overspend on staffing costs due to additional resources required to manage the increasing number of cases raised by tenants following the aftermath of COVID, as well as backfill for maternity and sick leave and the pay award. Part of the overspend relates to a budget saving for 2022/23 by undertaking RTB surveys using our in-house resources, however this resource is now unavailable, and the activity is now being procured externally.
- 4.11 **Maintenance:** The majority of this overspend relates to the ongoing repairs and maintenance of the housing stock through void activity undertaken to ensure our Lettable Standard is met before reletting. Whilst this is a very demand led and reactive service based on the condition of the properties being returned this service is experiencing an increase in cost pressures as inflation drives up the cost of materials (as seen nationally). There is an in-house initiative called the "Leaving Well" scheme which aims to work with and support the tenants to leave their homes in a suitable manner to reduce the time and cost of work then required on void properties before reletting. Since the Q1 report, and in light of the predicted overspend, the opportunities for capitalisation have been revisited and maximised within the code of practice.

- 4.12 **Assets:** This variance relates the £90k budget estimate for 2022/23 on SAP EPCs and Stock Validation which are now being covered and paid for as part of the majors and improvement capital programme. This change has been reflected in the budgets for 2023/24.
- 4.13 **Capital Investment:** The Capital Investment Team are responsible for driving the delivery of the Majors and Improvement capital programme. Since the Q1 report, and in light of the predicted overspend, the opportunities for capitalisation have been revisited and these salary costs are now being capitalised. This saving is offset in part by an overspend on pre-planned maintenance costs where previous years painting and cyclical repairs were delayed, so some additional costs have been incurred this year for repairs to previously painted surfaces, due to their deterioration.
- 4.14 **Compliance:** The outturn position is an underspend of £134k. Following a validation of apparatus / installations on site, the service identified that the previous data estimations were greater than those required in year. The compliance budget for 2023/24 has been updated with new budget estimates.
- 4.15 **Performance:** Of the total budget of £4.954m, £3.920m relates to shared costs such as support services, pension deficit, and governance, leaving £1.164m on operating costs such as staffing, insurance, training, travel, stationery, printing and bank charges, as well as the Tenants Empowerment and Tenants Action Group.
- 4.16 The forecast underspend of £144k mainly relates to a £380k favourable adjustment following the completion of a thorough review of the non-staff related cost apportionments between the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA), to ensure this reflects the up-to-date position and reasonable assumptions around the relative use of resources. This is offset by staffing pressures related to the senior management team job evaluation and performance team restructure, as well as procurement support.

Central Costs and Movements in Reserves

- 4.17 **Interest Payable:** The budget estimate for 2022/23 was £2.883m. This was based on assumptions for the refinancing of £10m of debt repaid in March 2022 which differ to the actual cost of borrowing and the term of the loan resulting in an underspend of £69k.
- 4.18 **Interest Receivable:** The reduction in the capital outturn position (see section 8) compared to the original projections has reduced the current year capital financing requirement for the HRA. Therefore, with investments exceeding the capital financing requirement, this has resulted in internal investment income of £247.5k above budget.
- 4.19 **Change in Provision for Bad Debt:** This is a technical accounting entry which considers the year end arrears position and makes a provision within the accounts for

the possibility of non-payment. This will change year-on-year depending on the level of arrears held at the end of each financial year and the aged profile of the arrears. This year the change in expected credit losses (provision for bad debt) has decreased by £120k which is an underspend of £300k against the budget of £180k.

- 4.20 **Depreciation:** Depreciation is transferred to the Major Repairs Reserve (MRR) and must be used to fund the capital programme and/or repay capital debt.
- 4.21 In prior years, elements of the depreciation calculation saw some components of the assets having a useful life over 100 years. For 2021/22 there was a recommended technical accounting update requiring components to have a maximum useful life of 70 years. This was applied to the calculation for 2021/22 resulting in an increase in the dwelling depreciation charge. This financial impact was managed strategically in 2021/22 by reducing the voluntary repayment of debt through the revenue account and replacing this with existing capital receipts to eliminate the financial impact on repaying debt as well as the impact on the revenue account.
- 4.22 Due to timings of the annual budget preparation, this technical accounting update was not applied to the budget estimates for depreciation for 2022/23. As such the outturn position is an overspend against budget of £1.420m. This is not only due to the technical accounting update but also the increase in year-end "existing use" valuations, which are driven by the effects of economic conditions impacting upon house price inflation.
- 4.23 This financial impact will again be managed strategically by offsetting this pressure in part against the voluntary repayment of debt through the revenue account (see below) and replacing this with existing capital receipts to eliminate the financial impact on repaying debt as well as the impact on the revenue account. The budget for 2023/24 has been updated to reflect this pressure.
- 4.24 **Capital Debt Repayment:** As per the Budget Setting Report for 2022/23 (Full Council Feb 2022) the HRA financial strategy presented a one-off reduction in budget (from £1.821m) of £800k to provide revenue capacity in 2022/23 replacing this with £800k of non-RTB capital receipts. The budget of £1.021m is being used to offset the adverse variance on the depreciation charge as described above. The Council still made a voluntary repayment provision using existing capital receipts to the value of £1.821m.

5 HRA Debt Write Off During the Year

- 5.1 The total amount of debtor write-offs made during 2022/23 amounted to £69.4k and relates to dwelling rental income, non-dwelling rental and other charges such as repairs and court costs. Of this there were no individual customers where individual debts greater than £25,000 that were written off.

6 HRA Earmarked Reserves

- 6.1 The HRA Earmarked Reserves at the beginning of 2022/23 totalled £54k (see **Table 3** below); during the year net transfers of £204k have increased reserves to £258k. The remaining funds have been earmarked to be spent within the next two years.

Table 3: Earmarked Reserves Balances

Description	Opening Balance 01/04/2022 £000	Transfers £000	Projected Balance 31/3/2023 £000
One Teams	6	-6	0
Hinkley – Home Moves Plus	48	-14	34
Climate Change Grant - Electric Vehicles	0	77	77
Hinkley – Community Grants	0	130	130
Tenant Satisfaction Grant	0	17	17
Total	54	204	258

7 HRA Unearmarked Reserves

- 7.1 The table below summarises the movement on the HRA unearmarked reserves during the year.

Table 4: HRA Unearmarked Reserves Balance

	Approval	£'000
Balance Brought Forward 1 April 2022		3,413
Budgeted Contribution to support base budget 2022/23	FC - 08/02/22	-200
Provisional Outturn 2022/23		-227
Projected Balance 31 March 2023		2,986
Recommended Minimum Balance		2,000
Projected Balance above Minimum Reserve Balance		986

- 7.2 The HRA unearmarked reserves at the start of the year were £3.413m. This is £1.413m above the minimum recommended reserve level of £2m. Remaining at or above these targets provides added financial resilience to in year pressures through volatility and unforeseen cost increases and income reductions.
- 7.3 Unearmarked reserves have decreased by £200k to support the base budget for 2022/23 and a further £227k to fund the overspend outturn position.
- 7.4 The balance as at 31 March 2023 (subject to audit) is £2.986m, which is £986m above the recommended minimum balance of £2m. The projected balance on reserves as at 31 March 2023 provides sufficient capacity to support the approach of the Medium Term Financial Plan which incorporates the planned use of £380k of reserves to support the 2023/24 budget.

7.5 Whilst this reduces reserves to only £606k above the minimum balance, the unearmarked reserves of Somerset West and Taunton and Sedgemoor District Council will be combined from the 1 April 2024 and will together provide further financial resilience and flexibility for management and members to mitigate short term pressures within the HRA.

8 HRA Capital Outturn Position

8.1 A summary of the HRA Capital Outturn position can be found in Appendix A.

8.2 The HRA **approved Capital Programme** at the end of 2022/23 is £110.9m. This consists of £14.4m of new schemes approved for 2022/23 plus £95m of previously approved schemes in prior years and a supplementary budget of £1.5m. The HRA Capital Programme relates to in-year works and longer-term schemes that will be completed over the next nine years. The Council proposes to finance this investment through the Major Repairs Reserve, Capital Receipts, Capital Grants and Borrowing.

8.3 The **actual spend** on the HRA Capital Programme during 2022/23 was £18.520m. The major areas of capital spend during the year related to the capital maintenance for the existing housing stock and the development of new stock. The Council is financing this investment through the Major Repairs Reserve, Capital Receipts, Capital Grants and Borrowing.

8.4 The capital outturn position is reporting an **overspend** of £2.295m. Of this £2.108m was spent on major works such as voids, electrical testing and community alarms, which were funded from underspends / budget returns on other major works schemes. In addition, £187.1k of expenditure relates to the fully funded property purchase and refurbishment of properties reserved for temporary accommodation under the Rough Sleepers Action Programme (RSAP).

8.5 The capital outturn position is also reporting **proposed capital budget returns** of £8.814m. The Housing Senior Management Team have reviewed projected capital expenditure and are confident that the remaining capital slippage and new approved budget for 2023/24 will be sufficient to meet the capital asset management plan over the next 12 months. These budget returns will positively impact the financial position of the HRA's 30-Year Business Plan and the Council's treasury management strategy.

8.6 The total budget to be **carried forward** into 2023/24 and future years is £85.861m. There was also £11.948m of new capital budget approved by Full Council on 22 February 2023. This gives a total approved capital budget of £97.809m to be spent in 2023/24 and future years.

9 HRA Right To Buy (RTB) Capital Receipts

- 9.1 The RTB scheme is a government scheme that enables tenants to purchase their homes at a discount, subject to meeting qualifying criteria. During 2022/23 the Council sold 28 homes through the RTB Scheme.
- 9.2 Through a “1-4-1 Agreement” with the Treasury / DLUHC, the Council can retain a small proportion of these RTB receipts and use them to fund new social housing. From the 1 April 2021, the Government issued a policy change allowing these receipts to now account for up to 40% (previously 30%) spend on new social housing costs, with the remaining 60% coming from other funds such as revenue funding or borrowing.
- 9.3 This policy change also increased the timeframe that these receipts must be spent to five years (previously 3 years) of the capital receipt or returned to Government with interest at 4% over base rate from the date of the original receipt. To date, the Council has successfully spent all of their retained 1-4-1 receipts with no returns being made to the Treasury / MHCLG.
- 9.4 During the financial year 2022/23 the total attributable spend on eligible RTB schemes was £4.636m. This was spent on a variety of social housing development schemes.

10 Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

- 10.1 A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

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

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

12 Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?

- 12.1 There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

13 Are there any Data Protection Implications?

- 13.1 There are no equality implications directly to do with this report.

14 Scrutiny Comments / Recommendations

- 14.1 This report will be considered by Scrutiny. A summary of the comments and recommendations discussed will be provided here for the Executive to consider.

List of Appendices

Appendix A	HRA Capital Outturn Position
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Contact Officers

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Appendix A: HRA Capital Outturn Position

SWT Capital Programme	Total Approved Budget as at 31 March 2023	Actual Capital Outturn 2022/23	Under (-) /Overspend on Completed Projects	Underspend - Budget No Longer Required	Remaining Approved Budget (ongoing projects)	Net 2022/23 Budget Additions Approved (Feb 2023)	Total Approved Budget 2023/24 and future years
Major Works	14,946,968	5,870,204	2,107,740	(7,985,138)	3,199,366	10,867,970	14,067,336
Fire Safety	3,573,637	3,199,966	0	0	373,671	150,000	523,671
Related Assets	120,000	55,601	0	(64,399)	0	50,000	50,000
Exceptional & Extensive	350,000	208,832	0	(141,168)	0	300,000	300,000
Vehicles	220,000	0	0	(220,000)	0	0	0
ICT & Transformation	551,405	266,267	0	(200,000)	85,138	210,000	295,138
Aids & Adaptations & DFGs	370,000	201,290	0	(168,710)	0	370,000	370,000
Sub-Total Majors & Improvements	20,132,010	9,802,160	2,107,740	(8,779,415)	3,658,175	11,947,970	15,606,145
Social Housing Development	90,768,617	8,717,901	187,175	(34,805)	82,203,086	0	82,203,086
Total HRA	110,900,627	18,520,062	2,294,915	(8,814,219)	85,861,261	11,947,970	97,809,231

Note: The approved budget for future years includes all Social Housing Development schemes approved for their duration plus one year of major works and improvements.



Tenants' Strategic Group – 24 July 2022

Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code - Self-Assessment update

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

Report Authors: Name of author Roxane McLean, Senior Case Manager – Customer Resolution team

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group on work being undertaken by the Customer Resolution team, to ensure that the Housing Directorate is compliant with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

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

The Housing Ombudsman self-assessment against the complaint handling code to ensure our complaint handling remains in line with the requirements set out and makes this information accessible. The power to issue a Complaint Handling Failure notice for non-compliance should this not be actioned every 12 Months. The Code

acts as a point of reference for residents and tenants supporting to help provide guidance on what should be expected from their landlord.

The Housing Ombudsman acknowledges that there may be reasons why a landlord is unable to fully comply with the Code for reasons which are beyond their control. For example, as a local authority landlord, our complaints handling falls under the Council's Complaints Policy. A few areas of non-compliance were identified in the June and September assessment, due to the Housing Directorate being bound by the wider, Somerset West and Taunton Complaints Policy and IT systems.

A request has been made to have the below information accessible as part of the recently created Somerset Council website;

- Adding the Housing Ombudsman details to the website
- To ensure that residents are aware of how to access the Complaints Policy through alternative formats
- Ensure the Self-Assessment and Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code have links to access on our website

To ensure best practice and that residents have access to all information effectively and easily and although we are compliant, we have requested the above action take place to support **code section 1.9 - 2.3 -2.4** in the self-assessment.

Currently work has been carried out to upskill and support the service areas with their knowledge of the Housing Ombudsman and the codes of practice so that we affiliate. As part of these discussions training and coaching will take place for the service area to support when answering a complaint.

Currently we are not compliant with mandatory **code section 5.1** and best practice **code section 5.13** as on balance we have had to extend a high volume of stage 1 and 2 complaints. The Customer Resolution team are working with the service areas to ensure high standards in complaint responses and get it right at stage 1. Further work has been undertaken changing working practices to ensure that we proactively get the complaint reply sent in the prescribed 10 working days. With the changes that are now in affect we are confident that this will see a reduction in the number of complaints requiring an extension at stage 1.

Following this self-assessment, we were able to establish a compliance rate of 97% for the *mandatory 'must' requirements* and 97% for the *best practice 'should' requirements* of the Code.

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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Appendix B – Self-Assessment Form

This self-assessment form should be completed by the complaints officer and discussed at the landlord’s governing body annually. Evidence should be included to support all statements with additional commentary as necessary.

Explanations must also be provided where a mandatory ‘must’ requirement is not met to set out the rationale for the alternative approach adopted and why this delivers a better outcome.

Section 1 - Definition of a complaint

Mandatory ‘must’ requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
Page 2 33	A complaint must be defined as: <i>‘an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents.’</i>	Yes	Section 3 ‘Scope of this policy’ provides a definition of a complaint. The wording is different but covers all points required.
1.3	The resident does not have to use the word ‘complaint’ for it to be treated as such. A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative must still be handled in line with the landlord’s complaints policy.	Yes	Covered in section 3 ‘Scope of this policy’ Section 12 ‘Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints’ in the policy regarding third party representatives complies.
1.6	<i>... if further enquiries are needed to resolve the matter, or if the resident requests it, the issue must be logged as a complaint.</i>	Yes	Section 8 ‘How to complain’ complies and covers putting things right. It is standard practice to raise a complaint should the resident request that we do so. The policy gives clear examples of how to make a complaint and how this will be logged.
1.7	A landlord must accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so.	Yes	Section 4 ‘Exemptions to this policy’ addresses the only circumstances when a complaint wouldn’t be accepted. Contractor complaints are excluded from main policy but included in section 12 ‘Additional information for Tenanted Housing Complaints’.

1.8	A complaints policy must clearly set out the circumstances in which a matter will not be considered, and these circumstances should be fair and reasonable to residents.	Yes	Section 4 'Exemptions to this policy' lists what would not be covered by the policy.
1.9	If a landlord decides not to accept a complaint, a detailed explanation must be provided to the resident setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Ombudsman.	Yes	Section 4 'Exemptions to this policy' complies. Wording of section 4 says we wouldn't <i>usually</i> investigate a complaint under certain circumstances. In the interests of being fair and reasonable, this is always assessed on a case by case basis.

Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
1.4	Landlords should recognise the difference between a service request , where a resident may be unhappy with a situation that they wish to have rectified, and a complaint about the service they have/have not received.	Yes	Section 4 'Exemptions to this policy' covers service requests. Service requests are triaged as such by the Customer Resolution team. Where no investigation is required and a solution can be offered quickly, the complaint service request is handled and responded to immediately.
1.5	Survey feedback may not necessarily need to be treated as a complaint, though, where possible, the person completing the survey should be made aware of how they can pursue their dissatisfaction as a complaint if they wish to.	Yes	Acuity carry out surveys on our behalf and ask relevant questions in line with Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs). Acuity will signpost to the complaints process if customer is dissatisfied. If the information captured has all the detail to log the complaint this is passed to the customer resolution team to log a complaint.

Section 2 - Accessibility and awareness

Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
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2.1	Landlords must make it easy for residents to complain by providing different channels through which residents can make a complaint such as in person, over the telephone, in writing, by email and digitally. While the Ombudsman recognises that it may not be feasible for a landlord to use all of the potential channels, there must be more than one route of access into the complaints system.	Yes	<p>Section 8 'How to complain' details channels to complain.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Form – www.somerset.gov.uk/complaints • Telephone – 0300 123 2224 • Email – generalenquiries@somerset.gov.uk • Mail – Customer Experience Team, Somerset Council, County Hall Taunton TA1 4DY <p>Section 12 'Additional information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' includes social media as a method for making a complaint. Where we are able to identify a complainant by the post online, we will attempt to engage with them in line with the policy to manage their complaint.</p>
2.3	Landlords must make their complaint policy available in a clear and accessible format for all residents. This will detail the number of stages involved, what will happen at each stage and the timeframes for responding.	Yes	<p>Accessibility statement at the start of the policy complies.</p> <p>Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' clearly sets out the complaints process and the timescales for responding.</p>
Page 35	Landlord websites, if they exist, must include information on how to raise a complaint. The complaints policy and process must be easy to find on the website.	Yes	<p>Somerset Council website has the all the necessary details on how to raise a complaint -</p> <p>Complaints, comments and compliments (somerset.gov.uk)</p>
2.5	Landlords must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and may need to adapt normal policies, procedures, or processes to accommodate an individual's needs. Landlords must satisfy themselves that their policy sets out how they will respond to reasonable adjustments requests in line with the Equality Act and that complaints handlers have had appropriate training to deal with such requests.	Yes	<p>Section 7 'Equalities' complies.</p> <p>Section 8 'How to complain' (and refers to Reasonable Adjustments Policy).</p> <p>Section 14 'Unreasonable customer behaviour' complies.</p>
2.6	Landlords must publicise the complaints policy and process, the Complaint Handling Code and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme in leaflets, posters, newsletters, online and as part of regular correspondence with residents.	Yes	<p>Regular newsletter mailings to tenants include details of the Complaints Policy and how to complain. Folder is retained on file by Customer Resolution Team with evidence of these publications.</p> <p>Included in Tenancy Handbook and online.</p>

2.7	Landlords must provide residents with contact information for the Ombudsman as part of its regular correspondence with residents.	Yes	<p>We include HO contact information and news updates in our regular newsletters to tenants.</p> <p>Following a recent transition to one Council the request for this information has been submitted to the website team to add all the necessary contact details on the new Somerset Council website</p>
2.8	Landlords must provide early advice to residents regarding their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the landlord's complaints process is exhausted.	Yes	<p>Section 13 Ombudsman Services</p> <p>We include HO contact details at stage one of our complaints process so that residents can seek advice from the HO at any stage of their complaint.</p> <p>Following a recent transition to one Council a request for this information has been submitted to the website team to add all the necessary contact details for the Housing Ombudsman on the new Somerset Council website</p>

Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
2.2	Where a landlord has set up channels to communicate with its residents via social media, then it should expect to receive complaints via those channels. Policies should contain details of the steps that will be taken when a complaint is received via social media and how confidentiality and privacy will be maintained.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies.

Section 3 - Complaint handling personnel

Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
3.1	Landlords must have a person or team assigned to take responsibility for complaint handling to ensure complaints receive the necessary attention, and that these are reported to the governing body. This Code will refer to that person or team as the “complaints officer”.	Yes	The Customer Resolution team fulfil this role. The team consists of three members of staff, two of which are dedicated full time to complaints. The team consists of the Performance and Improvement Lead, the Senior Case Manager, and the Case Manager.
3.2	...the complaint handler appointed must have appropriate complaint handling skills and no conflicts of interest.	Yes	The Customer Resolution team oversee and gatekeep all housing complaints, to ensure quality, impartiality, and fairness. The Customer Resolution team attend regular webinars and training delivered by the HO or HQN to remain up to date and upskill knowledge. This learning is then passed to the Housing Directorate.

Best practice ‘should’ requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
Page 37 3.3	Complaint handlers should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be able to act sensitively and fairly • be trained to handle complaints and deal with distressed and upset residents • have access to staff at all levels to facilitate quick resolution of complaints • have the authority and autonomy to act to resolve disputes quickly and fairly. 	Yes	‘Credibility’ section of the policy complies. Training was carried by the Customer Experience team in the month of November 2022, providing detailed guidance on how to effectively respond to a complaint. The Customer Resolution team attend regular webinars and training and have a wealth of complaints experience in a housing environment. They have access to staff at all levels across the directorate and can propose and agree resolution advice at any point during the complaint process.

Section 4 - Complaint handling principles

Mandatory ‘must’ requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
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4.1	<p>Any decision to try and resolve a concern must be taken in agreement with the resident and a landlord's audit trail/records should be able to demonstrate this. Landlords must ensure that efforts to resolve a resident's concerns do not obstruct access to the complaints procedure or result in any unreasonable delay. It is not appropriate to have extra named stages (such as 'stage 0' or 'pre-complaint stage') as this causes unnecessary confusion for residents.</p> <p>When a complaint is made, it must be acknowledged and logged at stage one of the complaints procedure within five days of receipt.</p>	Yes	<p>We engage with the complainant if we think their concerns can be resolved quickly in the first instance and are confident that we know what has gone wrong and why. This will be recorded as a stage 1 complaint and a response sent out immediately.</p> <p>Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' We will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within 5 working days. The acknowledgement will set out our understanding of the issues, and the outcome requested by the resident. If anything is unclear, we will ask for clarification and a full description of the complaint will be agreed.</p>
4.2 Page 38	<p>Within the complaint acknowledgement, landlords must set out their understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the resident is seeking.</p> <p>If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.</p>	Yes	<p>Complaints are directly triaged by the Customer Resolution team an acknowledgment is sent using a template for stage 1 and 2 clearly setting out our understanding of the complaint, the issues we need to address, and the outcome sought by the resident.</p> <p>If anything remains unclear, the complainant is asked within the acknowledgement to get back in contact within 3 working days.</p>
4.6	A complaint investigation must be conducted in an impartial manner.	Yes	<p>Section 2 'Our principles – Fairness' complies. All housing complaints are overseen by the Customer Resolution team to ensure impartiality.</p>
4.7	<p>The complaint handler must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deal with complaints on their merits • act independently and have an open mind • take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest • consider all information and evidence carefully • keep the complaint confidential as far as possible, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter. 	Yes	Section 2 'Our principles – Fairness' complies.
4.11	Landlords must adhere to any reasonable arrangements agreed with residents in terms of frequency and method of communication	Yes	<p>All reasonable arrangements are discussed and agreed with the resident during the complaint investigation.</p> <p>Section 8 of policy 'How to complain'</p>

			We will make reasonable adjustments to our complaints process ensuring customers with a specific need are not at a disadvantage when accessing the service. This includes making this Policy available in an alternative format on request. Please see our Reasonable Adjustments Policy for more details.
4.12	<p>The resident, and if applicable any staff member who is the subject of the complaint, must also be given a fair chance to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set out their position • comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made. 	Yes	<p>Residents are contacted at stage one of the complaints process to discuss the complaint.</p> <p>Residents can use stage two as their opportunity to set out their position or comment on our findings if they are not satisfied with the response at stage one. Stage two is considered the 'final decision' on a complaint.</p> <p>We try to speak or meet with the resident at stage two. Staff members who are complained about are given the opportunity at the complaint investigation stage to set out their position and comment on findings.</p>
Page 13	A landlord must include in its complaints policy its timescales for a resident to request escalation of a complaint	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' of policy applies under the heading 'Stage Two'.
Page 14	A landlord must not unreasonably refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of the complaints	Yes	The policy does not refuse to escalate a complaint unless one of the exemptions in section 4 'Exemptions to this policy' applies.
4.15	A full record must be kept of the complaint, any review and the outcomes at each stage. This must include the original complaint and the date received, all correspondence with the resident, correspondence with other parties and any reports or surveys prepared.	Yes	<p>A full audit of the case will be retained on iCasework (complaints system).</p> <p>Customer data is retained in line with the Council's Data Retention Policy.</p>
4.18	Landlords must have policies and procedures in place for managing unacceptable behaviour from residents and/or their representatives when pursuing a complaint.	Yes	Section 14 'Unreasonable customer behaviour' section of the policy applies and refers to the 'Managing Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy' which is available on Somerset Council's website.

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Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
4.3	Landlords should manage residents' expectations from the outset, being clear where a desired outcome is unreasonable or unrealistic	Yes	We do not make assumptions until we have the full picture of the complaint and we have had the opportunity to investigate, but we will be clear with residents as to what we are able to do to resolve a complaint. We manage expectations through the stage 1 complaint.
Page 40	A complaint should be resolved at the earliest possible opportunity, having assessed what evidence is needed to fully consider the issues, what outcome would resolve the matter for the resident and whether there are any urgent actions required.	Yes	Section 8 of policy 'How to complain' complies. We engage with the complainant if we think their concerns can be resolved quickly in the first instance and are confident that we know what has gone wrong and why. This will be recorded as a stage 1 complaint and a response sent detailing action to resolve.
4.5	Landlords should give residents the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented or accompanied at any meeting with the landlord where this is reasonable.	Yes	Sections 3 'Scope of this policy' and 12 'Additional information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies. Complainants may be accompanied by representatives at any meeting where this is considered reasonable.
4.8	Where a key issue of a complaint relates to the parties' legal obligations landlords should clearly set out their understanding of the obligations of both parties.	Yes	This would always be included in our complaint responses.
4.9	Communication with the resident should not generally identify individual members of staff or contractors.	Yes	Yes, unless the resident is aware of a staff member or contractor's identity, we would usually refer to a staff member by job title and use wording such as 'our contractor' in our responses.
4.10	Landlords should keep residents regularly updated about the progress of the investigation.	Yes	We contact the customer where a complaint deadline cannot be achieved, to advise them when a complaint needs to be extended and why. The Customer Resolution team use iCasework to keep the complainant and investigating officer up to date of contacts

			received.
4.16	Landlords should seek feedback from residents in relation to the landlord's complaint handling as part of the drive to encourage a positive complaint and learning culture	Yes	Acuity carry out surveys on our behalf with our tenants, and record complaint handling feedback. TSM Satisfaction Survey includes two measures on complaint handling. Project for the Senior Case Manager to introduce customer satisfaction surveys in the future.
4.17	Landlords should recognise the impact that being complained about can have on future service delivery. Landlords should ensure that staff are supported and engaged in the complaints process, including the learning that can be gained	Yes	Staff have access to counselling services through work if required, and are provided with support by their line managers where needed. More work is needed to look at this in a complaints context, which has been assigned to the Senior Case Manager.
4.19	Any restrictions place on a resident's contact due to unacceptable behaviour should be appropriate to their needs and should demonstrate regard for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.	Yes	Section 14 'Unreasonable customer behaviour' section of the policy applies. The Customer Resolution team carry out an assessment of the customer's behaviour against the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy before restricting contact with the housing directorate. Usually, a letter is sent to the customer before invoking the policy to advise that their behaviour has triggered the policy but where action may be taken if it continues. Part of the assessment is to consider any vulnerabilities under the EA 2010.

Section 5 - Complaint stages

Mandatory 'must' requirements Stage 1

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
5.1	Landlords must respond to the complaint <u>within 10 working days</u> of the complaint being logged. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.	No	Sections 2 'Our principles' and 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies with the timeframes in the code of practice. We are making improvements to ensure that complaints at stage one are answered in the agreed timescales. This is monitored by the Customer Resolution team and extension are only recommended as a last option. Currently our agreed working practice is to recognise the need to extend a complaint in

			expectational circumstances. The Customer Resolution team work with the investigating officer to try and ensure that the complaint is answered in the extended deadline date of 10 working days were possible.
5.5	A complaint response must be sent to the resident when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue, are completed. Outstanding actions must still be tracked and actioned expeditiously with regular updates provided to the resident.	Yes	Section 9 'Our corporate complaints process' (under stage 1) applies. We are committed to taking ownership of any outstanding actions and when the customer can expect them to be completed. Actions are logged and tracked by the Customer Resolution team.
5.6	Landlords must address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate.	Yes	The Customer Resolution team gatekeep complaints and provide the relevant investigating staff member with bullet pointed issues to address in the complaint response. Regular intervention measures are set out by the Customer Resolution team to monitor the complaint handling. Complaint responses come back through the team for quality control before it is sent to the customer.
5.8	Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage one in clear, plain language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • the decision on the complaint • the reasons for any decisions made • the details of any remedy offered to put things right • details of any outstanding actions details of how to escalate the matter to stage two if the resident is not satisfied with the answer	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' applies, under the heading Stage One. The Customer Resolution team use templates which set out the complaint stage; whether the complaint is upheld, partly upheld, or not upheld; the reasons why; any outstanding actions and who will be tracking these through and details of any remedy offered. All stage one complaints are closed with standard wording of the escalation process to review stage (stage 2). The HO details are provided for advice and guidance. At stage two, complaints are closed with standard wording on how to escalate to the HO.

Stage 2

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
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5.9	If all or part of the complaint is not resolved to the resident's satisfaction at stage one it must be progressed to stage two of the landlord's procedure, unless an exclusion ground now applies. In instances where landlord declines to escalate a complaint it must clearly communicate in writing its reasons for not escalating as well as the resident's right to approach the Ombudsman about its decision.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies under the heading 'Stage Two'. Section 4 'Exemptions to this policy' complies
5.10 Page 43	On receipt of the escalation request, landlords must set out their understanding of issues outstanding and the outcomes the resident is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies under the heading 'Stage Two'. Once the complaint is triaged by Housing, we will use an acknowledgement template for stage 2 to set out (bullet point) our understanding of the complaint, the issues we need to address, and the outcome sought. If anything remains unclear, the Customer Resolution team will contact the resident by telephone or email to gain clarification and then send the formal acknowledgement. The complaint handler will also speak to the resident for an understanding of their complaint, propose remedies and discuss outcomes.
5.11	Landlords must only escalate a complaint to stage two once it has completed stage one and at the request of the resident.	Yes	Two stage Complaint Policy complies Exemption may apply in the damp and mould policy, if you have had a full survey conducted for damp and mould and disagree with these findings this will be escalated to stage two in the complaint process, as the survey will act as the stage one reply. This approach has been implemented to assist residents removing a process of unnecessary investigation work that has already taken place.

5.12	The person considering the complaint at stage two, must not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage one.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies, under the heading 'Stage Two'.
5.13	Landlords must respond to the stage two complaint <u>within 20 working days</u> of the complaint being escalated. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.	No	<p>Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies, under the heading 'Stage Two'.</p> <p>As highlighted;</p> <p>We are making improvements to ensure that complaints at stage two are answered in the agreed timescales. This is monitored by the Customer Resolution team and extension are only recommended as a last option. Currently our agreed working practice is to recognise the need to extend a complaint in expectational circumstances. The Customer Resolution teamwork with the investigating officer to try and ensure that the complaint is answered in the extended deadline date not exceeding 10 working days were possible.</p>
5.16	<p>Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage two in clear, plain language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • the complaint definition • the decision on the complaint • the reasons for any decisions made • the details of any remedy offered to put things right • details of any outstanding actions <p>and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • if the landlord has a third stage, details of how to escalate the matter to stage three • if this was the final stage, details of how to escalate the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service if the resident remains dissatisfied. 	Yes	<p>Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies, under the heading 'Stage Two'.</p> <p>The Customer Resolution team use templates which set out the complaint stage; bullet point the issues to be addressed; whether the complaint is upheld, partly upheld, or not upheld; the reasons why; any outstanding actions and who will be tracking these through and details of any remedy offered.</p> <p>All stage two complaints are closed with standard wording on how to escalate to the HO should the resident remain dissatisfied.</p> <p>No third stage.</p>

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
5.17	Two stage landlord complaint procedures are ideal. This ensures that the complaint process is not unduly long. If landlords strongly believe a third stage is necessary, they must set out their reasons for this as part of their self-assessment. A process with more than three stages is not acceptable under any circumstances.	N/A	Not applicable
5.20	Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage three in clear, plain language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • the complaint definition • the decision on the complaint • the reasons for any decisions made • the details of any remedy offered to put things right • details of any outstanding actions • details of how to escalate the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service if the resident remains dissatisfied 	N/A	Not applicable

Best practice 'should' requirements

Stage 1

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
5.2	If an extension beyond 20 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies under the heading Stage One, although we will only extend by 10 working days.
5.3	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies under the heading Stage One. Residents are notified in writing of how to escalate the complaint to

			the HO.
5.4	Where the problem is a recurring issue, the landlord should consider any older reports as part of the background to the complaint if this will help to resolve the issue for the resident.	Yes	Customer Resolution team gatekeep housing complaints which means that historic complaints can be accessed and considered.
5.7	Where residents raise additional complaints during the investigation, these should be incorporated into the stage one response if they are relevant and the stage one response has not been issued. Where the stage one response has been issued, or it would unreasonably delay the response, the complaint should be logged as a new complaint.	Yes	Separate issues raised as new complaint. Related issues are added into existing complaint but also logged for statistical purposes. This is considered on a case-by-case basis.

Stage 2

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Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
5.14	If an extension beyond 10 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' under the heading Stage Two complies.
5.15	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response. landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' under the heading Stage Two applies. Residents are notified in writing of how to escalate the complaint to the HO.

Stage 3

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
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5.18	Complaints should only go to a third stage if the resident has actively requested a third stage review of their complaint. Where a third stage is in place and has been requested, landlords must respond to the stage three complaint within 20 working days of the complaint being escalated. Additional time will only be justified if related to convening a panel. An explanation and a date for when the stage three response will be received should be provided to the resident.	N/A	No third stage
5.19	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.	N/A	No third stage

Section 6 - Putting things right

Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
6.1	Effective dispute resolution requires a process designed to resolve complaints. Where something has gone wrong a landlord must acknowledge this and set out the actions it has already taken, or intends to take to put things right.	Yes	Section 2 'Our principles' under 'Credibility' of the policy applies. The Housing Performance team have autonomy to resolve complaints quickly and efficiently. The Customer Resolution team's role is to provide impartiality, and in gatekeeping responses will always deliver transparency and admit where we have fallen short. A resolution/next steps is always provided.
6.2	Any remedy offered must reflect the extent of any service failures and the level of detriment caused to the resident as a result. A landlord must carefully manage the expectations of residents and not promise anything that cannot be delivered or would cause unfairness to other residents.	Yes	Section 12 of policy 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' complies, under heading of Redress. Housing's Redress Policy applies.

6.5	The remedy offer must clearly set out what will happen and by when, in agreement with the resident where appropriate. Any remedy proposed must be followed through to completion.	Yes	Section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' under heading of Redress applies. The Customer Resolution team track any outstanding actions through with service areas (eg training, policy reviews) and are responsible for organising any remedy payment or delivery.
6.6	In awarding compensation, a landlord must consider whether any statutory payments are due, if any quantifiable losses have been incurred, the time and trouble a resident has been put to, as well as any distress and inconvenience caused.	Yes	Housing's Redress Policy applies, as well as section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints' section of the policy.

Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
6.3	Landlords should look beyond the circumstances of the individual complaint and consider whether anything needs to be 'put right' in terms of process or systems to the benefit of all residents.	Yes	Housing Performance team monitors trends and learning from complaints and highlights any changes needed to service area and/or senior leadership team. Section 2 'Our principles' of the policy applies under the heading 'Credibility' and also section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints'
6.7	In some cases, a resident may have a legal entitlement to redress. The landlord should still offer a resolution where possible, obtaining legal advice as to how any offer of resolution should be worded.	Yes	Statutory payments covered in Housing Redress Policy.

Section 7 - Continuous learning and improvement

Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
7.2	Accountability and transparency are integral to a positive complaint handling culture. Landlords must report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints in their annual report and more frequently to their residents, staff and scrutiny	Yes	Reports are provided 6 monthly and annual reports to Tenant Strategic Group, Housing Briefing, members and Senior Management. It is also referred to in the Complaints Policy section 12 'Additional Information for Tenanted Housing Complaints'

	panels.		Regular updates in tenant and staff newsletters. 'You Said, We Did' on the website.
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Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
7.3	A member of the governing body should be appointed to have lead responsibility for complaints to support a positive complaint handling culture. This role will be responsible for ensuring the governing body receives regular information on complaints that provides insight to the governing body on the landlord's complaint handling performance.	Yes	Director of Housing and Portfolio Holder for Housing fulfil this role. Corporate Scrutiny Committee (15 Cllrs) who have sight of complaint reports.
7.4	As a minimum, governing bodies should receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular updates on the volume, categories and outcome of complaints, alongside complaint handling performance including compliance with the Ombudsman's orders Regular reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling, The annual performance report produced by the Ombudsman, where applicable Individual complaint outcomes where necessary, including where the Ombudsman made findings of severe maladministration or referrals to regulatory bodies. The implementation of management responses should be tracked to ensure they are delivered to agreed timescales. The annual self-assessment against the Complaint Handling Code for scrutiny and challenge. 	Yes	Compliant in that reports containing this information are provided 6 monthly to Housing Briefing (PfH) and TSG. Trends and learning currently included as a project for the Customer Senior Case Manager. Compliant in that individual Ombudsman outcomes are shared with Councillors or Members if they have been involved with the complaint. Management responses are tracked through the Customer Resolution team. The self-assessment document will be provided and published to the Somerset Council website at least once a year.

7.5	Any themes or trends should be assessed by senior management to identify potential systemic issues, serious risks or policies and procedures that require revision. They should also be used to inform staff and contractor training.	Yes	Customer Resolution team - Senior Case Manager currently fulfils this role through HSMT. The Senior Case Manager is currently considering this as part of their project work. Training and coaching are currently carried out by the Performance and Improvement Lead and Senior Case Manager.
Page 50	Landlords should have a standard objective in relation to complaint handling for all employees that reflects the need to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a collaborative and co-operative approach towards resolving complaints, working with colleagues across teams and departments • take collective responsibility for any shortfalls identified through complaints rather than blaming others • act within the Professional Standards for engaging with complaints as set by the Chartered Institute of Housing. 	Yes	Customer Resolution team coordinate complaints where investigations cross multiple areas. This team support the collaboration of complaint investigation when need. The Senior Case Manager will be implementing a working process to ensure systemic collaborative working as part of complaint handling inclusive of any lessons learnt following a complaint reply.

Section 8 - Self-assessment and compliance

Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
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8.1	Landlords must carry out an annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure their complaint handling remains in line with its requirements.	Yes	Commitment to complete self-assessment every twelve months in line with the Code. More assessments have been undertaken in recent months due to significant policy changes due to LGR.
8.2	Landlords must also carry out a self-assessment following a significant restructure and/or change in procedures.	Yes	This further assessment carried out October 2022 to ensure new draft Somerset Council Policy is compliant with HO Code and reflects Housing directorate's needs.
8.3	<p>Following each self-assessment, a landlord must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report the outcome of their self-assessment to their governing body. In the case of local authorities, self- assessment outcomes should be reported to elected members • publish the outcome of their assessment on their website if they have one, or otherwise make accessible to residents • include the self-assessment in their annual report section on complaints handling performance 	Yes	<p>Document presented to Portfolio Holder – see action above at 7.3</p> <p>Once completed</p> <p>Assessments are included in 6 monthly and annual reports, newsletters, Housing Briefing 7.3</p>

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Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – 24/07/2023

HRA Communication Plan

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

Report Authors: Craig Rossiter

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group on work being undertaken as part of the communications plan agree with the assistance of the Tenants' Low Carbon Working Group.

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

Communication from the service to tenants and staff has been highlighted consistently over the past eighteen months. The service supported a Tenants' Communication Group in the development of this Communication Plan. The service has begun to implement a proactive communications plan that will elevate the quality of our outward communication to Somerset Council residents. The purpose of this

plan is to provide a better service to our tenants by presenting key information in a digestible, eye-catching, and logical format. In addition to improving communication with customers and colleagues the implementation of the plan will help meet our legal obligations from the social housing white paper. The plan also seeks to enable the smooth running of our capital works programmes through the use of high-quality communications throughout the entire lifecycle of contracts. Thereby increasing the satisfaction of our residents and allowing us greater access to complete works.

The plan has a number of core components:

A New Team

To implement this plan, it is necessary to create a new communications team within the Landlord Service. This will bring us into line with comparable organisations, such as Homes in Sedgemoor, which already have similar operations. The exact make up of this team is still to be decided pending the reorganisation of Somerset Council.

The new team will be responsible for implementing and developing the communications plan and working with the various teams within the service to plan and deliver proactive communications campaigns. This will include the production of modern communications materials such as posters and videos. The team will also be responsible for driving and promoting a digital first approach to communicating.

Capital Works

Improving the communications of the various Capital Works Programmes will be a priority for the new team.

Adopting a multimedia approach to sell the advantages of the upgrades we offer will go a long way to reducing our refusal rate. This will be done through the creation of striking posters and flyers, along with relevant videos for social media and newsletters. We will also support and promote in person events where residents can meet contractors.

We are committed to collaborating closely with both our team and contractors to ensure our communications are not only timely and accurate but also effectively convey desired information.

New property packs will be created for tenants that shows the customer journey, contact details, and provides a contractor's code of conduct that will give our residents confidence in receiving a professional experience.

The Capital works team will populate Open Housing with as much information as possible, including appointment history, so Housing Officers and Customer Services can answer questions.

Communication Champions & Publications Panel

The new team will run a Communications Champions programme that will ensure that the new ways of working are embedded across the business. These champions will also serve as a conduit for news and information to reach the Comms team. The champions will also staff the publications panel.

A publications panel will be created in recognition of the fact that high quality communications are created through collaboration. This will ensure that any errors are picked up, readability is finetuned, and layout is reviewed by a collective.

All major communications, letters, posters, emails, and others will have to be approved by the publications panel.

The panel will include staff and customers and seeks lived experience of neurodiversity.

The panel will check for spelling and grammar, understanding, consistency, and tone.

This will ensure our messaging will land well, reduce complaints, and presents a professional image.

Social Media

We aim to have a dedicated social media presence for Somerset Council tenants by April 2024. The initial phase of this workstream will focus on Facebook and Instagram profiles before looking at further platforms in the future.

We can use social media to get our messages to residents instantly for free. Through social media we can quickly promote changes like new phone numbers or processes for important priorities like Damp & Mould Reporting. We can post videos explaining how to do certain tasks like install battery doorbells or we can report on our performance.

Website

The website will be overhauled to ensure it has all the information our residents need and that its layout is intuitive and presents information well. The tenant's handbook will be available entirely online in webpages and will serve as the authoritative up to date source of information.

This process will be completed in conjunction with tenant's representatives to ensure it is fit for the needs of its users.

We will also be looking to bring online new features such as a news feed.

Newsletters

Newsletters are changing. Tenants will get timely and eye-catching updates in their email inbox every month. Crucially, we will get data to understand its impact.

Every 6 months these stories will be used to complete a printed newsletter that will be posted to sheltered/extra care/large print customers and tenants who opt in to receive it.

Tenant's Portal

Our ambition is to get a high-quality tenant's portal where residents can report and book repairs jobs, update their contact details, and communicate with staff.

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?**

The financial implications are not presently settled due to the make up of the communications team not being finalised and the procurement process for the tenant's portal not yet having begun.

6: Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?

The plan commits to having paper, telephone and in person methods of communication continuing for those who want it. It also commits to digital productions at least meeting legal requirements of accessibility.

7. Are there any Data Protection Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

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Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – 24th July 2023

Directorate Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Communities

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 May 2023.

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

- SWT has completed the first two new build homes which are very low carbon homes at North Taunton and over 20 more are due to be handed over for letting in

July. The procurement of a demolition contractor and main contractor is behind schedule and the team are working with procurement and governance colleagues to move this forward. The team is also progressing a new funding bid aimed at bringing additional subsidy into the scheme through a new Homes England regeneration fund.

- Progress at Rainbow Way, Minehead is going well. The 54 units at Rainbow Way off Seaward Way will provide a variety of property types and be zero carbon. The first homes will be complete in Autumn.
- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. The service has three retrofit grant funds operating in the west of the county – ECO4, Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund Waves 1 & 2. Works has commenced on all programmes through surveys or works. The works will include replacement windows with an improved insulation standard, additional loft insulation, LED lighting, boiler controls and mechanical ventilation. Several homes receiving cavity wall insulation or External Wall Insulation. Opportunities to visit some of the improved properties will be arranged for TSG and a low carbon retrofit show house is being created in Wellington.
- Unfortunately, inflation and market conditions continue to create challenges for building and retrofitting homes. The council recognise that the increased cost of building homes is no longer a risk but a reality and the HRA is addressing these challenges as it reviews its 30-year business plan. The service is seeking to build or acquire homes using 100% grant which will counter the high cost of building properties for the Housing Revenue Account.
- The Housing Directorate is likely to be responsible for the housing enabling service throughout the county. The housing enabling teamwork with private developers and registered providers to maximise the number of affordable homes in the county. C270 new affordable homes were built during 2022/2023.
- The Housing Strategy team are writing two important strategies which are the Somerset Housing Strategy and Somerset Homelessness and rough sleeper strategy. Both strategies will be complete prior to March 2025.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken, with performance being carefully monitored. We are working with Human Resources colleagues to recruit to vacant trade roles, although this is still proving challenging.
- We are continuing to monitor performance levels for responsive repair request call-handling. This is currently still being taken by call-handlers within the previous SWT Corporate Customer Service team, although we are reviewing options for the level of support the Scheduling team may be able to provide in the future.

- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP). Key to this will be improving ICT systems (e.g., job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.) and we are working with IT colleagues to prioritise and progress this work.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard and have commenced a new procurement exercise for external contractor support for major voids, when required, to ensure we meet our KPI targets.
- Following successful completion of an initial pilot for our newly procured materials supply chain process we have now started to roll this out to other trade areas.

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, lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works, and radon monitoring.
- Working with an independent specialist consultant (Savills) we are developing a Building and Resident health and Safety Assurance Framework. We will be comparing this with Homes in Sedgemoor (HiS), who are undertaking the same exercise, to jointly learn from each landlord's experiences.
- Following the Regulator's request for us to focus on completion of our Electrical Inspection programme, we are working closely with the contractor delivering the programme (with support from our in-house electrical team) to accelerate the programmed works. We have also developed and implemented an improved software monitoring tool to manage the programme more effectively.
- We are continuing to use our iAuditor software to undertake compliance data collection for emergency lighting visual inspections, fire door inspection, fire safety housekeeping 'sterile communal area' checks (flat block inspections), water risk assessments in dwellings and fire risk assessments. We will, however, be reviewing our approach to IT system options for holding all property safety compliance data.
- We continue to undertake a range of procurement activities to deliver compliance programmes, particularly in relation to fire safety programmed works.
- Weekly compliance meetings continue to carefully monitor and manage all these safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- A range of capital work programmes continues on-site; including kitchen and bathroom replacements, replacement fire doors, windows, and roofing. However, it should be noted that, due to reduced contractor and internal project management resource availability, some programmes are being delivered at a slower rate than

originally anticipated and an increased volume of work will therefore be required later in the financial year.

- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating our Retrofit aspiration.

Asset Management

- The service has recruited two graduate recruits who are adding capacity to the asset management service. The wider directorate is seeking to appoint eight graduates in total which are additional capacity.
- The service continues to carry out many energy surveys which are required to understand pathways to Zero Carbon and which funding regime properties are best placed in. These surveys are influencing the capital investment programme.
- The service is working on the medium-term financial plan (MTFP) and 30-year investment plan which will feed into future budgets and the 30-year business plan.

Housing and Communities Team

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- Having identified some tenants who were struggling to manage living independently within sheltered housing, we have been working with Adult Social Care colleagues to have their care needs assessed and been able to move some of the tenants into extra care, which is enabling them to continue to live independently, whilst also having help and support from the on-site Care team. We have also been able to accept a couple of tenants from Hospital, whose health concerns resulted in them not being able to return home.
- Following some of the challenging incidents we have had to manage, I have been arranging some 'dealing with violence and aggression' training, which will be running in September 2023. The training will be for staff within sheltered and general needs housing, maintenance, and housing options.
- We have had a few serious incidents requiring Police and emergency services response. These have included domestic abuse and tenants collapsing and dying. Staff have managed these exceedingly difficult circumstances with great professionalism and compassion for the tenants and families involved.
- We have been making plans to install some drop kerbs on one of our schemes, which will be of great benefit to the tenants living there.

- The team are working more closely with the open spaces team, to ensure that our tenants are getting the enhanced level of service that is part of our offer.
- Unfortunately, we still have 1 member of the team off sick (long term), we also had a week of significant sickness absence, which reduced the team to 4 staff. We had to reduce some of the usual work to ensure that all the essentials were covered, and the remaining team did really well.

Lettings

- Customer satisfaction remains very high with both the lettable standard of the property and the process of letting the properties with many positive comments being received from new tenants by the service;
- Team remains settled with no current vacancies; and
- The team's Home Moves Plus project officer continues to free up much needed larger properties for those on the Homefinder Somerset register by supporting our existing tenants to downsize from their current home into a smaller property.

Income

- Our Debt and Benefit Officers hold "drop in" surgeries at Priorswood resource centre (fortnightly) and Link Centre (weekly), the attendance at these has fallen with no one attending the Priorswood session for the last 3 fortnights. We have taken the decision to suspend the "drop in" Surgeries over the school summer holiday period, however the officers will still attend the locations for booked appointments with tenants as needed.
- The "drop in's" will start again in September on a slightly different schedule, Priorswood will now be the 1st Tuesday of the month and the Link centre will be every other Thursday (alternate to CA). However, if a tenant would like an appointment with an officer, we will do our best to accommodate this.
- The issues with payments following the introduction for Dynamic 365 are still causing issues for rent recovery, however we are hoping this will be resolved by the mid/end July. In the meantime, the team will continue with the supportive approach to the tenant affected to ensure payments are made onto the accounts.
- The team are continuing to support our tenants in ensuring their rent is paid, especially those who are struggling financially due to the cost-of-living crisis. They continue to help tenants to apply for all the benefits they are entitled to, apply for DHP's and any grant funding available including Housing Support Fund. They are also making regular referrals to CA and other support agencies for those tenants who need extra help and support.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- After having a period of stability with staff; the Senior Housing Officer has left in June as he was offered a permanent role; a temporary Case Manager is leaving on the 21st July. This means that along with planned holidays the team will be extremely busy for the next few months. We have been attempting to recruit but now need to complete job evaluations and get these approved before being allowed to recruit which is taking time.
- Work continues to remain busy in the Estates Team with enquiries, planned tasks and with demands for assistance to get tenants to allow compliance checks to be carried out. These involve vulnerable customers who have hoarding issues so are complex to deal with.
- Anti-social behaviour at Moorland Road – currently we are working intensively to calm the situation down in the area; there appears to be three strands of anti-social behaviour happening at the same time. We have a family with a young teenage daughter who is taking up lots of resources, including the Police. We are working with our Legal team and preparing a Notice of Seeking Possession to serve on her mother. We have teenage youths (mainly male) who are causing problems to a vulnerable family. We are now agreed to rehouse this vulnerable family elsewhere. We have a private tenant who uses their front garden to socialise in and they have people congregating there which is causing issues with other residents. Recently we had reports of a brawl in the street involving adults along with teenagers getting involved, we have CCTV and are visiting those that were involved. We have also shared this footage with the Police.
- We are hoping that the situation has quietened down with youth crime in the Priorswood area, as one of the main culprits has been removed from their home address by CSC.
- The ASB team are working closely with our legal team with a view that we are trained to prepare our own Notice of Seeking Possessions, which will speed up the process for us. We are regularly having meetings to progress this. The team are currently considering servicing Notices using a mandatory ground on the most serious cases. This means that the perpetrator will have the right to appeal to Somerset Council; but if this is not upheld the court will grant an outright order for possession.

Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team

- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group (TSG) and Tenants' Action Group and the subgroups. We have agreed a comprehensive training plan for TSG group members for 2023.

- A new format electronic newsletter is being developed for tenants who have email addresses with hardcopies still being sent to sheltered, extra care tenants and those who have requested large print.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and is supporting the progression of the Damp and Mould Action Plan.
- The Low Carbon Working group has continued to meet with a new focus on communication.
- We have arranged BIG 6 compliance training for our engaged tenants and a new Grounds maintenance group has been created to review and monitor the service delivery of Grounds maintenance.
- We are continuing to collectively work with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams. There are seven new areas that have been agreed as ongoing work from April 2023.
- The first tenant satisfaction survey has taken place in May 2023 and results are being generated and will be reported to TSG.
- We continue to strive for improvement in our complaint handling and are facing challenges in our response times. The Housing Ombudsman has not investigated any complaint made against us during the last year, although they have advised landlords that they are currently around six months behind in their own workloads and investigations.
- The Housing Ombudsman requires us to complete a self-assessment annually (last one completed in Oct 2022) and this last one has been completed to reflect the changes brought about to complaint handling processes and the Complaints Policy due to LGR. This will be shared at the next TSG meeting and will also shortly be published to our website
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. The texting (SMS) option is now live, and the review of the proposed tenant portal is underway. Options outside of the Capita solution are being considered to ensure best quality and functionality in the tenant portal but this will delay its launch.

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?

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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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