

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, 20 May 2024 at
6.00 pm

Present:

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

Alex Akhigbemen
Kevin Hellier
Abbie Johnson
Cllr Fran Smith

Jessie Bunn
Ivor Hussey
Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

Officers In attendance:

Chris Brown
Ian Candlish
Simon Lewis
Sharon Sloan
Sharon Yarde
Josh Barrett (Clerk)

58 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

The Chair took apologies from: Councillor Marcus Barr, Samantha Rickward

59 Welcome from the Chair - Agenda Item 2

The Chair welcomed the group and went through housekeeping procedures.

60 Minutes from the previous meeting - Agenda Item 3

The Chair resolved that the minutes from the previous meeting on 25th March were noted as a true record.

61 Engagement Group Updates - Agenda Item 4

The Chair gave an overview of the updates from the engagement groups. A summarised version of discussion is below:

- TAG - A new application to join the group was received and in the last meeting, it was unanimously agreed. The group currently has nine members, which only allows for one more space.
- VOIDS – Visits will be conducted by four members of the TAG group: Brian Wyatt, Sally Mitchell, Catherine Jarvis and Christine Smith. The group have recently visited four properties of various conditions, the group will return to these properties before the new tenants move in to ensure that meet the lettable standard. A folder has been created with pictures and a spreadsheet to record any useful information.
- Damp & Mould - The group met again on the 19th of April 2024. They scrutinised the number of open cases and monitored the progress of the Damp and Mould action plan. They have asked Barabara Bottomley to look into the clearing of guttering and drainage issues as this can be a trigger for Damp & Mould. It has been agreed that an article about flushing wet wipes and blocking drains will be added to the tenant's newsletter. The group are investigating whether the use of “kitchen” and “bathroom paint” instead of general emulsion would be beneficial.
- Bathrooms and Roofing – Over 60 bathrooms have been fitted since January 2024 and more than 400 roofs have been completed this financial year.

62 Directorate Report - Agenda Item 5

Chris Brown, Service Director for housing introduced the directorate report, Ian Candlish and Simon Lewis were brought in to discuss further and the following points were raised and discussed (summarised):

- The HRA finance team are busy finalising the year end accounts, and we will then understand the final outturn figure for the HRA budget 2023/2024. We will share this with TSG once concluded.
- The Service continues to work hard to recruit and populate the structures. However, there remains quite a few vacancies in the service leading to pressures on staff and additional work by managers progressing recruitments. We have seen a number of resignations from the service at a senior level which again the service is working hard to replace.

- A meeting took place last week with the Somerset Council's appointed lead regulator. This was an introductory meeting to discuss co-regulation and the consumer standards.
- Homes in Sedgemoor have carried out a mock regulatory inspection and both the service Director Housing and Executive Member for Communities were interviewed as part of the inspection process.
- The housing service has led the acquisition of 31 homes in the County which will be held in the Housing Revenue Account. These properties will be let to Refugees for the first tenancy with flexibility for future years to let as General Need Homes. A bid to government has been submitted to purchase an additional 33 units.
- Additional recruitment has taken place for the trades area which will help to manage workloads and ensure we continue to meet target completion dates.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, March 2024, shows we met the target for both emergency responsive repairs (100%) and non-emergency responsive repairs (98.1%).
- Our materials supply chain process continues to operate well overall, with regular review of the Core list and how we can leverage the contract to deliver further logistical efficiencies.

The group discussed how pleased they were with the housing awards. The issue with recruitment for the housing team was discussed in further detail between the group. A question was asked around the staffing issues of Homes in Sedgemoor and other private housing associations. The group would like to see a presentation of the findings from the mock inspection of Homes in Sedgemoor which will be investigated for a future meeting. The Oxford inn property numbers were discussed. The works programmes for properties are being done in stages so tenants can still live in properties whilst this is being done.

Further questions will be emailed by Sharon to from the group.

The update will be shared with the group after the meeting. Chris Brown brought an updated directorate report to the meeting that differs from that in the agenda that the group received.

63 Q4 (Jan - Mar) Performance Report - Agenda Item 6

Sharon Yarde case management lead, introduced the report, and the following was raised and discussed (summarised):

- Performance on our complaint handling response times has continued to

improve over the course of quarter 4, with more than 95% answered within the Complaint Handling Code timescales. This has been as a result of a shift in working processes which has resulted in service areas and senior management being accountable for their service's complaints.

- Complaint volumes increased during quarter 4 which is surprising in comparison to our year-on-year data, however this seems to be in line with the sector as a whole where complaint numbers made against landlords continues to increase. As explained in the new Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, landlords should not focus on significantly reducing the number of complaints, as a higher number of complaints received by the service demonstrates that residents feel they are able to bring complaints to their landlord and know they will be listened to, and the complaint acted upon.
- Work continues to investigate a software and telephone survey solution. A software solution will ideally integrate with our housing system and carry out repair surveys however we are also we are discussing costs and feasibility of telephone surveys through an independent company.
- We have been receiving compliments and the total for the year 2023/24 is 51. However, we are confident that many more compliments are received by staff but are not reported and logged formally. We are currently looking at a process to ensure compliments are captured and staff are given feedback to accurately reflect when there has been great service.
- Managing the volume of calls into the service continues to be a challenge as call waiting times for both repairs and tenancy and estates were consistently over 5 minutes on average throughout the quarter. Work is underway to put a new process in place which will change how calls are received into the service which should significantly improve our performance in this area.

8.2.1 in the report, a question was raised about when the lettable standard satisfaction data can be captured. It has been confirmed that there is no letting manager at the present so this data cannot be captured at this time. TAG however is visiting these properties to check the standards.

8.8.0 in the report, a question was raised about a plan for long term sickness in housing teams.

Further questions will be emailed to Sharon Yarde and circulated to the team.

64 Key priorities for the year ahead - Agenda Item 7

Chris Brown gave a verbal update on the key priorities for the year ahead, and

presented the HRA directorate plan and the following topics were raised and discussed (summarised):

- Establish top quartile performance in Core Services
- Improve Customer Journey/Experience
- Asset Management Strategy
- Moving towards Carbon Zero homes
- Complete Responsive Repairs Action Plan
- Improve Compliance
- Raise the profile of the HRA within the council.

If the group have questions they will be emailed to Sharon.

65 Flooding action plan and conclusion Report - Agenda Item 8

Simon Lewis, Head of Housing, Income and Tenancy Management and Ian Candlish, Head of Property Service introduced the report. The following points were raised and discussed (summarised):

What went well:

- Excellent response on the night and during the following days, were officers were on the ground daily, supporting every affected household.
- Excellent cross-working between Property Services and Tenancy Services, coordinating our support to tenants.
- Supportive and caring approach which was customer focussed and empathetic.
- Elected to cover the costs of carpet replacement and removal of furniture during cleaning, as many tenants would have struggled to afford this.
- Officers went above and beyond, many volunteering and working antisocial hours and showing agility and flexibility to find solutions
- Dehumidifiers were provided to all properties early in the process and we committed to pay excess heating and electricity costs for their use.
- Creative support solutions identified for complex tenants bringing in other agencies as needed. For example, one very elderly tenant was partially sighted and had support needs and needed decant; we also had examples of people with significant hoarding and other tenants struggling with their mental health – all of whom required sensitive support to meet their needs.

- Regular communication with those displaced and with their properties being prioritised to be made ready to return.
- Daily project meetings taking place and communications to tenants, with people on site every day meant our communications was clear and frequent.
- We identified a cost effective, empathetic contractor to undertake the removal and cleaning works required for each property.

What could have gone better:

- Having a clear process, allocated coordinator, and allocation of resource for a significant event like this, including backfill / reprioritisation of work from the start and ensuring a rota of officer to avoid burn-out.
- Better anticipation of the sheer amount of work this would entail.
- Ability to get hold of Deane Helpline and for them to bring in support was limited.
- A wider list of officers available for call out in an emergency, particularly when bad weather is forecast.
- Needed a single point of contact to be responsible for identifying works required. In practice actions were being identified by officers on the ground and being phoned in by tenants which duplicated work.
- Understanding of insurance arrangements and earlier involvement of the Council's insurance agency (note self-insurance requires service to take all responsibility for works and repairs)
- Ability to secure temporary accommodation was a significant challenge and needs to be easier.
- A necessity to have professional, accredited cleaning and sanitisation of properties earlier in the process, which is certified.
- Necessity for dry certificates to evidence that property is dried.
- Few tenants had contents insurance and we require clearer principles on what the HRA will pay for when tenant does not have contents insurance – for future cases. This needs to align to a hardship policy and fund. Note our current position sends out mixed messages.
- A clearer position on when we would insist on a decant, normally when the property or a person is at risk by staying in their home. Most incidents where water has entered a property will require a decant.
- Clearer guidance on our position when tenant refuses to leave or to use dehumidifiers, or for contaminated carpets to be removed. Legal Services has advised that a signed disclaimer would not suffice.

The group discussed what preventative measures are being put in place to try and stop the flooding issues. The use of specialist flooding consultancies and gully clearing are being used to try and stop flooding. The need of contents insurance was

discussed and how the council can communicate the importance of contents insurance to tenants. It has been taken forward that there is a wider strategic communication piece on this topic.

66 TSG Recruitment update - Agenda Item 9

Sharon Yarde talked through a presentation on an update for TSG recruitment, a summary of the key points can be found below:

- A timeline was shown detailing that the recruitment phase is well underway with the first meeting with the new recruits will be 29th July.
- 41 applications were received in.
- There were 30 applications that were eligible with 15 spaces.
- The recruitment panel and the process were explained.

67 Any other Business - Agenda Item 10

The next meeting is on 24 July 2024. The Chair closed the meeting.

(The meeting ended at Time Not Specified)

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CHAIR