



# Somerset Council

**Tenants' Strategic Group – 24<sup>th</sup> 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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