



Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – 25th September 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

Director's Team

- NTWP (North Taunton Woolaway Project) has completed six new homes with more under a four-week notice period. Phase A (47 homes) will be completed this year and phase B & Ci demolition contract is now progressing through

procurement. The service has submitted a bid to Homes England for £5m. Somerset Council's bid is the first bid received nationally by Homes England for their new Regeneration fund. If successful, this fund will help the Housing Revenue in relation to future schemes. Seaward Way, Minehead is progressing well with a recent community drop in arranged for 19th September 2023.

- The Regeneration at Wordsworth Drive and Coleridge Crescent flats continues to progress well with only one tenant awaiting decant at Coleridge Crescent and only the shop tenanted at Wordsworth Drive. The team has recently been working to make the site more secure following a spate of thefts. The demolition contract procurement is progressing and will see the two blocks demolished next year.
- The housing service is leading the acquisition of 31 homes in the County which will be held in the Housing Revenue Account. These properties will be let to Refugees and Asylum Seekers for the first tenancy with flexibility for future years to let as General Need Homes. The homes are 100% funded by the Local Authority Housing Fund and other subsidy available to the council.
- The service is progressing at pace with a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. The In-house housing service has retrofit grant – ECO4, Social Housing and Decarbonisation Fund Waves (SHDF) 1 & 2. Works has commenced on all programmes through surveys. The SHDF wave 1 & 2 pilot to replace windows, additional loft insulation, LED lighting, boiler controls and mechanical ventilation commenced mid-September. A number of schemes are progressing using ECO4 funding with planning permission being prepared for a number of schemes using External Wall Insulation. Another scheme is agreed with Photo Voltaic Panels and additional loft insulation. A show house in Wellington is being prepared and there will be opportunities for tenants to visit in the new year.
- The service has commenced its budget planning for 2024/2025 and is reviewing its 30-year business plan. The business plan is very important as it projects the costs of the council's core landlord services as well as funds for capital programmes and new build. The Business plan covers the expenditure of all 10,000 homes.
- The Consultation for the new council structure has now concluded and refinements to the staff structures are being made with the housing service preparing for a restructure in Autumn. The TSG will receive a presentation on the new housing structure.
- 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.
- Although recent affordable housing completions in the County by Registered Social Landlords and private developers have been quite good the future pipeline is low. Although the government has announced some changes to ecology requirements which could unblock some developments there is insufficient detail about this change to understand if more homes can be approved by planning.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken, and performance is improving in these areas. Nevertheless, it remains challenging to recruit to vacant trade roles.
- Responsive repair request call-handling is currently still being taken by call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team, although we are reviewing options for how this key activity may best be provided in the future.
- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP), including improving IT systems (e.g., job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.).
- We continue to undertake void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard, and are shortly due to go out to tender for external contractor support for major voids, when required, to ensure we meet our KPI targets.
- Our materials supply chain process has been expanded to all trade areas and we are evaluating efficiency and effectiveness of this process change.

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.
- We have completed a joint Building and Resident health and Safety Assurance Framework with Homes in Sedgemoor (HiS) and are reviewing lessons to be learnt from each other's experiences.
- We have recently completed a property safety compliance assurance audit undertaken by an external independent specialist consultancy practice, Savills. We are awaiting their full report, but initial feedback is positive and we look forward to implementing recommendations to improve service delivery further.
- A fire safety audit is underway, and we expect to have a formal report to feedback to TSG by the next meeting.
- We continue to undertake our Electrical Inspection programme with the main contractor delivering the programme and support from our in-house electrical team.
- 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 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.
- Additional recruitment has been undertaken in the team, with two new Interim Contract Managers recently taken on to facilitate the increased programmes of work due.
- 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 and two additional surveyors have joined for a short period to support the service purchase 31 units for the Local Authority Housing Fund. The service is working with Homes in Sedgemoor to reassure the council and tenants of the low risk of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC).
- The service continues to carry out many energy surveys which are required to understand pathways to Zero Carbon and which low energy 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. Ensuring homes meet the decent homes standard remain a high priority for the service and properties requiring these works have been identified and placed in the capital programme.

Housing and Communities Team

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- We have had a number of tenants whose family members have been wanting/having to stay with them, due to family breakdown. There is no doubt that the cost of living is placing everyone under additional pressure. Whilst our tenants are wanting to support their family members, they have also reported that this is stressful and costly for them too, as it impacts upon their personal income. We have been working with other colleagues in Housing Options and Social Care to ensure that families are getting the appropriate support and housing advice.
- We have been involved in resolving several neighbour disputes. Our tenants often live within close proximity to each other and can be disturbed by each

other's day-to-day noise and movements (doors closing shut, furniture being moved etc.). Often the person causing the noise hasn't been aware of the impact on their neighbour and in some cases, tenants have reported a problem in their property, which staff have been able to report into maintenance for fixing.

- We continue to represent our tenants and the Council's Landlord function, at a variety of multi-disciplinary meetings. Often our staff have discovered a tenant is in need of support and help when going about their usual day-to-day business. When we have a tenant who is struggling to live independently, this can also impact on others living around them. Staff make referrals for specialist help and support. Adult Social Care and Health service colleagues are able to offer tenant's support, but sometimes they refuse help, which then impacts on their ability to sustain their tenancy. This is why staff providing ongoing contact and representation at multi-disciplinary meetings is important and aids steps to be taken to enable the tenant to understand the need to engage with professional help and services and sustain their tenancy.
- The team have received training in 'Total Mobile' and are now using it to support them in their work. Total Mobile links to Open Housing and allows staff to access information on tenants whilst they are out and about, There are also several forms which can be accessed and completed, including the trusted assessor form, which staff use regularly to arrange aids and adaptations for tenants.
- The whole team are now back in work, but we have had some leave absences over summer, which the remaining team members have covered.

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.
- The team remains settled
- The teams' Home Moves Plus project officer has retired, He will be sadly missed. The project is on course to meet the target set by EDF and recruitment will commence soon to replace him.
- In the first week of September the first properties to be advertised from the North Taunton regeneration project will be advertised on home finder Somerset. (HFS). They consist of 16 flats.

Income

- Debt and Benefit surgeries have started again following the summer break. Priorswood is now held on the 1st Monday of each month and the link centre is every other Thursday (alternate to CA)
- The team have now started to submit applications for the Housing Hardship Fund. The fund aims to support council tenants experiencing financial hardship who are struggling or unable to pay their rent by providing short term assistance. Existing tenants can be awarded up to £1,000 towards any existing rent arrears.

- A member of the Rent Recovery team is leaving the organisation on 15th September 2023, this will see the team reduced to 4 Rent Recovery Officers. We will now be starting the recruitment process to fill this vacancy.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- The estates team have experienced high demand over the last few months and have been drawn into a number of complex cases that have required and continue to require significant officer input. We are currently recruiting two agency staff to replace officers that left earlier in the Summer and this will help alleviate some of the pressures and allow us to catch up with workloads. Management discussions are taking place to look to build more permanent staffing into the Tenancy structure, pending affordability to reflect the day to day demands the service faces. The normal challenges of Summer holidays, sickness and a recent occurrence of Covid cases has also added to capacity challenges.
- Anti-social behaviour at Moorland Road – we have reported previously on this and the issues we have been experiencing, particularly with two teenage children on the estate. This came to a head over the last few weeks. We had several serious incidents occurring daily and there has been public disorder in the evenings which the Police have attended and arrested the culprits. We are aware that Social Services are engaged and providing support, however behaviours are not improving and this continues to have a serious detrimental impact on the community. We are consulting a barrister to support us tackle this anti-social behaviour cases and are seeking injunctions as well as discussing a case for possession. We are now actively formalising statements and case notes so that the barrister can progress this case. The community who are usually very tolerant and robust have come forward to give statements, so this is very telling that the community have had enough of the anti-social behaviour that these children are causing.
- In addition to this we have had several other very serious anti-social behaviour cases that we are dealing with; and the team are currently under pressure to get these court ready.
- Youth crime has settled down in the Priorswood area, this is due to the main culprits being taken out of the community and we are aware that the main perpetrator is due to attend Court in the next few weeks for an unprovoked knife attack on a member of community.
- The experience that the anti-social behaviour team are gaining from working with the barrister will help to improve their confidence and learning and set out how they now move forward when preparing for future cases.

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 and membership of ARCH as well as TPAS.

- Two electronic newsletters have been sent to our tenants who have email addresses. A hardcopy newsletter will be sent to sheltered, extra care tenants and those who have requested large print twice a year.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and is supporting the progression of the Damp and Mould Action Plan. The group has attended 3 in person events. Behind the scenes considerable work has taken place to set up new triage processes in our software and these will go live by end of September.
- The Low Carbon Working group has continued to meet with a new focus on communication.
- We are continuing to collectively work with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- The first tenant satisfaction survey has taken place in May 2023 and results will be reported to TSG in September 2023
- 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 since April 2023.
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. The texting (SMS) option has been used 3 times to advertise the Damp and Mould in person events. The review of the proposed tenant portal continues and 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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