

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, 27 November 2023 at 6.00 pm

Present:

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

Alex Akhigbemen
Kevin Hellier

Jessie Bunn
Ivor Hussey
Councillor Fran Smith

Council Staff/Officers Present:

Chris Brown
Shari Hallett
Simon Lewis
Sharon Yarde
Ian Candlish

29 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies received Councillor Marcus Barr, Samantha Rickward and Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts.

30 Welcome from the Chair - Agenda Item 2

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and went through the housekeeping announcements. Permission has been received from all the group for photos to be taken during the meeting by Craig Rossiter for project work. The Chair introduced Abbie Johnson who is interested in joining the Tenant Strategic Group.

31 Minutes from the previous meeting - Agenda Item 3

The minutes from the previous meeting held on the 25th of September were

approved noting the following action points from the last meeting including:

- Access to external bins for wheelchair users
- Regulations for bin placement near to properties

RESOLVED Minutes were noted.

32 Engagement Group Updates - Agenda Item 4

The Chair gave an overview of the various engagement groups and their activities. A summarised overview of activities and updates below:

- New member voted onto TAG.
- Estate Improvement Fund budget allocation update.
- Leycroft Grove improvements moving in the right direction.
- SPARKLE funding agreed for Christmas presents for children.
- Damp and Mould group to organise evening events for tenants to discuss the issue. To be discussed after the next meeting in January 2024.

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

33 TAG Annual Report - Agenda Item 5

Wayne Hobson discussed the TAG annual report. Summarised highlights of the report can be found below:

- Recruitment update for TAG.
- Update on chair and vice chair votes.
- Estate walkabouts (Easte Officers) update.
- VOIDS update.
- Financial Summary Update.

Following the report, the following questions and comments were raised:

- Lack of officer presence at meetings of TAG workgroups.

- The group would like to understand more about the remit of the officer's workload (for example who is in charge of certain maintenance areas).

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

34 Flooding Review - Agenda Item 6

Simon Lewis, Head of Housing, Income and Tenancy Management discussed the flooding review report. The report notes lessons learnt from the recent flooding of HRA properties in Wellington. Highlights of the report can be found below:

Lessons Learnt - What went well (summarised):

- Excellent response on the night and during the following days, where officers were on the ground daily, supporting every affected household.
- 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 anti-social hours and showing agility and flexibility to find solutions.
- Daily project meetings taking place and communications to tenants, with people on site every day meant our communications was clear and frequent.
- Regular communication with those displaced and with their properties being prioritised to be made ready to return.

Lessons Learnt - What could have gone better (summarised):

- 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.
- Ability to secure temporary accommodation was a significant challenge and needs to be easier.

After the report the group discussed the following questions and comments:

- Gully clearing increasing in high risk areas.
- Simon Lewis will return at a future meeting to provide an update on the progress of work noted in the report.

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

35 Update from Chris Hall - Agenda Item 7

Chris Hall, Executive Director of community services gave an update and answered questions that were pre-submitted to him prior to the meeting by the group. A summarised version of the questions and answers that were discussed below:

With how long the unitary taking to get everything in place and all the stories in the news what is being done to reassure staff and residence about the future of jobs and homes?

Answer: There is continuous dialogue with employees through their line management structure, internal communications such as Dragons Pen, the Communities Q&A sessions, and CEO briefing and Q&A. We have been clear to employees that this is a financial emergency and unprecedented in its scale and we are working to offer up an affordable budget for Members to decide upon in February.

The HRA is not required to make savings in the context of the creation of the unitary council, there are however financial pressures caused by inflation and the rent cap. Whenever inflation exceeds the rent cap the service effectively has less money to spend on its housing stock.

Service structures have been designed and are going through the process of validation with HR and Finance. With the financial emergency now in place we are having to further review if our desired structures are affordable within the current budget gap. Again, differences for HRA and GF.

Is there a plan in place with regards to how the service will move forward?

Answer: Yes, the HRA business plan continues to guide all activity and financing within the account, this is the 30-year plan that is reviewed annually. There is a need to consider the future landlord model for Somerset Council. This will take time and require consultation. Estimates for this are in the region of 2 years. Savings from a single landlord model would help support the HRA business case in future years.

When are people going to know who is doing what job going forward because at present there seems to be some confusion?

Answer: All employees remain on their current terms and conditions and job descriptions, there may be places where we have asked people to undertake different or additional tasks to meet gaps in the service, but this will be resolved once the service structures are consulted on and recruited to. We anticipate the changes to be minimal.

What is the new structure going to look like and when can we see this?

Answer: Once it is ready for consultation, we will share it with you. For it to be ready we must have sign off from HR regarding any roles or individual that are impacted by the proposals and from Finance to demonstrate that the structure is affordable. There are delays in this as those are shared functions of the council and priority is being given to resolving the financial crisis. No significant changes can happen unless there is consultation.

Delay is frustrating but financial survival of the council is the main priority.

With the current financial crisis with the council, what does this mean for my tenancy and how will it be affected?

Answer: The HRA does not have the same financial issues as the council's general fund at this stage. Therefore, any impacts within housing are limited to shared HRA and GF services and roles. That said if the council has no choice but to submit a s114 notice this has the potential to impact on grants received into the HRA. We feel a strong case can be made to retain these grants, but this is a matter beyond our control.

How are you going to try and save money?

Answer: The council has been operating in emergency environment for some months now, this focuses resources on the problem. We have been reviewing and reducing our in-year expenditure and recruitment needs. All expenditure over £100 and all vacancies now must go to a spend control board for authorisation. We have reviewed the capital programme both in year and for future years, reviewed the income opportunities and our fees and charges levels for 24/25. We are reviewing service savings options and service

reductions. We are reviewing our structures to establish what further reductions could be made, we are considering a voluntary redundancy scheme. We have reviewed the EMR's, and we are taking advice on the minimum level of general reserves we can hold. We are in conversation with government about the type of support they can offer. We are monitoring the action of other councils who have submitted a s114 notice to see what we can learn. We have brought in external support to review Adults and Childrens services and see what reductions may be deliverable.

We are recording our progress and reporting it via the Strategic Management Group to the Member MTFP board.

How many jobs could be lost?

Answer: It is difficult to put a number on this, but it is likely to be significant across General Fund services.

During and after Transformation, there was no Tenant Engagement, how can you re-assure us that this will not happen again during unitary?

Answer: Transformation was a long time ago. We are committed to maintaining tenant engagement throughout any changes.

How is writing to the local, town and district councils going to help save money?

Answer: We are seeking for City, Town, and Parish councils to fund some of the services that might otherwise be cut. This might be through a payment to SC, or an asset or service transfer / devolution. Therefore, less costs to SC. City, Town and Parish councils do not have the same limit on their proportion of the council tax and so can increase their fees to cover the devolved costs.

If the cost of services is going to go up, like council tax and rent, how will this affect the community all round for all of us?

Answer: For general fund services we are seeking to increase income to the maximum permissible levels, the max levels that the market can sustain, and the maximum permissible by government.

The services we are used to receiving are underfunded and if we want them to continue or reduce at a slower rate than taxation will have to change.

Council Housing rents are capped by government, any increase that is below

inflation is a real terms financial cut.

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

36 Q2 (July-Sept) Performance and Finance Report - Agenda Item 8

The group submitted questions to the Chair on the Q2 Performance and Finance Report which will be answered via email and sent to the group after the meeting.

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

37 The Directorate Report-Senior Management - Agenda Item 9

The group submitted questions to the Chair on The Directorate Report. Which will be answered via email and sent to the group after the meeting.

RESOLVED. The report was noted.

38 Any other Business - Agenda Item 10

The group noted the “Special Meeting” for budget rent and service charge setting. This will take place on 15th January 2024 and will be via Teams.

The group was read a statement written by Abbie Johnson as an expression of interest to join the Tenant Strategic Group and the group voted unanimously that Abbie will be joining the TSG.

There was no other business raised.

(The meeting ended at 7.15 pm)

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CHAIR