



Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 22nd January 2024

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 November 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

HRA Growth and Business Function

- The service launched its post LGR (Local Government Reorganisation) structure in December and is working to embed the structure over the next 6 months. The structure recognised the responsibility of the council for 10,000 homes and the ambition to become a top quartile performing social landlord.
- The structure includes a Growth and Business Function aimed at emphasising the importance of increasing the number of homes in the HRA and ensuring the strategic and financial needs of the Single HRA are delivered through the In-House Service and the ALMO (Homes in Sedgemoor)
- The service has concluded its budget planning for 2024/2025 and its review of its 30-year business plan. The business plan is particularly 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 for all 10,000 Council homes.
- The Council is set to see the largest number of new and acquired homes for many years with 300 new homes to the HRA between 2023-2026. The business plan annually will consider new schemes of which there are a number.
- Over 30 NTWP (North Taunton Woolaway Project) Phase A are now let with the 47 being let within the few weeks.
- NTWP is the first scheme in the country to receive Homes England Regeneration funding. The Council has signed a contract and will receive £5m additional subsidy for phase A, B and Ci.
- The contract for the demolition of NTWP Phase B, Ci and Di and Wordsworth Drive and Coleridge Crescent Flats is approved. The demolition will take place February and into Spring
- The procurement of a main contractor for NTWP will conclude in January and if successful the new contractor will be appointed to start in the new financial year.
- Seaward Way/Rainbow Way, Minehead is progressing well. A second community drop in event will take place in January and the first eleven properties should be let before April.
- The Regeneration at Wordsworth Drive and Coleridge Crescent flats continues to progress well with site security and demolition the focus of the team.
- 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 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. To date ten homes have been purchased with nine more in conveyancing. Customers will have a secure tenancy agreement.
- The service will conclude in March its programme which has purchased five homes which are to be used as Housing First properties for people who were Sleeping Rough. An additional 5 Housing Revenue account properties have been switched from General Need through this programme. The funding to purchase the properties is all grant funded.
- The service is progressing with a Low Carbon Retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan significantly influenced by tenants. The In-house housing service has several retrofit grants including ECO4, Social Housing and Decarbonisation Fund Waves

(SHDF) 1 & 2. All schemes are starting to deliver with measures such as improved glazing, loft insulation, improved ventilation, LED lighting, Air Source

- Heat Pumps, Solar, PV, and External Wall Insulation being used on different properties to achieve EPC C or Net Zero.
- The HRA has Private Water Treatment Plants (Septic Tanks) and is currently replacing one of the oldest. The council will progress the replacement of others. The replacement of tanks with more environmentally sensitive tanks may allow the HRA to receive credits in relation to Phosphates.
- 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.

Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- The most recent available data for repairs performance, November 2023, shows a slight reduction with emergency responsive repairs at 99.4% and non-emergency responsive repairs at 98.1%. We are continuing to seek to recruit to vacant trade roles to ensure we have sufficient resources available to meet demand, but this remains challenging.
- Responsive repair request call-handling is currently still being taken by call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team. However, we have plans in place to enable this activity to be taken 'in-house' within the Housing Directorate in the future (thus allowing a smooth 'one and done' appointment-based service offer to the customer).
- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP). This includes improving IT systems, and we are about to launch an Open Contractor project review to ensure the system is fit-for-purpose as we improve future service delivery.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to successfully meet our Lettable Standard. Procurement activities for external contractor support for void repairs are ongoing and will be tendered in early 2024.
- Our materials supply chain process continues to operate well overall, with regular review of the Core list. We are also in discussions with the supplier regarding their Social Value offer.

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.

- The Fire Safety Audit by SWAP (Southwest Audit Partnership) is now complete although we are still awaiting their final report. We will incorporate their recommended actions into our overall Property Safety Compliance Action Plan.
- Our Electrical Inspection testing programme continues to improve compliancy in this area, with the latest data showing 94.24% (see Capital Programme section below for further details).
- A programme of urgent fire door replacement and fire door powered openers is being undertaken. A further programme of fire safety works (following Fire Risk Assessment recommended actions) is being procured.
- Weekly compliance meetings, together with monthly reports to the Executive team, are ongoing to carefully monitor and manage housing property safety.

Capital Programme

- Our Capital Programme team are delivering our electrical inspection testing programme with both the main contractor delivering the programme and support from our in-house electrical team. A consumer unit replacement programme is shortly due to commence (awaiting National Grid to schedule their contractor switches which are needed prior to our being able to commence works).
- A new programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements has commenced with three new contractors. Initial pilot properties are being undertaken to ensure quality standards can be achieved, with an accelerated programme planned for Q4.
- 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

- We are undertaking option appraisals to enable the purchase of 31 units funded by the Local Authority Housing Fund.
- We have undertaken a desktop review of our properties that potentially contain Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) and have passed this information to SC colleagues in the Corporate Assets team who are arranging on-site surveys to confirm whether this is present.
- The service continues to carry out 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 (DHS) remains a high priority for the service and properties requiring these works have been identified and placed in the capital programme.

- We are undertaking option appraisals for potential disposal of existing properties in the HRA which no longer serve as appropriate homes for our tenants.
- Stock condition surveys, and validation surveys (i.e. checking that works identified for programmes of replacement in the near future require the works to be undertaken now) are progressing with pace, which enable us to prioritise those most in need of upgrading, smooth the programmes to improve our financial planning, reduce the number of remedial repairs required and meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS).

Income and Tenancy Management Team

Sheltered & Extra Care Housing

- Flood update – we supported the tenants to have sterile cleaning of their property. Dry reports for every property were also completed and carpets fitted. All homes were visited, and additional works planned and arranged. Whilst this has been an upheaval for some of the tenants, they have been pleased that so many steps have been taken to make their homes safe. During the period we were dealing with the flood, we identified some tenants whose needs now exceed them being able to live independently and we have been able to support them to move to somewhere more appropriate, both within and outside of Council housing stock. This has impacted on our usual service delivery.
- We have taken part in the sessions to develop a flow chart for dealing with floods in future, reflecting on what we now know.
- The team has supported work to address issues around the fire door installation programme, including adapting some of them to ensure sheltered housing tenants are able to all use the new doors safely. This has also had an impact on our usual service delivery.
- A new model of Policing has been introduced in Wellington and we have been liaising with the local One Team Coordinator, to ensure information regarding tenants is passed through promptly to our staff within the area, to respond (matters such as unexpected deaths, concerns for vulnerability and exploitation).
- When officers conduct annual reviews with tenant, they sometimes identify people struggling with living on an upper floor (where there is no lift). This leads to a fire risk assessment and an evacuation plan being carried out. Sometimes we require tenants to move and when they agree we support them to update and bid on Homefinder. In some cases, where the person has local support and links, we occasionally look to do a direct match. If a tenant is not willing to move, staff discuss the best options for them if there was to be a fire.
- Work is continuing to take place re: the 'digital switchover,' which is planned for 2025. This is to ensure that all our tenants have digitally compatible lifelines.
- We have had conversations with Musgrove Park Hospital & Adult Social Care regarding improving referrals into Extra Care, including referrals from people who are ready to be discharged from the hospital, but who are needing to be

- re-housed, due to being unable to return to their own home (due to lack of accessibility etc.) We are continuing to work with these colleagues to improve this process and have made several referrals to Adult Social Care, for tenants who need care assessments, reviews, who are self-neglecting etc.
- The Sheltered Housing Manager I attended the LETRA Lane Estates residents meeting on behalf of the housing team and have followed up on several matters that were raised.
- We have held several multi-disciplinary team meetings for tenants who have more complex needs, to ensure that they have the support they need to sustain their tenancy.
- We had 4 staff providing cover over the Christmas to New Year period and have made sure tenants who can continue to have calls from Lifeline during the holiday period.

Lettings

- The feedback the team have received from tenants on both the lettable standard of the properties and our lettings process has remained high throughout 2023;
- More new build properties in the North Taunton area have been handed over and let. A few of weeks ago I had the pleasure of being shown around one of the homes by the new tenant/s. Their previous home had been demolished and they had received the keys to their new home a couple of weeks earlier - they were really pleased with their new 'forever home;'
- All the flats that are scheduled for demolition at Wordsworth Drive have been vacated with all the tenants moving on successfully;
- No recruitment of the Home Moves Plus officer has taken place at this stage, although downsizing is still a service offered to our tenants.
- Following the Christmas closedown of Homefinder Somerset the lettings team have this week (02.01.24) recommenced their advertising activities.

Income

- The Rent Recovery team are still working at reduced staff level, the team are working hard to give our tenants continuous support and ensure they are claiming everything they are entitled to. Recruitment to the vacant post will now commence.
- The case manager who deals with all the garage stock is leaving the organisation on 12th January, we are currently working on a plan to cover this workload while we undertake a recruitment exercise to fill this role.
- The Debt and Benefit team are also working at reduced capacity due to 1 staff member being absence from work. The remaining officer is now providing support for the whole of the housing stock, however some response times slightly longer than possible and some tenants sign posted to other organisation for help and support.

- We are working towards our new phone system being introduced before the end of January. Voicescape will enable us to make outbound calls much more effectively and should therefore help us with the collection of rent arrears.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- Having a full complement of Case Managers has had a positive impact on the team with the team managing their workloads and keeping up with the enquiries that come in daily. Permanent recruitment is being planned for the New Year.
- The success of the outright day possession order against the male tenant in Wellington, resulted in him leaving the property on the day of the order and therefore we did not have to utilise a bailiff warrant; this meant that the community will now be able to settle down and enjoy a quieter Christmas period.
- The case in Wellington related to a teenage boy with undiagnosed mental health issues has quietened down as the boy has not been allowed to return to the property due to his bail conditions. The family are now attempting to secure new alternative accommodation. We will work closely with them to do what we can to support them with this.
- We have updated regularly on a case where an aggressive tenant; who has had a restraining order against a member of our team; prior to the Christmas period moved to London and through the support services in London he has now engaged with, he has given notice on his property in Taunton. His tenancy ended on the 25th December 2023. We can now advise that his tenancy has terminated, and the property will now be sensitively let. The team are more relaxed about working in and around the Taunton area as this threat against them has ceased.
- Moorland Road – the recent problem of anti-social behaviour continues to be monitored but there have been no further problems reported. This will continue to be closely monitored. We are working with our Lettings Team to ensure that future voids in the area are sensitively let to enable the community to settle down and recover.
- Although workloads remain busy, we are seeing that the more serious anti-social behaviour has calmed down, which is usual and to be expected for this time of the year.
- The Priorswood regeneration area was busy leading up to the Christmas break as we had new properties to let. This went smoothly and people are happy and now feeling the benefits of their new home.
- In the New Year we are going to be actively working with the development team getting familiar with the new properties that are coming over in Minehead. Our first visit to the site is planned for the 31st January 2024

Housing Performance Team

- Supporting and enabling the work of the Tenants Strategic Group (TSG) and Tenants' Action Group and the subgroups is a key focus for our team. We

have agreed a comprehensive training plan for TSG group members for 2023/2024 and membership of ARCH as well as TPAS. Our engaged tenants have already attended 6 training sessions.

- TSG voted and welcomed a new member to the group and another interested tenant is attending the January 2024 TSG meeting.
- The process designed through the Damp and Mould group for tenants has gone live in our software and this work continues to support the progression of the Damp and Mould Action Plan.
- The Low Carbon Working group has ended; they achieved a new Low Carbon Strategy and a Communication plan.
- Collectively we are continuing to work with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams. We continue to meet regularly.
- We have completed the second tenant satisfaction survey for 2023, the results will be reported to TSG in March. The team dealt with 43 flags requiring urgent attention and investigated 301 comments.
- We have also submitted data to Housemark, our benchmarking organisation, to understand how our TSM (tenant satisfaction measurement) data compares to other providers.
- We continue to strive for improvement in our complaint handling and are facing challenges in our response times, however Housing Ombudsman has not investigated any complaint made against us since April 2023. The team has had to deal with staff absence in this area which has been challenging. Complaints performance is reporting to TSG through the performance quarterly reports and again in more detail in the complaints annual report to TSG.
- We have listened to tenant concerns, and we are keen to improve how we communicate as a service with customers. This year we have opened several communication channels with tenants including online newsletters, tenant liaison officers in our capital works teams, texting and we will use a system called voicescape shortly to reduce abortive telephone calls. We are enhancing our website content, and we are using new formats such as videos and quick surveys embedded in articles. We agree that we can go further still, and we are currently proposing a dedicated in-service communication team. The service remains committed to introducing a tenant's portal to allow tenants to self-serve 24/7 and we are keen to have a social media presence.

.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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