



Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 25th March 2024

Directorate Report

This matter is the responsibility of Cllr Federica Smith Robert Executive Member for Communities

Report Authors: Heads of Service and Housing Performance Manager

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group (TSG) on work being undertaken and progress made by the Housing Directorate since the last TSG meeting in January 2024.

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 last couple of months have been remarkably busy finalising and presenting the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) business plan and rent setting proposals to full council. We are incredibly pleased that the full council supported the 30 recommendations in the report including the capital programme, a single development programme for the HRA, rent and service charges and the 30-year business plan.
- The approved business plan is ambitious with efficiencies required and income to be maximised including a reduction of void times, more accuracy in service charge setting and improved collection of s20 leasehold charges.
- The HRA business plan is a single plan for all council homes including those in the West previously Somerset West and Taunton properties and those in the North previously Sedgemoor District Council properties managed by Homes in Sedgemoor.
- A single development plan for the HRA will see 448 homes purchased or built over the next five years. If the service outperforms the business plan more development will be proposed.
- Schemes at Oxford Inn and 24 units of modular construction now have the funding to progress and the HRA is appropriating 4 homes from the general fund in Martock.
- The business plan has included investment to achieve Net Zero on its current stock before 2050. This significant investment will see more investment in tenants' homes and a bigger annual capital programme. The capital programme for 2024/2025 is £18m for the inhouse service.
- Members received the HRA reports with enthusiasm and many positive comments were shared by members including a number which encourages the HRA to reach further into the East and the West of the County.
- The recruitment and embedding of this overarching HRA team are taking time primarily due to the approval of job descriptions and the recruitment process.
- The service provides the client monitoring function for Homes in Sedgemoor (The Council's Arm's Length Management Organisation)
- The service is responsible for service level agreement with general fund colleagues for Shops, Adaptations, grants to the HRA and strategic HRA finances and shortly some Net Zero delivery.
- The main contract for building NTWP Phase B and Ci has been agreed by members and demolition will start imminently at North Taunton and Wordsworth Drive/Coleridge Crescent. Boarding has now been erected at Wordsworth Crescent.
- Seaward Way/Rainbow Way, Minehead is progressing well, and a second community drop in event was well supported.
- 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.
- The council is considering a second phase which could see an additional 30 units acquired plus some new build homes over 2 years.

Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- The team are currently short staffed, both for the trades area and office support. Arrangements are in place to help manage workloads, but this is likely to affect future performance indicators and may lead to an increase in complaints for this service area.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, January 2024, shows we met the target for both emergency responsive repairs and non-emergency responsive repairs.
- Responsive repair request call-handling is currently still being taken by call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team. However, we continue to plan for 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 have launched an Open Contractor project review to develop the system and enable improved 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.
- 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 and we are implementing the agreed management actions contained within their final report.
- Our Electrical Inspection testing programme continues to improve compliance in this area, with the latest data showing 95.09% (see Capital Programme section below for further details).
- A procurement exercise for fire doors, compartmentalisation, and fire safety works (following Fire Risk Assessment recommended actions) is being undertaken.
- 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 continues to deliver 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 has commenced, including National Grid installing contractor switches.
- The accelerated programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements has commenced with three new contractors and is progressing well.
- 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.
- Following approval of the medium-term financial plan (MTFP) and 30-year investment plan, detailed lists of properties requiring capital works are in place to ensure homes meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS).
- 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, 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

Across some of the teams we currently have a few vacancies, due to sickness absence of staff (for a range of reasons) as well as challenges that are slowing up the recruitment of new staff into vacant positions, due to sign-off processes required through Somerset Council. We are working with HR to support people back into work from sickness and are also progressing sign-offs as quickly as possible, through support from the Director to prioritise key posts through the sign-off process.

Sheltered & Extra Care Housing

- We are undertaking closer working with Adult Social Care and Health Commissioners to help streamline the Extra Care Housing allocation process. This has led to the addition of extra 'panel meetings' to agree suitable placements and care packages for new tenants. A particular focus is on ensuring applicants have an up-to-date care assessment in place.

Lettings

- We continue to advertise and relet properties.
- Preparations are being made for the letting of the new council homes in Minehead.
- We are working on consolidating our reporting mechanisms and business intelligence reports to develop one clear picture of where every property is within the voids cycle, from temporary accommodation, through to demolitions, new builds and standard voids. This will help us better report on performance and prioritise properties for turn-around.

Income

- We have introduced a new phone system for Rent Recovery called Voicescape. This system is an outbound calls system, we are still in the first few weeks of using this for Rent Recovery, the officers are finding it helpful, and we have received valuable feedback from some of our tenants who have been contacted using the system.
- The Debt and Benefit team is providing bespoke reports to tenants who are struggling financially and need help in maximising eligible benefits, discretionary housing payments and in some cases consolidating debts. This service has proved invaluable to many tenants and helped ensure they are able to retain their tenancies and manage their finances.
- We will be sending our Universal Credit claimants a text the week of 25th March to remind all tenants that they need to update their Housing Costs on their UC claim. We have found this to be successful in the past. The team will all be helping those most vulnerable tenants who are unable to complete the update themselves.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- On 29th February 2024 Stephen Deakin took retirement so the team wished him well. Stephen had been with the team for over 5 years so will be missed.
- The team continue to be busy with enquiries and daily tasks; along with a noticeable increase in having to project manage complex vulnerable customers. These customers are having to be decanted out so that extensive repairs (replacement kitchen, heating, bathrooms, damp, and mould works). These customers need in-depth support which is time consuming.
- The team have recently dealt with a serious mental health case, where the tenant was reporting repair issues whilst hallucinating; the Case Manager recognising the signs was able to refer into the community mental health team who have responded and been able to provide support. The tenant is now

getting support and the case manager is working to resolve related tenancy issues so that the tenant's property and possessions will be safe when she returns to the address.

- On the 20th February 2024 a serious assault took place in one of our properties in Coronation Close. The tenant had invited friends over when one attacked the other causing serious harm. A few days later we were advised that the victim sadly passed away. The tenant was questioned and released. A man has been remanded in custody for the attack and is a council tenant from another address. We are attempting to meet with him in prison to progress getting his tenancy terminated.
- The ASB team have prepared and served a Community Protection Notice (CPN) on a tenant in Eastwick Road, due to their dogs constantly barking. We have attempted to work with the residents and offered advise; complaints continued and working with our legal team we have now served this notice. We are closely monitoring the situation.
- We are also preparing court documents for a neighbour nuisance case where the tenant has threatened to harm his neighbours. The perpetrator is currently on remand in prison due to the serious nature of the last incident. We have, over the last year, attempted to provide support for the perpetrator but due to drug and alcohol misuse his behaviour becomes very chaotic and we believe he poses a serious threat to others.
- The team have now carried out three lettings under the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) programme for displaced families and these have gone well with the families settling in quickly.
- A house on Dorchester Road sustained extensive fire damage in the early hours of Monday 19th February 2024; the family were able to get out of the property safely and are staying in temporary accommodation until we can find a suitable 3-bedroom house for them to decant into whilst their home is repaired.

Housing Performance Team

Tenant Engagement

- 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 (Association of Retained Council Housing) as well as TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service). Our engaged tenants have already attended 7 training sessions.
- Another interested tenant wishing to join TSG attended in January and has submitted his application to join.
- The tenants action Group met in February and approved 2 CYIF applications and 1 Estate Improvement fund application.
- Collectively we are continuing to work with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams and tenant engagement. We continue to meet regularly.

- We have completed the annual 2023/2024 TSM (Tenant Satisfaction Measurement) survey, the results will be reported to TSG in March and submitted to the regulator in April.
- We have also submitted data to Housemark, our benchmarking organisation, to understand how our TSM (tenant satisfaction measurement) data compares to other providers.
- There has been long-term sickness in the Tenancy Engagement team since January 2024, capacity reduced to 50%.
- There were 4 tenant engagement activities in February and 6 in March 2024

Complaint Handling and Performance

- We have been focussing on providing complaint handling training and support to the service areas to enable us as a directorate to better understand what our residents are telling us, and to be able to use this feedback to help us learn from the complaints we receive.
- The Housing Ombudsman have recently released a revised Complaint Handling Code, which comes into effect from 1st April 2024. Although we have self-assessed and reported our performance against the Code since its inception in 2020 (and shared this with TSG and online); from 1st April it will be a mandatory requirement to report the outcome of this assessment to the Regulator and the Housing Ombudsman. We have carried out a self-assessment against the Code and are working on actions we need to take, to ensure compliance with the new Complaint Handling Code by 1st April. We will share our findings with TSG at a future meeting.
- Since the last report, the Housing Ombudsman has decided to investigate one complaint made against us. We have provided our full report to the Ombudsman and await their determination on this case. It is noteworthy that this is the only Housing Ombudsman complaint we have received for investigation since January 2022, which is against the sector trend of increasing Ombudsman complaints.
- We were able to assess our performance against our registered provider peers through a bespoke presentation that was provided by Housemark, our benchmarking organisation. We were pleased to see that we are doing well in many areas, and to ensure continued access to such rich data we will continue to submit monthly data to Housemark.

Housing Comms

- In response to TSM survey comments about the difficulty of getting through to the right person with calls being passed from person to person, we have created a new intranet to better share information. This should help with identifying who is the responsible officer for a piece of work making handoffs smoother and passing enquiries onto the right team and person.
- Tenants' Newsletter continues to have a high level of engagement that puts us in the 80th percentile of performance for government newsletters in the UK.
- First printed & posted Sheltered & Extra Care newsletter delivered.

- Work progressing well on the plan to improve communication on the capital works programmes. A small pilot of providing residents and contractors with information packs has been undertaken, we are also working to revamp the
- letters sent through the capital works programme to make the key information easier to identify.
- Continue to have good engagement with the videos we produce.

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?

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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