



Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group –Monday 20th May 2024

Directorate Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Communities

Report Authors: Heads of Service

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 March 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 HRA finance team are busy finalising the year end accounts and we will then understand the final outturn figure for the HRA budget 2023/2024. We will share this with TSG once concluded.
- The Service continues to work hard to recruit and populate the structures. However, there remains quite a few vacancies in the service leading to pressures on staff and additional work by managers progressing recruitments. We have seen a number of resignations from the service at a senior level which again the service is working hard to replace.
- A meeting will take place in May with the Somerset Council's appointed lead regulator. This will be an introductory meeting to discuss co-regulation and the consumer standards.
- Homes in Sedgemoor have carried out a mock regulatory inspection and both the service Director Housing and Executive Member for Communities were interviewed as part of the inspection process.
- 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. New schemes are being lined up both by the inhouse team and Homes in Sedgemoor.
- Phase A of the North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) has won Insider's South West Property Award for affordable housing. An awards evening took place in Exeter on 18 April which revealed NTWP as the winners against seven other shortlisted projects. Judges were impressed with the high level of community engagement, alongside the impressive tenant feedback. This is a great achievement and credit to the customers engaged throughout the process and the team delivering the consultation and development over many years. The scheme is also shortlisted for the Michelmores property Awards.
- The main contract for building NTWP Phase B and Ci has been agreed by members and demolition has commenced at North Taunton and Wordsworth Drive/Coleridge Crescent.
- The first 8-week notices have been issued at Seaward Way/Rainbow Way, Minehead so the first properties will be let in the next few months following snagging.
- The schemes at Oxford Inn has gone back to market to try and achieve an acceptable build price.
- 24 units of modular construction now have the funding. The planning process will require phosphate and biodiversity net gain mitigation plans. These issues are causing challenges for developers progressing schemes including the HRA.
- The business plan has included investment to achieve Net Zero on its current stock before 2050.
- ECO 4 schemes have been delivered at George Street and shortly some units at Kelway and Juniper will receive works reducing their energy use and making them 2050 Net Zero Ready. If these schemes go well the works will move onto Oake and NTWP Phase E.
- SHDF Wave 2 is delivering extensive Net Zero Works at Dinhams Close. There are 180 properties in the wave 2 programme.
- A SHDF Wave 3 bid is being prepared for submission in the summer for c500 Somerset HRA properties.
- The capital programme for 2024/2025 is £18m for the inhouse service.

- The service provides the client monitoring function for Homes in Sedgemoor (The Council's Arm's Length Management Organisation). Both Homes in Sedgemoor and the In-House Service are increasing working to the same Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- 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 housing service has led 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. A bid to government has been submitted to purchase an additional 33 units.

Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Additional recruitment has taken place for the trades area which will help to manage workloads and ensure we continue to meet target completion dates.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, March 2024, shows we met the target for both emergency responsive repairs (100%) and non-emergency responsive repairs (98.1%).
- 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), although recent staff shortages have hampered our ability to progress some items as quickly as we'd prefer.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to successfully meet our Lettable Standard. Procurement activities for external contractor support for void repairs are ongoing, with implementation of new contracts planned for Q2 2024/25.
- Our materials supply chain process continues to operate well overall, with regular review of the Core list and how we can leverage the contract to deliver further logistical efficiencies.

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.
- Our Electrical Inspection testing programme continues to improve compliancy in this area, with the latest data showing 95.6% (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. Options for alternative fire door specifications are currently being evaluated.
- 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 utilising an external main contractor to deliver the programme. A consumer unit replacement programme has commenced, including National Grid (NG) installing contractor switches. We are currently in discussions with NG about obtaining authorisation to use a sub-contractor for their install.
- The 2024/25 programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements is progressing well, although we have now terminated the contract for one of the three contractors due to poor performance and quality issues. The balance of the properties have been re-allocated to the remaining contractors.
- 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 completing the purchase of 31 units funded by the Local Authority Housing Fund and will work to support an additional 33 units should the LAHF Wave 3 bid be successful.
- 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

Shelter and extra care housing:

- Somerset Council's extra care commissioners are to undertake a review of the current provision of care and support services. As part of a first step tenants at Lodge Close, Wellington and Kilkenny Court, Taunton are being contacted and invited to share their views as part of a consultation exercise.
- Adult Social Care officers and Health Commissioners continue to meet and work closer together with supported housing officers. With referral rates rising, Lodge Close, Wellington has recently become fully let. Further steps are being taken to let all available vacancies at Kilkenny Court, Taunton; and
- The team continue to prioritise their work demands so they can focus on the most important tasks. This is helping the team manage service delivery throughout a period that has seen several key members of the team being absent.

Lettings:

- Approval has now been granted to recruit to the team's manager position. This is a temporary arrangement and will be for an initial period of up to 3 months.
- Despite experiencing a period where staffing levels within the team were low, there were 30 property adverts placed on Homefinder Somerset and 25 properties let in the month of April; and
- With our new housing development in Minehead nearing completion the team are currently expecting and preparing to receive a first phase handover of properties in approximately 8 weeks.

Income

- We are still undertaking the recruitment process for both a Rent Recovery Case Manager and a Garage case Manager, the latter post will now be filled by Agency staff hopefully in the next month or so.
- The Rent Recovery Team finished the financial year with an arrears figure of 414k, this was below their target for the year. They have all worked tirelessly to achieve that figure while our tenants face challenging financial times. The support given to our tenants to ensure they are claiming all the benefits they are entitled to continues.
- Our Debt and Benefit Case Managers are working hard to support those tenants who are now transitioning over to Universal Credit, as well as supporting our tenants in making their claims for the benefits they are entitled to.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- We are still waiting to recruit 4 permanent Tenancy and Estate Case Managers and 1 Senior Housing Manager (currently covered by agency). We will soon be able to get the advert out to progress this.
- I reported last month that there is a noticeable increase in the team having to project manage extremely complex customers, whose property conditions are poor around disrepair, often due to their self-neglect or hoarding. Most officers are now holding 5 to 10 of these complex cases. This work is both challenging and time consuming due to the customers complex mental health needs; as well as the difficulties in getting them support; and if necessary, finding them alternative accommodation to decant into whilst work takes place in their home. This work is mainly coming to our attention through non-access issues or concerns from the community. Supporting agencies are equally holding high caseloads so there is long lead in times for getting the support that they need,
- We are investigating solutions to identify if there is a business case to set aside a small number of properties to be available for decant purposes.
- The Tenancy team are finding that they need to keep a close eye on these customers once the property is back in good condition, to ensure they are able to maintain it once support pulls away. This is hard to manage when the tenant reverts to non-engagement.
- Anti-social behaviour cases although not at high levels; the cases we do get are very complex and serious. I reported on the recent death of a man in one of our properties; the perpetrator being a tenant. This required the ASB Officers needing to visit him in prison on several occasions. This has now resulted in him agreeing to terminate the tenancy rather than go through a lengthy court hearing to evict him. We have another tenant who has been released from Prison, he had bail conditions not to return to his property but then was bailed at his brother's address. The brother is extremely vulnerable and we are now attempting to get him moved out and into an alternative address. We are working with our multi-agency partners to do this.
- Despite the challenges the team have remained constant, settled and sickness absence is low. The team are very supportive of each other. We arrange each month a team day. During these sessions we go through policies and procedures. We also consider what our current challenges are and invite partnering agencies to come in to discuss and work through some of these challenges for example we have had MIND, the multi-disciplinary team, Somerset Independence Plus etc). This is proving invaluable to us as a team.
- The team have also had a full day's training in housing management law from HQN. The team picked up some good methods and techniques for dealing with the complex cases. This training was well received and received positive feedback. One of the main outcomes was that we are now arranging for further training in how we proceed with injunctions as this is a tool we need to be using more. Many social housing providers are resorting to using

injunctions to gain access; deal with breaches of tenancy such as untidy gardens and properties.

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 2024/2025 and membership of ARCH as well as TPAS. Our engaged tenants have already attended 7 training sessions.
- The Tenants Strategic Group are currently recruiting for new membership. The applications closed on 30th April 2024 and we have processed 41 applications. A panel meeting will take place to select 15 applicants with a reserve list of 10. All successful applications will be endorsed by our other engaged tenants in a meeting to be held in July.
- The Tenants Action Group met in April and looked at the memorial garden that they had funded.
- Collectively we are continuing to work with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams and tenant engagement. We continue to meet regularly.
- The May 2024 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM's) has commenced, telephone surveys will take place between 13th - 31st May 2024.
- We have completed the TSM data return, so that it can be submitted to the regulator.
- We have started working with our procured contractors to monitor and spend the social value elements of the contracts.
- Sharon Yarde and Sharon Sloan attended the Inside Housing Tenant Engagement Conference in May.
- There were 7 tenant engagement activities in April 2024

Complaint Handling and Performance

- We continue to improve in our complaint handling performance with 95% or more of all complaints responded to in line with the Complaint Handling Code timescales during February and March.
- We have completed our self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's new Complaint Handling Code. We are currently finishing off a handful of actions needed to ensure compliance with the Code, including working with the wider council to update Somerset Council's Complaints Policy and ensure improved sharing of complaints data and learning. The new self-assessment document will be published on our website soon, and we will bring a copy of the document to the TSG meeting in July for discussion.
- In Q4 the Housing Ombudsman has investigated three complaints which were escalated to them. We are awaiting determinations on all three cases and will include the Housing Ombudsman's findings in future complaint reporting.

- We are investing in our own team to provide training on new performance software to facilitate better reporting and benchmarking against the sector going forward. This will start in June and will be a saving to the service.
- We are currently working on collating all performance data returns required by the Regulator to monitor our performance as a landlord, including LAHS, LADR, TSMs and Housemark data.

Housing Comms

- New Facebook Group – Somerset Council Tenant’s Hub – Launched on 01/05.
- Supported TSG Recruitment with innovative recruitment campaign, which provided evidence that SMS messages are a key way to communicate with our residents as they generate high engagement.
- Continue to work on website improvements that will make our webpages easier to navigate and more informative.
- Implementation of HRA Communication Plan moves from project stage to business as usual, representing successful bedding in of this new team.

.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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