



# Somerset Council

**Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025**

## **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 November 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**

- Classic Builders have commenced construction works on Phase Ci with foundations being poured. The groundworkers will then move to Phase B to start the foundations.
- Phase Dii (Hereford Drive flats) are being decanted, and a Compulsory Purchase Order is being pursued for the one remaining private flat.

- End of Defects inspections are being carried out on Phase A properties on a rolling programme as the new homes come to the end of their 12-month defect period.
- Demolition of the Oxford Inn on Roman Road in Taunton has completed. Work has now started on building the eight new energy efficient homes which we aim to complete by December 2025.
- At Seaward Way/Rainbow Way, 16 of the houses have now been completed, and several of these are now occupied. Unfortunately, there is then a delay until January to hand over the remaining 5 houses (included the two chalet bungalows) due to health and safety concerns and the proximity to construction works on the apartment blocks opposite. Both the 5 houses and the first 11 flats are now due in February, and the remaining 22 flats in April 2025. Another open event is planned, to view completed apartments, on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2025 from 2-5pm. A newsletter has been distributed locally and put onto social media and the website to advertise the open day and give details of the scheme progress. The properties are net zero, EPC A rated and with new technology to monitor the energy performance of the homes.

## **Property Team**

### **Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- There is ongoing recruitment for the trades area to ensure we continue to meet target completion dates. We are also now recruiting for a Building Disrepair Surveyor, following a resignation.
- The most recent available data at the time of writing this report for repairs performance, November 2024, demonstrates on target performance for both emergency responsive repairs (100%) and non-emergency responsive repairs (97.9%).
- We continue to undertake void repairs to successfully meet our Lettable Standard. Procurement for external contractor support for void repairs has now been evaluated and is progressing through the governance process.

### **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 as a focussed area of activity, with the latest data, November 2024, showing 96.18%. Additional activity to gain access is being undertaken, with the option of obtaining legal injunctions being reviewed with the council's legal team.
- The procurement exercise for fire doors is progressing with the governance approval process being undertaken.

- Weekly compliance meetings, together with monthly reports to the Executive team, are ongoing to carefully monitor and manage housing property safety.
- We are continuing to recruit for vacancies within the Property Safety Compliance team, although we have recently appointed an Interim Compliance Manager.

## **Capital Programme**

- Our Capital Programme team continues to deliver our electrical inspection testing programme (including both consumer unit replacement and contractor switches) using external contractors.
- The 2024/25 programme of kitchen and bathroom replacements is also progressing well, with two contractors meeting the required programme.
- We also have a roofing programme, and window replacement programme, on site which are both delivering the planned works.
- Procurement activities also continue, including electrical heating systems.
- We are recruiting for a number of vacant roles within the Capital Programme team.

## **Asset Management**

- The annual review of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and 30-year investment plan is being undertaken, including a review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating our Retrofit aspiration.
- 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).
- We are recruiting for a Housing Asset Surveyor within the Asset Management team.

## **Sheltered and extra care housing**

- Absences within the team have reduced over the last few weeks. The additional officer capacity that has been put in place to help manage existing work demands will be in place until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2025.
- One of the team's key performance indicators is the '% of tenants with a current support review.' At the end of December 2024, the team's

performance against this indicator was 85%. The team's year-end target is 98.5%. The team will continue to prioritize the completion of support reviews for tenants over the next 3 months.

- At their fortnightly meeting, the team have discussed the following housing service policies: Tenancy Policy; Tenancy and Neighbourhood Policy; and Anti-social Behaviour Policy.

## **Lettings**

- At Rainbow Way, Minehead, 12 new homes have been occupied and a further 3 have been verified and viewed by potential tenants. One other new home is currently subject to the shortlisting of applicants. On the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2024 the team received 8 weeks formal notice of handover for a further 16 new homes: 3 x 2 bed houses; 2 x 2 bed chalet bungalows; and 11 apartments (8 x 2 beds and 3 x 1 beds). These will be advertised on Homefinder Somerset in the coming weeks.
- Recruitment is underway to appoint an officer for a 3-month period to help existing officers manage a back log of case work. Managers were not able to appoint to the position following interviews held in December 2024. A second list of candidates have been invited to interview in early January 2025.

## **Income**

- The Garage Officer role has now been advertised and will be live until 6<sup>th</sup> January 2025, we will hopefully shortlist and interview by the end of January.
- We have appointed a new Rent Recovery Officer who started with us on 16<sup>th</sup> December, this means we are now back to 5 Rent Recovery Officers.
- The team are continuing to find several complex cases who have migrated from legacy benefits to Universal Credit. These cases are very time consuming, with the tenants needing greater levels of support to understand the new benefit they are now claiming, there is also a lot of liaisons direct with DWP and Universal Credit.
- Former Tenant arrears now also form part of our team, over the start of 2025 we will be undertaking a lean review of their current process and putting changes in place if needed to make the process more efficient.

## **Tenancy Management**

- I am pleased to report that we have now offered four candidates the role of Tenancy and Estates Case Manager, three of the positions went to our long-term agency staff meaning we should get good continuity of service. The fourth is an officer who has previously worked for the council's Displaced People Service as a Resettlement Worker and will be starting with us on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2025. Having the three-agency staff moving across to permanent roles means that there will be no or little disruption to our service. A full induction programme will be given to the fourth to ensure that they are confident with the role of Tenancy and Estates Case Manager so that they

can be functioning by the end of February, if not before. The team will be able to actively cover this patch whilst this training is being undertaken.

- Decants are still taking up a lot of time with a further two taking place in December.
- Anti-social behaviour case numbers are coming down which is expected during the winter months. We have now the capacity to take quick responsive action when dealing with new cases, and this is having a positive impact for the community.
- The Tenancy and Estates Case Managers are now working on tackling tenants that are not looking after their property; and our first case is being prepared for Court. We have demonstrated that we have provided lots of support, but the tenant continues to fail to adhere to their tenancy conditions, so our legal team are moving to submit this to court early in the New Year. The team's confidence in this area continues to grow and develop as we now work more effectively with our legal team.

## **Housing Performance Team**

### **Tenant Engagement**

- Supporting and enabling the work of the Tenants Strategic Group (TSG) and Tenants' Action Group (TAG) and the subgroups is a key focus for our team.
- We have agreed a comprehensive training plan for TSG group members and a new suite of training sessions will become available in 2025.
- Our engaged tenants thoroughly enjoyed Communication training from Carol Carpenter.
- The Tenants Action Group meet regularly to scrutinise capital programme communication and will produce a final report for the next TSG meeting.
- Our engaged tenants met in December for a Christmas lunch to celebrate all their achievements and thank them for all their hard work in 2024.
- We continue to spend from the social value fund, Estates Improvement Fund and Child Youth Initiative Fund (CYIF). The CYIF has been fully spent for 2024/2025. New applications will be assessed from 2025/2026 budget.
- A members of TAG attended a voids evaluation day to secure contractors for our void properties.
- A member of TSG attended a communal cleaning procurement evaluation day to secure contractors for our cleaning contract.
- There were 6 tenant engagement activities in December and 7 in January 2025.

### **Complaint handling**

- The two new Complaint Resolution Officer posts have been job evaluated but unfortunately, the grading did not make us competitive in the current job market and we are reviewing recruitment allowances to ensure we can advertise at the right salary to successfully recruit. Once we have recruited this will free up the capacity of the Senior Case Manager to facilitate learning from our complaints and to improve core service delivery.

- We have received one Housing Ombudsman determination this quarter. The Housing Ombudsman found severe maladministration for failing to carry out sufficient and compliant soundproofing works to a property suffering from neighbour noise nuisance. We are in the process of complying with the orders of the Housing Ombudsman and continue to work with them and the resident to put things right.
- We have sessions planned in the next few weeks for the Customer Resolution team to work with senior managers to identify learning from other recent Housing Ombudsman determinations, to create measurable action plans for each which will focus on improving our service delivery.
- We await determinations on four other complaints (three in relation to capital works and one about vulnerabilities) which are currently being investigated by the Housing Ombudsman.

### **Performance**

- We have finished a new performance scorecard for the Housing service which aligns with the Regulator's Consumer Standards and for the most part, can be benchmarked against our sector peers. We have linked in with Homes in Sedgemoor so that we work to the same indicators and targets, to ensure both landlords can offer meaningful performance data corporately, at a directorate level and to residents going forward. We hope to eventually create a bespoke Power Business Intelligence (BI) to create more accessible data in the future.
- The self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Report on Knowledge and Information Management has stalled due to team capacity until the recruitment has been resolved. This will be picked up as a priority once resource is in place.

### **Housing Comms**

- Some further Rainbow Way videos have been made live.
- Tenants' Newsletter open rate has improved further to 47.31%.
- Christmas Tenant newsletter has been circulated.
- Promoting of Damp & Mould issues across our channels as the wetter months are upon us.
- We are currently managing without any specific Communications resource as the person covering the manager post is now focussing on their substantive role and the graduate has left for a new job. However, we are looking to progress replacement of these posts as soon as possible.

#### **.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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