

Somerset Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 22 May 2023

Directorate Report

Lead Officer: Chris Brown – Service Director Housing

Report Authors: Housing Senior Management Team/ Shari Hallett – Housing Performance Manager

Executive Member: Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts, Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture and Cllr Fran Smith, Associate Lead Member for Housing

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 March 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

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. Members approved the Strategy and Delivery Plan in December. The Strategy seeks to place tenants at the heart of zero carbon retrofit and this has commenced with tenants influencing the strategy. SWT has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with E-ON which pledges £20m of energy company obligation for SC (Somerset Council) (ex SWTs) ECO4 Neighbourhood Fuel Efficiency Project. This project has surveyed the first 110 Council homes and is agreeing the specification with the Council for these council homes, the 1st project also included 80 private homes. Surveys are now taking place on the second and third projects which will consider cavity wall insulation on several street and External Wall Insulation on several Woolaway homes. The Woolaway homes are going to receive pull tests to understand if External Wall Insulation can be installed.

- SC (ex SWT) has been awarded SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund) Wave 1 and Wave 2 funds which will see 150 homes receive wrap around low carbon works as they receive new windows and other measures.
- SWT has completed the first two new build homes which are very low carbon homes. These NTWP (North Taunton Woolaway Project) dwellings are the first of 47 low carbon homes delivered in the next 6 months at North Taunton (NTWP). The council is reprocurring a contractor for phase B&C.
- A consultation event at Rainbow Way, Minehead was held in January. The scheme is progressing well with brick work, using large porotherm blocks, allowing a speedy build to first floor level. The 54 units at Rainbow Way off Seaward Way will provide a variety of property types and be zero carbon. The first homes will be complete in Autumn.
- Unfortunately, inflation and market conditions continue to create challenges for building and retrofitting homes. The council recognise that the increased cost of building homes is no longer a risk but a reality and the HRA is addressing these challenges as it reviews its 30-year business plan.
- Our Enabling Development team has supported Registered Providers who delivered c270 affordable homes during 2022/2023.
- The council was awarded £750k through the government Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme to accelerate the new provision round three including the purchase of six homes and refurbishment of six others for the Housing First model of accommodation. Eight of the twelve units have been completed and let. The 6 new homes will be held in the Housing Revenue account. The HRA is also seeking to purchase 31 units for refugees and asylum seekers using 100% grant over the next year.
- The service continues to deliver the Hinkley Point C Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work. This programme is providing new bed spaces in the district and support to vulnerable customers affected by the change in the housing market because of the uplift of workforce at HPC. The housing service has received circa £440k to start new projects and extend the delivery of some existing projects up to April 2025.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken, with overall 2022/23 year-end performance for emergency responsive repairs at 99.7% (0.3% lower than our targeted KPI (Key Performance Indicators)) and non-emergency responsive repairs at 89.53% (0.47% lower than our targeted KPI). It should, however, be noted that an overall increase in responsive repairs volume of 7.8% in March from the average volume throughout the year impacted our ability to achieve the KPI targets. We are reviewing our required

trade resource and outsourced contracting arrangements to mitigate against future performance issues during peaks and troughs of repair request demand.

- We are continuing to monitor performance levels for responsive repair request call-handling. This is currently still being taken by call-handlers within the previous SWT Corporate Customer Service team.
- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP). Key to this will be improving ICT systems (e.g., job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.) and we are working with IT colleagues to prioritise and progress this work.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard and have commenced a new procurement exercise for external contractor support for major voids, when required, to ensure we meet our KPI target.
- We have now commenced mobilisation of an initial pilot for our newly procured materials supply chain process.
- We have recently recruited to a permanent Maintenance Manager position.

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.
- An independent specialist consultant (Savills) has completed an overall desktop Property Safety Compliance Audit. They have concluded that we have effective systems in place and, following their undertaking a comprehensive review of our data sources, have confirmed they have found no areas of concern relating to our compliance records. However, they carried out a more detailed review of progress on compliance for Electrical Inspections (Electrical Inspection Condition Reports – EICRs (Electrical Installation Condition Report)) and Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) servicing and recommended that a prudent approach would be for SWT to 'self-refer' to the Regulator of Social Housing in relation to these workstreams. We have undertaken this 'self-referral' and the Regulator has subsequently written to advise that "We have now completed our consideration of this matter and I am writing to inform you of the outcome. That is, the regulator has found no breach of our standards at this time and therefore will be taking no further action at this time." We are, nevertheless, focussing on progressing to full compliance for these areas as soon as is possible.
- We are using our new iAuditor software to undertake compliance data collection for emergency lighting visual inspections, fire door inspection, fire

safety housekeeping 'sterile communal area' checks (flat block inspections), water risk assessments in dwellings and fire risk assessments. We will be reviewing our approach to IT system options for holding all property safety compliance data during 2023/24.

- We have completed updates to our compliance policies and procedures.
- We continue to undertake procurement to deliver compliance programmes, including fire safety flooring, fire door automation, and licensed asbestos removal.
- We have produced an Action Plan for implementation of our new Building and Resident Health and Safety Strategy.
- A training session has been undertaken with our engaged residents on property safety compliance to enable them to have a greater understanding on the subject, and to be able to monitor and scrutinise as a key part of their role.
- Weekly compliance meetings continue to carefully monitor and manage all these safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- A range of capital work programmes continues on-site; including kitchen and bathroom replacements, fire safety works (including replacement fire doors, and fire safety flooring), and roofing. However, it should be noted that, due to reduced contractor and internal project management resource availability, some programmes due to be finalised in 2022/23 have not been completed and these outstanding works will need to be 'slipped' into future programmes.
- 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

- The service is carryout many energy surveys which are required to understand pathways to Zero Carbon and which funding regime properties are best placed in.
- The service is recruiting two graduates to support the function, analyse data and streamline systems.
- The service is working with colleagues to refine the start to finish capital investment process from business planning through to delivery to updating data following investment. This work has particular focus on the tenant's journey.

Housing and Communities Team

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- There is significant works being undertaken within our extra care sites, to replace the communal floor covering. This work is very noisy and disruptive for the tenants and the Carers working on-site and Fay is supporting the tenants, keeping them informed etc. and liaising with the compliance team and contractors, as needed. As we have a tenant with noise sensitivity, we have requested additional support for them, liaising with the Carers and Adult Social Care.
- We have had a sad case where a tenant has been financially exploited by another tenant, including getting rid of all his belongings when he died, despite him having family as next of kin. Staff and the family have been liaising with the Police regarding this matter.
- The team are supporting the compliance team to deal with rubbish and belongings being left on schemes, which would present a fire risk, to get items cleared away/disposed of.
- Staff have done some excellent partnership working with Adult Mental Health colleagues, to resettle tenants who were admitted under a section, who are now well enough to return home.
- The team completed a 'Suicide Awareness' training course. Sadly, everyone in the team is personally familiar with cases of suicide, and the training was particularly challenging for some.
- The team also completed some 'reasonable adjustment' training, re: making all our services accessible to people with varying needs and disabilities.
- We have had several cases where tenants have reported that their adult children and grandchildren have temporarily moved in with them, due to domestic abuse and family breakdown. Staff are supporting these families and liaising with colleagues in Housing Options to support their family members to access appropriate housing. It appears that the financial strain everyone is feeling now is contributing to these situations.
- We have a possible eviction coming up and are working with colleagues in Adult Social Care and Housing Options to ensure that there are some alternate housing provisions available for the tenant concerned, if required.
- The possible 'Domestic Homicide Review,' which will begin in the next few weeks, regarding one of our tenants who died.
- We have some ongoing staff sickness, which we are covering from within the remaining team.

Lettings

- Customer satisfaction remains very high with both the Lettable standard of the property and the process of lettings the properties. The satisfaction surveys via QR did not gain much traction the uptake was low. A manual system is now back in operation which affords a further opportunity to engage with tenants and gain valuable feedback. Many positive comments such as *“I love it very satisfied it has made such a difference.”*
- A further 42 properties have been let since the date of the last report. Performance fell in March due to some complex major void properties requiring heating upgrades and work on the water mains. We are also looking to source a new contractor to take on surplus major voids from the team.
- Average turnaround times per void in March was 57 days against a target of 44 days.
- Relet for a Minor void was 29 days against a target of 31 days.
- Relet for a Major void was 77 days against a target of 72 days.
- Team remains settled.
- HMP project continues to free up much need bed spaces.

Income

- The Debt and Benefit team are still running at reduced capacity due to sickness. We are continuing prioritise new tenants and those tenants already in rent arrears.
- The new Dynamic 365 system has caused significant difficulties for the rent recovery team due to payments direct from Universal credit, standing order payments and some post office payments not being transferred to the tenants rent accounts. The team are taking a very sensitive and supportive approach to rent recovery where we are unsure if the payments have been made. This issue is also affecting the wider council and we are working with other areas of the council to have this resolved as soon as possible.
- April has been a very busy month for Universal Credit verifications due to the Rent increase. Each UC (Universal Credit) claimant has to update their Housing Costs on their journal and then the team must verify this on a portal. This has been very time consuming for all the team, but they have all been verified by the completion date for each one.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- The team have now completed their planned works programmes for Estates inspections, block inspections and skip events for the new financial year which are now published on our website as well as in the next tenant's newsletter.

- Our first skip event of 2023/2024 in Hereford Drive was a successful event; with two large skips filled. The event was also supported by Link Power who were extremely helpful and added to the success of the day.
- We are still busy preparing court papers for the serious ASB cases that we have previously reported on. This is time consuming to ensure that we present the best possible case to get the desired outcome for the neighbours and the community.
- Youth crime is still a concern, with two youths that live in the Priorswood area. We are working closely with our multi-agency partners, but we are now going to be commencing legal action against the parents. This initially will be by way of serving a Notice of Seeking Possession and is currently with our solicitors.

Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team

- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group (TSG) and Tenants' Action Group and the subgroups. Following the creation of the new Somerset Council Cllr Fran Smith and Cllr Marcus Barr have been nominated to sit on the TSG.
- The spring newsletter has been sent in hardcopy to tenants with a letter explaining the new council and the frequently asked questions. These are also available on the website for reference.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and has agreed a set of actions. The group is supporting the work of the Damp and Mould Action Plan and has already produced a new policy statement, webpage, and leaflet.
- The Low Carbon Working group has continued to meet with a new focus on communication.
- We have arranged BIG 6 compliance training for our engaged tenants and a new Grounds maintenance group has been created to review and monitor the service delivery of Grounds maintenance.
- We are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams. There are seven new areas that have been agreed as ongoing work from April 2023
- Our agreed policies have been approved by the new council and we are continuing to review policies that have been produced and create any new ones required. TSG members are involved in this review. We will also start to review policies of Homes in Sedgemoor and Somerset Council with a view to aligning.
- We continue to strive for improvement in our complaint handling and have been able to maintain an average of 73% of stage 1 complaint investigations completed and responded to within standard over 2022-23. A full year complaint report will be presented to TSG. The Housing Ombudsman has not

investigated any complaint made against us in this financial year to date, although they have advised landlords that they are currently around six months behind in their own workloads and investigations.

- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. We are now finalising the texting (SMS) option and the tenant portal which has been paused due to an ICT freeze because of moving over ICT platforms to the new council. The portal will give tenants direct access to rent balances, tenancy and personal details, repair history, view communication, view housing officers. It will also give links to make payments and raise repairs and other communications.

4. **Risk Assessment**

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

Name of Contact Officers: Shari Hallett

Telephone number: 07557 003944

Email address: s.hallett@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk