

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Thursday 13 January 2011 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, the Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr Etherington (Chairman)
Mr Edwards (Vice- Chairman)
Councillors Bowrah and Brooks, Mrs Drage, Mr Galpin, Mrs Hegarty, Mr Hellier, Mrs Marshall and Mr Watkin

Officers: Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Steven Clarke (Estate Officer), Chris Hall (DLO Project Manager), Helen Mockridge (Administrative Assistant), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), Rosie Reed (Tenant Services Development Officer), Christine Thompson (Supported Housing Manager) and Kevin Toller (Strategic Director)

Others: Councillor Stuart-Thorn

(The meeting commenced at 6.05pm)

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 6 December 2010 were taken as read and were signed.

2. Declaration of Interests

The following members declared a personal interest as a Council house tenant:

- Mrs Drage
- Mr Edwards
- Mr Etherington
- Mr Galpin
- Mrs Hegarty
- Mr Hellier
- Mrs Marshall
- Mr Watkin

Councillor Brooks declared a personal interest as a Council house tenant and a Member of Somerset County Council.

3. Installation of Solar PV Panels on the Housing Stock

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the options available for the installation of solar PV (solar panels installed on roofs) on appropriate properties within the housing stock.

The Sale of Electricity by Local Authorities (England and Wales) Regulations 2010 which came into force in August 2010 removed a restriction in place since 1989 and would allow local authorities in England and Wales to sell electricity generated from renewable as well as combined heat and power sources.

Local Authorities who sponsored renewable energy developments would benefit from lower energy bills and central government financial incentives, for example Feed in Tariffs and the Renewables Obligations.

This had opened the way for Local Authorities and tenants to benefit from the installation of renewable energy generation equipment on the Council's housing stock through the Feed in Tariff scheme (FiTs). Through this scheme, individuals, organisations and businesses in England, Wales and Scotland could claim cash back for electricity they produced from eligible renewable and low carbon sources. The scheme would provide a fixed payment for electricity generated called the 'generation tariff' and would also pay for any unused electricity exported to the grid, the 'export tariff'.

The Council was considering solar PV as the most viable option for a large number of their properties.

Solar PVs generated energy in the form of direct current from sunlight which was then converted. The South West was seen to be the most advantageous part of the UK to benefit from this.

The report detailed the most effective way of installing Solar PV. Taunton Deane had a total of 3573 properties which could benefit. A detailed analysis of each property was required to determine the structural integrity of the roofs. Investment could be needed to deal with any roofing problems and repairs would have to be carried out during the programme. It was suggested it would be good practice to review the insulation in the properties at the same time. Once completed the housing stock would be in a better condition for the Authority and the tenants.

The report showed the expected savings and costs which a typical family home would achieve.

Taunton Deane Borough Council had three basic options which could be pursued to install solar PV on appropriate properties within the housing stock:

- Arrange for contractor(s) to install solar PV at no cost to the Council. One or more contractors would be sought to install solar PV. The Council would be allowing the contractor to use the roof space. The contractors would be expected to bear all the costs of installation and maintenance. In return the Council would receive the appropriate FiTs.

The tenant would gain an amount of free electricity and the Council would gain positive publicity;

- Procurement – arrange for solar PV to be installed by the DLO and/or contractors paid for by the council. Contractors (maybe including the DLO) would be procured to install solar PV on behalf of the Council. The Council would expect to bear all the costs of installation and maintenance and in return receive the appropriate FiTs. The tenant would gain an amount of free electricity. Short term funding would be significant; or
- Join a consortium which would appoint a provider to install solar PV, with the option of the Council contributing capital funding. The Council would join an existing consortium such as Advantage South West, who was already procuring contractors to install solar PV on social housing. The consortium would establish an organisation to manage the installation. The Council could decide whether or not to invest any capital. The tenant would gain an amount of free electricity. The Council and the consortium would share income gained from the Generation Tariff.

A detailed analysis of each option was reported.

The questions which needed to be asked before a final decision was made were as follows:

- Where would the Council fund any investment from, GF or HRA?
- Where would any generation tariff received from the Council go, GF or HRA?
- Would individual tenants receive free electricity or was there a way of pooling the value of free electricity to spread it equally among all tenants?
- What would happen to the equipment and its ongoing maintenance at the end of 25 years?

The report concluded that whilst the use of contractors to fund and install solar PV presented the least risk to the Council, it also provided the least benefit and did not enable the Council to make any use of the funding available from electricity generation.

The funding of installation by the Council was the highest risk option. All risks and benefits would be borne by the Council. At worst, if the FiTs were no longer available during the 25 year period, the Council could find itself in the position of having significant loans with no income to pay them off. At best the Council would have a steady income over 25 years as a return on its investment.

The option of the Council joining with a consortium in principle appeared to offer the Council low risks with some return. Although the returns would not

be as great as option 2, there was a key advantage in that the programme would be managed through the consortium.

The Board were asked for their comments before the final report was finalised.

Board Members asked the following questions. Responses are shown in italics:-

- Were the roofs of the Council houses big enough to take the solar panels? *The size of the roof was one of the factors to be considered as well as the age of the roof. Unsuitable properties would need to be weeded out,*
- Would the Council eventually recover the costs of installing solar panels? *Yes. By April 2012 the grants would go down approximately 7% however by April 2013 the grant would go down considerably more;*
- Were solar panels the only option? *No the Consortium would consider all options available.*

Resolved that Taunton Deane Borough Council pursue the Consortium option.

4. DLO Transformation Project

Considered report previously circulated regarding the interim plan for internal transformation of the DLO which had been agreed by the Executive on 1 December and Full Council of 14 December 2010.

A new interim management structure had been implemented at the DLO bringing its structure in line with the arrangements of other themes within the Council.

Housing Property Services had been moved from Theme 3 DLO to Theme 4 Community Services as recommended by the Audit Commission.

Savings from the interim management restructure would help the Authority with the challenge of setting its 2011/12 budget.

Work to simplify the financial set up Of the DLO would start in the New Year.

The report set out the tasks, outcomes and milestones delivered and for the next period.

With regard to the major risks and issues, a revised risk register focusing on the internal transformation plan had been developed for the internal transformation project to run alongside the risk register for the project as a whole.

A finance project to examine the complexity of the DLO trading accounts had begun. External support had been brought in to look at the coding structure in order to simplify it for transparent accounting.

5. Regeneration – Halcon North

The Tenant Empowerment Manager updated members on the proposed regeneration of Halcon North.

Alison North, Performance and Client Lead, had taken on the role of Project Manager. She was working on the business plan and would appoint a consultant to assess the delivery options available.

Drop in surgeries for tenants would recommence on Tuesday 18 January 2011 at the Link Centre between 2 and 4pm.

6. Finance Update

The Council House Voids report was circulated by Mr Boland. The report had previously gone to Community Scrutiny on 11 January 2011.

The report provided members with information on void property performance in relation to council owned stock.

Statistical information was provided for 2009/2010 and 2010 to date relating to those voids.

Details of the actions being taken to address the voids performance were described following advice and assistance work carried out by the Audit Commission.

Members of the Board were asked to read the report and indicate whether they wished to receive reports in the future. Any questions and comments would be brought to the Tenant Services Management Board meeting in June 2011.

7. Communities and Local Government Consultation ‘Local Decisions: A Fairer Future for Social Housing’

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the Government’s consultation paper that outlined its proposals to reform the way that Councils were able to manage their waiting lists for Council and housing association homes. The document also outlined fundamental changes to the types of tenancy that could be offered to new Council and housing association tenants and the accommodation that could be offered to homeless households accepted for re-housing by the Councils. The response from a tenants’ consultation event held on 10th January and the Tenant’s Forum was included in the report.

The five key objectives of social housing reform were:

- Localism, fairness, and focussing social housing on those most in need, in a way that enabled them to use it as a springboard to opportunity;

- Social housing was flexible and available to more people and to those that genuinely needed it;
- To make the best use of social rented homes;
- To Increase freedoms available to all social landlords to determine the sort of tenancy they granted to new tenants; and
- To protect the rights of existing tenants.

The topics covered in the consultation document were social housing tenancies, empty homes, social housing allocations, mobility, homelessness, regulation and Council housing finance. Responses were required by the Government by 17 January 2011.

Local Authorities and housing associations would be able to let social housing on fixed term, rather than lifetime tenancies. The fixed term would be a minimum of two years. Tenants would then have the option to remain in social housing, or move into the private rented sector or home ownership.

Tenants, who did not have their tenancies reissued and were unable to obtain alternative accommodation, would be considered to have become homeless unintentionally. There was an expectation that advice and assistance would be provided to tenants, to help them find alternative accommodation.

The Government would create a fixed term tenancy with a minimum fixed term of two years. This was an additional tenancy and Local Authorities could choose to give longer term tenancies, or not offer them at all.

A tenancy standard would be used to increase freedom for all social landlords and would give housing associations the same ability to offer fixed term tenancies as Local Authorities.

Local Authorities would have a duty to publish a strategic policy on tenancies and social landlords would be required to publish and follow a policy on tenure.

The Government was introducing 'affordable rent' which would help those who would not otherwise have been able to afford adequate housing in the market. These tenancies could be offered by housing associations and not Local Authorities and would be offered on a fixed term of at least two years.

The Government was consulting on measures to empower local communities to tackle empty homes, such as the New Homes Bonus incentive. An investment of £100m would be made by the Government to refurbish 3,000 empty properties and manage them at an affordable rent for up to 10 years.

The Government intended to legislate to give Local Authorities freedom to determine which categories of applicant should qualify to join the waiting list. The rules that determined which people from abroad were eligible for social housing would be set centrally.

Measures would be taken to increase mobility within the social housing sector. These included taking transferring tenants out of the allocation system, which would avoid them competing on the waiting list.

Local Authorities would be given the flexibility to bring the homelessness duty to an end with an offer of suitable accommodation in the private rented sector without requiring the household's agreement.

The Government were considering reviewing the legal and statutory framework concerning overcrowding.

There were plans to implement the recommendations of the review into the role and purpose of the Tenant Services Authority and the framework for social housing regulation via the Localism Bill.

The Government intended to replace the Housing Revenue Account system with a new self financing arrangement.

The suggested response from the Council included the following:

- The Council welcomed the provision to retain secured tenancies for existing tenants. The review of existing tenant eligibility for social housing was likely to require additional staff and financial resources;
- There was concern for the long term stability of communities if the proposed new flexible fixed term tenancies left increased proportions of households on low income living in a particular area;
- The Council were concerned about extending the Right to Buy to tenants with fixed term tenancies, as the purpose of such tenancies was to encourage tenants to move into the private sector;
- Affordable rent would be helpful and the rental income generated could be reinvested to provide new housing;
- The Council welcomed the measures to tackle empty homes;
- The retention of the reasonable preference groups and the opportunity to determine other priority groups was welcomed;
- Measures which enabled social housing landlords to make the best use of their stock were supported;
- The Council welcomed proposals that enabled it to discharge its homelessness duty;
- Simplification of the current legal and regulatory framework was supported; and
- Service standards were welcomed, which would help drive service improvements and tenant problems/landlord failings.

The comments from the Members of this Board would be incorporated into the response. Members of the Board made the following comments:-

- Longer fixed term tenancies should be considered as some families could have children in education past the age of 16; and
- They would like the opportunity to be involved with shaping and agreeing any considered changes to tenure involving Taunton Deane Borough Council.

Resolved that the Council's response to the government consultation be supported.

8. Guest Rooms in Sheltered Housing

Considered report previously circulated asking the Tenant Services Management Board to note the recommendations as a result of the comments at the Board meeting on 11 October 2010 and the outcome of the Sheltered Housing Forum meeting on 28 October 2010.

This report updated the Board on the report submitted at the meeting on the 11 October 2010. At that meeting it was suggested that the availability of guest rooms in sheltered schemes service be more widely advertised.

The condition of use of Guest Rooms was reported and stated that the rooms were only for the use of relatives and friends of tenants on the schemes. At the Sheltered Housing Forum it had been asked whether this still applied or whether this facility could be offered to all tenants. It was considered that this condition should still apply. Flyers had been sent to residents and information provided in tenant's newsletters.

The Supported Housing Manager reported the following:

- That the availability of guest rooms would be advertised more widely to residents in sheltered schemes;
- That the use of these facilities would be monitored and reported back to the Sheltered Housing Forum; and
- After consultation with residents groups that consideration would be given to better use being made of this facility, where it was under used.

These actions would be monitored and the results reported to the Board in April.

Resolved that the report be noted.

9. Status Survey

The Housing Services Lead reported that as a Landlord, the Council needed to gather information to scrutinise the service it provided to tenants to

determine if they were being offered value for money. A Tenant Status Survey needed to be commissioned.

There were two options available for the feedback service. The service would include project management, postal fieldwork and a report:-

There was the option of a tenant friendly report at a cost of £300.

- Option 1 – This would sample 1,450 tenants and involve 3 mail outs. This would cost a total of £7,200;
- Option 2 – This would sample 1,450 tenants and involve 2 full mail outs. This would cost a total of £6,850;

The Board felt that costs would need to be closely monitored. The cost would come from the Housing Revenue Account. The Housing Services Lead would ensure there was no additional liability and would get an explicit breakdown of cost.

Resolved that Option 1 be adopted together with the optional Tenant Friendly Report.

(The meeting ended at 8.30pm)