

Minutes of the Meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 14 December 2016 at 6.30pm in meeting room at Flook House, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr R Balman (Chairman)
Mr Akhighbemen, Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty

Officers: Paul Hadley (Lettings Manager), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Paul Harding (Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager), Catrin Brown (Health and Safety Manager), Michaela Mullen (Welfare Reform Officer), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), and Tracey Meadows (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Councillor Beale, Julian Ranson, Savills. Julia Williamson

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr K Hellier, Mr Hussey, Councillors Booth and Bowrah

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 14 November 2016 were taken as read and were signed.

3. Public Question Time

No questions received for Public Question Time.

4. Declarations of Interests

Mr Akhighbemen, Mr R Balman, Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty, declared personal interests as Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants.

5. Asbestos Communication Strategy

The Housing Services Lead gave an update on the Taunton Deane Borough Council Asbestos Compliance Review. Stated that there had been a review going on for some time on how the Council had been managing their assets particularly regarding asbestos regulations and how the public would be informed in the future.

In order to categorically determine where asbestos was and more importantly, where it was not, TDBC and WSC were conducting an on-going programme of specialist's surveys and inspections of its properties. This had been underway for a number of years already and incorporated all relevant areas of TDBC and WSC buildings constructed before the year 2000, when the use of all asbestos containing materials were banned in the UK. The range of buildings surveyed public and commercial buildings, as well as flats, houses, communal areas, sheds, bin stores and garages.

As TDBC manage a large number of dwellings, this inspection programme would take time to complete and not all properties had been inspected yet.

Rather than wait for all individual surveys to be completed, TDBC had therefore decided to advise all residents at the outset as to the potential presence of asbestos, as well as the potential risk posed. If there was any possibility that asbestos could be present, we would presume that it was (until proven through the survey that it was not) and advise residents/building occupants accordingly.

A leaflet in clear language informing residents about what was Asbestos and what were the risks would be sent out to avoid unnecessary alarm or anxiety. This leaflet would also be included in the sign up pack when tenants signed up for a new property. This leaflet would provide information to anyone who was liable to disturb asbestos should it be present in their property which could be disturbed accidentally.

Conducted in the right way, TDBC regard early and clear communication with the residents in respect of the sensitive subject to be the best policy and that if it was conducted sensitively, need cause no alarm.

An asbestos Working Group had been formed to act as an operational group to help drive the asbestos compliance/improvement agenda on behalf of all stakeholders within Taunton Deane and West Somerset Council. This was principally to practically implement the recommendations arising from the Savills report and recommendations (dated 2015).

During the discussion of this item the following questions were raised:-

- If leaflets go out to tenants and a high volume ring the Council concerned that there is asbestos in their property how will this be handled? *If there are concerns with the tenants we would come out and survey to determine if there is actually asbestos in their property. We have contractors already set up to go out and survey properties. A desk top risk review to see which properties would be at risk of asbestos would be surveyed first;*
- Would individuals that had bought a Council property have a survey also? *This would be picked up by a Chartered Surveyor if asbestos were present in the property. We will also be addressing this matter with the new management plan.*

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

6. High Income Social Tenants: Pay to Stay

Executive Councillor for Housing Services, Terry Beale stated that in May 2016 the Government intended to introduce an income based rents policy requiring Local Authorities to set higher rents for higher income council tenants with house hold incomes of over £31k outside of London. Tenants would pay an extra 15p rent for every £1 over the threshold up to the equivalent market rent.

In the Autumn Statement the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, made a statement which confirmed that the government had decided not to pursue this policy in its compulsory form. Stated that Local Authorities and Housing Associations would continue to have discretion to implement the policy for those tenants with household incomes of £60k and over. The change in policy follows consultation with tenants, Local Authorities and other organisations.

Stated that although the government had given us to option to introduce this we had taken the decision not to implement this due to the cost of the administration. It should be noted that introducing 'Pay to Stay' would increase our 'Right to Buy' process. Tenants would purchase the property and reduce our housing stock even further.

During the discussion of this item the following points were made:-

- This is a good move that the Council has made as implementing this would result in a right mess;
- I personally thought this was a good idea but can see that the administration cost would not make it possible to administer. Could new tenants be evaluated before they were given the option of a Council property, if they were on a higher income bracket why would they need a Council property? *We are going to introduce fixed term tenancies as part of the process. Fixed term tenancies will fix this, social housing is for need and if you do not need this you will not be eligible for a council property, you will be encouraged towards private/ own ownership releasing council properties for people in need;*

Resolved that the report be noted.

7. Transformation of Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council

Update from the Corporate Strategy & Performance Manager regarding the transformation of Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council.

Stated that board members were aware of the proposal that were going through consultation. Why a new Council, TDBC had predicted a budget gap of £2.5m and WSC of £1.2m by 2020/21. Having a single Council would deliver at least £0.5m in savings a year. In addition to the £2.6m a year to be delivered through transformation (working differently), which is already underway. The consultation/engagement would start on 12 December 2016 and run until the 28 February 2017.

The consultation was to inform the Secretary of State's decision on whether to form a new council. He is the decision maker. It was not about Transformation. That was already underway. It was not a merger. Both Councils would be stood down and a new one created. It was not a vote/referendum on whether a new council should be created.

The changes that would be made to the new council are fewer district councillors, now 84-56 TDBC and 28 WSC. The new council would cover a larger area reducing operating costs by £0.5m a year.

Stated that the change would mean that you would still be council tenants (but to a new council. There would still be the option of 'Right to Buy' etc.; your landlord would still have the same obligations to you; in WS tenants will still stay with Magna HA.

The consultation delivery would be in the form of a questionnaire which can be found on www.yournewcouncil.org, reports & video; Roadshows x 6 – questionnaire and summary booklet; Town & Parish meetings x 10; Your Somerset, Gazette, Free Press & Tenants newsletter; Stakeholder group letters (inc equalities representative groups) . Face to face with some stakeholder groups; there will be Road Shows at the following locations;

- Watchet, Phoenix Centre, 12 January, (10-3pm)
- Wellington Library, 17 January, (10-3pm)
- Dulverton Library, 17 January, (10-3pm)
- Taunton Visitor Centre, 19 January (10-3pm)
- Minehead, Beach Hotel, 20 January (10-3pm)
- Wiveliscombe, Community Centre 26 January (10-3pm)

During the discussion of this item the following question were asked:-

- When this is a new Council will we be able to build new Council houses in West Somerset? *In theory yes, subject to the money, if there is a need and the land we can build,*
- Has a survey been taken of this being organised up and down the country and a survey of the Secretary of State's decision? *Taunton Deane and West Somerset have been blazing a bit of a trail. We will be the very first Councils that have used a new piece of legislation, 'Cities and Local Government devolution act of 2016' which no one yet has used. Councils have merged together to form unitary councils there was a pathway for achieving that. Two Councils merging together to create a new one using this piece of legislation is a first. There are two other councils going through this process as we speak;*
- Is there a financial incentive for this legislation that you quoted? *There is nothing good or bad coming from the Government, grants are being cut, Councils are being encouraged to work together to work it out. both TDBC and WSC want this merger;*
- Will there be any job losses? *There will be significant job losses, but there are a whole lot of jobs that we need people for, there will be changes and tenants will be made aware of this;*

The Housing Services Lead reported that Magna Housing have just created a new housing strategy. They had bases in West Somerset and Dorchester. We attended a conference in Williton a couple of months ago and they had a new plan to develop 300 new social housing units and 300 shared ownership and they had also signed up to a one for one on replacement units, so if any of their tenants exercise their Right to Buy, they will replace that one for one. This is good news as for the last few years there has not being any development in WS. Magna Housing had significant presence in WS and in Dorchester which means in terms of housing options we had the opportunity for more housing on the ground locally.

Resolved that the report be noted

8. **Universal Credit. Report of the Welfare Reform Project**

Report from the Paul Hadley, Lettings Manager and Michaela Mullen, Welfare Reform Officer

Stated that from the 26 October we went live with the full service of Universal Credit. Before that time we had what they called live service which was where only single newly unemployed people could claim. From the 26 October, anybody of working age can claim Universal Credit, so it has opened it up much wider to a lot more of our tenants. Since going live we have had 93 of our tenants make a claim, this is quite a high number but it could be that they are just claiming for tax credits and not necessarily for housing benefit. These have been split down to our three area teams;

- Halcon - 39 claims, 29 claims are currently in arrears with their rent and the arrears for that area is £20,025.58 just with those 39 claims. This does not mean that all of these arrears are for Universal Credit, those people would have been in arrears beforehand;
- North Taunton – 31 claims, 25 of which are in arrears and those total £12,264.65;
- Wellington - 23 claims, 13 of which are in arrears and those total £8,534.34;

This gives a total of £41,624.47. As you can see by the numbers a lot of these tenants were in arrears and we will have lots of work to do as these tenants will be waiting for 5/6 weeks for a payment.

The full service that were now on was completely different than the live service that we used to be on, there were no similarities at all. This is a new system that we are having to train and learn on. We were working closely with the DWP and were in a test and learn stage.

There were no bedroom tax figures to report this month due to not receiving this information anymore from Housing Benefit, this will be the same for Benefit Cap as under Universal Credit this information will not be divulged.

Universal Credit would work really well for some people and for some it would not. Ourselves, Citizens Advice and Partner Agencies would all have a role to play. The DWP also want to encourage tenants to make their claims on line so they will need to make sure that they are computer literate to be able to manage their claim online. It was recognised that work would be needed to help vulnerable people which is being worked on at present. There was work to do with the homeless as B&B costs do not work on the Universal Credit system. A meeting has been held and we will update you at a future meeting to let you know the outcome.

A lot of work has been done promoting this with a Money Matters magazine going out next week so everyone will have a copy of this with the new information in.

The Housing Services Lead stated that all staff involved in the Universal Credit system had had training and it was going well. We are in support of giving tenants the correct advice and claiming what they are entitled to.

Stated that this was a real culture shift as our tenants were not used to paying their own rent.

During the discussion of this item the following question were asked:-

- As this has just started we will need to give it 12 months to see how this new Universal Credit system is working;
- Concerns with tenants that are disadvantaged; *Estate Officers were happy to help with the most vulnerable. There will also be village agents to give help and advice for tenants that live in rural areas;*

Resolved that the report be noted.

9. Anti-Social Behaviour Team Activity

Update from the Lettings Manager, stated that our;

Performance - still remained good with satisfaction at 93% of tenants who reported ASB in year to date rated the help and advice received a good or excellent. This was a 2% reduction since the last update. Performance remains good and we have never fallen below target.

ASB demand - in all but one the demand had increased with the total number of high level cases increasing from 57 in 2012/13 to 93 in 2015/16. The only one which has reduced was noise which as it was a big issue for lots of tenants this could not be explained. I believe this is the impact of the One Team working with more reports coming in than before.

Victim/Perpetrator Profile – many of the victims and also perpetrators of ASB have pre-existing mental health issues, they may/may not be supported by statutory mental health or other services. In many cases it has been shown that these individuals have withdrawn from support or alternatively support services had been withdrawn.

We were now seeing organised crime gangs starting to infiltrate the South West and we have started to see where some of our properties were being taken over by these gangs. It will quite often be a vulnerable person, single female who may have a dependency and to service that dependency they come into contact with someone on a friendly basis and that dependency changes where they lose control of their own home. The home then is being basically run as a shop for substances. This issue first started to show itself in Halcon. A series of warrants were issued. Currently a closed order to reclaim the property was in progress. This was not just happening in Halcon, there had also been reports in the Priorswood area. We now needed to work closely with our Police colleagues to have an impact on this.

In summary the team continues to provide a high level of service for our tenants, this was evidenced by the high level of satisfaction we continued to be able to achieve. We had seen an increase in demand of high level cases, and this had also resulted in an increase in the percentage of victims and perpetrators who are vulnerable, either due to mental health issues or in some cases due to substance dependency. The effect of this was that the case management was becoming more challenging for our officers.

The Housing Services Lead asked the Lettings Manager to go back and thank the team for the work and support that they do on the Halcon estate for the tenants.

During the discussion of this item the following comments were made:-

- The board thanked the team for all its hard work and said it fully supported it 100%;

Resolved that the report be noted.

10. Dates of Tenant Services Management Board Meetings 2017

Dates for the Tenant Services Management Board noted.

(The meeting ended at 8.15pm)