

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 14 February 2011 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr Etherington (Chairman)
Councillor Bowrah, Councillor Brooks, Mrs Drage, Mr Galpin,
Mrs Hegarty, Mr Hellier, Mrs Marshall and Mr Watkin

Officers: Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Steven Clarke (Estate Officer), Norah Day (Housing Estate Manager), Donna Durham (Democratic Support Manager), Chris Hall (DLO Project Manager), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), Rosie Reed (Tenant Services Development Officer), Christine Thompson (Support Housnig Manager), Tracy Vernon (Tenant Services Development Officer), Lesley Webb (Housing Enabling Lead) and Phil Webb (Housing Property Services Manager)

(The meeting commenced at 6pm)

10. Apology

Apology: Mr Edwards (Vice-Chairman)

11. The minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 13 January 2011 were taken as read and were signed.

12. Declaration of Interests

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

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

Councillor Brooks declared personal interests as a Council House Tenant and as a Member of Somerset County Council.

13. DLO Transformation Project

Chris Hall updated Board members on the DLO Transformation Project.

A financial review was being undertaken which would look at how the financial deficit had originated.

Yarlington Homes was visited and saw that a lot of technology was used to issue and transfer jobs to their staff. They were currently considering which of their systems could be used by the DLO.

Work had begun on the Nursery's marketing plan. They were also making contact with other Local Authorities to find out what best practice was used.

The DLO staff survey had been published. These were included in the newsletter which was published on the Council's intranet.

The greenhouses and poly-tunnels were filled to capacity in the summer, but not during the winter months. Consideration was being given to buying in shrubs and plants to sell to gain additional income.

Deployment of staff was being consulted on with UNISON. A workshop had been held with key Managers to see how levels of sickness could be reduced. Additional support needed to be given to employees to ensure that staff returned to work as early as possible.

The options appraisal for the Vehicle Transport Workshop was due to be completed. The Vehicle Transport Workshop maintained the fleet and options were being considered for future efficiencies.

The process in the Stores was under review and it was thought that improvements could be made which would generate efficiencies.

During the discussion of this item, the following comments and questions were asked. Responses are shown in italics:

- Sickness was not recorded accurately and gave a false reading.
This had not been resolved; and
- Would it be feasible to have a bonus scheme for good attendance?
It had been considered but perhaps a form of recognition for good attendance.

Resolved that the update be noted.

14. Implementing Self-Financing for Council Housing

Reference Minute No 19/2010. The Housing services Lead updated the Board regarding the report on the Paper 'Implementing self financing for council housing'.

The objectives of the reforms which would be implemented in April 2012 were:

- To give Local Authorities the resources, incentives and flexibility they needed to manage their own housing stock;
- To have transparency in order to give tenants clear information as to how and where the rent collected by the landlord was spent;
- The reforms were based on individual Local Authority's housing business in order to give a sustainable self-financing settlement. The reforms were not redistributing a fixed amount of debt between Local Authorities but would abolish Housing Revenue Account Subsidy; and
- All the reforms had implications on the Housing Revenue Account and did not impact on the General Fund.

The key components to self financing were:

- It was only rental income that was included within the valuation as service charges were not included within the subsidy system;
- Spending needs had been recalculated which allowed Local Authorities to have more money to spend on maintaining, managing and repairing stock;
- With additional debt being taken, there would be further responsibilities for Treasury Management; and
- Following the consultation, it had been decided that any plans to demolish properties within the next few years, would be excluded.

For Taunton Deane Borough Council the self financing valuation was £117.8m and the self financing payment £87.2m, this left head room of

£30.6m. Taunton Deane Borough Council already had borrowings of £14.51m in the HRA so the available borrowing after the self financing would be £16.09m.

Robin Tebbutt from Housing Quality Network would work alongside the Finance Team to plan the transition.

A timetable of key dates was submitted, which showed that self financing would start in April 2012.

During the discussion of this item, Members of the Board made comments and asked questions. Responses are shown in italics:

- What benefits would self financing have for the tenants? *The detail was needed, although there could be additional funds available for the delivery of new developments, which had been a priority for the Board;*
- What was limit rent? *Housing Associations and Local Authorities charged different rents and the Government was looking for the rents to converge, by 2015/2016. This meant that the Council would have to increase their rents, but there was a limit as to how much they could be increased on an annual basis, without penalty costs being incurred;*
- Was £16.09m the limit that could be borrowed? *It was an additional amount of borrowing potential, but this could increase as debts were repaid;*
- Do we know how much our rents differ from Housing Associations? *The information was not available but the Housing Services Lead stated that he would circulate the information to the Board;* and
- When the Government announced that rents had to converge, 2010 was the date set originally for convergence.

Further updates would be issued to the Board.

Resolved that the report be noted.

15. Regeneration – Halcon North

The Housing Enabling Lead gave the Board an update on the Regeneration of Halcon North project.

Surgeries were being held once a week at Halcon for tenants, but it was vital to keep communications open.

The local elections would cause some delays. The Executive had recommended that £50k was provided from the Housing Revenue Account to fund consultancy expertise for the options appraisal work.

The Project Working Group were working hard to produce the Business Plan and it was hoped that the Business Plan would be completed by May 2011.

During the discussion of this item, Members of the Board made the following questions and asked questions. Responses are shown in italics:

- The delays were causing concern to owner/occupiers. *Meetings had been held with owner/occupiers and communication lines kept open. Owner/occupiers would be responsible for obtaining a valuation of their property with a view to the Council purchasing the properties. This was essential to the success of the Project. Each property would need to be considered on its own merit;*
- Was the incentive of £4,700 encouraging tenants to move forward with the Project? *Tenants had a variety of views about the incentive. Some tenants had said that the priority was to have a new property, others wanted a fresh start in a different area. However, any arrears would be taken out of the incentive bonus; and*
- Some tenants were concerned about the large number of houses that had been originally mentioned. *The architects had looked at the site and the concept showed a maximum of 500. However, it was likely that less than 500 homes would be delivered as larger houses were required on the site.*

Resolved that the update be noted.

16. Anti-Social Behaviour Service Standard

Considered report previously circulated, regarding the proposal for a new service standard for Anti Social Behaviour for Taunton Deane Borough Council Landlord Services.

The report outlined the service that tenants in Council housing could expect from landlords, with regard to managing anti social behaviour, and provided details of the specific elements of the service.

It showed how the current service worked and the timescales involved in contacting the complainants. The standards also showed that Taunton Deane Borough Council would keep in contact with the complainant.

The report gave the Tenant Services Management Board the opportunity to comment and shape the service standard for anti social behaviour.

Landlord services were responsible for ensuring tenants complied with their tenancy agreements and did not behave in an anti social manner within the community. The Council housed some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society who needed support.

The service standard showed the minimum standard that tenants could expect from the Council in relation to the investigation of neighbour nuisance or anti social behaviour. Following the registering of the complaint, tenants would be informed of the Council's response and what actions could be taken.

The outcomes which could be expected from the implementation of this standard were:

- Improved information to tenants on the landlord service;
- Tenants would be more aware of the service provided by the Council;
- The performance would be monitored and reported back to the Tenant Services Management Board.

If implemented it was intended to inform all tenants of the new Standard by updating existing Tenant Welcome Packs, information on the Council's website and providing information in editions of Deane Housing News.

During the discussion of this item, Members of the Board made comments and asked questions. Responses are shown in italics:

- There did not seem to be such a high level of anti-social behaviour recently. *As the weather gets better and the nights lighter, it was anticipated that more anti social behaviour would be reported. Details of the types of anti social behaviour and how it was dealt with could be reported to a future meeting;*
- There was some offensive graffiti in Wordsworth Drive. *The property was not in the Council's ownership, but the Council through a protocol with the Police was dealing with it;*

- There needed to be something in place to ensure that investigations into anti social behaviour could progress, even when staff were absent;
- Details of how complaints could be made, should be included in the leaflet. The leaflet should suggest that complainants could contact the Tenants Forum.

Resolved that the Anti Social Behaviour Standard be approved with the addition as suggested.

17. Homefinder Somerset Revised Allocations Policy – Revised Policy

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the recent review of the Allocations Policy.

The Homefinder Somerset Partnership was formed in 2005 and had secured funding for the Choice Based Letting scheme (CBL). The Partnership consisted of five housing authorities within Somerset and their principal social housing landlords.

The review group considered any issues that had been raised since CBL had gone live. In addition, a detailed scrutiny review by Members had been undertaken, which focussed on the customer facing aspects of the scheme. Where possible, any suggested improvements had been made.

Any proposed changes to the allocations policy were then consulted on. The key proposed changes were:

- Assessment of applicant finances to establish if an applicant could meet their own housing needs;
- Assessment of the level of medical considerations. Gold Band criteria would change from life threatening, to serious medical conditions and the Silver Band criteria would be reduced from significant to moderate medical conditions;
- Households who matched four or more Silver Band housing needs would be awarded Gold Band status for cumulative housing need;
- Tenants of Homefinder Somerset Partners, who lived in Somerset and were required to relocate due to major rebuilding or renovation works, would be placed into Gold Band to facilitate the rebuilding/renovation works;

- The removal of the priority given to households with children under ten years of age that had no access to an enclosed garden as a consideration for Silver Banding;
- Due to the shortage of social housing in the area, applicants with children who did not live with them permanently would not be entitled to an additional bedroom;
- To amend the policy to make it clearer when a property could be labelled for priority to local applicants;
- For a clearer definition of local connection which was based on that used for homelessness;
- That homeless cases awarded Gold Band status who did not bid for suitable properties within 8-16 weeks could have automatic bids placed on their behalf by the relevant Local Authority for suitable properties;
- In order to reduce the number of applicants refusing offers, it was proposed that applicants who refused three formal suitable offers could be placed into Bronze Band for three months. This would exclude accepted homeless cases; and
- To simplify the housing register application process, application forms would be reduced in size by approximately 50%.

The majority of stakeholders and applicants consulted, agreed with the proposed changes.

Resolved that:

- (1) The findings into the review of the existing Homefinder Somerset Common Allocations Policy be noted; and
- (2) The revised draft Homefinder Somerset Common Allocations Policy be agreed.

18. Tenant Services Management Board Annual General Meeting

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the Tenant Services Management Board's (TSMB) Annual General Meeting (AGM).

The Terms of Reference of the TSMB stated that an AGM would be held in April of each year or within 15 months of the previous AGM.

The purpose of the AGM was to:

- Receive reports from the outgoing Chairperson on the Board's activities during the year;
- Elect a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson;
- Elect representatives to any Sub-Committees or Working Groups; and
- Consider and vote on any resolutions put forward by tenants.

The options for the AGM were to either hold just the AGM, hold an AGM with other agenda items added as necessary, or to hold an AGM as part of 'Tenants Day'.

Previous discussions with tenants had suggested that a central Taunton venue was preferable, but not a Council venue.

Publicity of the AGM would be necessary to ensure that as many tenants as possible attended.

During the discussion of this item, Members of the Board made comments and asked questions. Responses are shown in italics:

- How long was the term of office for Board Members? *2 years;*
- Could any remaining budget for the Tenant Services Management Board be carried forward? *Yes;*
- A central Taunton location would be preferred. *There was an arrangement with Somerset County Cricket Club and a preferential rate could be secured;*
- 11am to 7pm was suggested for a 'Tenants Day';
- Neighbourhood Care and the Home Furniture Services Trust should be invited to attend. In addition, an organisation that offered parenting skills and representatives from Family Centres should be invited; and
- Additional items for the AGM agenda would be considered at the Board's next meeting.

Resolved that:

(1) The report be noted;

(2) The Annual General Meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board be held at the Somerset County Cricket Ground or a central Taunton venue if that was not available and as part of a 'Tenants Day'; and

(3) Officers be tasked with planning and organising the Annual General Meeting and report to the Board at their next meeting in March 2011.

19. Welcome Pack

The Housing Services Lead reported that a 'welcome pack' had been produced for new tenants.

The Audit Commission had commented that the 'welcome pack' included useful information for new tenants. However, they had also commented that it was not available to existing tenants.

The cost of issuing the 'welcome pack' to all tenants would be approximately £20,000.

It was suggested that either tenants could request a copy of the 'welcome pack', or a copy could be issued to all tenants. The 'welcome pack' was available electronically on the Council's website.

Members of the Board felt that the cost of issuing the 'welcome pack' to all tenants was excessive. They suggested that the issue of the 'welcome pack' be restricted to new tenants, but that details were included in the newsletter 'Tenants' Talk' stating how a copy could be obtained. The production of a small leaflet with a reply slip was discussed, which would enable all tenants to request a copy.

The Board felt that copies of the 'welcome pack' should be put in Libraries and Family Centres.

The Chairman commented that the 'welcome pack' had been well designed and could be easily updated. He suggested that a database should be maintained to ensure that any tenants who had been issued with a 'welcome pack', could be issued with any amendment sheets.

Resolved that the 'welcome pack' be issued to all new tenants and details be included in the 'Tenants' Talk' stating that it can be viewed online, or a hard copy can be requested.

(The meeting ended at 8.20pm)

