

**Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 19 September 2011 at 6pm in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.**

**Present:** Mr Etherington (Chairman)  
Mr Edwards (Vice- Chairman)  
Councillor Bowrah, Mrs Bunn, Mrs Drage, Mr Galpin, Mrs Hegarty, Mr Hellier, and Mrs Urquhart.

**Officers:** Kevin Toller (Strategic Director), James Barrah (Community Services Manager), Tim Burton (Growth and Development Manager), Maggie Hammond (Strategic Finance Officer), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), Tracey Vernon (Tenant Services Development Officer), and Keith Wiggins (Democratic Services Officer).

**Others:** Councillor Mrs Adkins, Nigel Stuart-Thorn, Malcolm Andrews, John Beaman, Cathy Osborn (Savills)

(The meeting commenced at 6.08pm)

**49. Apologies**

Apologies: Councillor Brooks and Mrs Marshall

**50. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 23 August 2011 were taken as read, with the exception of the omission of Mrs Hegarty from the declaration of interests, were amended accordingly and signed.

**51. Declaration of Interests**

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

- Mrs Bunn
- Mrs Drage
- Mr Edwards
- Mr Etherington
- Mr Galpin
- Mrs Hegarty
- Mr Hellier
- Mrs Urquhart

Councillor Bowrah declared a personal interest as a family member was a Council house tenant.

## 52. Tenant Awards

The Vice-Chairman introduced an urgent item to consider the board's view on a proposal for an annual awards scheme for council tenants.

Initial suggestions had been put forward for four award categories:

- Community Projects;
- Community Project Leader;
- Tenant of the Year and
- Young Tenant of the Year.

It was hoped the scheme would attract sponsorship and local press interest.

**Resolved** to support the award scheme and recommend it to the Tenant's Forum.

## 53. Housing Revenue Account Reform Project – Baseline Financial Position

Cathy Osborn from the consultants Savills described their role in assisting the Council to prepare a new Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, summarised the key issues and the current project status. As well as the changes to finance, the plan was taking account of public sector spending reductions, legislation on tenure and rent flexibility and welfare benefit reform.

Self Financing meant that, rather than the negative subsidy the Council currently paid back to the Government from its rents (approximately £7million per year), the Council would be allocated a share of the national housing debt directly. Draft debt settlement figures issued by the Government suggested the share of the debt would be £87million. The Council would be required to pay this debt amount back. Assuming that the Council chose to borrow that entire amount this would increase the total housing debt to £101.5 million.

Savills were conducting an external check on the status of the council housing stock to assist in estimates for repairs, renovation and re-build costs over the lifetime of the thirty year plan.

Using certain assumptions the baseline position was that the Council would be able to clear the HRA debt by year 19 of the business plan. The debt repayment period could vary between 17 and 30 years depending on Council decisions; associated risks were explained to board members.

**Resolved** to note the baseline financial position.

## 54. Housing Revenue Account Reform Project – Borrowing Options

Considered report previously circulated regarding the borrowing options for the Council, required by the move to "self-financing" of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Maggie Hammond explained that the Government estimate of the required repayment by the Council in March 2012 was £87.2m. This estimate might increase in December.

The various options for borrowing and likely associated borrowing rates were explained and questions from board members were answered.

Gilts were described as the benchmark for borrowing rates. At the time of writing the report the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) rate was Gilts plus 1%.

However announcements had been made at the Liberal Democrat Party conference that indicated a more favourable rate would be available from the PWLB for HRA borrowing.

The Council's Treasury Management Strategy, approved in March 2011, already gave authority for officers of the Council to undertake the required borrowing.

**Resolved** to note the report.

#### **55. Housing Revenue Account Reform Project Dashboard and SWOT Analysis**

Considered project progress dashboard report and strengths and weaknesses analysis previously circulated, concerning planned reforms to council housing finance in England and the management of those changes by the Council.

James Barraah explained that there were only concerns with one workstream – Assets – where a data validation exercise involving Savills was underway.

A detailed briefing on HRA Finance for Taunton Deane Borough Councillors was planned for 10 October 2011.

**Resolved** to note the report.

#### **56. Halcon North Project**

Tim Burton reminded board members of the objectives of the regeneration project and some of the main issues it sought to remedy. He explained the timetable for taking a report for decision by the Council's Executive on 12 October 2011.

Cathy Osborn from the Council's appointed consultants (Savill's) outlined the main findings of their initial Development Appraisal and new suggestions for an amended scheme.

The revised appraisal was based on a scheme for 400 homes with 50% affordable housing and up to 50 houses returning to Council HRA control.

It was assumed the scheme would be delivered by a developer procured through competitive tendering and that the 200 homes for purchase would be built over a period of eight years. Some short term borrowing would be required but “soft market testing” had informed their assessment that the revised scheme could be viable.

Four options would be put forward to Council members to discuss at a public meeting in Halcon on 3 October.

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

- How much would be paid to existing private home owners? *This would be depend on market factors and house prices at the time;*
- There were still many positives for the scheme which would produce 400 up-to date properties and 200 affordable homes;
- What percentage of housing will be designed for the elderly or those with disabilities? *This was not yet specified. The Council continued to consult with disabilities groups and any individuals assigned to accommodation would have their personal needs assessed;*
- How much had already been spent on homes in Halcon? *A higher percentage than the average across the council stock.*
- Our main concern would be the loss of homes in Halcon available for rental from the Council.

**Resolved** to support the proposal to proceed with the revised scheme, but with concerns about the small number of properties returning to the Council’s stock.

## **57. Installation of Solar PV Panels on the Council Housing Stock**

Considered report previously circulated, concerning options for the installation of solar photo voltaic (PV) panels on suitable council owned homes.

PV systems would have positive financial benefits to tenants, as they would get to use the electricity generated. The amount that a tenant benefits would be dependant on the amount of the free electricity they could use, which would be likely to be related to how much they were at home during the daytime. Any electricity not used would be exported to the grid, from where the developer would gain – and where the Council would wish to see a return.

Members commented that they would wish to see any return to the Council earmarked for tenants’ schemes, fuel poverty and renewable energy.

**Resolved** to support the proposal to carry out a mini procurement process for a scheme operated through licence.

## 58. Fire Safety in Flats

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the advantages and disadvantages of adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach when managing communal areas of council owned blocks of flats in order to reduce the risk of fire and to safeguard tenants.

Comprehensive fire safety research had been undertaken following an arson attack at a block of flats in Taunton. The attack had resulted in six families being made homeless and required a significant redevelopment project to totally refurbish the block and relocate the affected families.

The inspection of other similar blocks had identified significant fire hazards attributable to the storage of personal items within the communal hallways. Two of the biggest issues for resolution were the storage of containers for recycling and mobility scooters.

Early discussions with the Group Commander of Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service had indicated they were totally supportive of a zero tolerance policy within communal areas of flats.

Members commented that problems were not solely related to tenants but also to those sleeping rough or using communal areas for their own purposes.

Members discussed the merits and problems of door entry systems to blocks of flats.

Members' suggestions included:

- Working more closely on this issue with the Tenants' Forum;
- Inclusion of updated advice within the tenants handbook;
- Requiring all tenants to ensure hallways were kept clear;
- The creation of a working group to explore the options in more detail.

Some members were supportive of the zero tolerance approach whilst others favoured the suggested "managed use" alternatives.

**Resolved** to support the proposal to improve fire safety in flats based on zero tolerance within communal areas, but requesting council officers to take note of members' comments and concerns.

**59. Annual Report to Tenants**

The Tenant Empowerment Manager outlined the agreed calendar format and content for this year's annual report.

The calendar would contain dates of the forum and board meetings and details of choice based lettings options.

**Resolved** to support the production of the annual report.

**60. Dates of TSMB Meetings 2012**

Members had received a list of provisional dates for meetings of the board in 2012.

**Resolved** to accept the proposed dates.

(The meeting ended at 8.20pm)