

Minutes of the Meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 27 June 2016 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr R Balman (Chairman)
Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty, Mr I Hussey, Mr R Middleton,
Councillor Bowrah and Councillor C Booth.

Officers: Paul Hadley (Housing Manager – Lettings & Anti-Social behaviour), Simon Lewis (Assistant Director – Housing and Community Development), Michaela Mullen (Welfare Reform Project Officer), James Barrahan (Director – Housing and Communities), Lucy Clothier (Project Manager HRA Business Plan Review), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Terry May (Interim Assistant Director – Property and Development), Liam Canham (Area Community Manager), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), and Emma Hill (Democratic Services Officer).

Others: Julia Williamson; Vice-Chair, Tenants' Forum

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

1. Apologies

Mr K Hellier

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 17 May 2016 were taken as read and were signed.

3. Public Question Time

No questions received for Public Question Time.

4. Declarations of Interests

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

5. Report on Welfare Reform End of Year 2015/16

Members considered report previously circulated, concerning an update on the third years' performance since the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and its effect on the Council's Housing Service tenants. The update report covered a summary of the Welfare Reform 2012 legislation, work of the Welfare Reform Project Officer and Universal Credit Update.

Below was a summary of the main points from the update provided by the Housing Manager – Lettings & Anti-Social behaviour:

- Under Occupancy Penalty (UOP) in April 2015, 346 tenants affected by the UOP compared to 385 in April 2014.

- Rent Arrears in April 2015, 192 affected tenants were in rent arrears compared to 187 in April 2014.
- Average number of tenants affected in 2015/16 was 332 per month against 428 in 2014/15.
- Overall Rent Arrears in April 2016 were £392,342.79 compared to £382,583.18 in April 2015.
- Of this £36,784.46 pertained to tenants affected by UOP, compared with £44,874.09 in April 2015. This was a reduction.
- From Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Budget in 2015/16 107 tenants were awarded £44,322 from a budget of £117,000. The budget for 2016/16 was £150,894.

Universal Credit was introduced across Taunton Deane on the 20th April 2015 and initially only affected single people making a new claim as these would have traditionally had Job Seekers Allowance.

The DWP predicted in 2015/16 that there could be up to 1108 UC claims made from residents in Taunton Deane and there had only been 448 UC claims up to the end of February 2016, 37 of which were TDBC tenants

In October 2016 Universal Credit in Taunton Deane would change from just single working age people to include all working age residents making new claims or having a change in their circumstances.

It had been clear to the Council that the greatest impact so far had been felt by the tenants who were directly affected by the UOP. Housing Services had coped well with the challenges by re-allocating staff and working more closely with partners both in the public and voluntary sector. It would seem that the significant investment made in supporting tenants had helped to mitigate the worst of the impact of the changes.

Results from the direct payment pilot sites across the country endorse this approach in helping tenants maintain their tenancies.

The Housing Service had been working with tenants and partner agencies to counter the impact of welfare reform changes including Universal Credit on its rental income and would continue to monitor and review it throughout the year.

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

- In response to a question asking if the list of 192 people, did it remain the same people or changed to different people, the board was informed that the figure had remained the same but people within the 192 had changed. This meant people had been become affected and then became unaffected.
- In response to a question asking the Welfare Reform Project Officer for their opinion on what was the general feel, were things improving or getting worse, the board was informed that the positions for people were not necessarily improving but they were getting used to the situation and managing their money better.

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

6. Verbal Update on Anti-Social Behaviour Service

The Housing Manager for Letting and Anti-Social Behaviour gave a verbal update concerning the Anti-Social Behaviour Service.

Below was a summary of the main points from the update provided:

- The performance relating to people's satisfaction with the service has consistently been high (mid/high 90's) in each quarter.
- The ASB team had opened 80 cases in the last 12 months and half of these cases had been closed and resolved within the same period.
- The service received a variety of types of cases with a large number relating to harassment, noise nuisance and alcohol related.
- An increase in the number of cases relating to drugs and physical violence.
- Currently, only a small number of cases pertained to hate crimes and these would be dealt with by our colleagues at Avon & Somerset Constabulary with our support.
- The cases that consumed the most Officer time had been those where someone had Mental Health issues, which had to be taken into account, when dealing with the issue and looking for a resolution.
- Officers had provided a summary (excluding personal information) to the Board of the types of high profile cases dealt with by the service and their status either resolved or ongoing.

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

- In response to a question asking how far did the tenant have to go before the Council took action, the Board was informed that there was a set procedure and protocol that Officers had to follow but it was not set in stone and could be dependent on the severity of the case. Dealt with on a case by case basis. Officers would start with discussion, negotiation, support and advice and then if that did not work, they could go down the route of ASB notice, which was an informal action was but last resort was an injunction and possession of property.
- Director for Housing and Communities wanted to commend Housing Manager and his team for their work and performance. The work, they completed within the ASB service was frequently long and complex with multiple issues.
- In response to a question asking about council Houses which had been sold and the owners or private tenants causing problems, the Board was informed that when the Council sold a property through RtB, there was a conveyance attached to it. This conveyance included provision that the owner/occupier should not perpetrate ASB. Dealing with cases of ASB perpetrated by owner/occupiers' was more difficult than dealing with cases perpetrated by our tenants. With breaches of tenancy, the Council had the legal tenancy agreement that could be used to confront them but Officers had to be more flexible when dealing with cases with owner/occupiers'. The Council had the ability to impose a sanction but our first step would be to hold discussions with them. In many cases the owner/occupier had more to lose so when presented with the situation, they were more willing to reach an agreed position.

Resolved that the Officer's report be noted.

7. Report on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan Review

Members considered report previously circulated, which provided an update on the progress of the review of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

The Business Plan contained the aims and objectives of the HRA, and included a financial model of the next 30 years. A number of largely external changes had meant that a full refresh of the Business Plan was necessary. The report therefore identified the changes and the impact of these changes.

A copy of the updated Business Plan was included with this report, along with a new Asset Strategy and Development Strategy.

The new Business Plan was more robust than previously with the inclusion of better quality data, in particular around the Council's assets. However, the financial margins were now much tighter with the plan relying on the delivery of savings, which would require the imposition of continuing management vigilance in order to maintain a viable Business Plan.

The Business Plan had brought everything together and had set out the aims and objectives of the HRA. The review had updated strategic objectives for the service, which were to provide quality homes, support the most vulnerable, provide a better service and build a stronger business.

The review had also detailed the way in which the HRA would work in the future, including setting out a new operating model that would allow tenants, where appropriate, to move into additional services such as shared ownership. This model showed the way in which the HRA would support tenants into and through the Housing service.

Following consultations with Councillors, the Tenant Services Management Board, the Tenants' Forum and all staff members in the Housing and Communities Directorate, the following conclusions had been established:-

- The HRA's Core Business should be social rented housing for the most vulnerable in our communities.
- The proposed new objectives for the HRA were appropriate.
- That much could be done to improve the customer experience of the Housing Service.
- Subject to continuing commitments with repairs and maintenance service standards, it would be acceptable to prioritise new build projects over some maintenance expenditure.
- The priority for the tenants groups was not to allow standards in the Council's existing housing to fall.
- To make better use of current repairs and maintenance service in order to free up resources.
- There was an appetite for looking at housing products closer to the market in order to generate additional income on new build/regeneration schemes.
- The current revised debt repayment approach was acceptable based on treasury management advice and to achieve a viable Business Plan and protect services.

Due to a number of changes driven by both internal and external factors, which included a reduction in rent by 1% for four years, rental income by 2042 was likely to be reduced by 39%. Noted that there was likely to be a reduction in income of

£185,000,000 over the next 30 years. This substantial impact on the financial position of the Business Plan had meant the Council had to consider some corrective action to mitigate these impacts within the updated Plan.

The new financial position and baseline assumptions of the HRA Business Plan included the following:-

- Right to Buy (RtB) – This had been updated to include 60 sales per annum for a three year period, followed by a reduction to 30 sales a year. This would result in a reduced number of dwellings in the Housing stock and reduced rental income.
- Pay to Stay – The introduction of this meant that tenant households of local authorities earning over £31,000 per annum must be charged a higher rent, depending on their income, up to market, or near market rents.
- Welfare Reform – This included a provision for lower income for a period of three years due to an increase in bad debt. This would cover the roll out of Universal Credit in Taunton Deane.
- Maintenance – Inclusion of a slight increase to major works spend following the recent Stock Condition Survey as well as a reduction over five years to the day to day spend on maintenance.
- New Developments – Committing a budget over the full 30 years of £77,000,000, which equated to 15 units per year at an average rate of £130,000 per unit, rising with inflation.
- Disabled Facilities Grant – A budget reduction from £435,000 per annum to £300,000 per annum over a five year period.
- Capital Improvements - This once separate budget for Sustainable Energy had been 'mainstreamed' into the heating replacement programme and would now be included within the core capital programme. The Estate Improvements annual budget of up to £50,000 would be continued, which the Council had acknowledged was very important to tenants.
- Management Costs – This included efficiency savings of £253,000, which had been identified from management and service costs as well as a new permanent provision of £140,000 per annum was being included for schemes currently being covered with temporary funding.
- Debt – Where the Council's reserves allowed debt was being repaid, otherwise it would be refinanced. Also included were provisions for long term debt repayment to be spread over 60 years. This should result in the debt being reduced to less than £50,000,000 by year 30.

Further reported that the Business Plan faced a number of risks and uncertainties that were not currently quantifiable and so had not been included within the Business Plan finances. These included the introduction of Pay to Stay, selling off Higher Value Void Stock, the introduction of Local Housing Allowance Rates and the full roll out of Universal Credit replacing Housing Benefit.

The HRA had a well-established development programme and to ensure a continuing and deliverable programme, and the best use of the funding, a Development Strategy had been established which would allow opportunities for the development pipeline and other new challenges to be identified. A copy of the Development Strategy was attached as an appendix to the Business Plan for the information of members.

The review had also identified some future drivers for the HRA priorities, which included dealing with the loss of housing stock through Right to Buy, the Council's

investment priorities and dealing with non-traditional stock and poor performing stock as identified in the Asset Management Strategy.

Through the Asset Management Strategy, the Council had identified its objectives and principles in relation to active asset management and these included:-

- Objectives:-
 - Good quality homes and environmental standards;
 - Strengthening financial viability; and
 - Improving social sustainability.

- Principles:-
 - Using information on performance to target investment; and
 - The use of Options appraisals where performance was poor – prior to long term investment decisions.

This strategy had been developed so that decisions could be made in order to fund the contribution to Government, but also to start active asset management and stock churn. This was in order to make sure that the housing held was right for both the HRA and tenants.

This tool had been created to take all of the data and assess the Housing stock using this information. This did not indicate what stock should be sold but showed which groups should have an options appraisal. Following an appraisal, it was the Council's intention that decisions should be made regarding the disposal of vacant dwellings or related assets through an Executive Portfolio Holder decision in conjunction with the Director of Housing and Communities.

A copy of the Asset Strategy was also submitted as an appendix to the Business Plan for the information of members.

The financial position of the HRA Business Plan had changed considerably from a forecasted reserves balance of £156,000,000 at 2042 (year 30 of the existing Business Plan) to £18,000,000 at 2046 (year 30 of the new Business Plan). This was largely due to external changes such as the national rent policy, which had greatly reduced income expectations.

These changes meant that the HRA would not be able to continue the financing of the repayment of the current self-financing loans by year 2030 (year 18 of the Business Plan 2012) without a significant reduction in service quality.

The Council's Treasury Advisors had confirmed that the HRA would have a shortfall in cash when the loans were repaid. It would not therefore be beneficial to refinance the existing loans immediately and replace them with new longer term loans. Instead, it had been recommended to refinance the loans on maturity as and when needed, over the period required.

The current balance of HRA general reserves was £2,686,000, which was £886,000 over the minimum recommended balance of £1,800,000. These forecasted deficits would reduce the HRA general reserves balance to £1,800,000 in 2018/2019. This meant that all of the available funding in general reserves (over the minimum balance) was needed over the next two years, and no further allocations would be possible.

As a result of the review, an Action Plan had been developed based on the HRA Business Plan's key priority areas of providing quality homes, supporting the most vulnerable, providing a better service and building a stronger business. This detailed the future action for each priority and the sponsor for that priority.

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

- Board Members thanked Officers for the information within the report as it put their minds at ease knowing there was a plan of action, despite the reduction in income to HRA.
- In response to a question asking where the Woolaway properties indicated on the diagram were, the Board was informed that these particular properties were located between the wards of Galmington and Pyrland & Rowbarton.
- In response to a question concerning the introduction of 'Pay to Stay' and was the Council completing financial background checks to ensure financial affordability, the Board was informed that Officers could contact Revenues and Customs (HMRC) for background checks.
- Members and Director for Housing and Communities thanked the Project Manager for their work on the project.

Resolved that the Officer's update report be noted.

8. Report on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Landlord Health and Safety Compliance Status

Members considered report previously circulated, concerning an update on progress of landlord Health & Safety Compliance.

The Council had been advised that an interim action plan for Asbestos management was in place, and approval had been given to employ an 18 month fixed term Project Manager – Compliance to drive Landlord Health & Safety (LH&S) and deliver the Asbestos Action Plan.

The interim Asbestos Action Plan had been developed into a live final action plan that had been agreed by the Asbestos Working Group. The AWG met on a six week basis with a remit of delivering Asbestos Management improvements.

The Project Manager Compliance had started to develop documents and letter templates as part of the asbestos management process and a new Property & Development Directorate restructure was now starting to be implemented, with the Property Manager Asbestos now in post as well as the Asbestos Task Team was in place and working effectively.

In Addition, the Council had set up a small team of two electricians to carryout Periodic Electrical Testing and Inspections for the Housing Stock to maintain compliance of electrical safety requirements.

The Council had produced a compliance statement that would be included within the new Asset Management Strategy. A copy of this statement was provided to the Board Members within the covering report as well as developing Policy and Procedures for the other LH&S compliance areas that would be supported by a LH&S Action Plan, which would be presented at a future meeting of the Board.

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

- Board Members commented that they had received positive feedback and had positive experiences themselves regarding the work that had been completed by staff.

Resolved that the Officer's update report be noted.

9. Update Report on the One Team Areas

Reference Minute No. 8/25 January 2016, Members considered report previously circulated, concerning an update report on One Team areas.

The One Team model continued to work on the basis of co-locating our Estates Officers in the areas of Housing Estate that generate the most demand and to work alongside other partners to provide the best joined up solution to these issues.

Below was a summary of the Officer's update report:

- Although the Area Community Managers and their teams did locality working within the One Team areas due to demand but they were aware of and provided support and responded to requests from tenants in communities from all over the borough.
- The One Team area were still trying to improve their partnership reach and were trying to extend it to include new partners to provide new support for the communities.
- Partnership working continued to be good in some areas but challenging in others.
- A facilitated day had been organised with Get Set Services next month to try and agree closer working arrangements and communications and ensuring One Teams could provide a responsive service to families that need help.
- Ongoing conversations with Musgrove Park Hospital and the Ambulance Trust concerning the sharing of information and closer working to prevent future demand on services.
- Positive feedback received from both Tenants and One Team regarding the introduction and support provided by MIND. Along with other voluntary and community sector organisation such as CAB and Inspire to achieve, this was having positive affect on the communities and the Council's business as a landlord.
- A pilot scheme was being developed for the North Taunton funded by Somerset County Council Public Health to provide a stronger framework of mental health.
- Inspired to Achieve were bedding in but receiving increasing numbers of referrals to support unemployed tenants. The work of Inspired to Achieve would not only benefit tenants and their families but should also help us protect future rental income!
- Inspired to Achieve had received national recognition as a best practice organisation for delivering this kind of support.
- With the success of Link Power at East Taunton (Halcon), they were also assisting and supporting similar litter picks within Holway area.
- One of the continuing priorities for One Team areas was the look and feel of estates and communities.

- One Teams were still struggling to keep partnership involved and there were a number of reasons for this but this was increasingly affected by budget and service cuts due austerity.
- Area Community Managers, other Council staff and agency partnerships had seen the benefits of this model for working for individuals, families and communities.

The Officer provided a brief update on the individual One Teams including their progress and area where they were still struggling. Below was a summary of those points raised:

- Halcon One Team's Link Power success with 1500 hours of volunteer work and letters of recognition of their work on the estate
- Wellington One Team area was responding well to safeguarding and Early Help concerns.
- Rent Collection and Arrears management in the Wellington was at a good level.
- MIND work in North Taunton working really well
- Issues surrounding the levels and incidents of Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour
- Halcon had significant safeguarding issues within the community
- Chill and Chat in North Taunton was struggling to establish.

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

- In response to a question asking did the Council and the One Team Multi-Agency group work with the Village agents in rural communities, the Board were informed that overseeing the One Teams was the Strategic Partnership, which had a representative from the Somerset Community Foundation (SCF) who employed the Village Agents. The Council and other agency partners were aware that the focus at the moment had been urban areas and that we needed the Village Agents to support our rural areas and bring things to the Multi-Agency group requiring attention.
The Council was in discussions with SCF prior to the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and providing training for the agents so they would be able to support rural communities with UC.
- Board Member commented that they lived within a rural area where there was a village agent but they did not see much of them and the service did not appear to widely advertised.
- Board Member mentioned that the One Team Multi-Agency group had been well received within the Wellington area and everybody was very enthusiastic about it. Officers agreed with the comments and said that Wellington One Team had been well supported and backed by Wellington Town Council. The Town Council had also agreed to show financial support and provided funding which had extended presence of the Co-ordinator post.

Resolved that the Officer's update report be noted.

10. Report on the Review of Complaints 2015/16

Members considered report previously circulated, concerning the analysis of complaints received to the Housing and Communities Directorate between April 2015 and March 2016 and the findings.

From 1 April 2015 all corporate complaints, compliments and suggestions were recorded on a central database, which provided greater visibility of complaints received and provides better quality information pertaining to the complaint.

The analysis had proved difficult as not all fields were mandatory and there were options for some entries to be created manually rather than being selected from a pre-defined list.

The Officer gave a brief overview of the Corporate Complaints process to the Board including the deadline period for Officers to respond by as well as where the Complainant could go following the Council procedures if they were not satisfied with the outcome.

Following the analysis of the data, between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 a total of 120 complaints were logged as received within the Housing and Communities Directorate. This equated to around 10 a month. Of these, 106 were logged and then resolved at Stage 1; 12 were logged and then resolved at Stage 2; and 2 were referred on to the Housing Ombudsman. The complaints were received through a variety of means with 43 complaints via the web, 29 via post and the remainder either made in person or over the telephone.

The most common reason for complaints was regarding 'standard of service' and of the 64 complaints logged as standard of service, the majority of these (51) were related to some sort of repair work.

Of all complaints received and responded to between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016, the average response time was 28 working days and response times ranged from 1 working day to 172 working days. This highlighted that complaints were not being prioritised as they should be and response times had been impacted due to protracted hand-offs between Officers, as sometimes the complaint needed to be investigated by two different departments.

Complaints performance in relation to response times would continue to be monitored as this was an indicator on the Housing and Communities quarterly scorecard. Running alongside this was a project for Improving Tenant and Leaseholder satisfaction, which would produce some further data analysis and recommendations.

In order to make the data captured regarding complaints more robust, it was an intention to run complaints workshops with staff to ensure they were fully aware of the complaints process and train them in using the Corporate Complaints database correctly.

Resolved that the Officer's update report be noted.

11. Verbal Update on TDBC and the Housing of Refugees.

The Assistant Director for Housing and Community Development gave a verbal progress update concerning the Council current relating to the Housing of Refugees.

Below was a summary of the main points from the update provided by the Director of Housing and Communities:

- The government as a country had made a commitment to house 20,000 refugees from Syria.
- To date, Somerset had housed six families and two of those six had been housed in Taunton.
- The two families that had been housed in Taunton, had been supported and integrated into the community successfully.
- These families had not been housed within Council housing stock. They had been placed in private rented accommodation.
- The Government had been clear that they did not want Refugees families coming in the Country and affectively jumping the queue for Council Housing.
- In support of the refugee families, there had been a lot of Multi-Agency group working. This included Voluntary & Community Sector partnership, church groups as well as support from the local mosaic.
- The Council had been working closely with Somerset County Council (SCC) on this as there were a lot of restricting factors effecting the decision, which including if the Council could or could not house them as if they had any health needs and whether there were any educational places available.
- Refugees were offered an initial five year residency, which would reviewed and decision made depending on situation in Syria following the end of their residency, meaning if the situation had improved the families would encouraged to return home.
- The cost of Housing the Refugees did not sit with the Council's general fund or the HRA but this was funded by central government. Apart of this funding allowed the Council to kit out the properties prior to the arrival of the families.
- SCC were taking a report and recommendation to Cabinet stating that Somerset should take a further three families per year over the next three years. This could mean a further two or three families for Taunton Deane.
- This also had no impact on Homefinder Somerset or the Council's Housing Stock.

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

- In response to a question asking where did the housing come from and was it correct that they were only funded by the Government for 12 months, the Board were informed that housed refugees would receive benefits until they got into paid employment. These people were highly educated and held good jobs when they were in Syria and would most likely be looking for work. The five year residency afforded them the same rights as UK citizen.
- Officers stated there was definitely pressure on Social Housing but these people would be housed within private rented accommodation and would not be in competition with our other tenants or these people in need of housing.

Resolved that the Officer's report be noted.

(The meeting ended at 7.27pm)