

**Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 27 October 2014 at 6pm in JMR, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.**

**Present:** Mr R Balman, Mrs J Bunn, Ms M Davis, Mr D Etherington, Mr D Galpin, Mr K Hellier, Mr I Hussey and Councillor Bowrah.

**Officers:** Shari Hallett (Business Support Lead – Housing & Communities), Paul Hadley (Housing Manager – Lettings & Anti-Social Behaviour), Michaela Mullen (Welfare Reform Project Officer), Tony Knight (Estates Officer ASB), Phil Webb (Housing Manager – Property Services), Kene Ibezi (Assistant Director of Property & Development), James Barrah (Director of Housing & Communities), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), and Emma Hill (Corporate Support Officer).

**Others:** Councillors Mrs Smith and Mrs Warmington

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

**1. Apologies**

Mrs J Hegarty, Mr M Edwards, Mr R Middleton and Cllr Miss Smith

**2. Public Question Time**

No questions received for Public Question Time.

**3. Declarations of Interests**

Councillor Bowrah declared personal interest as members of his family were Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenant.

Mr R Balman, Mrs J Bunn, Ms M Davis, Mr D Etherington, Mr D Galpin, Mr K Hellier, Mr I Hussey and declared personal interests as Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants.

**4. Housing and Community Services – Fees and Charges 2015/16.**

Considering report previously circulated, concerning the proposed fees and charges for Housing and Community Services in 2015/16.

It was proposed to increase fees and charges by applying Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation as at the previous September 2014 (September 2014 RPI inflation was 2.3%). Board Member were presented with a revised version of the new Fees and Charges breakdown for 2015/16.

Council housing rents would be set early in the New Year.

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

- There was no inclusion of the new fees and charges concerning tenants with septic tanks. Would tenants be notified of any changes?

*The officer would look into any changes to fees and charges for septic tanks and come back to the Board with the information.*

- How many garages in the Council had on their books and how many were being rented out?

*The Council had roughly 1500 garages as stock. Currently, there were 60 garages advertised for rent but there were a number under repair before being putting up for rent.*

- Was the Council promoting and advertising the Council's garages which were for rent and could the Council target specific areas of the borough?

*The Council had garages available for rent all over the borough so the Council couldn't target specific areas but their availability was advertised on regular basis.*

- What did the Council do when they found out tenants were using rented garages as storage and not for their cars?

*All tenants were made aware that their tenancy excluded the use of their garage for storage.*

*When Estate Officers discover those who were using their garages for storage, the Council would start proceedings to take action against these tenants.*

- When would tenants be notified of any fees and charges changes?

*This information would be sent out to tenants as notification in February 2015.*

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

## **5. Welfare Reform 2014-15 Interim Year Report.**

Considering report previously circulated, concerning the first six months of the second year of the Welfare Reforms and its effects on Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Services tenants. The report makes the following recommendations for the future activity:

The main points of the report were as follows:

- Proactive support for tenants who had financial difficulties
- Working with partner agencies to support tenants
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's) were only a short term solution for tenants affected by the welfare reform changes. The application process being intensive and time consuming for staff.
- Highlighted the lack of one bedroom accommodation in our and other local housing providers stock.

But it also asks questions in relation to our potential responses to the forthcoming implementation of Universal Credit in Taunton Deane.

Since the WRPO took post over 22 months ago the officer had identified the tenants affected by the under occupancy penalty and subsequently the tenants affected by the Benefit Cap. Work was also being undertaken to identify our more vulnerable tenants who would be put at risk of enforcement action being taken against them through non-payment of rent.

Under Occupancy Affected Tenants on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014, there were 393 tenants affected by the Under Occupancy Penalty, this had reduced over the year to 372 of which 200 were in rent arrears. In a recent Inside Housing magazine report 'The Link Group' a housing provider in Scotland of a similar size to TDBC (6147 properties) has 377 tenants affected by the Under Occupancy Charge of which 196 were in rent arrears.

Early Intervention concerning personal visits were conducted by the Council Welfare Reform Project Officer. These supported and assisted our tenants to maintain their tenancy in light of the changes. The visits which on average continue to last up to one hour. Dependent on the need of the tenant, it can take more than one visit to supply the support required. This allowed the officer to:

- Explain about the changes and how they affect the individual household.
- Complete financial statements to support applications for DHP's.
- Sign post tenants to support agencies in relation to any debt issues.
- Explain and assist with HomeFinder Somerset applications
- Explain how the Transfer Removal Grant scheme works to assist those households wishing to downsize to accommodation more suitable for their housing needs.
- Explain about the Mutual Exchange process.
- Offer help and support to tenants.

Households affected could apply for Discretionary Housing Payments had been encouraged or supported in applying for a DHP to help mitigate the negative financial impact that being unable to move may have. Without the level of DHP available or the positive intervention of the WRPO and other officers more Council households would be suffering financial difficulty.

61 Council tenants were successfully awarded DHP's. The majority of successful applications were completed by or with the assistance of the WRPO. This equates to £24,433.27 of the DHP budget of £132,000.

Looking at rent arrears, on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014, there were 385 tenants affected, 187 of these households were in rent arrears amounting to a total of £38,704.25. Compared to 100 households with rent arrears, which amounted to £32,090.54 in April 2013.

Tenant overall rent arrears figures in April 2014 were £344,242.82 compared to £406,147.69 in April 2013.

Concerning evictions, as a result of the Under Occupancy Penalty 12 tenants had been subject to court action, no-one had been evicted.

The Council's Digital Inclusion Project was building up to the introduction of Universal Credit in 2015. It would be vital to the Council's business plan to maintain a high level of income and keep rent arrears to a minimum. It was vital that our tenants had access to IT because of the shift to digital by default for the majority of public and private sector services. The government had stated that 60% of Universal Credit claims would need to be completed and updated on line.

Housing services had procured self-service kiosks for use by our residents. The initial phase has seen the kiosks placed in the following locations across the borough:

- Deane House x 2
- Wellington Community Office
- Priorswood Resource Centre
- Milverton Community Hall

Each kiosk would enable tenants to access a variety of websites including TDBC, SCC, DWP, NHS Direct, Somerset Advice Network, CAB and Somerset Savings and Loan

The second phase would include kiosks being installed in a variety of community locations including Newton Road, Moorland Place, Middleway and Wellesley Street.

The first five kiosks were the initial phase of a broader borough wide installation. This burden should not be borne by the HRA alone and other areas of the council should now build on this initial stage of work by the housing services and commit resources and funds to provide greater access across the Deane for our communities.

Below are the Council Welfare Reform interim report recommendations:

- Close working relationships were vital between housing services and the Revenue and Benefits Department, DWP, CAB, and Jobcentre+ facilitated by timely and appropriate information sharing.
- Managing the impact of welfare reform was a whole organisation effort so communication and training for internal staff was a key to success.
- Improve the information and knowledge of our tenants and develop effective communications with them maximising contact opportunities. These were essential steps to secure payment of rent and identify personal or budgeting support needs.
- Ensure that there were sufficient resources in place to provide money management advice and support to residents which was key to protecting the housing service income stream.

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

- Had there been any feedback on the IT Access Kiosks?  
*The Council currently only had two months feedback from the Kiosks. The Kiosks situated at The Deane House and the Priorswood Centre were being heavily used but the feedback on the kiosks situated at Wellington Community Centre were not being widely used but the Council were looking into this.*
- Would users have access to assistance if they required it?  
*This particular feedback had been taken on board and officers were looking into a variety of sources for kiosks assistance as well as providing an appointment booking system.*
- Was DHP only going to those tenants or residents who expressed interest or who had applied to downsize?  
*They had to physically apply for DHP. This could be done through the Revenues and Benefits principal benefit's officer.  
The face to face contact via the Council's reception and officers was very important as people didn't always want to talk about their issues.*
- How difficult was it to find the information?

*Each case varies and it can take several visits from officers or agencies before the family or persons trusts the officer enough to discuss their underlying issues and for officers to gather the information they need for DHP.*

- Is the support provided the Welfare Reform Project Officer (WRPO) helping with the money management problems?

*The Council officers complete some very basic and minor debt management solutions then we refer them to the CAB to tackle their larger debt issues.*

*The Council aims to work with other departments and agencies to resolve debt issues.*

- Could the Council look into moving elderly residents into smaller two bed properties and then moving those young families stuck in two beds to the then freed up three and four beds properties?

*Unlike other agencies, the Council had always looked to make the best use of our housing stock. The normal procedure would be to downsize elderly tenants and residents into one bed properties, unless they had a specific need to be moved into two bed property.*

- Could the Council look into having WiFi in the community areas and meetings halls?

*Officers were looking into this and ways to restrict use and access to the networks as well as limiting what the network can be used for.*

*The officers had approached and produced a list of Digital Champions who had volunteered to support user of computer or kiosk facilities. But this had reduced from the original number, which was ten volunteers.*

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

## **6. Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy and Policy Update Report**

Considering report previously circulated, concerning an update on the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy and Policy for the Council's Housing Services, as a direct result of the introduction of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

The report outlined the strategic overview that tenants could expect from Housing Services in relation to Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB).

The ASB policy details the organisations arrangements for managing the risk of ASB to tenants within the councils housing stock.

The strategy and policy was a living documents and would be reviewed on a regular basis.

This Government had set out a new approach to crime, policing and community safety, based on a fundamental shift from bureaucratic to democratic accountability through directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners, increased transparency, and increasing professional discretion. This new approach included overhauling the whole system of dealing with ASB to ensure agencies are putting the needs of victims first.

Previously the police, councils and others had started to adopt a range of effective mechanisms that improve the response they provide to victims, which ensured that vulnerable victims were better supported.

In terms of the behaviour itself, what was seen as 'anti-social' would vary from victim to victim, and community to community. It no longer focuses on the behaviour, but on the impact it had on the victim.

The correct response would depend on a range of factors, but most importantly, on the needs of the victim and the impact the behaviour was having on their lives.

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

- After reading through this report, strategy and policy as a tenant and resident I felt safer and more secure even while reading it.

**Resolved** to recommend to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services Councillor Adkins the approval of the Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy and Policy.

## 7. Verbal Report on Police Innovation Fund.

The Director of Housing and Communities gave a verbal update concerning the Council's application to Police Innovation Fund.

Below was a summary of the Director's verbal report to Board Members:

- The new model of working for the Council and other agencies known as the Halcon One Team had produced great results on the Halcon estate with the families and the community.
- The Council and the One Team agencies were planning to roll this model out to other areas within the borough.
- Cllr Warmington and representatives had already presented the model of the Halcon One Team at variety of conferences and seminars and it had be taken up in a variety of other areas across the country.
- Council Officers and Cllr Warmington had put together an application for funding to roll out this model throughout the borough.
- The funding application to the Police Innovation Fund would cover further work in Halcon as well as extending to North Taunton and Wellington. This funding would allow work to continue or start for this year as well as next year.
- This funding would support data analysis across multiple agencies to build intelligence on those families most in need of support and assistance.
- The Council were in the process of locating an administrator and area managers for the areas.
- The interim staff for these areas were:
  - Halcon – Sgt James Turner
  - Wellington – Paul Chamberlin
  - North Taunton – Dean Chedzoy
- The funding was to bring all this together and co-ordinate the projects areas and pull all the agencies together.
- The demand on this service related to particular core demand within each targeted area.
- There were roughly 2000 properties within each area.
- The Council and other agencies were also looking to include lower demand rural areas as well as working in the higher demand urban areas.
- The project model plans would come back to a future meeting of the Board in due course.

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

- Were there any prospective savings and not just monetary terms?  
*The aim was to reduce the demand on agencies services by reducing and solving the debt issues for tenants and residents in areas of the borough. This also included solving other issues such ASB.  
Starting with areas such as benefits at an individual family level, when these issues were resolved it had a benefit at community level.  
This new model for agencies was all about working differently with existing data and resources rather than employing new staff, the idea was to pool and use the existing resources as well as funding some additional support.  
The officer helps families make sure they were claiming the correct benefits and what they were entitled to but also helping them to live on a low income.*
- Were Parish Councils be included and have an effect on this?  
*The Parish Councils were not currently involved with the single area model as urban central areas of Taunton including Halcon were not parished but as the model moved into new and other areas, we would aim to make contact and include Parish and Town Council such as Wellington Town Council. The solutions for each area would be different as it would depend on the individual needs and issues of the area.*
- Did the senior partners of the Halcon One Team meet regularly and would representatives of all three areas meet to co-ordinate and make contact?  
*The Council were working on a new governance structure for this new three area approach and this would be reported back to the Board Members in due course.*
- Would there be an overarching executive committee monitoring all the agencies in these areas?  
Yes, there would be an overarching Executive monitoring the areas, partners and agencies.

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

## **8. Report on the Dates for Tenant Services Management Board Meetings for 2015.**

Considering report previously circulated, concerning the dates of the Tenant Services Management Board meetings for 2015.

The Tenant Services Management Board (TSMB) met on a monthly basis. Members of the public were welcome to attend. In order to give board members and members of the public plenty of notice it was prudent to set the dates for 2015 in advance. The dates would also be publicised to tenants and leaseholders. The proposed meetings dates for 2015 were as follows:

- Monday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2015
- Monday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2015
- Monday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2015
- Monday 20<sup>th</sup> April 2015
- Monday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015
- Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015
- Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2015

- Monday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2015
- Monday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015
- Monday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2015
- Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015
- Monday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2015

Board Members would notice from the above that there was one meeting date booked for a Tuesday – on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June. The TSMB may choose to hold its meeting on a Monday as usual but at a venue different from the John Meikle Room in the Deane House. Also the meeting on 17 August 2015 would need to be held away from The Deane House as the John Meikle Room was not available.

Board members may also remember that traditionally the April meeting had been the TSMB Annual General Meeting which in previous years had been amalgamated with the Tenants and Leaseholders Open Day. There was currently a tenant working group planning the 2015 open day. This group was considering holding the event in June.

The TSMB may therefore need to consider whether to hold its Annual General Meeting separately from the open day.

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

- Board Members were happy with the planned meeting date for the Board for 2015.
- Training could be held before the Board meeting but could these be staggered and not before every month's meeting?
- The first training session could be before the November meeting starting at 4:30pm and running until 5:30pm to allow time for a break before going into the Board meeting at 6pm.

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

## 9. Exclusion of the Press and Public

**Resolved** that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item because of the likelihood that exempt information would otherwise be disclosed relating to Clause 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972 and the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

## 10. Confidential Report on the West Somerset and Taunton Deane Joint Management and Shared Services Project.

Considered confidential report previously circulated, concerning the Management and Shared Services Structure for Housing and Community Development.

The Director for Housing and Communities provided the Board Members with an updated summary the shared services structure for Housing and Community Development.

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

**11. Confidential Report on the Confidential Report on the West Somerset and Taunton Deane Joint Management and Shared Services Project.**

Considered confidential report previously circulated, concerning the Management and Shared Services Structure for Property and Development.

The Assistant Director for Property and Development provided the Board Members with an updated summary of the shared services structure for Property and Development.

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

**12. Confidential Report on the Confidential Report on the West Somerset and Taunton Deane Joint Management and Shared Services Project.**

Considered confidential report previously circulated, concerning the Management and Shared Services Structure for Business Support for Housing and Communities.

The Business Support Lead for Housing and Communities provided the Board Members with an updated summary of the shared services structure for Business Support for Housing and Communities.

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's report.

(The meeting ended at 8.10pm)