

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 16 December 2013 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr Dustyn Etherington (Chairman),
Mrs J Hegarty (Vice-Chairman),
Mrs J Bunn, Mrs E Drage, Mr M Edwards, Mr D Gaplin, Mr K Hellier, Mr R Middleton, Councillor Bowrah and Councillor Miss Smith.

Officers: Paul Hadley (Housing Manager – Lettings and Anti-Social Behaviour), Steven Clarke (Tenant Services Development Officer), Michaela Mullen (Welfare Reform Project Officer), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Lisa West (Housing Income Manager), Phil Webb (Housing Manager – Property Services), James Barrahan (Health and Housing Manager), Simon Lewis (Assistant Director – Housing & Community Development wef 1 January 2014), Lucy Clothier (Accountant), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager) and Emma Hill (Corporate Support Officer).

Others: Councillor Mrs F Smith
John Beaman; Vice-Chair of Tenants' Forum.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

1. Apologies

No apologies received.

2. Public Question Time

Resident of Kilkenny Court approached the Board and Officers for details of the Kilkenny Court works timetable. The residents would like to know more information regarding the planned ongoing works at Kilkenny Court including when some of it would start and how long it would take?

It had been five months since the residents had approached the Board for support regarding works that needed doing. Although, Officers informed the Kilkenny resident that the work on the guttering had been completed, in places the guttering was falling on the building.

Kilkenny Court residents felt that the work needing to be done at Kilkenny Court had been brushed under the carpet or forgotten about.

Would the officers be able to provide more information to the residents regarding the works and their schedule?

The Housing Manager for Property Services wanted to reassure the residents of Kilkenny Court that the planned works for the building had not be brushed under the carpet or forgotten but that the work needs to be done correctly, which included right down to the planning of each job. The majority of the planned works would be completed by the end of March 2014. The lift repair and replacement project would start in April 2014, but there were still no firm details relating to these works as yet. The officer did not have the precise details of the all planned works for Kilkenny Court. If the residents had any concerns or questions regarding all the planned works, they could contact the Scheme Manager or Supported Housing Manager with any of their concerns.

Board Members requested an update report from the Housing Manager regarding the planned works at Kilkenny Court to be presented to the Board at the next meeting in January 2014. The Board also asked the Supported Housing Manager and Property Manager from Maintenance to present at the January meeting of the Board.

3. Declarations of Interests

Councillor Bowrah and Councillor Miss Smith declared personal interests as several members of their families were Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants. Mr Etherington, Mrs Hegarty, Mrs Bunn, Mrs Drage, Mr Edwards, Mr Galpin, Mr Gould, Mr Hellier and Mr Middleton declared personal interests as Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants.

4. Tenants and Leaseholders Open Day

The Vice-Chair of Tenants' Forum gave a verbal update concerning the Tenants' Forum input towards Tenants and Leaseholder Open Day 2014.

The Forum had some suggestions to present to the Board regarding 2014 Open Day and their future involvement with the organisation of the Open Days; this had previously been discussed with the Tenant Empowerment Manager. Below was a summary of the Forums' suggestions brought to the Board and Officers:

- A 'working group' should be set up to include representatives from Tenants' Forum, Tenant Services Management Board, Supported Housing Service Development Group and Leaseholders Forum to shape the open day.
- The Tenants Forum had felt the last two Open Days had not been published to the fullest potential.
- The Forum was looking for three volunteers from the Board to sit as representative on the working group to help organise the Open Days.
- First meeting would be on 6 January 2014 from 10:00am until 3:00pm at The Deane House.
- The Forum were also setting up a 'proofing reading group' to work through all the Housing Department leaflets, handouts, letters and information documents as there had been some small mistakes spotted and the Forum felt this looked unprofessional.

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

- Three Tenant Services Management Board volunteers to sit on Forums' working group were Judith Hegarty, Jessie Bunn and Dustyn Etherington.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

5. Welfare Reform Update

The Tenant Services Development Officer presented a Welfare Reform update via Powerpoint presentation. The Welfare Reform Project Officer and Housing Manager from Lettings and Anti-Social Behaviour provided additional verbal information in support.

Below was a summary of the topics and information covered during the presentation to the Board Members:

- The Welfare Reform Act became law in April 2013. This only affected working age tenants, those below state pension credit age.
- Under the new act, the followings areas changed; Under Occupancy Charge, Benefit Cap, Non Dependant Deductions and Universal Credit.
- There were currently 15 tenant families affected by the Benefit Cap in the Taunton Deane area.
- Also central government changes to Council Tax; this has in turn affected Council Tax Benefit for low income and non-working households.
- Overall those tenants in rent arrears were down in comparison to last year.
- Overall that tenants affected by Welfare Reform was down.
- Of the 5795 properties, 406 tenants were affected by the changes 43 of which have moved with six pending.
- The main issues reported from the project sites nationally were increase in rent arrears and lack of smaller properties.
- Currently, within Taunton Deane there was a lack of one bedroom property.
- There were a variety of sources to provide support and advice for tenants.
- 35 Transfer Removal Grants in 2012/13 and 38 so far in 2013/14.
- The project objectives for the future consist of
 - a. Digital Inclusion Project
 - b. Improved partnership working to tackle deprivation
 - c. Funding
 - d. Training for staff and tenants.

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

- 90 plus people want to downsize their properties? When would it level out and would this decrease officer time?
The Council had probably cleared that stage at the moment but there was still work to be done.
- Was access to IT at a stage for advertisement yet?
The Council was not at the publishing stage yet with this project as it didn't have internet access. The vast majority of the facilities were meeting halls and community buildings. There was also the possibility of a mobile internet access facility through the Somerset County Council mobile library facility for those rural areas with no facilities.
- 'Help you get online' or HUGO; was advertised at the TPAS conference.
The key to digital inclusion project was getting members of the communities not just Council Tenants.
- Would there be CRB or Criminal Background checks for IT champions within those facilities?
Officers were looking into the DBS checks, especially for those who would be working with vulnerable persons using those facilities.

- Would Wifi internet access be available at these facilities to everyone using the space?
The Council didn't want to exclude anyone using these facilities so Wifi was being looked into.
- Concerning the blocking of unwanted or inappropriate websites, how would the council implement this at the facilities?
The Council were looking into set locations and set times with staff or champions to support.
- Board Members shared concerns that the SCC Library Bus didn't stop anywhere long enough for internet access.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

6. Taunton Deane and West Somerset Re-structure Update

The Health and Housing Manager gave a verbal update regarding the Taunton Deane and West Somerset Shared Services and Council Re-structure.

The project was now progressing with the re-structure of both councils.

The Health and Housing Manager had recently been appointed the new Director of Housing and Communities.

The Strategy and Performance Manager had recently been appointed the new Assistant Director of Housing and Communities.

There would be more information to come in the New Year.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's update.

7. Rents for Social Housing from 2015-16; Communities and Local Government Consultation.

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the key government proposals on rent policy for social housing from April 2015 onwards. Draft guidance for stock-owning local authorities on rents for social housing was also set out.

Tenant Services Management Board (TSMB) was invited to comment on key rent policy proposals and the guidance. Comments would be included in the council's final response to the consultation which ended on 24th December 2013.

In October 2013 the Department for Communities and Local Government announced proposals on rent policy for social housing from April 2015 onwards.

The main proposals were:

- Moving from annual increases in weekly rents of RPI + 0.5 percentage points, to increases of CPI + 1 percentage point. As a result, removing the flexibility available to landlords to increase weekly social rents each year by an additional £2, above the increase in formula rent, where the rent was below the rent flexibility level and rent cap; and

- Making clear that rent policy does not apply where a social tenant household had an income of at least £60,000 a year.

Draft guidance setting out the Government's policy on rents for local authorities was also proposed, and replaced the "Guide to Social Rent Reforms", published by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions in 2001, and "A Guide to Social Rent Reform in the Local Authority Sector", issued in February 2003.

During the meeting, the Board Members had the opportunity to discuss and agree their views on the proposals which would be incorporated into the final response to be made to government by the officers.

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

- The additional rent, could it be kept locally?
It could go to either building affordable homes or maintain current stock.

Resolved that the:-

1. The officer's report was noted.
2. Board Members provided the final responses to officers regarding the consultation issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government on Rents for Social Housing from 2015-16.

8. Review of the HRA Business Case Update

The Health and Housing Manager gave a verbal briefing on the planned review of the HRA Business Plan.

A report of the HRA Business Plan review would be brought to the Board in the New Year.

Below was a summary of the headlines regarding the HRA Business Plan review:

- There was a theoretical surplus of £242,000.
- There were big changes, financial issues concerning main income.
- There would be changes to the rent policy and current stock levels.
- The reduced reserve position stands at £91,000.
- Final Balance £167,064
- So far 39 Right to Buy's sales this year. This was higher in comparison with last year.
- There had been no impact on business with the change from RPI to CPI.
- Looking at rent convergence, the target was 91%, but only 14% converged currently. The convergence would be halted after 2014/15.
- All new tenancy would be subject to the new rent formula.
- Reviewing the Voids budget, altering the budget to what the Council should be spending not, what the Council was spending.
- There were 600 Voids this year, still ongoing. Previously, year's figures were 400.

- Consider increasing the budget. The individual cost per voids was £3000.
- Looking at a pre-planned maintenance cycle of every five years.
- Budget brought forward for some expenditure now, which would reduce expenditure in the future.
- Management costs had increased by £77,000 per year.

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

- Were the loans that the Council had taken out at a Fixed Rate of Interest?
The majority were fixed rate but some were viable rate. The information presented to the Board was the worse case scenario.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

(The meeting ended at 7.50pm)