

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 26 October 2015 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr R Balman (Chairman)
Ms M Davis (Vice-Chair)
Mr A Akhigbemen, Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty, Mr I Hussey, Mr R Middleton, Ms D Pierowicz, Councillor Bowrah, and Councillor Appleby.

Officers: Shari Hallett (Business Support Lead), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead – Housing Communities), Terry May (Assistant Director – Property & Development), Sophie Trowbridge (Housing Income Officer), James Barrah (Director of Housing & Communities), and Emma Hill (Democratic Services Officer).

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

1. Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Ms Dorota Pierowicz as the new member of the Tenant Services Management Board.

2. Apologies

Mr K Hellier
Councillor Beale and Warmington.

3. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 14 September 2015 and 13 October 2015 were taken as read and were signed.

4. Public Question Time

No questions received for Public Question Time.

5. Declarations of Interests

Councillor Bowrah declared a personal interest as member of his family were Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants and declared a personal interest as family member had applied to the Council's Right to Buy Social Mobility Fund 'Homeownership' Cash Incentive Scheme.

Councillor Appleby declared a personal interest as Leaseholder of Taunton Deane Borough Council property.

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

6. Report on Fees and Charges 2016/2017

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the proposed fees and charges for Housing and Community Services in 2016/17.

The housing service charged its service users for the services that they used. These charges were set locally each year.

It was proposed to increase fees and charges by applying Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation as at September 2015. The individual fees and charges had been set out in a separate document which accompanied this covering report.

In line with the approved HRA Business Plan, the Fees and Charges for 2016/17 had been increased across the board by 0.8% with the following exceptions:

- Provision of meals at Kilkenny Court would be increased in accordance with the meal service contract.
- Charges for properties not on mains sewer would be increased in line with Wessex Water increases, once known (Wessex Water rates for sewer standing charge per annum and poundage charges were used in the system calculation).

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

- The report mentions 'No exceptions' to the increase but the Grounds Maintenance charges had remained the same?
There were no exceptions to the increase by if you applied 0.8% to the Grounds Maintenance charges (60p), the increase did not make it up to 61p so with rounding up the charge stayed the same.
- Why was RPI being used and not CPI? Was this included in the Business Plan?
The decision to use RPI when calculating service charges came from the Business Plan. The officer said they would investigate why the Council uses RPI and not CPI but CPI was much lower and if the Council used CPI, then the calculations and predictions may not stack up concerning affordability for the Council in the long term.
Currently, it stated in the Business Plan that Service Charges would be calculated using RPI and rent would be calculated using CPI +1% but this had now been overridden but new government policy which stated there would need to be 1% decrease in rents. This would be looked at by the Council later in the year.
- It would be helpful to Members and Tenants an explanation as why the service charge increase and what they were paying for?
Officers could review the letter that would go out to Tenants and see if this could be included if not it could be included in more detail in the Frequently Asked Questions information sheet that went out with the letter.
- Was the 0.8% increase on service charges adequate to cover the Council additional costs?
Probably not and I am unable to give the Board details regarding each individual service charge but this was what the Council was tied into for the moment. This would be looked in detail during the Business Plan review project.
- Who decided that the Council should use the 0.8%?
The percentage was published by the government on monthly basis. This figure was verified by the Council's accountants.
- Looking at the increases to properties not on mains sewer now being brought in

line with Wessex Water Charges. Please could you explain what this means?
This meant any Council properties that were not on mains sewer and therefore pay service charges to the Council not Wessex Water would see an increase in charges to come in line with Wessex Water charges. The Council had a specific calculation done by our computer systems at the same rate as Wessex Water.

Resolved that the Officer's report be noted and made comment on the proposed fees and charges for 2016/17 as set out in this report.

7. Report on Any Day Direct Debits for Payment of Housing Rent

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the proposed alterations to the available dates the Council could offer Tenants to pay their rent via Direct Debit.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) relied upon prompt payment of rental income due. Currently a number of payment methods included direct debit were offered to tenants to allow them to pay rent. With the introduction of universal credit, where tenants would receive all benefit monies, which included rent directly, it was imperative that Taunton Deane Borough Council could offer payment methods that would allow payment of rent as soon as funds become available to the tenant.

It was proposed that from the 1 November, Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) Housing Department would be offering tenants the ability to pay rent by direct debit weekly (collected on a Friday), fortnightly (collected on Monday), or any day of the month between 1-28. Other methods of payment such as standing order, would remain but this allowed the Council to offer more flexible payments and begin to respond to the changes that would result from Universal Credit.

At present, only three methods of direct debit payment were offered to TDBC tenants, monthly payment on the 3rd of the month, monthly payment on the 20th of the month, fortnightly payments on the Monday of each fortnight. This did not allow for direct debit payments to be made on any day of the month. Benefit payments might be made on any day of the month with the introduction of Universal Credit.

Weekly direct debit collections, and direct debit collections on the 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9, 10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 of the month would be newly set up and available from 1st November 2015.

If the board supported officer's recommendations, the Council proposed to publish an article in the tenants' newsletter. The Council would also mail all tenants to offer them the opportunity to set up a new direct debit, as well as publishing details on the screens in reception.

In order to set up the new collections it had been necessary to temporarily cover the direct debit functions with additional capacity at grade D (a second temporary Income Assistant) so that the Income Officer could undertake the set up work. This had been funded from previous year underspends and funding ceases at the end of March 2016. It was hoped that the day to day running of the additional services could be accommodated through the existing Income Officer and Income Assistant posts but workloads would be continually assessed.

Each method of payment incurs banking costs for the council per transaction (excluding staff time). Current bank charging information indicated that Post Office

payments cost 58p per transaction whilst direct debits cost less than 10p per transaction (both figures exclude any staffing time). Direct debits therefore ensured that the council pay less transaction charges and therefore more rental income was retained by the council.

Every day Direct Debits were crucial to ensure tenants could pay their rent as soon as their Universal Credit, salary, or other source of income was available. It was hoped that this would limit an increase in arrears on the introduction of Universal Credit, but would also help tenants not receiving Universal Credit to manage their finances.

This proposal could be funded from existing resources and so would not have an impact on the overall position of the HRA.

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

- Looking at 3.3 of the report, what was special about 20th as it was missing from the list of dates?
The list of dates at 3.3 of the reports was those dates which would include in the available dates the Council could offer. The excluded dates from the list were the current available dates, which would remain available to Tenants.
- Had officer thought about including Bank Transfer through the use of app on their phones as a way for Tenants to pay their rent and this was quicker method and the cost for each payment would be negligible?
Tenants can pay by standing order and pay over the phone. If tenants set the Council up as Payee on their bill payment with their account, they can complete Bank Transfers like that. The Council had looked into having their app to allow Tenants to pay their rent etc via their phones but this would require some major IT improvements and at the moment it was a case of prioritising those improvements.
- I would welcome this improvement allowing the public to have more control over what day of the month their payments need to be made. Not everyone's wages were paid into their accounts on 30th or 31st of the month.
- Looking at 4.1 regarding the temporary Income Assistant, what was meant by temporary three, six or twelve months?
Temporary Income Assistant since February. There was a limited pot of money for this and the Housing Income department had been watching the budget carefully and after being reviewed this member of staff had since agreed to go part time going forward. This was dependant on demand for changing of direct debits.
- Could the officer, come back to the Board and provide members with an update report on if there was any increase in the number of payments by direct debit and how much money we had saved because of any increase?
Officer were happy to do this.
- I pay my rent to the Council by Direct Debit and every some many months I receive a paper statement from the Council, why can't this be emailed to Tenants as well or instead?
Officer was going to take this suggestion and look into it. This was a perfectly reasonable request but officers needed to check to see if the computer software which produces the statements could understand the difference between the two requests and still produce paper statements as well as emailing tenants. The officer would report back to the Board after doing some investigation into this.

Resolved that:-

1. The Board noted the Officer's Report.
2. To recommend the approval of the introduction of the any day direct debits.

8. Tenant and Leaseholders Satisfaction Survey 2015

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the Tenant and Leaseholders Satisfaction Survey 2015 reported its findings in September 2015.

Tenant Services Management Board members were provided with a summary of the results of the survey.

Tenant Services Management Board members would be receiving a further report from managers, over the coming months, containing more details of the plan of activities in response to the key findings raised within the survey.

Housing and Community Services had been working with an independent organisation since 2006 to measure and understand levels of tenant and leaseholder satisfaction with its housing and community services. The bi-annual survey helped to inform decision making and changes to service delivery by identified key issues and actions for improvement. The satisfaction measurements also help to communicate and engage with tenants and leaseholders on performance.

A total of 2851 surveys were sent out to tenants and leaseholders, achieving a 46% response rate (1300 surveys completed and returned).

The results of the survey were mixed with some parts of our services clearly on the right track and showing improvement, whilst other parts showing relatively little change since the 2013 survey and then clearly pointing towards the need for much deeper analysis and action planning.

Over the coming weeks and months managers within Housing and Communities would be meeting to assess, in more detail, the survey results and coming forward with a plan of activities in response to the key issues.

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

- Members thanked officer for a good report. Tenants were reporting to Board Members that things had improved since the introduction of the new computer system and the underlying issues had been resolved. The feedback being received was positive.
- Asked if Officers could provide Board Members with information regarding Tenants on new housing estates and what their satisfaction was regarding parking and any issues they were reporting?
There were planning conditions included in the planning applications process regarding the provision of car parking for properties but officers would get back to Members on this topic.
- The underlying feature of any business was its workforce. Looking at the survey results for Staff Helpfulness, this appeared to have dipped considerably? What would Managers and the Council going to do to improve this?

Concerning the new Open Contractor IT system, had moved the officers from paper to electronic. A temporary Manager had been appointed to monitor its performance and improve that performance.

Regarding the concerns over the results of Staff Helpfulness. This had to be taken in a wider context, the Council and officer had been through challenges and busy period regarding the introduction of One Team working and the merging of Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council. Looking much further afield, the ever increasing of work load and pressure of budgets. This combination of factors had effected staff morale. Also there were further modernisations to services and more pressure in the Councils future with shrinking budgets.

- The data and figures from this survey were bad and the Council needed to stop making excuses and look at making real improvements to the problem areas.
- This had been requested before but with Grounds Maintenance, could the cut grass be collected afterwards. It looks very untidy and gets everywhere.
- Where the Council still having problems with Open Contractor or had they been resolved?

There had been problem with OC, the product didn't sit together as should with existing systems.

Recently, there had been less failure and with an increased number of PDAs and staff trained to use them. The Council had recently run another training session on the use of PDAs.

The Council had initially received increased pressure to 'Go Live' with Open Contractor before we felt we should.

Capita would be returning to look at the ongoing issues concerning OC and see them for themselves.

The TD Housing department had contacted other Local Authority Housing departments and we had discovered they had similar issues with OC to TDBC.

- A Boards Member had completed some research into other Local Authorities using Open Contractor (OC) and there Tenant Satisfaction had increased and improved after only six months.
- Board raised concerns and issues regarding the parking situation on their street. Previously there had been no issue but since the arrival of the newest residents with four vehicles, parking for all residents had become difficult.

Resolved that the Officer's report be noted and made comment on the key results of the survey.

9. Report on Building Services Transformation

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the identified further improvements being made against the transformation priorities for the Building Service by aligning the work of the Property Services Team and the Building Services DLO.

It was identified that a phased approach to bringing these functions together could make a number of key improvements and meets with the previous Member approvals from the DLO transformation plan.

This report identified the two areas of Council operation that would combine to deliver a more resilient, transparent and effective service for tenants without any loss of emphasis on other internal areas of service provision.

Closer working for these functions would provide a stronger service delivery and greater tenant focus. Phase one of this process was cost neutral to the Council and placed no employees “at risk”.

The purpose of the report was to update relevant staff, stakeholders, Tenant Services Management Board and members of a proposed operational change in line management of the DLO Building Service. The change proposed was transfer of the line management of the DLO Building service from the Assistant Director-Operational Delivery, to the Assistant Director-Property and Development.

In addition to the agreed priorities a further commitment was made to continuous improvement, this report sets out the latest in this line of improvements. This transfer of line management of the workforce service removed the client and contractor split from the management structure although retains it for the necessary financial accounting processes.

The combination of client and contractor functions was first trailed within the street and public toilet cleaning processes and had proved to be much more efficient and transparent, whilst these services started at different positions the principles were not dissimilar. In addition, within the wider Social Landlord housing sector there is very much a direction of travel to provide and enhance in house repairs and maintenance services as part of the wider “housing team”.

The Building Service deliver the work commissioned and were paid through a trading account. There were a number of key areas of duplication that provide an opportunity for service improvements to all internal clients. For the purposes of this report an internal client was another service or department of this Council where money paid did not leave the Authority’s control.

With the current segregation of responsibilities, situations could arise where each team’s delivery could be directly affected by the others, this could create additional work in seeking instructions or approvals rather than the necessary focus on delivering for the tenants and internal clients. A holistic view to delivering works, resolving issues where they occur, and improving performance measures was needed.

For some time now the DLO had not been meeting with the key performance indicators set by Housing and TSMB, whilst recent improvements had been made and implementation issues with the Open Contractor system had delayed progression, a further review of these was needed to determine the priorities and if these were affordable.

For phase one of this change the current Building Service structure would be placed under the Assistant Director, Property and Development. No further changes in the Building Services or Housing Property teams were being identified at this stage. All other elements of the business, the interdependencies, and financial controls would remain unchanged at this time

Phase two or subsequent changes would be considered alongside the HRA Business Plan review, and or, as we head into the transformational stage of the JMASS project over the coming months.

There were no proposed changes to the Business Support Teams or the various cross service licences or contracts at this stage, any benefits that may come from further

changes to these would be considered and if appropriate implemented as part of a separate phase.

Informal consultation was underway with the Building Services Manager and wider structure, this would conclude on 12th October. This gave time for any suggestions to be considered before a transfer of responsibilities on 1st November '15.

Resolved that the Officer's report be noted and made comment on the proposed Building Services Transformation.

10. Report on Dates of Tenant Services Management Board Meetings 2016

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the dates of the Tenant Services Management Board meetings for 2016.

The proposed meeting dates for 2016 were as follows:

- Monday 25th January 2016
- Thursday 25th February 2016
- Monday 21st March 2016
- Monday 18th April 2016 – usually Annual General Meeting
- Tuesday 17th May 2016
- Monday 27th June 2016
- Monday 25th July 2016
- Monday 15th August 2016
- Tuesday 20th September 2016
- Monday 24th October 2016
- Monday 14th November 2016
- Wednesday 14th December 2016

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

- Two Board Members stated that they would be unable to attend meeting if they were on a Tuesday and or Wednesday.

Resolved to agree the proposed dates of meetings for 2016 as detailed in the officer's report.

11. AOB

Members of the Committee asked the following question of the officers present after the main agenda items had been discussed:

- Members enquired about officers progress in organising a date for Board Members to visit SCC regarding the Council relocation project to County Hall. *Tenant Empowerment Manager informed the Board that the Relocation Project Manager was awaiting more information and dates from Somerset County Council (SCC).*
- Members raised concerns of the progress and increasing delay of the Creechbarrow Road Development? Could the officer provide a brief update?

Director for Housing and Communities informed the Board that officers were doing work to find out the causes and reasons for the increasing delay on the site.

(The meeting ended at 19.20pm)