

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Thursday 29 April 2010 at 6pm, in Committee Room 1, the Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton

Present: Mr Baker, Councillor Brooks, Mrs Drage, Mr Edwards, Mr Etherington, Mr Galpin, Mrs Hegarty, Mr Hellier, Mr Pearson, Mrs Vanstone and Mr Watkin

Officers: James Barrah (Community Services Manager), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Donna Durham (Democratic Support Manager), Helen Mockridge (Administrative Officer) and Martin Price (Acting Tenant Empowerment Manager)

Others: Councillors Morrell and Stuart-Thorn

1. Introductions

The Acting Tenant Empowerment Manager, asked members of the Board and officers to introduce themselves.

2. Apology

The Conservative Group had not selected a representative for the Board, but this would be done in time for the next meeting.

3. Role of Board Member

The Acting Tenant Empowerment Manager gave a presentation on the role of Board which was:

- (1) To represent the tenants of Taunton Deane Borough Council to raise the standards of the Housing Service; and
- (2) To work with officers of the Council to agree acceptable and realistic standards of service in Taunton Deane.

Details of the Boards key responsibilities were submitted, which included consideration of the Housing Service budget and reviewing and revising policies and procedures on the operation of the Housing Service.

The Board would not discuss individual or estate specific complaints or issues, unless they illustrated a matter of principle which applied to Borough. The Board would not deal with neighbour or inter-personal disputes, nor be involved with operational matters or matters of detailed service delivery.

The responsibilities of a Board Member were as follows:

- To act in the best interests of all Taunton Deane Borough Council tenants;

- To contribute fully to meetings by preparing for meetings in advance, reading all the relevant papers and attending training sessions and other events;
- To participate in decision making and abide by the decisions made by the Board, even if it was not the individual's personal point of view;
- To respect the confidentiality of information;
- To work as part of team;
- To have a willingness to ask questions in order to fully understand the topic before making a decision;
- To have the ability to look at the bigger picture, the service as a whole, when making a decision; and
- To have the confidence to express views as part of a group discussion.

Monthly meetings would be held and dates and times would be agreed by the Board on a six monthly basis. An Annual General Meeting would be held in April each year, or within fifteen months of the previous Annual General Meeting.

Training would be offered to all Board Members to ensure they had the skills and knowledge they needed to make effective decisions.

Members would be appointed to the Board for two years, with an eligibility of reappointment after two years. If a Board Member's circumstances changed and they did not fit into the eligibility criteria, their membership would cease.

4. Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference were distributed to the Board. Board Members were asked to review them and they would be considered at the next meeting.

5. Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct was circulated to the Board for their consideration. The Code of Conduct would be formally adopted at the next meeting of the Board, incorporating any changes that had been agreed.

6. Appointment of Chairman

The Board felt it would be beneficial to appoint the Chairman and Vice-Chairman at the next meeting but it was necessary to appoint a Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

Resolved that Mr Etherington be elected as Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

8. Public Question Time

Mrs Edwards asked if all Members of the Board would be expected to attend training. The Chairman explained that training would be provided as necessary.

Councillor Morrell enquired about the relationship between the Board and the Tenants' Forum. The Chairman replied that the Board would consider more general issues, rather than specific ones that the Tenants' Forum discussed.

Councillor Morrell was concerned that the Terms of Reference appeared to discriminate against Members who were not part of the leading groups. The Chairman explained that it would be for the Board to consider this when the Terms of Reference were agreed at the next meeting.

Councillor Morrell felt that substitutes for the Councillor representatives should be allowed as many Councillors had a lot of knowledge and experience and could contribute to the Board.

9. Declaration of Interests

The Acting Tenant Empowerment Manager explained the purpose of the Declaration of Interests.

Councillor Brooks suggested that training on personal and prejudicial interests

should be arranged for the Board at a later date, but in the meantime asked if

details could be sent to Board Members. The Democratic Support Manager agreed to discuss the requirements with the Monitoring Officer and would report back to the Board.

10. Introduction to Service Standards

Service Standards would be brought to future meetings of the Board.

11. Lettable Standard

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the introduction of a Lettable Standard.

The Rent, Recovery and Void Team was created in 2005 and consisted of three full time officers, two full time assistants and one Debt and Benefit Advisor. The team were responsible for ensuring that vacant housing stock was brought back to a Lettable Standard for incoming tenants.

A Standard had been produced after carrying out research for examples of best practice. The Standard could currently be met within existing resources, but this would be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Tenants would be able to access the Standard on the website and copies, in leaflet form, would be sent to new tenants. Leaflets would also be available in the Reception in The Deane House and at housing surgeries.

Receiving feedback on the new Standard would help to improve services and in addition, spot checks would be carried out on two properties per week to ensure that standards were maintained.

Leaflets would be produced within 8 weeks, along with a satisfaction questionnaire and a spreadsheet. Spot checks on properties would be carried out within 12 weeks.

A report detailing the progress would be brought back to the Board after 9 months and a budget report would be completed after a years budget spend.

The Board felt that tenants should be responsible and if they failed to uphold their tenancy agreement, enforcement action should be taken.

The Board asked if the implementation of the Lettable Standard would delay the re-letting of properties, but the Housing Services Lead explained that it was not expected to impact on the turnaround time.

Members of the Board were concerned that some properties were 'boarded up' for long periods of time. The Housing Services Lead explained the many reasons for this, which included making the property secure if the tenant had vacated. If the Council wanted to end the tenancy, it had to be done through Court, which took time.

The Board asked about the Decent Homes Standard that had been introduced by the Government. The Council met the minimum Standard, but tenants could agree locally to provide services beyond the Decent Homes Standard. The Board were concerned that the Council's standard did not always meet with the tenants expectations. The Housing Services Lead explained that post tenancy visits would ensure that tenants' views were shared with the Board and decisions could be made about improving the standards if necessary.

The Board were concerned that there was no mention of responsibilities for boundaries in the Lettable Standard leaflet and that it should be included.

Resolved that the Lettable Standard be implemented.

12. Tenant Services Management Board Forward Plan

Submitted for information the proposed Forward Programme of the Tenant Services Management Board.

Resolved that the Forward Plan be noted and the following items be added:

Negative Subsidy;

Code of Conduct;

Terms of Reference;
Election of Chairman and Vice-Chairman;

The Core Council Review's effect on the Housing Team;

Housing Client Review;

DLO Review;

Landlord Standards and Local Standards;

Training;

Choice Based Lettings – review of the scheme;

Regeneration;

Council House Waiting List;

Fuel Poverty; and

Provision of accommodation for the disabled.

13. Dates, times and venues of future meetings

It was agreed that meetings would start at 6pm and would be held on the following dates:

10 June 2010 – Parmin Close Meeting Hall

1 July 2010 – The John Meikle Room, The Deane House

5 August 2010 – The John Meikle Room, The Deane House

(The meeting ended at 8.50pm)