

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 20th August 2012 at 6pm in the Meeting Room, Kilkenny Court, Taunton.

Present: Mr Dustyn Etherington (Chairman), Mrs Jessie Bunn, Mrs Enid Drage, Mr Dennis Galpin, Mrs Judith Hegarty, Mr Robert Middleton, Mrs Tammy Urquhart, , Councillor Robert Bowrah and Councillor Steve Brooks.

Officers: Paul Harding (Corporate and Client Services Lead), Shari Hallett (Health and Housing Business Support Lead), Steve Boland (Housing Services Lead), Phil Webb (Property Services Manager), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager), Steve Clarke (Tenants Service Development Officer) and Emma Hill (Corporate Support Officer).

Others: Lisa Wychwood and Graham Vickery from Halcon North Tenants & Residents Association

(The meeting commenced at 6.01pm)

1. Apologies

Mr M Edwards

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 23rd July 2012 were taken as read and signed.

3. Public Question Time

A representative of the Halcon North Tenants and Residents Association expressed a desire to draw attention to officers of Taunton Deane and Members of Board:-

1. That Tenants and Residents Association encouraged tenants and residents at a recent public meeting to complete and return the questionnaire starting today.
2. Also to mention reports of Asbestos in two houses in Moorland Road. It was asked if this was discovered during the property surveys.

Members of Board thanked the Tenants and Residents Association for their support and encouragement regarding the questionnaire. The Board advised that the second item would be covered by item 8 on the agenda and would be dealt with at appropriate point in the meeting.

4. Declaration of Interest

The following members declared a personal interest as a council house tenants:

- Mr Dustyn Etherington
- Mr Mark Edwards
- Mrs Enid Drage
- Mrs Judith Hegarty
- Mrs Jessie Bunn
- Mrs Tammy Urquhart
- Mr Robert Middleton
- Mr Dennis Galpin

- Councillor Bowrah & Councillor Brooks both declared having family members who are council tenants.
- Councillor Brooks also declared he is a County Councillor.

The board requested that the existing declarations of interests are automatically recorded in the minutes at each TSMB meeting.

5. Report on Welfare Reform and Housing Benefit Changes.

There was a presentation to raise awareness of the key changes coming from the government's welfare reform agenda and how these would impact on our tenants and the HRA.

The following scheduled changes over 2012 and 2013 include increasing Non-dependant deductions.

Also from April 2013 the below changes would include:-

- Council Tax Benefit Abolished
- Maximum Benefit Cap
- Social Sector size criteria changes
- Empty Property Charges
- Council Tax Changes
- From October 2013 and beyond, Universal Credit would be introduced.

For Non Dependent Deductions, there would be a 10 year freeze on NDD reversed over 3 yrs from April 2011 to 2013. The figures are as follows:-

- Lowest HB NDD rates rise from £7.40 to £13.40
- Highest HB NDD rates rise from £47 to £90

It is predicted a higher incidence of adult children being asked to leave the family home would lead to an increase in demand for independent housing. With the possibility of a higher risk and incidence of increasing rent arrears and a reluctance for private landlords to accept benefit claimants, financial difficulties for social providers = possible rise in homelessness

Council Tax Support

The government has announced that it is reducing spending on Council Tax Support by 10 per cent and localising it, saving £490 million a year from 2013-14. Currently Council Tax support is delivered through the national Council Tax Benefit (CTB) scheme.

From 1st April 2013 CTB is being abolished. Instead Council's like TDBC have been told they must design a scheme to help those on low incomes pay their Council Tax.

This is no longer demand led; councils will be given a fixed grant. Although, pensioners are protected under a national grant scheme, many people who have never had to pay council tax may have to start.

The final scheme must be adopted by the council before 31st January 2013 for introduction in April 2013.

Maximum Benefit Cap

The government have stated that no household would receive more in benefits than the average earnings of working households after tax. This doesn't apply to households temporary out of work and the disabled and pensioners.

This is based on national average earnings; for singles £350/week and for couples and lone parent's £500/week (these are current figures).

These are some of the areas affected by the cap; Large families entitled to a significant amount of CTC / families in high rental areas and families with 4/5 children are likely to see £12 / £40 per week shortfall applied to housing costs.

This benefit cap reduces max housing benefit entitlement by 14% for 1 bed under occupation and 25% for 2 or more.

Areas of the Council Tax reforms, which might affect tenants and/or HRA, are as follows:-

- Right to pay council tax by 12 instalments to be introduced and publicised.
- Allow councils to charge up to 100% council tax on properties undergoing major repair.
- Abolish the 12 months exemption relating to empty dwellings under major repair but allow council's to instead offer a discount of between 0% and 100% of the council tax.

Universal Credit

Some of the main features of the Universal Credit system are as follows:-

- National Scheme administered by DWP
- Replaces: IS, WTC, JSA, HB, Child Tax Credit, ESA etc.
- New work-related requirements / commitments / tough sanctions
- All claims for housing support will move to UC by end 2017.

The implications of universal credit are that it would be paid direct to the claimant. This could have the potential for major rent arrears. This direct payment could affect lending ability for registered providers.

Also this would affect parents who share the care of their children, meaning only one parent eligible to receive the child element of universal credit.

In addition, there will be a medical assessment for the Disability Living Allowance from 2013 for new and existing claimants.

Some additional implications with the introduction of Universal Credit would be as follows:-

- Child Benefit being withdrawn from higher rate taxpayers
- Tax Credit childcare costs reduced from 80 per cent to 70per cent
- Working Tax Credit hours changed for couples

In conclusion, this would mean a variety of implications for council tax payers. They would be the following:-

Council and private tenants paying out more to the council through size criteria, increased rent through non-dependent deductions, a benefit cap and also having to pay more for council tax

Rent harder to collect leading to higher arrears, in turn causing higher transaction costs. Also housing benefit being paid direct to the tenant instead of to their rent account, as well as welfare payments made monthly and not in line with the rent cycle.

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

- Member asked for confirmation relating to non-dependent deductions; as long as tenant tells the council about a boarder in their house, this would mean no deductions.
Officer said there was a benefit to having a boarder for tenants. The meaning of boarder is on single room not the whole house, which would be sub-letting.
- Members asked if you should declare having a boarder.
Officers said that tenants should declare it, as tenants would get 25% discount on Council Tax.
- Members asked if there was an incentive for down sizing.
Officers said there is currently a review of the policy and that Housing Services still has an incentive for down sizing. Currently, up to £2000, also housing services are looking at additional services including decorating, removals and help moving utilities.
- Members asked who would be charged for major works on council properties.
Officers said that the revenue would charge the HRA. Those empty properties could get 6 months allowance for free, and then at 6 – 12 months a 50% charge and over 12months 100% charge. This is only a rough idea.
- Members asked if disabled or carer allowance affected.
Officers said they were not aware of any change for carer's allowance but there would be a more robust assessment for disabled working age adults. Also looking to make the rules tougher for claimants.
- Members asked if council can ask for direct debts for Council Rent.
Officers said they were looking into multiple ways of paying rent. This includes looking at direct debts at any date in the month but the council need to look at the computer systems they use. Direct Debt not a tenancy condition.
- Members asked if direct debt could be a condition of the tenancy for those who continually don't pay.
- *Officers stated that very few tenants don't pay their rent on time in the Taunton Deane area. But officers want to include new measures to prevent this.*
- Members showed concerned over the number of people from outside of the county getting rented properties over local people after they have been priced out of areas such as London.
Officers felt that people moving into the Taunton area from larger places, are more likely to be from Bristol.
- *Officers asked what the board thought were a fair percentage rates for voids properties.*
- Members asked do the council charge void percentages by the day.
Officers said that the council don't charge by the day.
- Members asked if an incentive for leaving tenants who leave the properties in good state could be introduced.

Officers stated that the Members idea about incentive scheme for leaving tenants was interesting and they would look into it further.

- Members commented that a 3 month turn around period for void properties was a sufficient time period.
- Members asked what the scaled council charge would be for void properties.

Officer asked Members if the following charges would be agreeable; 0 – 3 months no charge, 3 – 6 months 50% charge and 6 – 12 months 100% charge. These charges would be across the board for both private and council.

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

6. Report on Performance Indicators – Quarter 1 2012 /13.

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the performance indicators play an important role in measuring how well housing services is performing, highlighting areas of strength and weakness and allowing services to be monitored and tailored to achieve their targets and objectives of providing the best possible service to tenants.

Performance indicators are reported on a quarterly basis and the report for Quarter 1 (1st April 2012 to 30th June 2012) has been produced.

Performance indicators measure the performance of housing services in specific areas and provide important information on the key services TDBC provides. They allow TDBC to continually improve the services it delivers to tenants. The indicators cover operational issues in greater detail which highlight trends and assist in decision making and service development.

Both councilors and officers use performance indicators in the form of regular reports to monitor performance. It is the intention of this report to propose that the use and publication of the reports is widened to those who use the services, i.e. tenants.

Performance indicators are reported on a quarterly basis, i.e. every three months. The Members of Board were asked to consider at what frequency they would like to receive the performance indicator reports. Officers proposed that the reports are presented to the Board Members on a quarterly basis as soon as the information has been collected.

Finance Comments

The cost of implementing the reporting of quarterly performance indicators can be met within the existing resources of staff and budget.

There are no legal, specific environmental, partnership or community safety implications on this specific topic. Although there are no specific links to performance indicators, the indicators themselves support the corporate priorities.

Equalities Impact

Regarding equality impacts, officers will be available to assist any tenants that may need specific help to fully access the quarterly reports and where required officers will visit vulnerable tenants to explain the performance indicators and then identify any specific needs.

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

- *Officers asked that Board Members discuss, which Key Performance Indicator they wish to report to the tenants and residents in the newsletter.*
- Members asked about when Taunton Deane would be replacing the tenants boilers as they are inefficient. Some tenants maybe waiting up to 7 years for a more efficient boiler.
Officers informed the Members that the reason this particular boiler being inefficient was due to it storing the water not heating it on demand. Taunton Deane are replacing the older style boilers as they go along.
- Members asked if there are plans to remove the electric storage heaters in tenants properties.
Officers said the removal of these would be done later.

Resolved that the:-

1. That the officer's report be noted.
2. The Board Members voiced the opinions on which ten Key Performance Indicators should be sent out to Tenants via the newsletter:-
 - Repairs and Maintenance
 - Rent Collection
 - Letting: Re-Letter (Voids)
 - Response times for repairs
 - Anti-Social Behaviour
 - Comparison to other Local Authority
3. The Board Members discussed and agreed timescales for further report as every quarter.

7. Verbal Update on Halcon North Project.

The Housing Services Manager gave a verbal update on Taunton Deane's Halcon North Project. The officer reported on the current activities of the project including the progress of the questionnaire.

The Officer informed the board that all residents had received the letter informing them about the questionnaire exercise happening over the next two weeks. Also eight estate officers were paired with tenant representatives and so far 65 questionnaires had been returned.

The Officer stated that no data or information was available at this time to be given to the Board Members. There would be a stakeholder consultation to include a wide range of agencies such as Police, Schools and Health Department. The board was informed that the Growth and Development Manager would be presenting the results and analysis of the main resident's questionnaire to the board on 17th September. The Officer would make enquires about board receiving an update on the stakeholder consultation.

The board were informed that the next step was to present this to the Community Scrutiny Committee on 9th October which would include the board's comments.

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

- A Board Member asked if the Board of Governors from the Schools would be invited to stakeholder consultation.
- Board Members asked if they could have an update on the result after this item had gone to Executive in October.

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

8. Report on High Income Social Tenants: Pay to Stay Consultation

The report previously circulated was considered, that describes key government proposals that social landlords should be able to require tenants in social rented housing on high incomes to pay higher rents.

Tenant Services Management Board (TSMB) is invited to comment on the key proposals which will be included in the final response to the consultation that ends on 12th September 2012.

Below are the Boards responses to the Key Proposals:-

1. Do you agree with principle that very high earners living in social housing should pay higher than social rent?
A. The Board Agreed with this and should be full market rent.
2. Do you consider that 60, 80 and 100 would be on appropriate threshold?
A. The Board agreed that a combined threshold split should £80,000 and £60,000.
3. Do you agree that certain groups should be exempt from the higher threshold?
A. The Board felt that if they have got the money they should not be exempt.
4. Do you agree that landlords should be able to charge 80% of market rates to high income households?
A. The board agreed with this 80% charge.
5. Would allowing Landlords to charge full market rents be appropriated in our area in your view?
A. The board agreed with this.
6. Do you consider the policy should be voluntary or compulsory for social landlords?
A. The Board felt flexibility on national as well as local basis.

The document can also be obtained by visiting the Communities and Local Government website: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/paytostayconsultation

Resolved that the:-

1. That the Officers report be noted.
2. The Board Members considered and agreed their final responses to the consultation questions.

9. Report on Housing (HRA) Capital Programme 2012/13.

Considered the spreadsheet previously circulated, concerning the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme for 2012/13. The officers gave a verbal explanation in relation to the previously circulated spreadsheet stating that programme of works planned for the coming months including the available budget. This is part of a 30 year business programme.

This programme of works includes a variety of types of contracts depending on the type of works being carried out.

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

- Board Member asked how the contracts would be delivered.
Officers stated that depending on the size of the contract, depends how the contract was actualised. Each contract specifies the deals included schedule and how much work to be completed.
- Board Member asked if there would be plan to remove and replace storage heaters.
Officers said there would be some investigation into those households that maybe able to have gas. Taunton Deane currently, looking into doing a deal with Transco for cheaper connections. For those homes that are unable to have gas, council will be looking into either updated versions of storage heaters or other alternatives such as Air Source Heat Pumps.
- Board Members brought to the attention to Housing Property Services Manager the reported Asbestos in Moorland Road and asked was found during the property surveys.
Officers reported that it was picked up during the property survey but these were one off's and not in all of the houses on Moorland Road.
- Board Member reported about problems with contractor 'Homesafe'. The contractor had no uniform and no ID as well as after they had finished, the Member had to clean up after them. The Member also had to push and negotiate with the contractor when getting a choice in glass and handles. The whole process felt rushed.
Officers said that those particular contractors are sub-contractors and these contracts are re-newed every three years. Officers noted the compliant and said that regardless it shouldn't be rushed.
- Board Member commented that they lived a conservation area and the replacement of doors and windows are affected but rules and restrictions, does this include Council Houses.
Officers said they would look into this matter.

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

10. Report on Homefinder Somerset Annual Report 2011/12.

Considered the report previously circulated, concerning Homefinder Somerset which is the Choice Based Lettings partnership between the five local housing authorities and all the major housing associations within Somerset.

Homefinder Somerset has been operating for a number of years and an annual report provides all partner landlords and other agencies with information on the progress and outcomes achieved during the financial year 2011/12.

The Homefinder Somerset Annual Report – 2011/2012 summarises the outcomes of Homefinder Somerset in the financial year 2011/12.

The report contains:

- Statistics about the housing register in Somerset and the lettings made by social landlords over the course of the year;
- Background information about Homefinder Somerset and how the scheme works
- Information about the Monitoring Board and its membership is; and
- A summary of the main changes introduced after a review during 2010/11

As well as monitoring the outcomes of choice based lettings, the Monitoring Board looks closely at the time it takes local authorities to process housing applications and the size of any backlogs in each Council. It does this because delays in processing can affect a household's housing choices.

Currently on Homefinder Somerset, there are 3758 people registered and the number of the available vacancies per year stands at 548 properties.

Those registered are given a banding of Gold, Silver or Bronze. Officers looking at the statistics from the last year stated more people had been housed from the silver band.

Resolved that the officer's report be noted.

11. AOB

No further business was raised at this meeting.

(The meeting ended at 8.35pm)

