

Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on Monday 16 June 2014 at 6pm in The John Meikle Room, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr Dustyn Etherington (Chairman), Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mr K Hellier, Mr R Middleton, Councillor Bowrah and Councillor Miss Smith.

Officers: Paul Hadley (Housing Manager - Lettings), Michaela Mullen (Welfare Reform Project Officer), Steve Clarke (Tenant Services Development Officer), Mark Antonelli (Principal Benefits Officer), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Phil Webb (Housing Manager – Property Services), Kene Ibezi (Assistant Director Property and Development), James Barra (Director Housing & Communities), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager) and Emma Hill (Corporate Support Officer).

Others: Councillors Mrs Smith and Jane Warmington.
Sgt Andy Murphy - Halcon One Team and Avon & Somerset Police

(The meeting commenced at 6.05pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies: Councillor J Adkins, Mr M Edwards and Mrs J Hegarty

2. Public Question Time

No questions received for Public Question Time.

3. Declarations of Interests

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

4. Halcon One Team Update

The Sgt Murphy gave a verbal update with PowerPoint presentation updating the Board Members on the progress made by the multi-agency group the 'Halcon One Team'.

The Multi-agency working group the 'Halcon One Team' met three mornings per week and had a set agenda based against the families they were supporting. Their process during these meetings was review, assess, action and ensure outcomes.

This involved the following with the Team Co-ordinator at the centre:

- Families
- Family Focus
- TDBC
- Police

- Mental Health
- Schools
- Health
- Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
- Somerset Drug & Alcohol Service (SDAS)
- Education

What had started to change was the living environment on the estate through the invention of the Halcon One Team.

There had been a variety of outcomes as a direct result of the work of multi-agency group known as 'The One Team' and invention and new procedures put into place to challenge and support the Community. There had been reductions in recorded crime and Anti-social behaviour when comparing the figures from 2012/13 to 2013/14 as well as comparing the estates/areas with Taunton, some of which had seen increases.

There had been continually year on year reductions with tenant evictions with 2011/12 having ten, then 2012/13 only five and 2013/14 only three. This created a saving of £164,000 for the Council.

The new approaches had challenged the Council. There had been a great need for a change in the way the Council and other agencies operated in order to help support and make real change in this community.

The next challenge for 'The One Team' and the Council was to challenge, encourage and get on board those agencies who were still a little reluctant to support Halcon One Team.

Tenant and Community programmes include such things as:

- Link Power
- Chill and Chat
- Newsletter
- Youth Projects
- Supporting Healthy Living
- Adult Education Programme

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

- Board Members gave thanks to Sgt Murphy for achievement and ongoing efforts in Halcon and the Halcon One Team.
- Why did officers think that some agencies and partnerships were refusing to be involved with the Halcon One Team and what could Taunton Deane do to get them involved?
- Would Sgt Murphy consider attending Full Council to provide an update to Taunton Deane Councillors?

Yes, it was a good time for Halcon One Team to update Taunton Deane Councillors with our progress as we have some good data now.

Agencies concerns and priorities were different to the concerns, priorities and desires of the community.

Our early invention/prevention had started to show outward signs of success as a result of our improvements.

Young people had found that not only were they being ignored by their parents but agencies as well. The One Team had set up a number of projects and schemes to help young people access the things they need and desire.

We needed to change perceptions not just the processes.

The One Team was also challenging agencies who receive grants on the back of the Halcon estate's community to actually deliver services in the area not just receive the grants.

- What would happen if Sgt Murphy were to leave the Halcon One Team? What would happen to the current level of support to the community and the success?

The One Team Co-ordinator was a huge part of the process and the project/pilot would go on without me.

I had made recommendations to the Halcon One Team group that if this pilot extended to other deprived areas that local police officers should take a role within that team.

Resolved that the Sgt Murphy's update would be noted.

5. Welfare Reform 2013-14 End of Year Report

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the details of work undertaken by the Welfare Reform Project Officer (WRPO) during 2013-14 and outlines the progress housing services had made in helping tenants to mitigate the impact of the welfare reform benefit changes. It also compares Housing Services actions and responses with other housing providers nationally.

In April 2013, when the Welfare Reform Act 2012 became law, welfare reforms had reduced the level of benefit that applicants could receive if they had a spare bedroom in their council home. The changes only apply to housing benefit claimants of working age, and were referred to as the 'Under Occupancy Penalty' or more commonly the 'Bedroom Tax'.

The reduction was a fixed percentage of the eligible rent. The reduction was 14% for one spare bedroom and 25% for two or more spare bedrooms.

The criteria for non-dependent deductions had also been adjusted for social housing tenants to bring this in line with the private rented sector. Disability Living Allowance had been replaced by the Personal Independence Payment which uses more robust medical assessment criteria in an attempt to get more people into work.

Council Tax Benefit was now called Council Tax Support and all working age residents now had to contribute to their council tax payments. This was a direct result of the government localising council tax schemes.

The latest information available from central government was that universal credit would be rolled out in Taunton Deane in January 2015. The nearest universal credit project currently running was in Bath and North East Somerset, which began in February 2014.

More than half of our tenants were currently claiming benefit in one form or another. Universal credit would only affect working age tenants; they would be paid a monthly

payment direct into a bank account and this amount would include their housing costs. People over working age would receive pension credit and their housing benefit would still be paid directly to the council. This would continue until 2020 when housing credit was expected to be introduced to replace housing benefit, this would then also be paid direct to the applicant.

Below was a summary of Welfare Reform Project progress within Taunton Deane:

- There had been a decrease in the number of arrears from 1923 in 2012/13 to 188 in 2013/14. Rent arrears stands at £37,037.00
- The Council had reached a steady state with rent arrears.
- In April 2013 there were 477 tenants affected by the under occupancy penalty, this had reduced over the year.
- It was identified that there were 15 affected tenants living in TDBC housing stock.
- Taunton Deane's early intervention, included the appointment of a Welfare Reform Project Officer (WRPO). This officer had written to all affected tenants and followed this up with personal visits.
- As a result of this targeted early intervention since December 2012, housing services had identified 102 affected households that want to downsize.
- The WRPO had assisted 57 tenants to down size and supported the majority of them through the Transfer Removal Grant procedure and the moving process.
- One of the issues highlighted during the early intervention had been the lack of one bedroom accommodation within TDBC housing stock to meet the increased demand as a result of the welfare changes.
- This means that 45 households who wish to downsize had not been able to do so from the initial 102. Despite the fact that most TDBC one bedroom vacancies were advertised giving priority to Under Occupancy Penalty affected households that wish to downsize.
- 122 TDBC tenants were successfully awarded DHP's this amounts to approximately 40% of the total DHP fund granted to the council by central government. The majority of successful applications were completed by or with the assistance of the WRPO.
- Introduction of the under occupancy charge in April 2013, there were 477 TDBC tenants who were affected.
- In May 2013, 288 of these households were in rent arrears amounting to a total of £41,680.08. Under Occupancy Penalty related rent arrears peaked in July 2013 at a total of £51,881.25.
- As a result of the hard work completed by staff and the continuing availability of DHP rent arrears had reduced from the July peak to £37,370.07 in March 2014.
- TDBC (6,000 stock) had moved 57 tenants to more suitable accommodation.
- In comparison TDBC initially had 7.9% of our 477 tenants in rent arrears and in March 2014 it stood at 3%.
- TDBC had achieved this decrease in rent arrears through the good work of officers and improved partnership working.
- TDBC was given a budget of £132,000 for DHP's of which £52,896.52 was allocated to TDBC tenants (40% of the overall budget). Each tenant getting on average £551.98 for the year.
- Officers were already working to ensure this happens by broadening the regular Benefit meetings that take place between the housing service and the Revenues & Benefits Department to include other partners.

- Officers were already reviewing the current arrears recovery protocol to ensure that it is fit for purpose once Universal Credit is implemented.

Following the completion of the Star Survey and with the introduction of Universal Credit in January 2015, it was becoming more important for our tenants to have access to the internet. So as part of the Council's digital inclusion project, the Council had identified a number of locations across the borough to install computer equipment to enable tenants to get online access. The initial phase would see five kiosks placed in the following location:

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

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

- Could Councillors have some training in relation to Universal Credit to make sure when we were asked questions we were giving the correct information out?
The Council could organise some training for Members in regards to Universal Credit before this kicks in.
- Some of the questions needed to split down to get more specific data from the results.
The officers did split down the options further and had the data. This gave them more specific target areas. The information was a summarised version for the Board.
- What were the percentage of Voids?
Housing Manager for Lettings and ASB would put together some statistic and come back to the Board and provide an update to the Members on Voids.
- Single Bed Properties – the Council needed to increase their stock of this type of property.
*There were a number of ongoing 'Phase One' developments being undertaken within the Taunton Deane area. All of these developments would include one bedroom properties to increase our stock.
The Council was using our RtB receipts to purchase back ex-council properties to put back into our stock, some of which were one bedroom properties.*
- Board Member suggested that Members keep their eyes open for pieces of land for Taunton Deane to look into for possible development opportunities.
Development Team were investigating a long list of Council owned and non-council owned land for development. If Members see anything, please contact Development Team.
- Was there a pressure on RSL's (Housing Associations) to build one bedroom properties?
Officers couldn't be sure if private sector housing association were being pressured to build more one bedroom properties. This isn't something they would be aware of.
- Those receiving Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were they receiving it because they expressed an interest to move or because they were affected by the Welfare Reform?
- Would there always be DHP?

The Council had always had DHP and it had increased year on year. But there was no information from central government as to how long DHP would be available.

- Were the Council getting funds to implement Universal Credit?
*There was no extra funding for Council in the implementing of Universal Credit.
Department for Work and Pensions would be administering Universal Credit.*
- There were concerns that the Council may not have the staffing levels to implement Universal Credit and with that staff would not be tackling other important tasks.
This relates to Shared Services Structure. The Director and Assistant Director were evolving the structure to deal with the work loads.
- Thinking of the current and future demographic make-up of the Taunton Deane area, had any work been done on future proofing our housing stock based on the number of one bed properties and matching it with our need?
*Somerset West Private Sector Housing Partnership had statistical report and data relating to demographics. SWPSHP annual report should be out in July for the Board to read through.
There were roughly 3,500 people on the waiting list and there was still a demand for one bedroom properties.*
- Cost of digital inclusion project?
*Over the next two years for five kiosks the cost was £13,000. The Council was going to rent the kiosks as the technology changes so rapidly they would be out of date if we were to purchase them, also renting meant the Council could increase or decrease the number of kiosks depending on our situation.
This digital inclusion and access to online services and payments would have long term benefits for our tenants and their communities.*
- How confidential were the kiosks screens for people using them?
They kiosks would have privacy screens.
- If a tenant was to ask about the Council purchasing a tablet or laptop as part of digital inclusion would the Council provide one?
This would depend on demand and funds. This would be something for the Council to consider in the future of the project.
- Would there be someone to assist people with working the kiosks facility?
*There would be overseers or IT champions at each kiosk to provide support, advice and training for users.
The Council were currently looking into using work experience as well as volunteers and there would also be phone support access at each kiosk.*

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

6. Council Tax Support Scheme Proposals for 2015/16.

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the Council Tax Support Scheme for Local Authorities for 2015/16.

The Government gave Councils funding for local schemes that was 10% less than was previously paid for CTB. While the Council kept our CTS the same for 2014/15, Government funding reduced and in 2015/16 they expect a cut of a further 14.3%. Therefore, the Council had to consider our options from 1 April 2015 as, the funding to assist people of working age through CTS would have reduced by £1.71m since 1 April 2013.

The Council were not allowed complete freedom on our Council Tax Support scheme.

The Government say the Council must fully protect pensioners under the same rules that applied to Council Tax Benefit.

As pensioners make up 48% of those entitled to Council Tax Support in Taunton Deane, this meant any cut in the help they could give, falls on the remaining 52% of working age people. The Council must also consider the impact on “Vulnerable” groups when they decide our Council Tax Support scheme. The Government had not defined which groups were “vulnerable”, but people with disabilities and those with responsibility for young children fall into this category.

These changes would affect around 5,300 customers of working age only.

In March 2014, the Council wrote to all our Council Tax charge payers with a copy of the consultation document asking for views and responses by 23 May 2014.

The Council had received a satisfactory response from individuals but welcome further feedback from our partners.

The scheme for 2013/14 and 2014/15

With the funds available, the Council decided to limit the maximum help and give to working age people through Council Tax Support to 80%. This meant all working age people had to pay at least 20% towards their Council Tax bill.

- Increase the amount of earned income.
- Increase non-dependant deductions.
- Treat child maintenance as income when working out Council Tax Support.
- Abolish Second Adult Rebate.
- Create a Discretionary Council Tax Assistance Fund, to protect the most vulnerable.

The Council expected the funding it had for Council Tax Support to be cut by 15.4% in 2015/16. This would mean a shortfall of over £900k. There were three options open to the Council, they were:

- Option 1 – No change to Council Tax Support limiting the maximum help for working age people to 80%
- Option 2 – Pass on the full grant cut
- Option 3 – Pass on some of the cut

Below were listed were the proposals for changing Council Tax Support from 1 April 2015:

- Proposal 1 – Reduce the maximum support
- Proposal 2 – Protecting people with disabilities
- Proposal 3 – Extra help for people with disabilities
- Proposal 4 – Protecting lone parents with children under 5 years old
- Proposal 5 – Extra help for lone parents with children under 5 years old
- Proposal 6 – Non dependants
- Proposal 7 – No longer treat Child Maintenance as income

- Proposal 8 – Protecting people with caring responsibilities

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

- The Board Members would need more time to read and comment on this report than just tonight.
- If people were in arrears, would the Council consider an incentive or discount to the arrears if people to encourage to pay them off?
The Council had cleared some of tenant arrears if they had made an effort to pay them off.
The Council had tried a similar scheme, at Christmas the Council had run a prize draw for all those who paid their debts off before Christmas and stayed debt free over the period.
The bottom line was if the tenant was in debt, the Council would take action to cover that debt and that meant in some cases taking people to court.
The Council had looked at incentives but this was something we had consider implementing.
Our total rent arrears was a small percentage to our overall income.
- The Council collect 19 million in rent and our arrears was only £346,000. This was only 1.7% of our income. This would indicate that the Council was successful at collecting rent and arrears already.
- The Council needed to look at supporting Tenants to help them manage their debts and pay them off sensibly.
- If you gave an incentive to those who pay off their debt, it's a real kick in the teeth to those who pay on time.
- There was a clear difference between those who won't pay and those can't pay.
There was already a very robust process and procedure for dealing with rent arrears. Cases officers were required to complete the process and build a case before any action would be taken.
Work was done in advance to prevent rent arrears i.e. early invention.
- Would the Council consider an increase in the number of Council Tax Bands and consider an increase in the difference of costs between bands.
This could be included in your suggestions reply to the consultation.
Proposals could also depend on demographic make-up of the area as well.
- Increase in the cost of Band A houses would give relief to those at the other end of the banding.

Resolved that the:-

1. Officer's report was to be noted.
2. Member of Board would read the report provided by the Principal Benefits Officers and provide feedback at the meeting of the Board on 30 June 2014.

7. Request for Information – Rent Arrears by Area.

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the requested information update at Tenant Services Management Board meeting of 20 May 2014 regarding Rent Arrears for Taunton Deane detailed by area

This update report contained Taunton Deane's Rent Arrears policy, which detailed the approach followed by Managers and Officers in collecting rent and arrears.

Board Members were presented with the current rent arrears performance as from 6 June 2014. The presented data showed the rent arrears across Taunton Deane's nine patches/areas (see below) as well as the target rent arrears figure for each area.

- Round 1 – Arrears £20,467.85 – Target £26,000.00
- Round 2 – Arrears £46,115.85 – Target £45,000.00
- Round 3 – Arrears £20,778.06 – Target £21,000.00
- Round 4 – Arrears £22,968.75 – Target £40,000.00
- Round 5 – Arrears £53,699.94 – Target £49,000.00
- Round 6 – Arrears £41,527.66 – Target £35,000.00
- Round 7 – Arrears £28,999.54 – Target £48,000.00
- Round 8 – Arrears £49,609.75 – Target £44,000.00
- All Rounds – Arrears £327,978.70 – Target £360,000.00

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

- Board Members requested an update on Rent Arrears by Area be brought to the meeting in September. Of the report, pages one and ten was the only information needed.
- Looking at page ten of the update, the repayment agreements with those in arrears it appears that Round Eight was not hitting their target by a considerable way.
The repayment procedures and the repayment amounts could differ depending on the area the officer was responsible for. Some the areas make higher repayments so the targets were higher. There were many other factors involved in the repayments which can affect those in arrears paying back the money they owe.
Some officers were better at encouraging people to stick to their repayment plans and pay on regular basis.
- Did the Council rotate the officer's patches/areas on regular basis?
The Council did rotate officers to different patches/areas on a regular basis but it was a fine balance between getting to know your tenants and not getting too close or involved with them. Officers had to build and work their rapport with tenants.
- Board Members agreed with Cllr Bowrah that the information on pages one and ten was adequate to update them about Rent Arrears.
This was something the Council needed to think about as part of the restructure. Management may need to narrow the officers work area. Officers were used to hand holding to retrieve unpaid debts.
The review of the estates officers would need to be looked at over the next couple months.
- With Universal Credit was there a process to apply to the courts to receive people's payments directly?
Yes, there was a process to receive payments directly from their employers as well as getting a lump sum from the employer and then the employer would claim it back over a number of weeks or months from their employee.
- How did the Council calculate the targets and could they change?
A lot of it was grounded in how the Council had performed over the past.

Managers had good knowledge of the data as well as knowledge of the areas and performance comparison between us and them.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

8. Taunton Deane Borough Council's Accommodation Project.

Considering the report previously circulated, concerning the proposed new structure for Housing and Community Development had been developed to meet the requirements for the Joint Management and Shared Services (JMASS) project. The JMASS project focussed on identifying savings for the General Fund (GF) and gained approval through Full Council for use of General Fund reserves to cover redundancy costs.

Approval was now sought for use of HRA reserves to cover one-off redundancy costs to put in place the HRA element of the new structures. The biggest proportion of these costs relates to the Housing and Community Development structure, however some cost also related to other redundancies across the Council where a proportion of an officer's time was attributed to HRA work. This paper additionally seeks approval for an earmarked provision for further redundancy costs that may be required for Tier 6 redundancies across the Council once these proposals had been developed. This was an estimated figure provided by Finance based on modelling which was applied for earlier JMASS work.

The opportunity was taken to review the HRA structure as part of the JMASS project as it was sensible to consider both GF and HRA at the same time to provide the optimum structure to best meet the needs of tenants. Whereas with General Fund services, a significant focus was on making financial savings, the approach taken for the HRA services was very different with emphasis placed on having the right structure to invest in better outcomes for tenants, rather than to make savings for the HRA.

Although the redundancy costs borne by the HRA were fairly significant, the structure would deliver significant benefits to tenants through providing joined-up partnership working on the ground that would deliver far more effectively than the current piecemeal (silo) public sector model currently in place. The Community Area Working model proposed in the new structure uses the Halcon One Team model as an exemplar and the anticipated outcomes clearly justify this one-off cost over the HRA Business Plan lifetime.

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.

Resolved that the:-

1. Officer's report be noted.
2. Board Members recommended to Full Council the approval of a Supplementary Estimate from HRA General Reserves to fund the estimated one-off costs to the HRA of the JMASS restructure to provide the necessary structure to deliver improved outcomes for tenants over the lifetime of the HRA Business Plan.
3. Board Members also recommended for approval by Full Council the following:
 - a. £199k toward the Tier 4 and 5 Housing and Community Development structure
 - b. £28k to allow the JMASS project to proceed in other parts of the Council for Tier 4 and 5, and
 - c. £120k as a supplementary estimate of potential future Tier 6 redundancy costs across Housing and Community Development and other Council areas, with any underspends being returned to reserves.

(The meeting ended at 8.50pm)