

Minutes of the Meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 29 January 2018 at 6.00pm in Meeting Room C in Flook House at The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

Present: Mr A Akhigbemen, Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty, Mr I Hussey and Councillor R Bowrah, BEM.

Officers: Steve Boland (Housing Services Lead), Sophie Trowbridge (Housing and Communities Business Support Lead), Steve Clarke (Tenants Service Development Officer) and Clare Rendell (Democratic Services Officer).

Others: Councillor Mrs J Warmington, Councillor P Berry and Julia Williamson.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor C Booth and Mr K Hellier.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 11 December 2017 were signed and taken as read.

3. Public Question Time

Julia Williamson questioned whether the case studies mentioned in Agenda Item 7 – Homes and Communities Agency Consumer Regulation Review 2016-2017, were local or from other organisations. This would be answered when the report was discussed.

4. Declarations of Interests

Mr A Akhigbemen, Mrs J Bunn, Mr D Galpin, Mrs J Hegarty and Mr I Hussey declared personal interests as Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants. Councillor Bowrah declared a personal interest as a Member of Wellington Town Council.

5. Appointment of Chairman

Resolved that Mr A Akhigbemen be appointed Chairman of the Tenant Services Management Board and that Mr D Galpin remain as Vice-Chairman.

The Tenants Service Development Officer raised four items for the Board to approve:-

- The next election for Board Members was not scheduled until September 2018, which he thought was too late due to the low amount of Board Members

currently appointed. He requested that this was brought forward and asked for Board Members to advise other tenants of the process.

- The Officer requested that a letter of thanks was sent to the previous Chairman for his service on the Board.
- The Officer asked the Board Members whether they would support his request that the agendas were emailed out to attendees rather than sent in the post.
- The Code of Conduct and the Terms of Reference required an update and he asked the Board Members if they were happy for that to go ahead.

Resolved that the Board Members supported all of the Tenants Service Development Officer's proposals.

6. Information Update on the Cash Transactions

The Business Support Lead for Housing and Communities presented her report which provided an update on the Cash Transactions.

Currently there were cash machines located in the Wellington Community Office and the Deane House. The contracts for the machines were due to end in March 2018. Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) had signed a contract with Allpay, which was due to start in April 2018 and would take cash and telephone payments for:-

- Rent;
- Council Tax; and
- Sundry Debts.

Alternative payment methods, which included direct debits, standing orders and website payments, would remain unchanged.

From the 1 April 2018 tenants would no longer be able to pay rent by cash at the Deane House or the Wellington Community Office, they would need to take their cash to an Allpay outlet and use the bar code that would be sent to them. Tenants would also need to use the new reference number located beneath the barcode when they made a telephone payment.

Tenants would be informed of the changes. The following methods would be used:-

- Tenants would receive a mailshot to encourage them to switch to other payment methods;
- Reception staff would start to inform customers;
- Posters and information would be placed in the reception areas and on the website;
- Information about the changes would be published in the rent increase letters which would be sent out in February 2018;
- There would be an article in the Tenant's Talk newsletter in March 2018; and
- Tenants would receive a second mailshot which would include their new barcode and information about the changes in March 2018.

Staff would also be informed of the changes. Estate and Lettings Officers and Assistants would be made aware of the changes and be issued briefing notes for their Team Meetings. The Income Team would be available to attend the meetings for support. Information would be published on the website and sharepoint.

During the discussion of this item, Board Members made the following comments

and asked questions (Responses shown in italics):-

- Concern was raised that the barcode letters would not be very durable and it was suggested that tenants should receive a plastic card with their barcode printed on it.
There would be an additional cost to produce cards for all tenants, the cost quoted was £1.75 per card. Plastic cards had been looked into, but due to the considerable cost to produce them, were not taken as an option. However, they would still be a possibility for those tenants that had problems with their letters durability.
- Concern was raised that if a tenant lost their letter could they still call up and pay.
Yes. They would call Allpay, who would redirect them through to TDBC staff, who would look up their reference number and take a payment and also re-issue their barcode.
- Concern was raised that the letter with the barcode was being sent out too late.
The reason for the letter being sent out in March 2018, was that officers were concerned that they would bombard their tenants with letters and if the letter was sent out too early, tenants could misplace it.
- Board Members queried whether the locations of the paypoints would be included in the tenant's letter.
Yes they would.
- Board Members queried who would be able to assist tenants with the change when they came into reception to make a cash payment.
Customer Services would be able to assist all customers when they came in to make a payment.
- Board Members queried how many tenants paid by cash and would tenants that paid by cash be signposted to switch to direct debit.
Unfortunately the figures on how many cash payers were not known. However, approximately £900,000 was taken in cash at the Deane House and £600,000 in the Wellington Community Office. 37% of tenants paid by direct debit. Officers had tried to signpost tenants to alternative payments in the past and this was something to look at again.
- Board Members suggested that officers could place a notice on the cash machines and send out a direct debit mandate to encourage tenants to switch.
This was something to think about. Officers had suggested a possible prize draw to help encourage tenants to change to direct debit.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

7. Homes and Communities Agency Consumer Regulation Review 2016-2017

The Housing Services Lead presented his report which provided the Board Members with an update on the Homes and Communities Agency (H&CA) Consumer Regulation Review 2016-2017.

The H&CA's principal focus was to promote a viable, efficient and well-governed social housing sector that was able to deliver homes that met a range of needs. Parliament had given the regulator an economic objective and a consumer regulation objective. The consumer regulation objective was intended to:-

- Support the provision of well-managed and appropriate quality housing;
- Ensure tenants were given an appropriate degree of choice and protection;
- Ensure tenants had the opportunity to be involved in the management of their homes and to hold their landlords to account; and
- Encourage registered providers to contribute to the well-being of the areas in which their homes were situated.

For the objective to be achieved, the regulator set out some consumer standards. There were four consumer standards:-

- Home;
- Neighbourhood and Community;
- Tenancy; and
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment.

Boards and Councillors who governed registered providers were responsible for ensuring that their organisations met the consumer standards.

TDBC officers were governed by the consumer regulations and wanted to keep the Board Members informed. It was important that TDBC as a landlord, complied with health and safety regulations.

The compliance requirements included fire safety, gas safety, legionella and asbestos. The Board was kept informed of the compliance issues within their quarterly performance reports.

During the discussion of this item, Board Members made the following comments and asked questions (Responses shown in italics):-

- Concern was raised on whether TDBC had the correct policies and procedures in place that would provide transparency, which was a key point for the H&CA.
The Housing Services Lead suggested that the relevant Managers should attend the next meeting to address any concerns and give the assurance needed by the Board.
- Concern was raised on whether staff were adequately trained.
Managers were aware that staff training needed to be kept up to date.
- Board Members queried whether the correct standard performance indicators were used to show what TDBC had achieved each quarter.
Yes and the statistics were available and presented to the Board each quarter.
- Board Members queried whether the H&CA could enforce compliance issues that had been identified.
Yes the H&CA had the powers to check governance issues and address concerns if any weaknesses were identified.

Resolved that the Board noted the Officer's report.

(The meeting ended at 7.07pm)