

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 25 September 2017 at 6.00pm in the Committee Room, The Brittons Ash Community Centre (BACH), Bridgwater Road, Bathpool, Taunton.**

**Present:** Mr R Balman (Chairman)  
Mr A Akhigbemen, Mrs J Belcher, Mrs J Bunn, Mrs J Hegarty, Mr K Hellier, Mr I Hussey, Councillor C Booth and Councillor R Bowrah, BEM.

**Officers:** Simon Lewis (Assistant Director – Housing and Community Development), Stephen Boland (Housing Services Lead), Jo Humble (Housing Development and Enabling Manager), Richard Burge (Open Spaces Manager), Neil Anderson (Housing and Community Strategy Officer), Martin Price (Tenant Empowerment Manager) and Tracey Meadows (Democratic Services Officer).

**Others:** Councillor T Beale.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00pm)

**1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Mr D Galpin.

**2. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Tenant Services Management Board held on 14 August 2017 were signed and taken as read.

**3. Public Question Time**

No questions were received for Public Question Time.

**4. Declarations of Interests**

Mr R Balman, Mr A Akhigbemen, Mrs J Belcher, Mrs J Bunn, Mrs J Hegarty, Mr K Hellier and Mr I Hussey declared personal interests as Taunton Deane Borough Council Housing Tenants.

**5. Methods of Payment, Rent and the Transformed Council**

The Housing Services Lead gave a verbal update on the method of payments used by the Taunton Deane Borough Council tenants.

Members were reminded of the update given to the Board on April 2016 by the Director of Housing and Communities which referred to the Council's Transformation Project. During the presentation the Director discussed the process to make transactions more efficient with more transactions going digital.

In March 2017, the Chief Executive also gave the Members an update on the Transformation Project and the design principles that would set the framework for the transformation vision. The New Operating Model was based on the following:-

- The focus was on customer demand being reduced;
- There would be a reduction in cost for the services that could be delivered online;

- Service 'silos' would be removed and services would be designed around the needs of customers; and
- The Council would be able to support customers to access information and services at a time and place that was convenient to them.

The Housing Services Lead gave the Members a breakdown of the value and volume of payments received at both the cash machines located in Taunton and Wellington:-

- Rent payments received at Taunton totalled £1,270,027 which included 9966 transactions.
- Rent payments received at Wellington totalled £411,751 which included 3857 transactions.

Officers understood that the Taunton and Wellington offices would not always be a convenient place to make payments in the future. With this in mind, they had investigated where tenants could make payments in their own neighbourhoods which could be more convenient to them. They found that there were 31 Pay Point outlets and 58 Post Offices within the Taunton Deane and West Somerset area that could be used by tenants. (Website and telephone payments were not included in the results.)

The cash machines were due to be removed in Spring 2018 and officers were keen to be proactive and wanted to help users to transition over to other payment methods and recognised the potential need for a temporary person to help explain what changes were being made and engage with users on a transformed way of accessing services.

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

- Members gave positive feedback on the ability to be able to pay their rent in their local convenient store or Post Office.
- Members requested that tenants were kept informed of the other payment methods available to use. A suggestion was made to add a message on the cash machine that when a cash method was selected, it advised the customer of other methods of payment.  
*There would be lots of information distributed to customers, which included mailshots and other communications. Officers were aware they needed to be careful during the process because they still needed to be able to collect rent payments. The cash collectors charged £18,000 per year to collect from the cash machines and the machines were also very costly to maintain. There would be an officer temporarily sited at the machines to give advice on alternative payment methods.*
- Members queried whether the other payment methods were detailed in their annual rent statement?  
*Yes this was detailed in the statement. Direct debit had already been promoted in the tenant's newsletter and there were 1600 tenants that paid via direct debit.*
- Concern was raised about tenants that had used credit cards to pay for their rent.  
*Work had been carried out with tenants that used credit cards to try and help them manage their finances and possibly use credit unions rather than other lenders that would charge high interest rates.*
- Members queried what costs would be involved in the use of other pay points

in the area.

*To be able to access the other pay points, there would be a procurement process to secure a supplier for the services and there would be a cost but this was unknown at present.*

- Concern was raised for customers that still had their wages paid in cash and were unable to visit the Council offices during opening hours. Officers would need to ensure that there were pay points in local shops for those types of customers.

*There would be lots of locations to choose from, which would be more convenient for customers.*

**Resolved** that the Board noted the Officer's update.

## 6. Diversifying the Choice of Tenure

The Housing Enabling and Development Manager presented her report which provided the reasons for and advised Members on the implementation of two new Council tenures, Affordable Rent and Shared Ownership, to be piloted at the Weavers Arms housing development site in Rockwell Green, Wellington.

The broad range of homes being built at the Council's Weavers Arms, Rockwell Green development had offered the opportunity for the Council to explore the introduction of two new tenures, affordable rent and shared ownership in addition to social rent that was currently offered through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) housing stock.

Following the review of the HRA Business Plan and the adoption of the Development Strategy in 2016, work had been carried out which explored the options to diversify the choice of tenures that were offered within the 'Newbuild Council Housing Program' and to bring forward the 'Housing Vision'.

The offer would diversify the housing mix at Weavers Arms from 26 social rented properties to:-

- 21 affordable rented properties;
- 2 shared ownership properties; and
- 3 social rented properties for the returning decants.

These new tenures would align the housing scheme with the Council's current aspirations and provide further housing options for the local residents and tenants in the area whilst they significantly improved the financial payback for the scheme in response to the increased build costs and reduced financial income following the implementation of rent reduction.

The diversifying of tenure allowed the Council to have an increased level of revenue which could then be used to finance new development projects through a net positive effect on the HRA Business Plan.

**Affordable Rent.** This was subject to rent controls that required a rent of no more than 80 per cent of the local market rent, which included services charges, where applicable.

When the rent was set it used property valuations from professional valuers and was reviewed on an annual basis. They took account of factors such as the local housing market and the individual property features. Consideration was also given to the

relevant Local Housing Allowance, which was the benefit that residents would receive if they were renting from a private landlord.

**Shared Ownership.** This was a form of Low Cost Home Ownership and offered a route into owner occupation for those who would not normally be able to afford to purchase on the open market. The resident would buy a share of the property and would pay rent on the share they did not own. The property was shared in terms of ownership between the resident and the Council.

The intention was to use the Homes and Communities Agency Standard Shared Ownership Lease. This was the legal document that set out details of rent and how it was increased, arrangements for buying further shares in the property, service charges and buildings insurance, purchaser's responsibilities and the Council's responsibilities.

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

- Concern was raised that there would be mixed tenure schemes within the same housing estates which could cause problems.  
*Officers would avoid this where possible.*
- Members queried the amount given for the service charge.  
*This was the amount used for social and affordable rent.*
- Members queried was there any information or feedback from existing schemes on how easy it was to sell a shared ownership property.  
*If a resident wanted to sell their property, the Council would get the property valued. The Council would then have first refusal to purchase it back, however, there would be no obligation to the Council to do so.*
- Concern was raised on what would happen when the rent was increased on the shared ownership properties and how over several years, the rent payments would be more than the mortgage payments.  
*Information was given on the opportunities for first time buyers through the shared ownership scheme and the ability to get onto the housing ladder. Figures were also given on deposits required, rent and mortgage figures for both shared ownership compared to open market properties.*
- Members queried the progress made on the Weavers Arms project.  
*Good progress had been made but there had been delays caused by the section 278 agreement with Somerset County Council for the highways section of the development.*
- Members queried whose responsibility would it be if the boiler broke down.  
*It would be the home owner's responsibility for any repairs to the property.*
- Concern was raised about what happened if the home owner got into arrears on their mortgage, would the Council lose out to the mortgage companies.  
*Officers were working with solicitors who used fundamental clauses and could provide add ons to ensure that the Council did not lose out to the mortgage companies.*
- Members queried when the shared ownership scheme would be available.  
*Once the decision notice had been advertised in the Weekly Bulletin, the properties would be marketed and when they had been sold, the Officer would return to give Members an update on the scheme.*

**Resolved** that the decision for the tenure of the scheme had been discussed and agreed with the Director for Housing and Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services. The decision would be advertised through the

Weekly Bulletin once consultation comments were received from the Tenant Services Management Board and Tenants' Forum.

## **7. Grounds Maintenance Service**

The Open Spaces Manager and Strategy and Partnership Officer presented their report which provided details on the work that had taken place on the review of the current content and arrangement for the delivery of grounds maintenance service to land. The report was based on the consultation that had taken place with representatives of the three main Tenant Groups and also provided details of proposed improvements to the specification and potential savings to the service that could be made.

Since the last report to the Tenant Services Management Board (TSMB) in March 2017, further work had taken place which involved tenants in the review and a tour of the District and the establishment of a tenant's panel made up of representatives from the TSMB, Supported Housing Development Group (SHDG) and the Tenants' Forum (TF).

The purpose of the tour was to inspect areas to see examples of good and bad practice and to agree between the various parties what tenants felt was an acceptable standard.

The tenant's panel were provided with details on the cost of each part of the specification and of how the inclusion or exclusion of different items from the grounds maintenance specification effected the overall weekly charge to tenants.

There had also been a demonstration held in August 2017 of four different methods of cutting grass which included a mulching mower, which tenant representatives had attended. Further investigation into the type of mower to be used and the potential cost savings to the service would continue. The mulching mowers would be trialled from April 2018 alongside conventional mowers.

The chosen specification would result in an annual cost to the Council of £538,996, which would equal a weekly service charge of £1.84. The Council and tenant groups recognised that this represented a substantial increase on the current weekly charge of £0.81, but collectively officers and tenants were confident that this would result in improvements to the service and ensure the long term sustainability of the service, which until now had been underfunded. It should be noted that although the current weekly charge had only been £0.81, the actual weekly cost had been £1.12 per week with the annual budget overspend being taken from other HRA budgets.

The new specification and service standard would have the following benefits:-

- Provide a clear, costed, improved service standard for tenants.
- A clear service standard for both Open Space staff and Housing staff to work with.
- Make it simpler for all involved to understand the expected service standard that would be delivered.
- Enable improved monitoring of contract.

Work was currently underway to establish a costed programme of work to tackle those areas in the Housing Estate which required additional attention to bring them back to the agreed standard.

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

- Concern was raised that the current standard of fifteen grass cuts per year was not carried out in most areas and how would the officers maintain this standard going forward.  
*Officers had based their service charges on the figures for what they wanted to achieve and also they would use the new visual guide to ensure the standard was achieved.*
- Members were happy with their own areas and the grounds maintenance that had been carried out.
- Concern was raised that if weed spraying was carried out in some areas this would kill the whole lawn because some areas were predominantly weeds and not grass.  
*The areas would be sprayed to kill the weeds and then re-seeded to create a lawn. The affected areas would take approximately a year to develop but in the long term the area would benefit and meet the specification.*
- Officers had created a new visual guide to use. Officers would be able to take photos to show what the areas looked like at certain times to prove they had met the standard set in the guide.
- Officers were keen to get the specification and fees correct to make sure they were included in the Fees and Charges report due to go to Council before Christmas. This allowed officers time to implement the changes before April 2018 and communicate the changes to tenants.
- Concern was raised on the confusion over whose jurisdiction it was to maintain the footpaths.  
*Somerset County Council was responsible for the maintenance of the footpaths, however, because this was an important issue for tenants, the officers had included this in the new specification.*
- Concern was raised on the removal of the rose beds and what would they be replaced with.  
*The rose beds cost £14,000 to maintain and it was decided that they were too costly to retain. Discussions would take place with the local residents and they could be replaced with shrubs which were easier to maintain.*

**Resolved** that the Board approved:-

- a) The implementation of the new specification from the 1 April 2018;
- b) The increase in the level of the service charge to £1.84 per week from April 2018;
- c) That Council officers carry out further work on establishing a robust system of monitoring, the outcome of which was reported back to TSMB in March 2018;
- d) The current tenant panel was invited to become the tenant monitoring panel for the new specification which would be responsible for reporting on a regular basis to the TSMB on the performance of the contract;
- e) The appropriate officers of the Council would provide a progress report to the TSMB on how any new charges and new specification would be publicised to tenants in January 2018; and
- f) Officers from both Housing and Communities and Open Spaces would report on a quarterly basis on progress of the new specification that would commence in April 2018.

(The meeting ended at 7.40pm)