

SWT Tenants Strategic Group - 21 September 2020 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Alex Akhigbemen (Chair)

Jessie Bunn, Paul Cram, Kevin Hellier, Ivor Hussey, Livi Mongare and Francesca Smith

Officers: James Barrah, Stephen Boland, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Simon Lewis, Shari Hallett (Housing Performance Manager), Tracey Meadows, Louisa Hill (specialist), Amy Maggs (Housing) and Sharon Yarde (Housing)

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm)

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Janet Lloyd

8. Notes from previous meeting

Notes from the previous meeting on the 20 July 2020 were approved as an accurate record.

9. Directorate report - James Barrah, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Simon Lewis, Shari Hallett

Housing Directorate Report to Housing Strategic Board

The Director of Housing and Communities updated the group on Unitary Authority Stronger Somerset Business Case which proposed two new unitary Councils and a combined authority. The plan would streamline our local government structure with two new Unitaries for East and West, while creating a Combined Authority so more decisions can be made locally, not in Westminster.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Somerset County Council pushed ahead with their bid for a single Unitary for Somerset, while the District Councils were focused on supporting communities and businesses.

A white paper from Government which is called the Devolution White Paper would be the trigger for a consultation exercise and decision making paper that deals with changes to Local Democracy and how areas were represented. This would be taken as our bid being formally submitted and ratified and a consultation exercise undertaken by government of either bid.

The times scales for this were quite tight with the consultation process launched in the New Year, and a shadows authority would be set up in April 2021, this

would run for 12 months with the new Council starting in April/May 2022. We need to bear in mind that these time scales could be subject to change.

Housing and Communities Teams update

The Assistant Director of Housing and Community Development updated the group that during the pandemic good feedback had been received from tenants regarding welfare checks and support by phone from staff members.

At the beginning of lockdown the letting of properties were suspended whilst the voids team concentrated on emergency accommodation for the homeless applicants due to the closure of commercial Bed and Breakfasts. The 17 properties in Pyrland Fields have now been successfully let.

Now that restriction rules had been relaxed, it is under consideration to open meeting halls from October by appointment only, more information on this will follow shortly.

Reported that we have been successful in securing Hinkley C funding to create the role of a Home Moves Plus Officer Full time for 2 years. This post will work within the Lettings team to work with tenants to encourage and facilitate moves for those currently under-occupying properties and allowing SWT to make best use of its stock for the benefit of all those on the Housing Register.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP) has successfully recruited a Hospital Resettlement Coordinator. Working out of Musgrove Park Hospital and surrounding NHS Community Hospitals, the post will be responsible for assisting patients with a smooth discharge from hospital into their home setting. The post will be jointly managed by Health and Somerset Independence Plus. It is an 18 month post, funding will be from the Better Care Fund. SIP have also just launched a new service to tackle hoarding. Designed to assist clients who have extensive problems with clutter in their home. The Independent Living Officers' will centre their level of intervention based upon the clutter scale. Besides working with the client to clear the property, they will also put in place an agreed plan with the client to prevent hoarding in the future.

The Rent Recovery team continues to work to support our tenants through the effects of having a reduced income or in some cases redundancy due to COVID-19. They continue to embrace the "LEAN" approach to rent recovery and the rent arrears are showing the benefit of this approach. Face to Face appointments were now being taken in the DH.

In the last quarter we have been reviewing the existing ASB policy, with the team now working on processes to work alongside this. Although we had an increase in serious ASB cases during Covid this is now starting to slow down a little and the team have seen the number of new cases declining.

Comments made by group members included;

- Will the funding from Hinckley C just cover Somerset West and Taunton area or is it Council wide? *We also work closely with Magna in the West Somerset area, so this is about enabling moves between properties in the County and possibly wider afield. We are also looking at Home Swap which is a national scheme to see whether this is a better model for us moving forward.*

Development and Regeneration

The Assistant director- Development and Regeneration updated the group on housing strategy. Work was now progressing across partners across the County to adopt a health, care and housing memorandum of understanding as are discussions regarding the establishment of a Homelessness Reduction Board. Eco Flex scheme was now being adopted in SWT which provided access to fuel poor private households for energy saving measures such as insulation, fuel switch, etc.

A programme aimed at increasing affordable homes in the most difficult parts of the district through a community led approach is commencing with the recruitment of a part time specialist officer to work primarily in the Exmoor National Park with communities including Parish Councils. The Programme aimed to unlock rare development opportunities through community awareness and activity. Work was taking place with planning to understand the implications of the planning white paper on affordable housing supply in Somerset.

There are 309 HRA homes at various stages of delivery. Laxton Road (8 units) will be ready to let around Christmas followed by NTWP phase A homes (47) and zero carbon homes with five sites prioritised for early delivery (43 units). Plans are progressing well for other schemes at Seaward Way (53 units in the west of Somerset) and Oxford Inn (11 units in Taunton). Seaward Way has the benefit of an allocation of funds from the Hinckley Point C Housing Strategy. The Council is working with our contractor Engie to improve the low carbon qualities of the NTWP new homes and the refurbished homes. SWT is looking to improve the fabric of the homes over the tendered requirements and current building regulation requirements.

Comments made by group members included;

- What monitoring will be done on these new energy efficient houses to make sure that they are energy efficient without evidence? *I agree, you cannot prove this without evidence, but we are going through quite an extensive procurement process to determine that what we are told is true in reality. We also have a programme of data collection which will take place to ensure that what they state will be delivered has been delivered. At the procurement process we will be asking some very direct questions around the materials they use and their construction techniques. We also have expert energy advisors to help us probe the claims that are made by the company contractors. We then need to measure and monitor to prove*

what they say is correct. We will not appoint the company until we are confident that they can deliver what we need. Will all the new tenants have all their energy recorded and monitored? We will be using smart technology where we can, we also need to have discussions with the tenants on how they use the property as some low carbon homes it uses it differently to make significant energy savings. Part of our plan comprises of data collection and analysis. We will be using a pilot scheme called the LETI model to collect this data, it is a London Energy Transformation Initiative Model which is a very comprehensive model to benchmark proposals so it not only measures the occupational use and the suggested occupational use of power, it also measures the embodied carbon for materials which are used to transport to site and it also tries to measure the life needs of the material.

- *We are looking at 373 units as outline, what are the time scales for getting these units on the ground? Those units will be delivered over 7 years although they are front loaded. Laxton Road will be delivered this year, Seaward Way (if we get planning permission) will be delivered in 3 years with the low carbon being on site early next year. As they are modular constructions we hope to have the first ones available at the end of the summer next year and the others within the next 14 months of that date. North Taunton will be delivered in 4 phases of build which will be spread out over a number of years. The Oxford Inn will comprise of 11 units which will follow on from the zero carbon pilots. This project is well ahead of the 30 year programme announced by the Council.*

The Assistant Director-Housing Property updated the group on the briefing paper that was sent to the group.

Key points updated to the group;

- The Housing maintenance team;
- Void repairs;
- Property Safety Compliance;
- Additional resources with two new posts, Compliance Manager and a Landlord and Compliance Specialist;
- New Asbestos Management and Fire Safety policies and procedures;
- Fire Risk Assessments;
- Continuing with Gas Safety check;
- Undertaking a programme of Water Risk Assessments;
- Carrying out electrical checks to communal areas;

Comments made by group members included;

- *How will the work be completed by Contractors before the next financial year? Everyone is in the same boat, so everyone is pushing for a limited contractor resource, which is what puts the pressure on. The time frame is tight in this financial year as everyone wants to complete works which will have to roll on if not completed.*

Update from the Housing Performance Manager – Shari Hallett

Reported that a new small team had been set up as part of the housing restructure to help in a number of areas. The team consisted of Shari Hallett, Sharon Yarde and Amy Maggs, two new team members will be recruited next month. The role of the team was to enhancing the experience of our customers and to manage some of the other activities that we need to do as a business, preparing the score card, managing the risk register and managing policies and procedures that have been approved and gone through the relevant channels and have being signed off.

Work will be undertaken to engage with our customers to improve our housing service which has started with the News Letter which has gone out to residents this week.

Comments made by group members included;

- Concerns that although the hub was open there were no face to face appointments available? *Visits to the hub are for business that cannot be done through other channels, this is done through the prioritisation of appointments;*
- Will arrears and maintenance figures still be worked on and given to the board? *Yes if you are looking on updates on arrears etc we will be bringing these to future meetings. There is no forward plan of business at present but I am happy for this to be driven by group members too as this is part of the two way process;*
- Concerns that calls to general enquiries were not being answered; *call times to Customer Services are very good so I am perplexed by this as there are plenty of resources there. If you can give us any indication of the date and time of the calls we will look into this and report back;*
- The proposed unitary arrangement, can you confirm that you are already formally working with Sedgemoor District Council? *We already have informal working partnerships in place with Sedgemoor District Council such as Building Control and the private sector housing partnership;*

Resolved that – the group recommended the report

10. Tenant Strategic Board Election - Sharon Yarde

Update on the Tenant Strategic Group Elections – Sharon Yarde

As you are aware the last election for the Strategic Group was before the transformation of the joint councils of Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset District Council.

Our Terms of Reference state that elections should be held every 3 years, currently we are in breach of those terms. The next election for Group members will be held at the beginning of January 2021.

Information to tenants will be distributed at the beginning of November giving tenants 1 month to submit their application. The application form will include a personal statement from the applicant and a photo which will be returned to the Housing Performance team in a self-addressed envelope. The team then will check eligibility and contacts the tenants if they are not eligible.

The election statement will be sent to all tenants in January, it will include the details of everyone that is standing for election and a ballot paper with a self-addressed envelope.

Currently we are looking to use a third party for the ballot as our Electoral Services cannot perform this due to current canvassing for the Police elections in May. Once the results are in the team will advise the candidates of the results.

Dates and the time lines may change due to the unitary bid.

Comments from the group members included;

- I was under the impression from a previous meeting that if not enough people applied to join the group there was no need for an election, please can you clarify? *The terms of reference states that there should be an election every 3 years, as there has not been an election for a few years we are actually in breach of this. We hope that by sending out an information pack to all of our tenants informing them of the work that the group perform, we will get enough people to apply;*
- We can help with the elections by speaking to our neighbours and encouraging them to vote/stand for election to represent the tenants;

Resolved that – the group recommended the report

11. **Housing Policies and Tenants Strategic Board Policy comment - Shari Hallett**

Housing Policies and Tenants Strategic Group Policy – Shari Hallett

Reported that two policies were being brought forward to the meeting for approval, these were, Allocations and the letting policies. Stated that four further policies would be brought to the group shortly and four to follow.

Agreement was sought with the group on the best way to share and seek approval and comments of these policies without having to wait for the next meeting. This could be in the way of a special meetings or agree to sign off a couple of policies once a fortnight via email.

Resolved that – the Policies were recommended and Officers to send out hard copies/emails of the Policies once a fortnight for group members to send their comments back to Officers;

12. **Allocation and Lettings Policy - Louisa Hill**

Allocations and Lettings Policy – Housing Specialist Louisa Hill

Update on the Lettings Policy attached with the agenda, key points stated were;

- SWT Housing Service will participate in the Homefinder Somerset Partnership, the partnership operates a countywide choice based lettings scheme which is administered by the Local Authorities of Somerset;
- Asylum seekers - SWT will assist in the rehousing of Asylum Seekers and persons from abroad, in accordance with statutory and regulatory requirements. We will accept referrals from the Local Authority for Asylum seekers with “limited leave to remain” as well as the NASS scheme (National Asylum Support Scheme);
- Aids and adaptations - We will seek to allocate our housing stock in a way that ensures best use of the property, this will include where there are significant Aids and Adaptations, property size and also the local situation (ensuring adherence to Section 106 agreements. We will achieve this by effective use of adverts, using appropriate labelling and working with partners such as Housing Occupational Therapists;
- Policy - We will review our allocations and lettings performance and consult on this policy by seeking comments from customers, stakeholders and partners, as well as reviewing against good practice and regulatory and legal requirements;
- Portfolio sign off - To ensure fairness and transparency ,where we identify an applicant has a significant relationship either with SWT or an employee of SWT, we will ensure that any proposed let is reviewed with the Housing Portfolio Holder before the allocation is confirmed;
- Downsizing - We will seek assist our existing customers who need to downsize to a smaller property by supporting them through the application and lettings process and by provision of a Transfer Removal Grant, once the home move is completed;
- ASB - We will not usually make an allocation to an applicant where they or a member of their household has a recent history, (defined as the last 2 years) of ASB. We will take into account, the extent of the ASB, its impact on the local community at the time, the length of time since the activity occurred, but also what the applicant or household member has done to change their behaviour and be better able to sustain a tenancy with SWT;

Comments from group members included;

- When you are allocating properties in the rural areas are you taking into consideration applications from people that already live there or want to come back to the village due to family living there? *This is about making the best use of our stock so there maybe people that are in the village that maybe in a lower band and in a lower need for housing and so we have to look even if it is outside of that village area people that are in more need for that type of accommodation and if they have expressed an interest to be in that village that is an appropriate let;*
- ASB – no mention of the impact on the victims of this anti-social behaviour; *this is not directly addressing the ASB. This is in a separate ASB policy document which will be brought to your attention. This is about the re-letting of properties specifically and for consideration of what may have happened in a previous tenancy and what they have done to address that behaviour and the impact of that behaviour;*

Resolved that – the group were happy to recommend the Policy

13. **Tenancy Policy - Stephen Boland**

Tenancy Policy – Housing Specialist, Stephen Boland

Update on the Tenancy Policy attached with the agenda, key points stated were;

- We have been operating our current tenancy policy for the last 5 years with no major changes to the County wide policy since last reviewed. The Somerset policy sets up rules and conditions for tenancies and we have to make sure that our council fits within this County wide strategy;
- Tenancy policies for new tenancies – Introductory tenancy introduced in 2015 which is a starter tenancy with slightly less rights attached to it making sure that tenants get off to a good start with managing their tenancy well and conducting themselves in a tenant like manner. These tenancies have a 12 month duration which can be extended up to 18 months. This is an automatic roll on to a secure tenancy on successful completion of the introductory period. There are currently 214 introductory tenancies in progress at present with only a few being rolled over as they did not meet all the conditions. There have been very few evictions within this period;
- Secure tenancy agreement – This agreement is the best option for tenants and has more rights attached to it through legislation with the added option of Right to Buy. The policy gives us the option to apply to the courts for demoted tenancy which prevents nuisance and allows the secure tenancy to be demoted to a demotion tenancy, which the judge sets out the period of demotion. If a tenant breaches this order, we go back to court and the tenant has less rights to defend those proceedings so if you have to go back to court the resolution means that tenants do not

have to go back through a whole court process, it is a mandatory granting of possession. This is an option in our anti-social tool kit;

- Non secure tenancy agreement – these tenancies do not have the same security of tenure or rights as those set out in secure tenancies;
- Licences or forms of agreement – we offer licences or forms of agreement for example , where a decant property is made available to a secure tenant who has to move temporarily to have works carried out;
- Mutual exchange – a secure or assured tenant has the right to exchange their tenancy with another secure or assured tenant, subject to the written consent of his/her landlord;
- Tenancy succession - Existing SWT secure tenancies that commenced from the date of the introduction of this policy will only allow there to be one statutory right of succession to a spouse or civil partner or a member of the deceased tenant's family, limited to son or daughter only;
- Redevelopment or major works - Tenants who have been moved into alternative accommodation during any redevelopment or other major works will be granted a tenancy with no less security of tenure on their return to settled accommodation;

Comments from group members included;

- Please can you clarify the status of the person who is downsizing? *If you are an existing tenant and then you move to another one of our properties you will retain your security of tenure;*
- If you move from a Housing Association to a council property why do they not have an introductory tenancy as I feel they should do? *The process for mutual exchange is very thorough. If this is a mutual exchange we need to perform the necessary checks as a landlord to see if we want to accept them as tenant of ours. There a number of grounds for refusal of a mutual exchange, one being if their behaviour does not comply with our policies. Housing Associations work on the same policies;*

Resolved that – the group recommended the Policy.

(The Meeting ended at 7.45 pm)