

SWT Tenants Strategic Group - 24 May 2021 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Councillor Alex Akhigbemen (Chair)
Paul Cram, Colin England, Luke Manning, Corrine McMylor,
Samantha Rickward, Mark Lithgow, Janet Lloyd and Francesca Smith

Officers: James Barrah, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Shari Hallett (Housing Performance Manager), Sharon Yarde (Housing), Simon Lewis, Adam Evans, Suzie Rea (People Business Partner) and Tracey Meadows (Democracy and Governance)

Also Present: Councillors Lithgow, Lloyd, Smith and Weston

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm)

1. **Notes from previous meeting**

The minutes from the previous meeting on the 22 March 2021 were agreed.

Proposed by the Chair, Alek Akhigbemen and seconded by Livi Mongare.

2. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Jessie Bunn, Kelvin Hellier, Ivor Hussey and Stephen Smith.

3. **Directorate Report**

The Group considered a comprehensive report from the circulated agenda, presented by James Barrah (Director of Housing and Communities), Chris Brown (Assistant Director-Development and Regeneration), Ian Candlish (Assistant Director – Housing Property), Simon Lewis (Assistant Director- Housing and Community Development), Shari Hallett (Housing Performance Manager) and Adam Evans (Compliance Manager).

James Barrah welcomed the new members to the group. He stated that the Group had a busy year ahead with plenty of matters being brought to them for their consideration.

Comments/ questions by the group included (responses in italic);

- Were there any delays to any of the building projects that the Council would be commencing due to the delay of building materials? *This was a challenging time but we were pleased that the Seaward Way project has a fixed price so that gave us a bit of comfort regarding an increase of the prices of materials. North Taunton had been a challenge due to the risks being costed into the proposal.*

- The Internet Audit came out as reasonable. Were we going to increase the work being done to good or great? *The internal Audit was based on compliance, governance, and reporting processes. All our systems and data were looked at and how we were progressing and reporting our programmes to make sure that they were safe;*
- On the Capital Programme report, it stated that there was a charge for Water main replacement works was this the responsibility of the Council to replace? *If the water main was on our land it be our area of responsibility unless it is of the shared element;*
- Concerns that the delays to responsive repair works meant that we could possibly spend more money to fix these repairs. *During the Covid Lockdown period we were keeping a log of what works being requested. This was being monitored by the team to make sure that there was nothing that could cause an issue and if that was the case it would have been inspected. This was being reviewed regularly to get the repairs and back log down;*
- With regards to mutual exchanges and void properties. Lettings were now dealing more in line with the OT's. Would this mean that void properties would now be allocated to the correct tenants, i.e. disabled tenants being moved into properties that already had adaptations to meet their needs? *The Aids and Adaptions Policy was being looked at to get this approved as a policy. A bit part of that was that we properly advertised our properties particularly those with adaptations to ensure that the correct tenants were housed. The Home finder System now included notes from Doctors or Health Care providers with the latest information;*
- With regards to the Firepool development, did we as a Council have a stake in the accommodation property development? *As a council we did but the site was owned by the General Fund as opposed to being Housing land. The new approach was for the Council to take a master plan with the developer. This had been divided up into differing sections. More discussions would need to be had with regards to Affordable Housing when this comes forward in the scheme;*

4. **Impact of Covid on Housing Staff**

The group considered a report from Suzie Rea (People Business Partner) on the impact of Covid on staff in the Housing and Communities Directorate.

Comments from the group included; (responses in *Italic*)

- Concerns with the high level of sickness in the ASB team; *There were only two members of staff in the ASB team so when one member of the team went off sick this would have an impact on the team. We would continue to measure sickness absence levels;*
- The Chair conveyed the groups appreciation and gratitude to the entire Housing Team for their hard work and dedication;

Resolved that the group noted the report

5. **Fire Remedial Work Programme**

The group considered a Fire Remedial Work Programme Report from the circulated agenda from Adam Evans (Compliance Manager)

Comments from the group included; (responses in *Italic*)

- Did fire regulations differ for each property type, was there an overall standard for each property or were the requirements different?. *All SWT properties were treated by a high standard and identified by a risk assessment;*
- Were specialists required to procure the Fire Doors? *These needed to be an accreditation for the manufacturing for the fitting of the Fire Doors which took 12 months to achieve;*
- What would happen if the Lease Holders tenant refused to update their Fire Doors? *We were embarking on a programme shortly to replace the existing Fire Doors, so we needed to ensure that all doors, including Lease Holders were being replaced;*
- If a flat has been bought by a private tenant, would this cost of the replacement fire door be at the cost of the taxpayer, not the private tenant? *On the cost of expediting fire safety as a priority over the time it would take to negotiate, take legal action in many cases and having to liaise with the lease holder on things around choice, colour ect if they were paying for the upgrade. To protect the tenants, we had taken these steps to progress the programme;*

Resolved that the report be noted.

6. **Housing Website Report**

The Housing Performance Manager, Shari Hallett presented the Housing and Communities Website progress report

Comments from the group included; (responses in *Italic*)

- Concerns around;
 - tenants that were not technical enough to access all this information and how this would be implemented with the impending merger;
 - Customer Services not being trained properly due to their lack of knowledge on members of staff and the department that they worked in. You are then waiting on the telephone for 45 minutes while they find out this information;

The housing officer form that we have developed was important for tenants that not only have access to the website but tenants that call in. This information would be what our Customer Service staff use to find the correct department to pass the call onto. Going forward these calls would be routed correctly;

Unitary would not change how we provided our services. We have purchased a software system and portal to enable tenants to access this in the future;

- Concerns that the website process was a waste of time and money. When you rung for a repair, they booked you in there and then. If you book online it took a week and then staff still have to call you to book in the repair. How were you getting on with the survey to see how many tenants were computer literate and were happy to use this service? *We are happy for customers to use whichever process suits them either via the website or phone. This work on the survey had not yet stated. It was a part of a bigger part of work that needed undertaking;*
- Would the money spent on developing this new website be required again in 12 month's, 2 years' time due the impending Unitary decision? *The changes that we were making to the website was using existing staff. The programme to replace the computer software would need to be implement as it would no longer be supported. The cost for this would be minimal;*

Resolved that – the report be noted.

7. **STAR Action Plan Report**

The group considered a Star Survey/Action Plan update report from Sharon Yarde (Housing Customer Experience Lead)

Comments from the Group included; (responses in *Italic*)

- Concerns with the way that Customer Service staff were not trained enough in the way that they spoke to the elderly, disabled clients and learning difficulties on the phone and face to face; *training would be provided to the Housing Directorate. The Customer Services team who picked up the phones for the whole of the Council were not part of the Housing Directorate team. Customer Services that deal with Housing queries would be included in the course;*
- The recent block inspection letters had only the generic SWT phone number and no Officer contact details which was frustrating when you needed to speak to them direct; *This comment was also mentioned by the Tenants Action Group. It has recently been agreed with the Tenant Manager that going forward there would be a name and a photo added to*

- the letters. It had also been suggested that when Estates Officers were on a walk about that they wear SWT tabards to identify who they were;*
- Information was also needed on the Estate walk about with where to find the Officers would be helpful; *this would be fed back to the Estates Officers;*
 - Information was needed on the website to state which Housing Officer covered which area as at present this was unclear. You need to make them human by putting a bit of a bio about them. This would help communications as the Estate Officers change so often; *the website had been updated and the form for 'contact my housing officer' now stated the name of your Estate Officer;*
 - Concerns that the Estates Officers do not always respond to calls made to them. The structure also needed looking at as staff were constantly being moved around so could not build a rapport with tenants making them feel insecure; *since May 2020 we now have our own established Housing Directorate so this should be pretty stable going forward;*
 - Training for Estates Officers to deal with complex cases was needed to assist the officers in their role; *A training programme would be rolling out soon to all our front line housing staff on domestic abuse as there was new legislation around this and we wanted to make sure that everybody knows what to look out for and everybody knows how to address concerns raised to them. Training would also be undertaken on First Aid and Mental Health issues; As a landlord, why has this training taken so long to happen? Everyone was required to undertake online training which consisted of a core of set modules. Our policies have now been updated to make sure that they were current as legislation changed all the time. As a result of this, more front facing training would be given;*
 - More face to face training was required; *face to face training would still be given;*

The Director of Housing and Communities, James Barraah stated that he would give the group access to the training packages so that they could see and experience what training our staff undertook in modules like Safeguarding so that you were better informed.

An action would also be taken to Customer Services to accelerate work at the front end where calls come through to work with the team that worked on our housing calls and to ask for some better reporting back.

Resolved that - the report be noted.

8. **Forward Plan**

Forward Plan noted.

(The Meeting ended at 8.06 pm)