

SWT Tenants Strategic Group - 27 September 2021 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Alex Akhigbemen (Chair)

Jessie Bunn, Paul Cram, Luke Manning, Samantha Rickward,
Mark Lithgow and Janet Lloyd

Officers: Adam Evans, James Barrah, Ian Candlish, Chris Brown, Simon Lewis,
Sharon Yarde (Housing), Stephen Boland, Kerry Prisco and Tracey
Meadows (Governance and Democracy Case Manager)

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm)

16. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Ivor Hussey, Kevin Hellier and Steve Smith.

17. **Notes from previous meeting**

The minutes from the previous meeting were agreed by the Chair and seconded by Cllr Janet Lloyd.

18. **Directorate Report**

The group discussed the Directorate Report item in the agenda pack. Presented by James Barrah (Director of Housing and Communities), Ian Candlish (Assistant Director- Housing Property), Chris Brown (Assistant Director – Development and Regeneration) and Simon Lewis (Assistant Director – Housing and Community Development)

Comments/questions from the group members included;

- With regards to the Government subsidy for the single homelessness issue, did this include converting commercial units? what was our strategy for bring empty properties back into use? *We were asking for a grant from Homes England to match some funding from the general fund to purchase from the market 6 units but we also do want to use 6 existing single bedroom Council homes and dedicate these for use of the single homeless. Environmental Health dealt with empty properties and there were usually issues why these properties were vacant. As a Housing Service do not have much of a strategy for this;*
- What were the plans for retrofit works in the future? *There was a programme running to replace existing electrical heating systems with Air source heat pumps. Unfortunately, we have had a high level of refusals on this, but we are encouraging tenants to take this up:*

- Would the Capital Works be completed in this Financial Year?
Unfortunately, due to Covid etc, some works would go into the next Financial Year;
- There were concerns from a tenant with the level of enforcement from the Compliance Team to keep the Communal areas of flats clear. Was this because of the Glenfel incident? *We have a zero-tolerance approach to keep tenants safe and allow the Emergency Services to evacuate the tenants safely. You are encouraged to speak to your Housing Officer or a member of the Compliance team with regards to any issues that arise;*
- Concerns that there was one rule for flats and one rule for houses regarding the zero-tolerance approach for putting rubbish bins outside of your front door. *A member of the Compliance team would come out to access this issue;*
- Concerns that there was no time frame from the estates walkabout once an issue had been reported with regards to a property. *A report would be written up by the Estates Officer and actions taken and rectified as per the Tenancy Agreement;*
- Extra staff was needed to reduce the time scales for getting people to court for ASB. This was causing misery to tenants who had to endure this for months on end; *The process took a while as we needed to produce evidence to the Judge that we had taken every opportunity for the issues to be resolved. We also needed to show the Judge that we had given the tenant every opportunity with help and support to change their behaviour before the tenant/family were evicted from their property;*
- Did the Council work with other organisations to help tenants that were struggling with ASB's due to their children being the source of this behaviour? *We link in with other agencies and if this went to court for possession of a property the Judge would expect us to have done this as it is good Housing management;*
- What happened if the source of ASB was a private tenant? *This would be difficult to influence on properties that we did not own. We could engage with the tenant write to their Landlord;*
- How were we going to evaluate how good the recent Customer Service training had been? *We had undertaken a mystery shopper exercise prior to the customer training exercise taking place and we would undertake this again once the training had finished. It should be noted that only eight members of the Customer Services team had been identified to undertake this training with the remainder not trained on Housing;*
- The Universal Credit top up of £20 per week would shortly cease. Do you anticipate that tenants arrears would increase? *This would have an impact on some households. Communications had been sent out to all our tenants that were on Universal Credit to warn them that that this would be stopped shortly by Government, and to say that we were here to help and to contact our Debt Adviser Officers should they need support;*

Resolved that the report be noted.

19. **Performance Report**

The Group considered the Performance Report presented by James Barrah (Director of Housing and Communities) and Kerry Prisco (Housing Accountant)

Comments and questions from the group included;
(summarised)

- Concerns that the use of electronic questionnaires for lettable standard and maintenance works were not being sent to every customer that had used the service; *The repairs questionnaire was a reasonable new piece of software that we are putting into place. This information comes on the back of the data that we hold on tenants, i.e. phone numbers ect. There were a few issues with this that we are looking into at present;*
- How many properties were void and how many of these were due to compliance works? *The compliance works forms part of a package of what is encountered at the property. We have to perform checks regarding electrical testing, asbestos testing and to make sure that the property was safe to work in;*
- 4.4 in the report reads that “action was required to control spending to ensure the outturn is on or close to budget”. What would these actions be? *Capitalising some of our costs is one option and taking appropriate financial advice. We do also have reserves that we could use, and a budget had been set aside for the upgrade of our housing management system;*
- Concerns that the overspend would increase the rent for tenants for 2022/23. Is there any assurance that this would not happen? *We had our rent policy that this previous group and our Members had signed off which follows Government direction on the formular rent that we are able to utilise and a methodology for a CPR + 1% rent increase and the business plan was set on this basis. Historically CPR has been low, but we have been seeing an increase. If we deviate on this, we need to look at how this would impact on our service. This would be challenging on our budget setting this year;*

Resolved that the report was noted.

20. **Equalities/Disability Report**

The group considered the Equalities/Disability Report, presented by Simon Lewis (Assistant Director – Housing and Community Development)

Comments/questions from the group included:
(summarised)

- Are the Trusted Assessors already in place or was this something that you were putting in place now? How do you get an Assessor to visit you? *we already have these Assessors in place, members of staff have been trained in this. We only deal with minor alterations such as grab rails etc. All other alterations would be undertaken by an Occupational Therapist to*

undertake a proper assessment. Homefinder has all the questions referring to disabilities and we can have further conversations with tenants about this;

- Appendix 1 reads, 'do you use a wheelchair' this seemed quite blunt. There was nowhere else on the form to add that you use crutches, walking sticks etc. It would be beneficial for the tenant to write what disability that they had. *There were pages of information on the Homefinder document with regards to disabilities. On each form there is a space for the tenant to tell us about the support that they need and why. The Homefinder Somerset Partnership Document was a universal document used in the whole of Somerset to find out what support the tenant needs in their property, we realise that the questionnaire was not perfect;*
- Does the partnership have regular meetings where you can take these sorts of questions that we were asking regarding the Homefinder questionnaires? *The Housing providers provide quarterly reports and put feed back onto Homefinder. I can feed this back, but I need to know what was not working. I.e. if we were not allocation houses properly to the right sort of tenants and there was evidence of this, but I would suggest that the housing providers across somerset would know that already and address this.*
- Concerns with the position of the bin store in flats for tenants with disabilities and these tenants having to move an already heavy bin over several steps to put it out for collection. These issues should be brought to you by the Housing Officers, not the tenants. *Unfortunately, the bin store has never been satisfactory. We could make adjustments on a case by case basis. This was a wider conversation that we needed to have. Somerset Waste Partnership do offer an assisted waste collection service for disabled tenants;*
- How does an existing tenant contact the Council for works to be done? You could also put in the information regarding assisted bin collection; *The tenant would contact their Housing Officer to report this, we can then action this in house. Further information would be signposted. Our next newsletter would promote this;*

Action

- Sam Rickward to work with Sharon Yarde on the newsletter and on comms for tenants regarding updates on their current Housing Officer and contact.

21. **Compliance Presentation (slide deck to be presented at the meeting)**

The Compliance Presentation will be discussed at the next meeting on the 22 November.

22. **Action points from the meeting**

- Compliance Team to contact group member, Luke Manning re: bins – Sharon Yarde;

- How many properties were currently void, how much money lost in income – Tony Knight;
- Flow chart, clear route for trusted assessor – Simon Lewis;
- Add Trusted Assessor to the Tenant's Newsletter – Sharon Yarde;
- Assisted bin collections for Newsletter and 'Sort it' collections – Sharon Yarde;
- Circulate the slides for Compliance and put on the top of the agenda for the next meeting – Sharon Yarde;
- Quick messaging route for change of TCM – Julie Sabey;
- AOB on agenda for the next meeting – Sharon Yarde:

(The Meeting ended at 8.15 pm)