

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – 24th January 2022

Directorate Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Housing.

Report Authors: Assistant Directors and Housing Performance Manager

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group on work being undertaken and progress made by the Housing Directorate since the last TSG meeting in November 2021.

2. Recommendations

The Tenants' Strategic Group is asked to note this report and are invited to ask questions.

3. Background and Full details of the Report

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

HRA New Homes, Housing Strategy and Housing Enabling

- NTWP Phase A build is progressing and negotiations on the contract for Phases B and Ci will commence in January. A delivery programme for Phase E refurbishment is being finalised and a grant application has been submitted. Should the planning application be successful, a contractor will be appointed in the Spring and a steady refurbishment programme will commence. The Council is waiting to see if it has been successful in being awarded Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding to help support this scheme.
- The Seaward Way development in Minehead will commence on site in January. Site security, welfare facilities and groundwork will be the first work elements.

- The planning applications for the zero carbon affordable housing schemes on various sites in Taunton was submitted and should be considered by planning committee in February/March. These schemes include a phosphate mitigation strategy which the service is hopeful will meet Natural England and the Local Planning Authorities requirements. If the mitigation strategy is approved the service will accelerate its programme of investment in septic tank replacements to create more phosphate credits.
- The service was successful in a bid for RSAP(Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme) to part fund 12 units of accommodation to support the Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Strategy and delivery plan.
- The service is leading the thinking of the Council's HRA low carbon retrofit strategy. This work is gaining momentum and over the next 12 months a strategy and a financial and delivery plan to support it will emerge. SWT has submitted a grant request (as part of a consortium bid), under the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund wave one and the service propose to submit a much more ambitious wave two bid in Spring. Successful retrofit will require significant tenant involvement to permit access to carry out works, understand fuel use before and after improvements and act as champions to develop confidence for other customers.
- Sixteen apartments at Wordsworth Drive and Coleridge Crescent have unfortunately reached the end of their life. The properties are failing on decent homes and thermal efficiency standards and the structure of the buildings are of insufficient quality to merit investment. The service has engaged with the 14 tenants, a leaseholder and the shop and a report is making its way through the Council's decision-making process to support the recommendation.
- New affordable housing in the district is set to see a higher-than-average number of properties completed this financial year. The pipeline of new units is currently at its strongest in the west of the district, which is unaffected by the phosphate mitigation planning requirements.
- The Housing Enabling team are also preparing the district for the impact of First Homes which is a Government initiative to increase low-cost home ownership.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Both emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs continue to be undertaken, with all Covid precautions in place.
- Emergency repairs are all being delivered within our defined timescale (24 hours from logging).
- There remains a backlog of non-emergency repair jobs, although this is reducing following the use of external contractors. We are reviewing further procurement options for additional external contractor support.
- Void repairs are also being carried out, although returning the properties back to our Lettings team promptly remains a challenge.

- We are still actively seeking to recruit skilled tradespersons for our in-house activities and we are reviewing payment levels (via benchmarking and job evaluation). We are also considering a 'job-fair' event.

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken, again with all Covid precautions in place.
- These include gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works, fire safety checks, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works.
- We have appointed an independent third party consultant to undertake sample quality audits of heating and electrical works (both in-house and for external contractors) and will be implementing this approach fully in the next few months.
- Weekly review meetings are being held to carefully monitor and manage all safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- Progress on Capital Work programmes has increased, in particular with kitchen and bathroom replacements, emergency lighting, additional electrical testing, and window replacements.
- Procurement activities remain at a high level, including flooring replacement to communal areas of flat blocks.
- Recruitment for a number of vacant staff positions is being undertaken.

Asset Management

- Post 'go-live' work on our Capita Open Assets module continues, including the development of reports (e.g. Decent Homes position) and further data-loading and checking from stock condition and energy surveys.
- Accelerated programmes of Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments continue to take place, with support from external consultants.
- Detailed capital work programme planning is actively being undertaken, as well as a review of their financial impact on our long-term Business Plan.

Housing and Communities Team

Extra Care Housing

- SWT and Care staff are taking precautions to protect tenants from the additional Covid risks.

Sheltered Housing

- As directed, staff are working from home where possible, but sign-ups etc. are continuing as usual.

Lettings

- Lettable Standard has been to HMST and is due to be forwarded to TSG shortly for their consideration. A further meeting with the TAG will take place in early 2022
- 282 properties have been re-let YTD- April -November.
- Customer satisfaction year-to-date is running at 98%. Recent feedback received includes comments such as “I am very satisfied with the whole process”.
- Compliments have also been received about individual Lettings team members, one being “Debbie James and Georgina Farebrother were lovely - nothing was too much trouble, really very helpful.”
- Home Moves Plus project continues to make best use of SWT housing stock the project is still on course to achieve the target figures well in advance of the target date. 89 bedspaces have currently been freed up which amounts to 34 households. The current pipeline contains work involving the potential of returning two 6 bed properties and one 5 bed property to SWT.
- Voids turnaround times are still adversely affected by Shortages of SWT trades staff and supply chain issues within the construction industry. However, ‘major voids’ have been reduced from a year-to-date high of 80 days to the current figure of 67.

Income

- The team sent Christmas texts to those tenants in arrears on 24th November and 20th December, reminding them that they need to pay over the Christmas period. The team will continue to work in accordance with the “Lean Process” to reduce the arrears, whilst continuing to support our tenants.
- An agency member of staff left the team on 16th December and another is due to leave on 7th January. We are actively seeking to replace both team members, but this does mean a reduction in the capacity of the Rent Recovery team from five to three officers until the roles can be filled. Existing officers will be working hard to mitigate the impact this has on our tenants and our rent recovery.
- We continue to work to let our vacant garages are currently working on a plan to rent more of our garages. We are also looking into other options for advertising the garages to see if we can increase the uptake.
- The team continue to work well within the changing environment of covid, they are mindful of tenants’ needs and ensure they are using the correct PPE.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- Both teams will be reviewing working arrangements in line with the recently announced change in COVID measures.
- We are reminding staff to work in line with the previous lockdown measures to ensure that staff and customers alike remain safe, (for example phoning before visiting anyone face to face in their home to check that they are well and free from COVID symptoms, and wearing PPE).

- We hope to keep all our activities ongoing with minimum disruption.
- The Tenancy/Estate team is gearing up to recruit to two permanent posts that have been filled by temporary staff for some considerable time. Adverts are due to go live this week, with a view to the successful applicants starting in the New Year.
- We have also had another permanent member of the Tenancy/Estate team give notice to leave at the end of December. We will therefore be considering three full time positions.
- The ASB team are actively pursuing three difficult ASB cases into court and this is generating a high amount of administration in preparing the necessary paperwork for the legal team.
- In addition, the ASB team are busy testing Open Housing and ensuring that the system is ready in time for going live.

Housing Performance Team

- A Senior Complaints Case Manager started in post to assist with improving complaints responses and outcomes.
- We have undertaken a deeper look into our complaints performance and compared that with Homes in Sedgemoor.
- The Christmas newsletter to tenants and leaseholders has been designed, printed and sent.
- The Tenants' Action Group have agreed to fund a kiosk (touch screen internet access) at Priorswood Place.
- The Children and Youth Initiative Fund awarded by the Tenants' Action Group has started to receive applications. Applications will be assessed in the new year.
- The "reporting a repair" online form is currently in the draft stages with our business analysts.
- The work to deliver a "tenant portal" which will provide tenants with online access to rent balances and other information will start in the new year.
- We continue to submit Pulse data monthly so that we can benchmark our performance with other housing providers.
- The second meeting of the "damp and mould" working group has taken place.
- A review of our Housing Policies has commenced with the HQN (Housing Quality Network), the review will include rewrite and introduction of new policies where required.
- TAG (Tenants' Action Group) has continued to meet, in person in December and virtually in January.

4. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

5. Are there any Finance / Resource, Legal implications directly to do with this report?

There are no financial implications directly to do with the recommendations in this report

6: Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

7. Are there any Data Protection Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

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