

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 28th November 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 September 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

- SWT are close to entering North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) Phase B and Ci contract which will see 51 new homes in addition to an increased number of 49 homes being built for phase A. Some phase A dwellings will shortly be ready for handovers and these homes 2050 Zero carbon ready. Visits to the properties are being arranged for members of our Tenant consultation groups, staff and elected members as well as funders. Visitors will see both the quality and size of homes but also the low carbon and ecological credentials of the homes. The development is incorporating many features such as bird and bat boxes, bee bricks and hedgehog highways.
- Piling at Seaward Way, Minehead Homes has finished, and brick work will become visible above ground over the next few weeks. The brick work is using large porotherm blocks which will allow a speedy build to first floor level. The porotherm bricks are a honeycomb construction often used in very low

carbon passivhaus construction. The 54 units provide a variety of property types and will be zero carbon.

- Four applications will remain in the planning pipeline until agreed phosphate mitigation approaches are confirmed.
- Unfortunately, inflation and market conditions continue to create challenges for building and retrofitting homes. We recognise that the increased cost of building homes is no longer a risk but a reality and the HRA is addressing these challenges as it reviews its 30 year business plan.
- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. Members will consider the strategy and delivery plan in December. The Strategy seeks to place tenants at the heart of zero carbon retrofit and this has commenced with tenants influencing the strategy.
- SWT has been awarded SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund) Wave 1 funds and has made a substantial bid for Wave 2 funds. In addition, a significant Energy company obligation fund has been reserved by a large energy provider for a neighbourhood based ECO4 programme with the contract being finalised.
- The procurement of a contractor to deliver refurbishment to 37 Zero Carbon retrofit Council woolaway homes at NTWP phase E and Oake has been amended and advertised for the second time following insufficient market interest.
- Our Enabling Development team works with housing partners and our own development teams and through this we see an increasing challenge in meeting affordable housing need in the district and specialist accommodation. These challenges are significant to the impact of phosphates, the volatility in the market and although the district has experienced significant house price inflation these matters ultimately have an impact on scheme viability making them unable to support affordable housing provision.
- Despite the volatility of the housing market in the district has seen 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 Single Homeless and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Strategy and delivery plan was approved by Full Council in October and Officers are supporting the delivery of new homeless bedspaces through several partners and direct council supply. The council has been awarded £750k through the government Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme to accelerate the new provision round three including the purchase of 6 homes for Home First, which is aimed at providing independent living for complex Rough Sleepers.
- The service continues to deliver the Hinkley Point C Housing Programme, working with partners to drive forward 11 key areas of work. This programme is providing new bed spaces in the district and support to vulnerable customers affected by the change in the housing market because of the uplift of workforce at HPC. The service has received circa £440k to start new projects and extend the delivery of some existing projects up to December 2023.

Housing Property Team

Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken.
- All emergency jobs are being delivered within our defined timescale (24 hours from logging).
- The responsive repair requests are now being taken by a cohort of specialist repair call-handlers. This has led to a significant improvement in performance (less abandoned calls, faster answering, and more accurate detailed work orders being raised).
- We have developed a detailed Repairs Action Plan (RAP) which includes a wide range of activities being progressed to further improve the customer journey and drive-in value for money. This plan includes improvements to ICT systems (e.g. job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal), review of available reporting functionality, review and implementation of an updated Disrepair Policy and monitoring system, review of imprest van stock, review of our COSHH Register and associated Risk Assessments, review of fleet requirements (including move to EV's), and continuing to develop our approach to damp and mould (working with tenants on a specific group to address the issue).
- Performance on completing void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard continues to improve, with targets being met for both minor and major voids. We are, however, continuing to require external contractor support to maintain this position.
- We have undertaken a stocktake and are reviewing our stores stock utilising a new module within our Open Contractor IT software.
- We have successfully recruited an experienced interim Maintenance Manager to lead the team.
- We are progressing with a review of our materials supply chain processes, including procurement of a framework consortium (Procurement for Housing) to partner within development of an option appraisal process.

Property Safety Compliance

- All property safety compliance checks and works continue to be undertaken. 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.
- Following a procurement exercise, a new contract has been mobilised to undertake outstanding electrical inspections (EICR's) and associated remedial works. Some additional contractor resource has been maintained, however, to facilitate prompt completion of this activity.
- Weekly compliance meetings, together with additional EICR review meetings, are being held to carefully monitor and manage all of these safety critical areas.

Capital Programmes

- Progress on several capital work programmes continues on-site; including kitchen and bathroom replacements, fire safety works (replacement fire doors, fire safety flooring and emergency lighting), roofing, replacement gutters and fascias, and door entry systems. It should be noted, however, that available contractor resource remains a challenge and accordingly some programmes may not be completed by the end of this financial year.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), as well as our Retrofit aspiration.

Asset Management

- The service has identified pathways to Zero Carbon for 12 of the Council's 14 main archetypes. The service is working to integrate low carbon retrofit investment with the decent homes and capital investment programme
- New energy surveys are complementing programmes of EPC, Stock Condition and validation surveys. This data will continue to enrich the services knowledge of its stock.
- Post 'go-live' work on the Open Assets module of our Capita software system is now underway, following the Open Housing implementation.
- The service is working with colleagues to refine the start to finish capital investment process from business planning through to delivery to updating data following investment. This work has particular focus on the tenant's journey.

Housing and Communities Team

Supported Housing (extra care and sheltered)

- The officer team has 1 p/t staff member off sick who is planning to return 14th Nov 2022, so normal service has returned to tenants.
- In addition to their usual duties, staff have been completing fire safety risk assessments on tenants who may struggle to safely evacuate themselves, if there was a fire. This is mainly tenants on upper floors. In cases where this would be a risk and no suitable remedies can be put in place, tenants are being offered a move. Where requested (and possible, depending on voids) we are trying to keep tenants within the same scheme, to enable them to continue to have close access to the people and services they know and rely on.
- Our 3-month temporary member of staff has completed his contract and reduced overdue reviews to a more manageable amount. Team members are being tasked on catching up with the remaining overdue reviews but needing to balance these with the additional fire safety work (as above).
- The team continue to complete the bi-monthly estates and block checks and have been identifying suitable locations for bin storage on several schemes, with compliance and assets colleagues, in line with Fire Risk Assessments. We have also been in contact with the Hydrographic Office re: their trees being cut back where they are bordering our schemes and been assured this will be completed by Xmas.
- Budget restrictions have limited our ability to replace new furniture at Heathfield meeting hall. We have therefore re-distributed and recycled unwanted tables and chairs from other sites, to make the halls as welcoming and tidy as possible.
- We continue to manage several complex situations with tenants who have substance dependency and self-neglect and hoard. Challenges faced by Adult Social Care in recruiting sufficient capacity has meant a significant waiting list for assessment and support, leading to greater pressure on Housing in trying to manage these complex cases.
- Covid and its impact on supply chains and workforce has resulted in delays for tenants referred to Somerset Independence Project works to get adaptations works assessed and delivered. We have been working alongside colleagues in our Capital Works team to find alternative solutions for tenants where appropriate, such as offering a very low-level step-in shower, as this is easier and lower cost to fit than installing a walk-in shower.
- Plans are in place to begin practice fire drills within our extra care schemes. As many of these tenants are quite unwell and a number have additional needs, we are working with the compliance team and on-site Carers to enable this to happen with as little disruption as possible.
- Our Supported Housing Manager attended the recent Tenant Action Group meeting. She (or a colleague) can be available for future meetings where the agenda requires this.

Lettings

- Team working well with Open Housing system;

- Staff are settled in their roles.
- 3 tenants from Wordsworth Drive have successful bid on SWT properties advertised through HFS. They will therefore decant from Wordsworth in the coming weeks.
- Home Moves Plus project is ahead of target.
- Local Lettings plan being written for North Taunton regeneration project and Seaward Way.
- Lettings policy in progress additional work required on the above two items.

Income Team

- The recruitment process is currently underway for a Rent Recovery Case Manager. Following an earlier round of recruitment, the appointed officer has now started her employment and is settling into the role well.
- We are currently in the process of organising our Christmas Rent campaign. We will once again use text messages for this as we have had positive results to this in the past. The 1st text will be sent on 23rd November and the 2nd will be sent on 19th December.
- The Debt and Benefit case managers continue to work with tenants to ensure they are claiming the correct benefits. They are also working hard to apply for grant funding wherever possible to help tenants with arrears and any other debts. The team are also reviewing DHP's which are coming to an end for some tenants to see if they would be eligible for any further award.

Tenancy/Estates & ASB

- The Estate Team are now going through a period of change – we recently lost 2 of our long-term temporary staff and now attempting to recruit new staff to these positions. This has a major impact on the team due to patch areas not being covered and time involved in the induction and training of new staff. We are expecting the first new Case Manager to be in post by week ending 4 November 2022.
- The introduction of Open Housing has highlighted that the team deal with a higher volume of enquiries coming in than other departments by a considerable amount. The team must balance this work with being out on the estates.
- Complaints have remained low in both service areas.
- The team are also noticing that the number of complex mental health cases are on the rise. The knock-on effect with a drop-in vital mental health service is starting to influence the workload as tenants are turning to us for additional support,
- We are noticing that the number of low-level neighbour nuisance is still increasing but we will continue to monitor the impact of this on the team.

- ASB team have recently had success by obtaining a Suspended Possession Order. The tenant has complex needs but has agreed to the Suspended Possession Order without going through a full trial hearing.
- We are waiting to enter Court to end an introductory Tenancy for anti-social behaviour. The delay has been down to SHAPE (our legal service) having to out source this case to another solicitor.
- We have seen an increase in the number of Notices of Seeking Possessions we are serving for anti-social behaviour. We have found that this does have a positive impact on most cases and tenants will amend their behaviour rather than risk losing their home.

Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team (Shari Hallett)

- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. On the 24th November 2022 we will hold third joint tenant meeting with Homes in Sedgemoor, specifically to engage tenants on LGR.
- The damp and mould group for tenants continues to meet and has agreed a set of actions. The group has produced a new webpage which has been published. A report on the actions of the group will be produced after the next meeting.
- A new Low Carbon Working group for tenants has their first meeting in July and had meetings each month.
- A group of involved tenants will undertake a mystery shopper exercise.
- The tenants' autumn newsletter has been posted and our Christmas newsletter is being prepared.
- We are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- The policy review work with the HQN (Housing Quality Network) continues and TSG (Tenants' Strategic Group) members will receive revised policy documents for comment prior to publication.
- Our headline Tenant Satisfaction Survey results (completed in May 2022) have been received and during November the second part of the survey sample will be completed.
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. We are now finalising the tenant portal which we hope to be live in December. The portal will give tenants direct access to rent balances, tenancy and personal details, repair history, view communication, view housing officers. It will also give links to make payments and raise repairs and other communications.
- We have published our assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (which was reported to the July meeting) on our website. Together with other councils we have ensured that the new Somerset Council draft complaint policy will cover Housing Ombudsman requirements. The policy will proceed to Executive in January 2023 for approval.

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

Name of Contact Officers: Shari Hallett

Telephone number: 07557 003944

Email address: s.hallett@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk