

## **Somerset West and Taunton Council**

**Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2023**

### **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 February 2023.

#### **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**

- The service is progressing at pace a low carbon retrofit Strategy and Delivery plan. Members approved 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 signed a Memorandum of Understanding with E-ON which pledges £20m of energy company obligation for SWTs ECO4 Neighbourhood Fuel Efficiency Project. This fund will see some of the worst energy performing council homes and some private home, where owners qualify, improved by two EPC bands which will see a significant reduction in fuel usage to keep their homes warm.
- SWT has been awarded SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund) Wave 1 funds and has made a substantial bid for Wave 2 funds. SWT will be informed if it has been successful in being awarded wave two funding in February. The award of the fund will be known in March.

- SWT has completed the first two new build SWT low carbon homes at North Taunton. These dwellings are the first of 49 low carbon homes delivered in the next 6 months at North Taunton (NTWP). The council is reprocurring a contractor for phase B&C due to the main contractor pulling out of new contracts in the South West.
- A consultation event at Rainbow Way, Minehead was held in January. The scheme is progressing well with brick work, using large porotherm blocks, allowing a speedy build to first floor level. The 54 units at Rainbow Way off Seaward Way will provide a variety of property types and be zero carbon.
- 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.
- 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.
- Despite the volatility of the housing market the district has seen a higher-than-average number of affordable homes 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 council was awarded £750k through the government Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme to accelerate the new provision round three including the purchase of six homes and refurbishment of six others for the Housing First model of accommodation. Eight of the twelve units have been completed and let.
- 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 April 2025.
- The Housing Strategy Team continue to work hard with partners to improve the services for vulnerable adults. The team are helping influence the integrated care system through the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Integrated Care Partnership. Working with Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) the team are identifying better ways for health, care and housing services to work together for the benefit of customers.

## **Housing Property Team**

### **Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- Emergency and non-emergency responsive repairs are being undertaken, largely within our defined timescales.
- We are continuing to monitor performance levels for responsive repair requests (now being taken by a cohort of specialist repair call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team) and have now introduced an 'overflow' of calls process to repairs schedulers when available. Nevertheless, this remains an area of challenge to ensure calls are answered within the corporate SLA.
- We continue to develop and implement activities within our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP). However, progress to improving ICT systems (e.g. job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.) and further review of available reporting functionality is still being delayed by a corporate 'change freeze' to existing IT systems prior to LGR Vesting Day on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023.
- We continue to undertake void repairs to meet our Lettable Standard and have commenced a new procurement exercise for external contractor support.
- We have completed an update on the Materials Supplies Audit previously undertaken, including implementing an updated imprest van stock.
- We are progressing with implementation of an improved materials supply chain process, although again this has been affected by the current corporate 'change freeze' to existing IT systems.

### **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, lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works, and radon monitoring.
- We have recently procured an independent specialist consultant (Savills) to undertake an overall desktop Property Safety Compliance Audit. This will act as a key opportunity to measure our progress as we approach Vesting Day into Somerset Council. They have indicated we have effective systems in place and, following their undertaking a detailed review of our data sources, have confirmed they have found no areas of concern relating to our compliance records. However, their audit has reaffirmed our need to ensure we continue to focus on Electrical Inspections (Electrical Inspection Condition Reports – EICRs) and Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) servicing. We are undertaking a range of activities to achieve this as a key priority.
- We are using our new iAuditor software to undertake compliance data collection for emergency lighting visual inspections, fire door inspection, fire safety housekeeping 'sterile communal area' checks (flat block inspections), water risk assessments in dwellings and fire risk assessments.

- We have undertaken a review and update of our compliance policies and procedures.
- Additional procurement has taken place to deliver compliance programmes, including emergency exit release switches to door entry systems on communal doors, fire alarm systems to extra-care schemes, and an extension to the third-party independent audit process for certification of gas systems and electrical inspections.
- We have produced a Building and Resident Health and Safety Strategy (as required by the new Building Safety Act).
- Weekly compliance meetings continue to carefully monitor and manage all of these safety critical areas, and an update report has recently been presented to the Audit Committee.

### **Capital Programmes**

- A range of 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. As previously noted however, available contractor resource remains a challenge and accordingly some programmes will not be completed by the end of this financial year – the balance of any outstanding works will be completed during the 2023/24 financial year.
- Procurement activities also continue, including review of required capital programme works needed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), incorporating 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)**

- Bi-monthly estates and compliance checks continue, and we are working with colleagues to ensure that bin stores and any scooter parking is located in the safest locations possible. Most communal hallways are clear when inspected, but staff regularly remind some tenants to remove their personal items/arrange for items to be removed.
- The team continues to have several very complex and time intensive cases running including cases related to County Lines, self-neglect, hoarding and significant mental health where we are working hard to support the tenant. Unfortunately, some of our tenants with complex needs are not easily persuaded to engage with the appropriate support and services and this can take some 'hand holding' by our staff to introduce and persuade them to engage with these services.
- The team are liaising well with the mental health teams that are supporting tenants who have had had mental health breakdowns and need to be accommodated within their wards due to significant mental illness. We meet with them to support them to return home, when and where appropriate and support them to end their tenancy where they will be moving to a more specialist provision. This engagement and support is often challenging and upsetting both for the tenants and staff.
- We have completed the paperwork for a 'Domestic Homicide Review', which will begin in the next few weeks, regarding one of our tenants who died.
- We regularly have deaths where there are no known next of kin, which can make ending the tenancy challenging and time-consuming. We have to ensure that tenants rights and property are protected until the necessary processes are in place for us to take back possession of the property. Our officers make enquiries with tenants during their annual review about next of kin to ensure this information is up to date for when it is required.
- We continue focussing on compliance work and are arranging for all the communal lofts to be emptied and secured/kept empty.
- We are liaising with Deane Helpline to be prepared for digital switchover in 2025 to ensure that all tenants have working equipment after this date.
- The team have been referring tenants who have damp and mould to have the areas treated and to provide advice and support.
- Business as usual continues day-to-day; sign ups, leaving wells, completing annual reviews, estates and block checks, ad-hoc calls and emergencies, referrals to specialist help and support, Deane Help Line Rota etc. The team has struggled with capacity in the past few weeks due to some sickness

## **Lettings**

- Customer satisfaction remains very high with both the Lettable standard of the property and the process of lettings the properties. The satisfaction surveys

via QR did not gain much traction the uptake was low. A manual system is now back in operation which affords a further opportunity to engage with tenants and gain valuable feedback.

- A further 34 properties have been let since the date of the last report.
- Average turnaround times per void is currently 37 days.
- Relet for a Minor void is 30 days against a target of 31 days.
- Relet for a Major void is 56 days against a target of 44 days.
- Since October 2022 478 properties have been let through HFS of which 153 were SWT properties accounting for 32%
- SWT have 3,815 applicants registered on HFS.
- An SWT 2-bed house will attract an average of 205 bids.

## **Income**

- Due to staff absence within the Debt and Benefit service, we are running at half capacity for at least 6 weeks. We will therefore be prioritising those tenants who are already in rent arrears and those new tenants who need support at the start of the tenancy to prevent them falling into arrears. We will then be prioritising other work in accordance to need and making referrals to CA and other support agencies, as necessary.
- The rent recovery officers continue to support tenants to reduce their rent arrears in accordance with the Lean Recovery process.
- We are working with a number of tenants who have very complex needs, these cases can be very time intensive.
- The team will continue to sign post to any grant funding which may be available for tenants to help with their rent arrears and also to help with the cost of living.

## **Tenancy/Estates & ASB**

- The Estates Team have now introduced a new Tenants Handbook. We are really pleased with the new handbook and hope that it will be of interest and useful to all our new tenants. We are also preparing a new version in preparation for vesting day.
- We are pleased that we have also been able to recruit a temporary Tenancy/Estates Case Manager, so we are back to having a full team. We will be looking to recruit for a permanent member of staff in April.
- We are now reporting that during the last few weeks we have experienced some serious anti-social behaviour. Resulting in two tenants being reprimanded in custody and another being sectioned. These extreme cases are becoming more frequent; as well as the concern for our other customers this is impacting on our staff and how they go about conducting the day-to-day work. We have also had to prepare two reviews from the Domestic Homicide safeguarding team.
- In the current climate we may not be always so visible to our tenants when working on the estates; we have also improved our lone working procedures.

## **Housing Performance Team Housing Performance Team (Shari Hallett)**

- It continues to be an incredibly busy time for us all with no sign of pressures relenting.
- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. On the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023 we held 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 is supporting the work of the Damp and Mould Action Plan and has already produced a new policy statement, webpage and leaflet.
- The Low Carbon Working group has continued to meet with a new focus on communication.
- A group of involved tenants have completed a mystery shopper exercise and we have presented the outcome to the group.
- The tenants' Spring newsletter has been posted and we are researching new ways to produce the newsletter from April 2023 (there will be printed and electronic versions).
- We are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- The policy review work started with the HQN is concluding, we are continuing to review policies that have been produced.

- We continue to strive for improvement in our complaint handling and have been able to maintain an average of 83% of stage 1 complaint investigations completed and responded to within standard since the beginning of October 2022. The Housing Ombudsman has not investigated any complaint made against us in this financial year to date, although they have advised landlords that they are currently around six months behind in their own workloads and investigations.
- Open Housing the new housing management software went live 27th July 2022. We are now finalising the texting (SMS) option, the tenant portal which we hope to be live in the next few months subject to any ICT freeze or restrictions imposed as a result of moving over ICT platforms to the new council. 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.

#### **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