

Governance Team to populate Report number: Report Number: SWT

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REPORT SIGNED OFF BY?	Date:14/07/20
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Somerset West and Taunton Council

Tenants Strategic Group – 20 July 2020

Housing Director Update Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Member for Housing, Councillor Francesca Smith

Report Author: James Barrah –Director of Housing

1 Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

To update the Tenants Strategic Group on key issues across the Housing and Communities Directorate since the last meeting and in particular to reflect on the Directorate response to the Corona virus pandemic. The report also raises some key issues forming the workplan of the Directorate over the coming weeks and months.

2 Recommendations

2.1 For the Tenants Strategic Group to note the report.

3 Director of Housing and Communities update.

Covid 19 Response

Understandably most of the focus of the Directorate since the last meeting has been in relation to our response to Covid 19, we have strived to provide the best support to tenants and the ongoing provision of essential services through this period as we could. I would like to acknowledge the flexibility, commitment and hard work of the team during the last few months, it has been exceptional in a period when our team will have had a range of their own personal impacts to address, I am very proud of them all.

Our activities during the lock down period are set out in the report but some key support is as follows:-

- We redeployed staff to contact all tenants over 55 or with a disability (3500) to check they were ok and to provide support if required.
- Letters were sent to residents to remind them of services and signpost to support.
- Supported tenant reviews were completed for sheltered tenants.
- Welfare Visits were undertaken where we could not make contact or had particular concerns, this resulted in some Adult Social Care referrals.
- Returning calls to those who requested regular call back.
- Provision of funded lifelines where we felt this necessary.
- Provision of food parcels from our distribution hub

Recruitment

We have more recently been undertaking recruitment activity to fully populate our structure following the organisation realignment into 4 Directorates. This process is going well with some internal and external appointments. This will ensure we have resources in the right place to take the business forward and deliver our ambitions.

Hinkley Point C - Housing Funding Strategy: We have £1.4M of developer contributions to invest in new housing initiatives. This includes proposals to support new affordable housing at Seaward Way (Minehead), provision of additional Temporary Accommodation, and investment in support services.

Directorate Governance

We are in the process of establishing our new Housing Performance Team but work is also underway to establish a new Performance framework and reporting structure for the Directorate, and we plan to increase our resident engagement capacity to improve our delivery in this area.

5. Assistant Director -Housing Development and Regeneration update.

Since April, seven new HRA homes have been acquired at Pyrlands Fields (making 17 in total) and five buy back properties have been identified for Buy back. The new SWT build Laxton Road scheme will complete eight homes this year.

Although lockdown has led to contractors reducing capacity on sites, our officers have used this time to prepare SWT new build schemes for member approval and to allow delivery as soon as possible after lockdown. Engie were selected as main contractor for North Taunton Woolaways and LA Moore have continued work on Phase A properties with demolition due to complete by November to allow work to then commence on site. 27 North Taunton Voids

have been made ready to support homeless families over the next 3-5 years which will have the added benefits of a rental income and preventing blight.

The team has prepared proposals for members for a 50 unit Zero Carbon Affordable Homes pilot and enabling works. The three priority schemes for the service are North Taunton Woolaways, Seaward Way and Zero Carbon Homes. Other Scheme sites include the Oxford Inn Taunton and Woolaway properties in Oake are also being prepared ready to progress at the appropriate time.

Housing enablers have been working with social housing partners to understand the Covid impact on their schemes and to be support them resuming delivery. Discussions are taking place with Homes England on accessing available grants for new build. Rural enabling work has seen a strong pipeline of homes coming forward and a partnership project with Exmoor national park is being finalised.

6. Assistant Director -Housing Property update.

Responsive Repairs, Void Repairs and Safety Checks

Essential emergency repairs have been ongoing through Covid and we have continued to meet our target response times on this work, despite resource pressures due to Covid restrictions. We moved to emergency only repairs once lockdown started but are now working on our backlog and have resumed non-emergency repairs (both backlog and new repair requests). It should be noted, however, that it will take some time to return to normal levels of service delivery in all areas of repairs work. Non priority repair requests slowed down during the lockdown period, we did however reach a backlog of 700 jobs. In the last few weeks non priority repairs have increased so it is likely the backlog may increase as the team try to deliver current jobs along with reducing the backlog.

Void repairs have been undertaken during the period, although reduced capacity and a need for social distancing in properties has inevitably led to delays in completion. We are developing plans to mitigate further delays and reduce our empty properties. We have maintained 100% compliance on gas safety checks as required by law, during lockdown.

Housing Property Safety Compliance

Significant progress on property safety compliance has been made, including:

- Fire Safety – ongoing delivery of Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) remedial actions; including fire safety housekeeping, signage and upgrading fire doors. We have started FRA sample audits to further validate safety measures on our properties.
- Asbestos – produced a new Asbestos Policy and procedure, and undertaken asbestos management surveys to communal areas.
- Electrical Safety – recommenced a programme of electrical checks to communal areas.
- Water Safety – procured contractor to undertake a programme of Water Risk Assessments.

Housing Asset Management

We are developing an approach to enable a return to survey work, including energy surveys and stock condition surveys. These will facilitate proposals to be developed for future energy efficiency programmes and planned maintenance work.

HRA Capital Programmes

All capital programmes ceased during lockdown. In the meantime, we have procured contracts and are planning our approach to recommence works, starting with external works (e.g. external painting and replacement soffits and gutters).

7. Assistant Director – Housing and Communities

Income

The Income and Rent Recovery teams have worked hard to support all our tenants through the financial effects of COVID-19, giving advice and helping tenants claim for benefits they are entitled to and make payment plans for ongoing payments. They continue to take the “Lean” approach and although arrears have risen slightly over the last couple of months (£711k) a reduction of £80k since the Lean review started. Across the country Registered Housing Providers have seen a 10% increase in arrears since April and SWT are slightly lower than that figure.

Anti Social Behaviour

Some increase in this area and officers are reviewing how cases are managed to ensure earlier involvement through our Tenancy Team and we are also reviewing our ASB policies.

Supported Housing

During lockdown, phone contact was made with all sheltered and extra care tenants, to check welfare and remind them of support available. We also referred to Village Agents for practical support for those shielding. Food parcels were delivered to tenants in crisis and in-person welfare checks for those not contactable by phone.

The vast majority of ‘Supported Housing Tenant Reviews’ have been completed, to provide current contact and medical information for Deane Helpline colleagues to respond to emergency call outs. Many tenants were also added to the Deane Helpline daily welfare calls schedule, to support those who were unable to get support from family or friends. Sheltered tenants are receiving a monthly welfare check by phone. Home visits are made only when necessary and safe to do so. Tenants needing aids and adaptations are assessed by phone and visited where necessary to complete the assessment.

Extra Care tenants were requested not to have visitors, to reduce the risk of Covid. Our staff and care providers have worked together to ensure tenants have food and medications and that people are not feeling isolated. Gardening staff have completed some works across the sites and this has been positive for tenants to see.

Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)

The Somerset Independence Plus has continued to work during the Covid Crisis and have been supporting clients by telephone as well as working with the Housing Options team occupational therapists. The team have been able during this time to identify client’s requirements and prioritise ready for when work can commence with the contractors and suppliers. Site visits to void properties have been undertaken in preparation and outdoor works where possible have been commenced. Indoor work is hoping to commence where safe to do so this month.

Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

During Covid, the Homelessness team initially saw demand drop off as S21 eviction notices were withdrawn by government. However this is now picking up again and we anticipate a surge in demand once lock-down lifts and the full impact of Covid is felt on the economy. We

are trying to mitigate this by encouraging landlords and tenants to contact us early if they are facing problems with rent.

To protect rough sleepers during Covid, we created the Canonsgrove rough sleeper accommodation to take rough sleepers off the streets and decant tenants from Lindley House into self-contained accommodation. We also brought 26 units forward at the Beach Hotel, Minehead. There are now 50 tenants at Canonsgrove, all who have individual support plans and receive support from a range of agencies. We are working hard with partners to find a sustainable solution to keep rough sleepers off the streets and build on the success of this project. Workshops with partner organisations and SWT officers are underway to develop proposals and recommendation for a solution for the future.

Lettings and Homefinder

When Covid started we stopped advertising new properties on Homefinder Somerset as only essential moves were allowed. Work continued so that tenants were ready for sign-up, to reduce delays when restrictions changed. We also facilitated direct matches into our properties for those who did meet the 'essential moves' criteria, which allowed us to minimise rent loss and free up temporary accommodation.

Restrictions have now been relaxed and we are advertising properties again and starting to enable moves for those who have been waiting for their property. We are in the process of allocating the 17 new properties at Pyrland Fields which we expect to be tenanted from mid-July.

A slowdown in demand during lockdown has also allowed the Homefinder team to successfully reduce a backlog of work. As restrictions have lifted the team have experienced a return to normal levels of new applications and an increase in phone calls. We have started running Homefinder renewals which will be a significant piece of work to ensure all applications are up to date and relevant.

Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny Committee – No**
- **Executive – No**
- **Full Council – No**

Reporting Frequency: Once only

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(IF YOU HAVE ANY QUERIES REGARDING THIS TEMPLATE PLEASE CONTACT THE GOVERNANCE TEAM governance@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk)