

## **Somerset West and Taunton Council**

**Tenants' Strategic Group – Monday 30<sup>th</sup> January 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 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**

- 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. A tenant low carbon retrofit group continues to meet and is focusing on the theme of timely communication with tenants during retrofit and capital investment programmes.
- 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. The project is timetabled to start in February and run for four years. A single contractor is delivering works funded by E-On.

- 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 funding will run for two years.
- SWT will let the first two new build SWT low carbon homes zero carbon at North Taunton in February. These dwellings are the first of 49 low carbon homes delivered in the next 12 months at Phase a North taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP). The council remain close to signing a contract for Phase B and Ci contract which will deliver 51 new low carbon affordable homes.
- Brick work at Seaward/Rainbow Way in Minehead is commencing and a consultation event for local people was held in January. 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 at Rainbow Way off Seaward Way will provide a variety of property types and be zero carbon. The scheme will complete in 2024.
- 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. 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 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 other 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 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).
- Performance levels for responsive repair requests (now being taken by a cohort of specialist repair call-handlers within the Corporate Customer Service team) has recently been challenged by maternity leave and sick leave within that team. This has led to a reduction in the previously improved performance levels reported, albeit there still remain less abandoned calls, faster answering, and more accurate detailed work orders being raised than was being achieved prior to the change in approach. We are reviewing this position carefully, including evaluation of required staffing levels, and introducing 'overflow' of calls to repairs schedulers when available.
- Our Repairs Service Improvement Plan (RSIP) has been further developed and many activities are being progressed. However, progress to improving ICT systems (e.g. job diagnosis and appointments, trades scheduling, contractor portal, etc.) and further review of available reporting functionality have been hampered 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 are seeking to streamline external contractor support to meet property performance turnaround targets.
- Following an external Materials Supplies Audit, we have progressed with implementing an updated imprest van stock and have also undertaken a stocktake of our stores.
- 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, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works.
- The new contract to undertake outstanding electrical inspections (EICR's) and associated remedial works is progressing well. We have streamlined the process to make appointments and have increased focus on 'hard to access' properties.
- We have implemented new iAuditor software to assist with 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.

- Additional procurement has taken place, including air source heat pump (ASHP) servicing, and extension of our stair-lift contract.
- We have mobilised a new radon monitoring contract.
- A street lighting safety assessment survey programme has been undertaken.
- Installation of alarms as required under the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (Amendment) Regulations 2022 has been completed.
- We have appointed Savills to undertake an independent review of our compliance activities, together with helping us develop a Building and Resident Health and Safety Strategy for the new Council.
- 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)**

- The officer team has 1 staff member off sick who will hopefully return to work in January 2023.
- The team continue to complete the fire/evacuation compliance checks and risk assessments for tenants who might struggle to evacuate themselves. We have several tenants identified needing to be moved, and they are receiving support with this.
- Bi-monthly estates and compliance checks continue. Unfortunately, staff have identified some tenants complying with the sterile building's expectations on the day the checks are completed, then putting mats etc. back out, once the checks are completed. This is being challenged and in the new year tenants will have details of the week the checks will take place, rather than the day and time.
- Compliance work is ongoing to relocate bin stores and scooter charging points in a safer location for tenants.
- The team have had several very complex and time intensive cases running. This has included; a tenant who needed to be sectioned due to the threat they were posing to others and themselves; a tenant with significant health and support needs discharged from hospital with no daily Carer support available for a week (no Carer was available); a property where there are concerns for possible drugs dealing/County Lines involvement; long-standing noise issues affecting neighbours sleep and quality of life and tenants with significant self-neglect.
- The team have also had to respond to several floods. In some cases, tenants haven't had anyone to stay with and we have had to accommodate them elsewhere, which has involved sourcing furniture, kitchen items etc. to enable them to have some 'normality' whilst the works are completed (usually takes 3-5 weeks).
- Fire doors – several tenants have reported challenges with the newly fitted fire doors (too heavy and difficult to open and very fast closing, a result). These are being adjusted to meet the tenants needs, but also enable them to live independently.
- Within sheltered housing and extra care, we have a regular turnover of tenants. We often have problems ending tenancies where the tenant has no next of kin. This can result in us having to take legal steps to take possession of the property, which takes additional time and finance, and delays to the

voids work and re-letting. We are keen to develop some agreements where Adult Social Care are involved, for them to be able to end tenancies.

- 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.
- Staff have been receiving training for the new IT systems, as part of the move to Unitary.
- Our Capital Works team have been able to complete some low-level shower tray installations for several tenants, which has resulted in tenants having better and safer access to their shower facilities. Unfortunately, tenant's requiring a change to a wet room are still being affected by the Somerset Independence Project covid backlog and delays.
- A fire drill has been held with staff at Kilkenny Court. Deane Helpline staff are based there too and took part. Plans are continuing for another drill, to involve tenants.
- The national Carer recruitment issue is affecting Carer services within Somerset and within our extra care schemes. Staff numbers are limited, and the Care Provider has also had to bring in agency staff to cover shifts. This is a concern, now and in the longer term, which we have raised with the Commissioners of the service.
- The national Social Worker recruitment issue is also affecting services within Somerset. We have made referrals to Adult Social Care, and whilst they have acknowledged that the tenant reaches the threshold for help and support, there can be a 8-12 week wait for people to be seen. This has resulted in the team being under strain having to respond to ongoing issues and concerns for the tenant(s) concerned. We have raised our concerns about this work being above and beyond a usual Landlord role and responsibility, but staff are doing what they can to try and keep people safe.

## **Lettings**

- Customer satisfaction remains very high Year to date average of 93% Tenants Action Group (TAG) visited properties to be returned to tenants after Voids works completed. They commented positively on the standard of the properties being returned and will feed this back to tenants.
- Team is now back to full strength after some staff time off through family bereavements.
- 3 tenants remain at Wordsworth Drive flats. Regular meetings with project team to move this forward.
- Home Moves Plus project is ahead of target.
- Local Lettings plan being written for North Taunton regeneration project and Seaward Way. Still work in progress.
- Lettings policy in progress additional work required on the above two items. Still work in progress.
- 22 properties let in December. YTD figure of 179 which give a monthly average of 22.3.
- Average relet days of 26 days for a Minor Void set against a target of 31 days.

- Average relet days of 41 for a Major void set against a target of 44 days

## **Income**

- The Rent Recovery Officers are working through our Lean Process for those tenants who failed to make payments over the Christmas period to ensure those tenants make up the missed payments.
- Court applications for Rent Recovery case which are now being applied for are not going to be heard until dates in March, so there is a delay on these with the court.
- The team are continuing to look at all options for tenants who are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. This includes applying for DHP's, any grant funding available, referrals to CA and to the Debt and Benefit Officers

## **Tenancy/Estates & ASB**

- Unfortunately, we have not been successful in shortlisting any candidates for the role of Tenancy and Estates Case Manager. Although we had 7 applicants, we felt that they did not meet the desired level to interview. We will readvertise this position in the next two weeks. We will continue using the temporary member of staff that we have in post until we can successfully recruit.
- The team are still dealing with high volume of enquiries.
- The team prior to Christmas were dealing with several staff absences due to colds/flu and this did have a knock-on effect with managing workloads
- Last month we reported on the Suspended Possession Order obtained against a tenant; we have now received further complaints about similar anti-social behaviour and are now pursuing an eviction warrant against the tenant.

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

- It continues to be an incredibly busy time for the team, staff absences due to illness and workload demands are being juggled every day.
- We continue to support the work of the Tenants Strategic Group and Tenants' Action Group. On the 24th November 2022 we held third joint tenant meeting with Homes in Sedgemoor, specifically to engage tenants on LGR. The next meeting is planned for the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

- 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.
- The Low Carbon Working group for tenants had their first meeting in July and has had meetings each month. The agreed outcomes agreed for the group have been achieved but the group has continued to meet with a new focus on communication.
- A group of involved tenants has started a mystery shopper exercise.
- The tenants' Christmas newsletter has been posted and we are researching new ways to produce the newsletter from April 2023. Work will need to begin now if changes are to be made in April 2023.
- We are collectively working with Homes in Sedgemoor on local government reorganisation workstreams.
- Our performance in managing complaints continues to improve. Response times on stage 1 complaints has increased from an average of 54% between April and July, to over 85% every month since. The team are working hard to thoroughly investigate complaints, to provide our tenants with great quality and comprehensive replies within the prescribed ten working days.
- 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. The Somerset Council Complaints Policy was shared in December 2022. The policy will proceed to Executive in January 2023 for approval.
- Our Tenant Satisfaction Survey report from November 2022 and the comments have been received and we will report to TSG in January 2023. Alongside the report we also received 260 comments which are being individually analysed and responded to where requested including 66 call backs.
- 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 February 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