

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING MANAGEMENT ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 12 September 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: John Lloyd (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Lizzy Kelly and Margaret Notley

In Attendance: Di Dharmasuriya (Service Delivery Manager – Property Repairs), Simon Nuttall (Housing Development Delivery Manager), Dennis Panter (M and E Compliance Manager) and Councillor Jeannette Thomas (Portfolio Holder – Housing, Health and Older People)

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.10pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from C Miller (Assistant Director – Stevenage Direct Services), F Plumridge (Tenant), L Saunders (Tenant), C Smith (Tenant), J Thurlow (Leaseholder) and Councillors L Martin-Haugh and L Harrington.

There were no declarations of interest.

The Members present recognised that, given the absence of customers, the numbers in attendance did not constitute a quorum. The issues before the HMAB did not require a decision as such and it was agreed that it would be worthwhile to receive the reports and to comment as appropriate.

2 **MINUTES - 15 AUGUST 2019**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Housing Management Advisory Board meeting held on 15 August 2019 be approved as a correct record but would not be signed by the Chair on this occasion given that this was an inquorate meeting.

3 **HOUSING DEVELOPMENT UPDATE**

The Housing Development Delivery Manager gave an update on progress at current and future Housing Development sites in Stevenage. The Manager highlighted developments at Gresley Way, Burwell Court, Ditchmore Lane, North Road, Symonds Green, Shephall Way and Kenilworth Scheme. It was announced that the Shephall Way development would be named Addison House to celebrate the centenary of the Housing Act 1919 ('Addison Act'). The Health Minister at the time, Christopher Addison, paved the way for large-scale council housing. The Housing

Development Delivery Manager informed the Board that pupils from Peartree Spring and Featherstone Wood Primary Schools had submitted drawings and paintings of what they thought houses would look like in the next 100 years. The winning entries would be projected as murals on the external walls of the building.

The Board welcomed the housing developments. Members welcomed the provision of Independent Living properties under the Council's current and future housing development plans.

The Housing Development Delivery Manager informed the Board that:

- The Council would endeavour to deliver more Independent Living properties in Stevenage
- Contrary to some news and social media reports, Asquith Court was empty and all former occupants had found accommodation in Council or private accommodation in Stevenage and other parts of the country
- The new community centre at Kenilworth was part of Phase Two of the project. However, the contract was flexible and there was an option to bring forward start dates for some aspects of the scheme

It was **RESOLVED** that the update be noted.

4 **INDEPENDENT LIVING ALLOCATION REVIEW REPORT**

The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) presented the report on the Panel's review of the allocation of Independent Living properties. The report covered the background to the review, methodology, recommendations, observations and positive findings. The review team reported that they had observed the independent living properties allocation pilot. The Panel endorsed the pilot and commended the supported housing officers involved in the pilot.

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) reported that the pilot had received positive feedback. It was anticipated that a full roll out of the pilot would contribute towards the reduction of long term voids. Plans were in place to provide self-serve options for customers. It was confirmed that the Council assessed requests for re-housing support and decorating grants on a case-by-case basis.

With regard to the observation that the Lettings pack did not have Universal Credit contact details, the HMAB noted that Universal Credit was a digital-only service. Members agreed that more support should be provided for people who were not computer literate or did not have access to the internet.

Members were informed that Les Isaacs – a member of the review team and founding CSP member – had resigned from the CSP after the review. The HMAB thanked the Panel for the review and expressed gratitude for Les Isaacs's contribution to the Customer Scrutiny Panel.

It was **RESOLVED** that the review be noted.

PROCUREMENT OF DOMESTIC GAS CONTRACT

The M and E Compliance Manager presented an update on the procurement of the domestic gas contract. The presentation highlighted the following:

- The Council had adopted the new MOT style service
- The MOT-style service will allow landlords to carry out the annual gas safety check in the two months before the due date and retain the existing expiry date
- SBC worked collaboratively with the current contractor to address the surge in customer complaints following the extreme winter of 2017/18 and shortcomings within the contractor's operations
- During the recovery period, the current contractor and the parent company (ForViva Housing Association) offered to develop a number of enhancements to the existing service using artificial intelligence. The enhancements would enable the Council to perform a full "Home MOT" in a single visit
- The full "Home MOT" would involve gas engineers carrying out gas safety inspections and test smoke & CO alarms, check the presence and condition of fire doors in appropriate properties, complete domestic legionella inspections and risk assessments and offer the tenant an opportunity to report repairs or report them on behalf of the tenant
- Artificial intelligence systems would use the full Home MOT information to generate an asset appraisal leading to an intelligence-led decent homes programme
- As part of the full Home-MOT, the operative would conduct tenancy checks including tenant I.D. and contact details, safeguarding and subletting flags and give the tenant the opportunity to arrange a tenancy officer visit
- A variety of council-owned and operated assets in larger housing blocks are currently maintained as extras to the communal gas contract
- There is a separate Legionella contract for 25 Housing and Investment sites that are owned and operated by the Council. The current Legionella contract expires in August 2020

The M and E Compliance Manager indicated that following an options appraisal, it was proposed that the new contract mobilise in mid-summer (and not October). It was also proposed that robust Service Level Agreements, Key Performance Indicators and performance incentives be included to give SBC control over the contract. It was reported that the new contracts would have the Home MOT as a development option and would have scope for additional assets and additional commercial properties.

In response to questions, the Compliance Manager informed the HMAB that:

- Leaseholders would not automatically be offered the Home MOT service. However, extending the service to leaseholders would ensure uniformity of service
- Leaseholders would not require Home MOT tenancy checks
- SBC was on target for the statutory gas safe compliance requirements
- There was a statutory requirement for the Council to keep records of gas inspections for its housing stock

- Gas certificates were uploaded to the Northgate system overnight and currently the certificates were kept indefinitely
- The Home MOT would enable tenancy officers to focus on customers that required more assistance
- There was no provision for penalty clauses in the gas contract. However, the new gas contract would provide incentives by paying the contractors performance-related incentives for work such as out-of-hours calls
- If a tenant continually denied officers/contractors entry to a property the Council would use its legal right to make forcible entry to carry out gas safety checks and ensure the continued safety of tenants. Forced entry was used 12 times per year on average and most of these properties turned out to be abandoned

The Portfolio Holder welcomed the proposal to include a development option in the new contract. The Assistant Director confirmed that requests for decoration grants were assessed on a case-by-case basis. It was indicated that the Home MOT system would eliminate duplication of tasks and also enable better utilisation of resources. The Assistant Director highlighted efforts to introduce more technology to ways of working and to encourage officers to be more visible.

It was **RESOLVED** that the update is noted.

6 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The HMAB thanked the Portfolio Holder (Housing, Health and Older People) for her recent media engagements that were aimed at highlighting and setting the record straight on housing developments in Stevenage.

7 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Thursday 24 October 2019, 6.00pm

Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete

CHAIR