

# Tenant Board Meeting

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2024

## Attendees:

Gerry Crease	Tenant Board Member
Marcus Cooper	Tenant Board Member
Liz Perryman	Tenant Board Member
Tony Cole	Tenant Board Member
Paula Warren	Potential Tenant Board Member
Arthur Charvonia	Chief Executive Officer
Deborah Fenton	Head of Housing
David White	Housing Transformation Manager
Georgia Mecoy	Tenant Engagement Co-ordinator
Kerry Lecomber	Tenant Engagement Co-ordinator
Cllr Richard Winch	Housing Portfolio Holder
Rob Longfoot	Tenant Services Manager

## Apologies

Lisa Benjamin

## Actions from last meeting and introduction

Paula Warren was introduced who is a tenant and staff member who is interested in joining the board.

1. Training pack – still working on it.
2. Southwark Report – done.
3. Information on rents included on the dashboard – will be on next dashboard.

On 1. GM requested feedback once she has provided it.

## Arthur Charvonia – introduction and questions

AC thanked Board for inviting him and advised he would be available for any or all meetings in the future. He also thanked the Board for all they did.

AC advised his view is that Housing was the No.1 priority with Council Housing being the main focus and that the tenants were the most important thing within that. He advised this view was deep rooted in politicians and the officers and also really important as it's the single biggest way we can have a positive impact in our communities. Ensuring tenants are living healthy and happy lives in safe and comfortable homes is the most important thing we can do.

He feels that this is the most significant time for Housing in the 7 plus years he has worked for BMSDC.

He then addressed questions that the Board had posed beforehand.

## Q1. What does future look like and will we merge?

AC advised in the near future no – in part because it's not something quick to do. The absolute earliest we could merge would be by April 2027. Fair to say that for both Councils there is not an instinct to want to merge. However, the way in which we work together has become closer and closer. We are one organisation despite being two councils as we're that integrated. Two exceptions – politicians and budgets. Legally prevented from one council subsidising the other. There is no will on either side to separate at all and we will continue to do more together where we can. A merger would effectively be the dissolving both Babergh and Mid Suffolk and creating a new

council. However neither council can ignore their financial situation so if it came to a point that it makes financial sense for tenants and residents it would be a prospect. Lastly even if they did want to come together we would need permission from Government.

RW: advised agreement with AC. In short term want to work together as closely as possible and longer term are open minded. In terms of how it would benefit tenants, we would be guided by that rather than political angles and he can see certain scenarios where it would benefit.

AC advised we would have to meet tests set by Government. 1. In what way would that be better value for money? 2. Does it provide a more effective mechanism of governance? 3. Is there support for it – stakeholders etc?

MC: Mentioned 2027 – is that due to Mid Suffolk being possibly 2 years away from possible bankruptcy.

AC advised no it was not possible to do it before rather than that's when it will happen. That timing is due to all the hoops we have to go through; consultation, paper to government, law has to be passed and then it's generally done at District election. In terms of money however, if there comes a point where we look at the numbers then clearly it makes sense to look at every single possible opportunity. Not always better financially to merge, can make the position worse. MSDC financial position for everything else is very strong – unusually so. However in terms of Housing – and we are obliged to keep things separate – it goes bankrupt after a certain number of years and we can't allow that to happen.

LP: A few months ago we were shown a pie chart of all the finances and she noticed – why is Housing given so little and places she could see seemed to get so much finance.

AC: Not many people know but the way in which Council Housing finances are structured is we can only spend money from rent on Council Housing. All other money we get in in terms of parking, planning, council tax etc. we can't spend on Housing. For whatever reason the Government want these things completely ring fenced. There are some very rare exceptional circumstances where you can take money from General Fund and spend on Housing account but message we got was – you need permission from the Secretary of State and you need to have fallen over the cliff before we'll even consider it – rather than walking towards the cliff worrying. So we have to make it worse before we can even consider it. We also can't even become a charity and get people to pay towards.

RW: He agrees it's an utterly bonkers system and he hopes we can get the new government to change any of the rules. Mid Suffolk has Gateway 14 and we can't spend any income from it on our housing stock which is insane. Originally having rents pay for the service made sense but now we have increased regulation and need for insulation etc. Eventually the penny will drop with central Government.

AC: As Richard described that money that comes in, not only can we not build social housing, but we can build private housing! Also usually when Government introduce changes that we need to respond to, for everything other than council housing they give us funding called 'new burden's which goes towards what they've asked. However they don't ever give anything when they change the rules for Council Housing properties – retrofitting, standards etc. they give us no new money as they think it should all come from rent. We are lobbying hard with other councils on this approach – it's going to make us all bankrupt so going to end up with less good quality council housing.

AC: We have also brought a motion to both Councils tomorrow to write to Government.

## **Q2. If we do end up merging how will budgets work?**

Short answer he doesn't know what the rules are as he's not sure anyone's ever done it before. In both East and West they didn't have two HRAs as they weren't both stockholding. With Council Tax if you bring two councils together you get a grace period of 5 years within which you have to equalise the tax rates. He therefore assumes would have to do the same around rents.

DF: It comes down to the level of debt and if one has more than the other it becomes really complicated as you have to deal with it against the value of properties. She doesn't have an easy answer because of the debt issue.

AC: At the moment we absolutely have to keep them separate as it's a legal matter. Part of the point of a merger is that you could actually subsidise as it would become legal.

RL: Rents – just to reassure everyone they are set on a govt formula to do with bedrooms and value of property so rents themselves are set and wouldn't change so to reassure everyone.

### **Q3. When we're inspected by RSH and get gradings etc. how will tenants know?**

AC asked the Board: How do we think you should? From his perspective he wants to make sure they know and can continue to hold us to account.

GC: One of his pet peeves is that all govt or local govt organisations want everything digital but 10% are not connected digitally. In spite of everything must be universally available to everyone – phone, face to face and well publicised everywhere.

AC: Also we should know our tenants well enough to know that. I spend so much time online but his preference is still face to face.

PW: Local newsletters – In Touch with Stowmarket?

DW: We know that about 20% of our tenants aren't online which is the base we're working towards. Conversations with RSH are starting to focus more on providing equitable services. Long gone are the days where blanket services are OK. That includes communications – so the scrutiny project you ran this year on Tenant Handbook which is a long document would be expensive to provide in hard copy so we're looking at local ward members, libraries, CAB etc. Can't forget that not all our tenants are online.

GM: A lot of those suggestions came from the Board and Scrutiny Panel.

AC: Also from his perspective need to be as inclusive as possible for beyond that there's the need for it to be available for those who can't read, or see, or speak English. Also a responsibility to help people be online who do want to be as it supports those who do want to and will benefit from it.

KL: Liaising with Town and Village councils and utilising their publications can also work to reach rural communities.

LP: Lives in tiny village. Is there a reason you can't use traditional media – radio, press, local news etc.. Could big news be given out that way?

AC: No legal reason we can't and there have been TV and radio adverts for other things. Expensive but nothing to prevent us legally.

### **Housing update – Deborah Fenton**

DF updated on Building Services Transformation, HRA and some news about how we're improving services in Housing Management.

#### **Building Services**

DF took the meeting through the decision 3 years ago that repairs, maintenance and compliance needed improvements. Deep dive was carried out and a transformation programme started. Looked seriously at the numbers of each team needed and a large scale change was agreed to be needed. Currently the compliance and planned programme roles are recruited to. That was done first as we were breaching some of the H&S standards. RSH is now really pleased with the work, we are compliant and they are now saying they are expecting us to write to them and request to come out of close regulation.

On the repairs side recruiting trades people. Lots of the existing people applied for jobs and they tested them all out properly with external regulation – both qualification and experience. That should be complete next month.

In January a new job management system will be brought in to address the issue of operatives not turning up or wrong operatives being booked. System is a scheduling tool which is dynamic and have new planners in team who are experienced. New suppliers with van stock. It's taken time but we're nearly there. Will continue to measure and capture any improvement and your team will ensure that you are all kept up to date no progress.

GC: Have you considered cross-training – i.e. having someone who can come in and do repairs of something that isn't their major trade?

DF: Very good point and we haven't got multi-trade and that's because there are minimal levels of qualifications for each trade and it's really hard to find people with qualifications for more than one. However what we need to do is minimise inconvenience – which will be continuously under review.

DW: Also done a lot of work on process mapping so jobs schedule both jobs at the same time – system will identify if a job will need a plumber, electrician and plasterer.

GC: how have the Unions taken it?

DF: We have consulted with them all along, they've had questions but no significant challenge. We have answered those questions along the way. We have however really sought to look after our staff along the way.

## HRA

DF advised she has done a session before on the history of this so won't go over it but if anyone wants more information she can provide an article. **Action: she'll provide to GM or KL and they can include in Minutes.**

Stock Condition Survey has now taken place which enables us to ensure that we can plan work so we know how much we need to spend in the next 5 years on kitchen, bathrooms, heating etc. Now at 97% completed which is being modelled into financial plan and that will go to Cabinet members to look at next 5 years and 30 years. Thankfully it's not too different to what we originally thought so no significant increase to spending needed.

Bit of a challenge now as the Govt has now started another consultation on Decent Homes. Our Stock Condition Survey was based on current Decent Homes Standard.

TC – was the company carried out by Ridge? Advised they are and TC advised very happy to have his done.

Have recently done work on financial plans and know there are real challenges. Will have to introduce Service Charges and will keep you all updated and ask for views as we go along reviewing the business plan.

## Housing Management

Anti-social behaviour, Estates, Rent, Communal gardens – Roan, Rosi, Polly etc. who the Board have met and all report into Rob Longfoot. What we do know is that we have a chunk of the rent money which sits in Housing Solutions – Homelessness, allocations etc. Have looked at it carefully along with the TSMs and we do know that as a provider of social housing we don't have enough feet on the ground, not enough door-knocking and not visible enough. What we are planning to do is a restructure in both Solutions and Management so that in Management we will have a significant increase in resources to provide those services to tenants. Patch size for Neighbourhoods and HO's is about 1100 properties – which needs to be significantly reduced to 400 or 500 so those officers can really make a difference. So watch this space, it's something which will be discussed at this board so expect to see draft structures and ideas as to functions etc.

LP: Payments of services going out of HRA and yet AC said that comes out of General.

DF clarified – if you live in a block of flats will have communal lighting, repairs, cleaning service, Fire Risk Assessments and those will be charge back as service charges however they are covered by benefits. Service charges are for paying for services to communal areas.

RL: In terms of waste worth pointing out – fly tipping on HRA land will recharge those through services charges but if persistent litter picking needed that's separate.

DF: Grounds Maintenance is not charged for yet.

GM: Enquired if Board will see structures – can they have it at next meeting?

DF: Will liaise with DW.

### **Anti-social behaviour (ASB) update – Rob Longfoot**

Shared 4 slides and presented on fourth as the rest were self-explanatory.

RL took meeting through procedure. We do lots of things through ASB policy and it's shared by three teams so need to have one policy that covers everything.

Did some research into people who have experienced our ASB service and found some communication issues.

Policy is still all in a draft version at the moment so any comments / questions are welcome.

### **Chair and Vice-Chair**

One nomination for Chair and none for Vice-Chair. GM explained the situation so will take it outside of meeting. LP has nominated herself as chair and has a lot of experience. Requests all to sent email before cob Friday advising yes, no or abstain. LP advised she was chair of last board and chair when it was the Babergh tenants forum, been a tenant a long time and a tenant Board member a long time. Is an active member and can be more so now.

In terms of Vice Chair GM advised their job was mainly to step in when Chair is unavailable and there were no members who wanted to put themselves forwards.

GM advised can look at Terms of Reference and can wait another year. DW advised leave the position open and hope to recruit to it in the coming months.

### **Terms of Reference**

GM advised we wanted to review this each September. She and KL have found a couple of bits that need clarification – one of which is the Breach of Tenancy. LP advised use 'severe' breach of tenancy and give some examples of what that is.

Second is to think about staff tenant board members. So thought we should be a little more specific.

RW: Makes sense – would have to have a declaration of interest for everyone.

DW: Reword to talk about personal development rather than professional development so will change wording

**KL suggested adding Declarations of interest as a standing item on the agenda which all agreed – Action.**

### **AOB**

- December meet up – Recommendations of places and evenings agreed to be better.
- **Action: GM will send dates and hopefully agree.**
- Will be trying to carry out 1:2:1s.
- KL focussing on CADs and GM focussing on Tenant Board.