

Thursday, 17 March 2022

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Homelessness Prevention and Social Housing

Council Housing Rent Accreditation

Exempt Information

None

Purpose

1. To outline Housing Quality Network's (HQN) 'Maximising Income and Sustaining Tenancies' (MIST) Accreditation Award to Tamworth Borough Council, including the assessment process and findings report.
2. To update Cabinet on Tamworth Borough Council's 'Maximising Income and Sustaining Tenancies, 3 Year Improvement Action Plan 2022 – 2025'.

Recommendations

Cabinet are recommended to:

1. Acknowledge the independent assessment resulting in the Re-Accreditation of the Councils council housing rent and tenancy sustainment services.
Appendix D: Assessment Report.
2. Approve the Council's Maximising Income and Sustaining Tenancies, 3 Year Improvement Action Plan 2022 – 2025'. **Appendix A: Action Plan.**

Executive Summary

Maximising rental income directly supports the Councils Vision, ***Tamworth - celebrating our heritage, creating a better future***. Tackling the causes of poverty and financial hardship, and ensuring a *one council* approach to the management of debt is central to the Councils core purpose around ensuring sustainable and resilient communities.

The Council has a corporate project around welfare reform which includes the management of council income streams; and collection of council housing rents is a significant part of this, led by the Neighbourhoods Team. During the Pandemic the Department Levelling Up Communities and Housing issued a raft of guidance and support to people facing financial hardship. This has included things like

- Repeated guidance on renting and arrears management

- Moratorium on possession proceedings for periods to support COVID related restrictions
- Introduction of schemes such as Breathing Space
- Financial support including £20 per week uplift to Universal credit, furlough scheme, £500 test and trace support payment, Household Fund for food and essential supplies

Despite the pressures from the Pandemic Income continues to be maximised and current arrears performance continues to compare well when benchmarked. This is annually reported to Cabinet as part of the tenants' annual report.

The table below shows performance trends, over the past four years, against recognised key performance indicators.

Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
% of rent collected (incl arrears b/f)	101%	101.14%	101.92%	101.57%
% of rent collected (excl arrears b/f)	103%	103.33%	104.77%	104.42%
Total rent collected (£)	£17.699m	£17.527m	£17.672m	£18.094m
Current arrears as % of debit	2.45%	2.82%	2.87%	2.66%
Current arrears value £	£434k	£494k	£507k	£481k
(Former tenant arrears) FTA value £	£633k	£685k	£699k	£720k
Total debt only £	£1.07m	£1.18m	£1.21m	£1.20m
FTA collected £	£36,547	£54,084	£80,169	£90,917
FTA collected %	5.77%	7.89%	11.47%	12.63%
FTA as % of debit	3.57%	3.90%	3.95%	3.98%
Value of rent written off	£42,176	£25,260	£57,249	£51,849
Evictions for rent arrears (number)	18	13	9	0

Note: The figures detailed above only refer to current and former rent arrears, they do not include any other debts i.e. current and former garage arrears, court costs and repair recharges etc. The overall total debt outstanding will therefore be higher than the rent arrears figures detailed above and are reported on separately by the Council's finance team.

Part of the Housing Rent tenancy sustainment service has always sought to benchmark and learn from best practice. Concurrent to this work, the Council is also undertaking a self-assessment of its Council housing services around consumer and economic compliance – having a robust and comprehensive approach to income management will be important for that.

Previously the rent accreditation process has routinely included an annual external review from Housing Quality Network, with a three-yearly full assessment identifying strengths and areas for improvement so the Council can continue to evidence high

quality services including supporting those most vulnerable in the councils housing stock. As a result of this process the councils housing income services continues to be externally accredited; and the improvement plan updated with latest findings. Progress on the last action plan is available on request.

Between November and December 2021, the Council underwent this anticipated and full housing rent/income assessment. As a result of that process, which in itself is externally moderated by an independent panel, Tamworth were awarded a further 3 years accreditation based on its continued delivery of high quality services across its full range of services, evidenced through partner and stakeholder feedback to the inspectors. (December 2021-December 2024) The award notification and certificates are shown at **Appendix B: Award Letter. Appendix C: Certificate**

Independent Panel Approach

Feedback from the review follows usual conventions, namely to set out areas identified as positive practice, key organisational strengths and areas for improvement which then inform recommendations for the Councils improvement plan. These are summarised below.

Areas of Positive Practice

Set out below as just a few of the positive comments the Council received from the Independent & Accreditation Panel;

- *“They appear to strike to right balance between support and enforcement, with good examples of supportive case management.”*
- *“They clearly care a great deal about their tenants’ wellbeing and sustaining their tenancies”.*
- *“The support on offer for Tamworth’s residents is excellent and the Accreditation Report shows strong links with Citizens Advice and the DWP and good joint working with other teams within the Council in order to provide a well-rounded offer of support to residents.”*

Strengths Identified

Tamworth Borough Council demonstrates;

- ✓ service strengths in all six rent accreditation standards modules
- ✓ a strong offer to support residents’ financial well-being including where there are multiple tenancy and debt issues including, early intervention/prevention, budgeting and benefit advice
- ✓ a strong performer on rent collection and arrears management, with the collection rate and arrears likely to be in the top quartile compared with HouseMark benchmarking data
- ✓ has clear strategic, policy and performance framework that is reflective of best practice, with an explicit focus on tenancy sustainment, looking to avoid legal action unless necessary
- ✓ confidence levels regarding the shape and direction of the service
- ✓ no material weaknesses in rent income management

Areas for Improvement

Inevitably, and as part of the process, HQN have identified areas for improvement which have been integrated into the improvement plan for approval. These were well received and support Officers own assessment of opportunities for continual improvement.

Below is a summary of the key areas for improvements;

1. policy framework including document control to be strengthened
2. measurement of customer satisfaction with service with the findings shaping future delivery
3. the monitoring of service demand to ensure that appropriate staffing resources are available and allocated efficiently
4. tenant involvement and participation, possibly through the Council's wider community engagement initiatives
5. the digital offer, in line with the digital inclusion strategy continue to explore and develop the digital service offer
6. pre-tenancy work, supporting and assisting tenants from start of tenancy
7. sustained performance focus on former tenancy rent arrears recovery
8. Take up of direct debt payment, through promotion of the ease and benefits of this payment type

The action plan has been developed by the Council's Neighbourhood Income Team together with the Tenants Consultative Group, which incorporates all of HQN's recommendations outlined in their assessment report.

The Tenants consultative group continue to be involved with the development of this service critical action plan, During the last tenant meeting in January 2022, tenants agreed the action plan is fundamental to ensuring tenants continue to receive all the right support, information and advice they need to pay their rent on time and minimise debt.

Progress and monitoring of the action plan will be reported to;

- ✓ Members via Pentana Project Highlight Report
- ✓ Senior Management and Officers via monthly performance meetings and where relevant on the council housing live dashboard on the web
- ✓ Tenants via tenant consultative groups
- ✓ Discussed with the Portfolio Holder and when relevant via the Homelessness Prevention and Social Housing sub committee

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Delivery Timetable

Tenants Group involvement with the drafting of the 3 Year Action Plan	January 2022 & March 2022
Communication Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website update • Open House 	January 2022 – April 2022

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press Release – all council approved social media platforms, via communications team • HQN website & press release • Strap line on rent letters • Internal briefings / newsletters 	
Implement 3 Year Action plan	March 2022 – end March 2025
Monthly Monitor & Review Progress of Action Plan via <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TCG & Neighbourhoods Performance monitoring framework 	Ongoing March 2022 – end March 2025

Report Author

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Background Papers Appendices

Appendix A – Accreditation award letter
 Appendix B – Accreditation award certificate
 Appendix C – Accreditation assessment report
 Appendix D – Accreditation 3 Year Action Plan 2022-2025

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