

Minutes of Meeting

Meeting Name: Shropshire Towns & Rural Housing Limited

Meeting Location: Microsoft Teams

Date and Time: Tuesday 21st September 2021 14:00 – 16:35

Members present:

Chair – Tony Deakin (Independent) TDk
Julia Buckley (Shropshire Council) JB
James Willocks (Shropshire Council) JWI
Paul Hayward (Co-Optee) PH
Val Jones (Tenant) VJ

James Wood (Independent) JW
Mark Jones (Shropshire Council) MJ
Emma Jones (STAR) EJ
Paul Weston (Co-Optee) PW
Sue Norris (Tenant) SN

**Non-Members
Present:**

Sue Adams (STAR) SA
Steve Ogram (STAR) SO
Jessica Beech (STAR) JBe
Jane Trethewey (Shropshire Council) JT
Ayyaz Ahmed (STAR) AA

Claire Allen (STAR) CA
Jo Williams (STAR) JoW
Angela Simpson (STAR) AS
Lucy Heath (Shropshire Council) LH

1.	Apologies	<p>TDk opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to the STAR Housing Board meeting. TDk welcomed Val to the meeting as our new Tenant Board member and also welcomed Jessica as the new Corporate Support Officer. TDk introduced himself as the new Chair. All members introduced themselves to the Board.</p> <p>Apologies were received from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steve Robinson (SR) • Sue Norris (SN) <p>Mark Jones was nominated to be Vice-Chair at the last board meeting. TDk requested to formally vote MJ in. All Board members agreed. MJ was formally appointed as Vice-Chair.</p> <p>TDk stated we are keen for Board meetings to take place face to face when safe to do so after the face-to-face meeting of the AGM.</p> <p>TDk – ‘I would also like to formally say goodbye to Nicki Barker, our former Vice-Chair and former Chair who recently stepped down. We have thanked Nicki for her tremendous service and SA has sent some flowers. Nicki hopes to attend our AGM next month.’</p>		
2.	Declaration of Interests	<p>TDk asked the Board if they have any interests to declare on any items on the agenda.</p> <p>EJ declared an interest in the staffing matters and review of the tenants’ voice (items 6 and 9).</p>		
3.	Minutes from STAR Board Meeting 6 th July 2021	<p>TDk asked all members if they had received a copy of the Minutes to the previous meeting and if these Minutes are an accurate reflection of the meeting.</p> <p>Everyone confirmed they are happy with the minutes.</p> <p>TDk advised that a copy of the Minutes will be signed and placed in the Minute book.</p>		
4.	Matters Arising	<p>TDk advised that there was one matter arising: AA to send MJ list of community chest successful applicants over the past year. MJ confirmed this has been actioned.</p>		

		No other matters were raised.		
5.	Review of Constitution and Schedule of Delegation	<p>SA introduced the report and said the emergency Written Resolution agreed to help manage business during the pandemic emergency has been discussed at previous meetings and now was the time to review if more permanent changes to the Constitution or Schedule of Delegations are required. Given ongoing uncertainty about the timescale for a return to "normal" ways of working it was felt this review was timely.</p> <p>SA has discussed this with the Council and JT, this is outlined in the paper shared with the Board. At the AGM we will formalise some arrangements as outlined in the paper. SA has consulted with Anthony Collins solicitors with regard to the legal arrangements and also to ensure the wording is right, there is work still to be done on this prior to the AGM.</p> <p>TDk asked JT to comment on the changes and if she was happy with the proposal. JT said that this was a reasonable approach as Anthony Collins are a leading law firm with a great deal of experience in this area of work. JT had asked her assistant LH to look over and check for any last minute comments, any issues raised etc. LH had checked the documents and was happy, there were no comments to raise at this time.</p> <p>TDk – feels we have some reassurance from the commissioning of Anthony Collins.</p> <p>The Board all agreed the recommendation to:</p> <p>Approve the suggested changes in the Constitution and authorise the Managing Director to develop a written resolution for a revised Constitution to be presented at the AGM for approval by the Shareholder.'</p> <p>The Board all agreed the recommendation to: Approve exploring changes in the Schedule of Delegations to be considered by the Board in November.</p>		
6.	People Strategy	<p>TDk handed over to Claire Allen.</p> <p>CA presented slides on the People Strategy 2020-2024 and provided an overview of the 20/21 results against the PI's set out in the People Strategy. Results from 2021 Staff Survey saw a 3% drop in staff satisfied with STAR as an employer, target</p>		

		<p>was 90%, achieved 88% compared to 91% in 2019. CA said we are not surprised by this result as it is recognised that staff have seen unprecedented changes to work practices in the last 18 months.</p> <p>Existing staff who recommend STAR as an employer is 93%, this was a 9% increase on results achieved in 2019, staff had commented positively on the support received from STAR and the way the organisation had handled the pandemic.</p> <p>There has been a dramatic down turn in satisfaction with arrangements for 1-2-1s, target was 80%, achieved a result of 69% so 11% under target. It is interesting to note that 77% of staff feel that they have clear and regular feedback outside of 1-2-1s. This tends to suggest that conversations are taking place informally but staff aren't recognising these as 1-2-1s. In recent years the organisation has put an emphasis on quality of conversation rather than paperwork so rather than have set templates to use across the organisation, teams have been tasked with agreeing format of discussions to meet service and individual needs. CA expressed the figures are a little disappointing and there is some room for improvement here.</p> <p>The HR team are currently working on the Confident Manager Programme and 121 training for managers will be a priority as will managing teams remotely. We hope to launch the Confident Manager Programme in autumn to give managers the opportunity to assess skills and identify areas for development and formulate training plans where appropriate.</p> <p>82% of staff were satisfied with the arrangements for Teams meetings so above target of 80%. CA stated it was good to see an improvement. Feedback from staff is that remote meetings are more effective use of time and cost saving on travel.</p> <p>85% of staff were satisfied that they know how to access organisational policies, the same percentage was achieved for satisfaction with access to training and development opportunities, both hit target.</p> <p>Overall feedback on what STAR does well from the survey identified supporting staff, communication, caring and supporting tenants, allowing a flexible approach and IT. When asked what could be improved some staff felt that communication</p>		
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		<p>could be improved. Throughout the pandemic the MD has done a weekly update to all staff. Staff felt the newsletter is helpful.</p> <p>Another area for improvement was better line management. A suite of training will be developed to cover key performance management areas including 1-2-1s.</p> <p>Vacancies filled - our target is to fill 80% of vacancies at first advert, our actual figure for last year was just 50% filled at first advert. External recruitment has been challenging through the pandemic and continues to be so. We are seeing reports of issues across lots of sectors and construction has been identified as a high skill shortage area. The vacancies that we struggled to fill include an Electrician, Energy Surveyor and PA posts. In the short term we have found ourselves working more closely with agencies to find suitably qualified recruits. A review of recruitment practices is currently a priority for the HR service. We do however need to be mindful of the sample size on this PI, we are only looking at 6 vacancies so this does skew percentage figures.</p> <p>Our target set in the People Strategy is to employ 6 apprentices, historically we have only had 4 trade apprentices but we increased the target following the success of an apprenticeship in the Lettings Team in Bridgnorth which resulted in an appointment to a permanent post. Our desire to increase apprenticeship opportunities have been scuppered somewhat by the pandemic. Given remote working arrangements for our office based staff and need for supervision and support for apprenticeship roles it hasn't been possible to develop further opportunities but we hope that this can be addressed in forthcoming months. Although we are reporting on performance for last year we do need to acknowledge that we have seen a dramatic downturn in the numbers of apprentices employed in Q1 this year, when 3 of our existing trade apprentices left the organisation to take up employment elsewhere. All 3 were due to complete their training in August this year so it was disappointing they did not complete full apprenticeship prior to leaving but all moved on to paid full time employment with the same employer. Positively, the apprentice who remained at STAR and completed the training has now been appointed to a permanent operative post in our Oswestry team. Work is also well underway to recruit our new cohort of trade apprentices, 4 offers have been made subject to pre-employment checks.</p> <p>Early leavers during employment are staff who leave or are managed out during probationary period (first six months of employment). If someone does not perform</p>		
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		<p>or if conduct issues arise early in employment then it's much more straightforward to manage staff out via probationary period. 2020 saw no early leavers. There has been one early leaver in Q1 this year.</p> <p>Voluntary staff leavers - target is 12%, our actual turnover last year was 5.22% so we were well within target.</p> <p>The PI for staff exiting the organisation who recommend STAR as an employer is 85%, we achieved 100% on this in 20/21. It does need to be noted that only 3/8 leavers completed the online questionnaire that is voluntary. We are looking to improve engagement in this process.</p> <p>Our target average number of working days lost due to sickness (ALD) is 9.5 days, our actual figure this year was 8.55 days, this is the first year that we have come in under target. From Peer comparisons we know that given the size of the organisation we don't perform well overall in terms of (ALD) and we rank in the lower quartile, our head count is low and a small number of long term sickness absences can skew the overall figures. This is confirmed when we compare our short term sickness with peers, our figure is fairly low and we rank in the upper quartile for this. We know that sickness cannot be prevented but we continue to work on support and interventions to get staff back to work in the shortest time.</p> <p>TDk stated that he can see how covid restrictions have affected performance in some areas. TDk also noted that he is glad CA highlighted recruitment as an area for improvement. Recruitment is an area that is affecting a number of organisations across a lot of sectors and TDk would welcome seeing the future reports on recruitment.</p> <p>TDk acknowledged the work programme and where we are with the PI's and thanked CA for the extensive information presented.</p>		
7.	Sustainability Strategy	<p>TDk handed over to Angela Simpson who introduced the Strategy.</p> <p>AS confirmed that the strategy follows on from the presentation she made to Board in May and the subsequent Bratch report that had been commissioned. AS confirmed that all members had had the opportunity to look at the strategy and action plan. AS said lots happening in the industry at the moment and the most important thing out of this is to be given the flexibility to address the issues as we</p>		

		<p>know the direction we are taking. AS advised that the comfort we have is that we [STAR] are coming from better place with regard to the information that is held on current stock. A lot of work has already been done to upgrade and insulate properties and there is a window programme in place. There are however a number of fundamental financial and technological issues that the organisation will need to address such as how the funding gap of over £100 million could be overcome to bring all properties up to net zero by 2030. This amount averages to around 30k per property to bring them up to standard and there still remains the issue of customers giving access for the work to be carried out.</p> <p>AS said she feels we need to deliver more education to those people who are resistant to the work required. They do not want to make changes to cut costs and be more energy efficient such as having loft insulations even when there are money saving incentives. AS said she would welcome any examples of good practice from other organizations and any good ideas on how we can overcome these challenges.</p> <p>MJ asked for clarification on regulations for right to buy if STAR spend a lot of money and then the property is sold via RTB.</p> <p>AS was unsure as to whether this expenditure could be looked at under the right to buy cost. If a property is valued at £140k with discount valued at £100k, the cost of capital repairs can be offset against discounts.</p> <p>SO noted that the cost of upgrades won't necessarily increase the market value of property but STAR should hopefully be able to recoup some of the capital outlay. SO noted that there may be some increase in valuation but we would look to the cost floor to be a greater safeguard. Clearly this is an on-going risk.</p> <p>JB questioned whether we could offer a reward/incentives to tenants if they take up cost effective/more energy efficient ideas and persuade friends to do the same.</p> <p>AS said that some tenants don't seem to want to change even their tariff – not even to switch to an alternative more competitive energy company but we will continue to try.</p>	<p>Report back on whether costs for work can be received if RTB</p>	<p>AS</p>
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		<p>JB noted that whilst it may be obvious to the group there is definitely a barrier to people doing this and this may be a way of overcoming this. We have access via other agencies who may be able to help.</p> <p>AS confirmed that the FI team can help people work to reduce their bills and can signpost to other agencies. AA noted that as part of the education process it would be a good idea to link in with schools to raise awareness.</p> <p>TDk noted that there is a fuel poverty issue as he had seen reports from Asset Management consultants which indicated that if someone moves from gas to electricity with no solar panels, their energy bill is likely to cost an extra £400 per year. The de-carbonisation agenda states that we need to move from gas to electricity and we can't put gas boilers into new homes after 2023. Tenants are likely to ask why they should move away from gas now, especially if fuel costs are going to rise, there is no incentive.</p> <p>The UK government appear to be working to a 2050 date but some councils have declared this a climate emergency and brought the date forward to 2030 which produces the figures discussed earlier. Even if STAR were to borrow the money to make the £30k improvements to every property there is no more extra income coming in to cover costs. This needs to be debated with the Local Authority and questions asked about whether the 2030 date is policy, and if so, where the money is coming from. Even if available – there is the fuel poverty issue– arising from converting gas to electricity. However, in a few years a cheaper alternative may be available.</p> <p>SO - The costings and options we have are based on current knowledge and technologies. We are aware that a number organisations are investing in research and development to find new and innovative solutions that could make a significant impact on our options in the future. Our financial resources are limited and there is a case that we should have caution and not commit to any major programme at this time but continue to monitor the situation and see what happens nationally and internationally. However we do have opportunities to begin initiatives to start to address the problem such as an education awareness programme. We could undertake pilot schemes within the wider stock and focus on the independent living homes where there are a cluster of properties of a similar design and construction</p>		
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		<p>and there are no right to buy issues. Overall we should maintain awareness of developments and continue to engage with the Council.</p> <p>TDk agreed that we need to continue dialogue with the Local Authority.</p> <p>JT noted the points made by SO had been raised by others and this is something that will be raised at the Council conference on this issue. We have been trying to bring this issue up across private landlords and housing associations as there seems to be lots of people trying to address this, and everyone is in the same boat. The Council is aware that no one has a spare £116m. It is worth noting that the action plan ends in 2022 and we need to see that strategy has an annual review so emerging technologies can be considered. It will also be important to monitor funding regimes available, MHCLG are working on this and the intention is to get a more structured funding regime for organisations to bid into. STAR needs to be aware of existing stock and know what work is required in line with the strategy and how to address. One of the points highlighted by Philip Dunn are that departments are not necessarily acting cooperatively with accessing funding. JT noted that some works could become part of void standard, work can easily be done when a property is empty.</p> <p>EJ noted that she would be talking about the tenant voice later in the meeting but a recent questionnaire of 70 tenants suggested that Climate Change and Environment was one of the top four issues that tenants want to hear about and discuss. What's interesting is that lots have said that they don't want the inconvenience of works being done in their homes.</p> <p>TDk said we need to have flexible plans in place so as to exploit technological advances . Changes in technology come about so this has got to be a multi-year approach. TDk noted that this agenda should be discussed again at the Asset Assurance Board and that the strategy would be reviewed annually and include education.</p> <p>AS provided reassurance to JT that STAR are working to the lettable standard in voids, but noted that building regulations are currently under review and it is currently unclear as to which way this will go, this is recorded in the action plan.</p>	<p>Annual review to Board meeting in July and summary in annual</p>	<p>SA</p>
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		<p>SA to sum up - there are lots of consideration at government level around, how our organisations/communities are going to fund the drive to net zero carbon neutral and we will take any opportunity if it arises. We have been working with other housing associations to put forward joint bids. We carry out an annual review to highlight progress in the annual report to Board.</p> <p>JT added we have talked about political climate and climate change. There will be legal obligations on utility companies and we can try to react to those opportunities available. Awareness is rising and we are hoping for good coverage at the tenant conference.</p> <p>TDk asked if everyone is content with the report and thanked AS.</p> <p>The Board agreed the recommendation:</p> <p>To note and approve the Environmental Sustainability Strategy and action plan.</p>	report to Council in September	
8.	Request for Grounds Maintenance Improvement Works Supplementary Estimate	<p>TDk handed over to Steve Ogram who introduced the report.</p> <p>Since March 2019 we have had an in-house grounds maintenance team – comprising 2 x 3 operative crews with 1 based in the north and 1 in the south. Working seasonal hours, with longer days during the summer grass cutting months and shorter days during the winter programme, undertaking work such as hedge cutting, leaf clearance and maintaining borders and shrub beds. They will also undertake occasional projects that come through neighbourhoods.</p> <p>The annual budget accommodates ad hoc expenditure on materials but doesn't contain provision for investment in materials or plants to undertake landscaping or re-planting schemes. The proposal is to allocate up to £20,000 as one-off expenditure in the current financial year to enable the Team Leader to identify and improve open spaces in the areas we maintain as part of a winter programme of work. It is hoped that this relatively low investment will make noticeable improvements to the estates and neighbourhoods we manage.</p> <p>TDk – asked if anyone has any questions.</p>		

		<p>JW stated it's worth the Board recognising that the complaints have come down from 115 down to 3 and that we should be very pleased with this.</p> <p>The Board agreed the recommendation:</p> <p>That a Supplementary Estimate up to a maximum of £20,000 is approved for the purchase of plants and materials to be used for a winter programme of grounds maintenance improvement works in 2021/22.</p>		
9.	Review of the Tenants Voice	<p>TDk handed over to Emma Jones who talked through the presentation.</p> <p>We are looking at a review of the tenants' voice which came up as part of the social housing White Paper and was highlighted in the BDA governance review and the need for this review was highlighted in the BDA action plan. The aim of the review is to see what we already have and what we need to do to increase the tenants' voice.</p> <p>What do we currently do? How do we currently engage with tenants and give them a voice and how they can engage with the Board. We will then look at how we improve our methods of engagement.</p> <p>The area panel has been very important to us. We also have scrutiny panels who look at certain parts of the business to see where we can improve the service.</p> <p>There is a piece of work around how we look at how the Tenant's Voice can be used to improve the service using satisfaction information and other existing information such as complaints.</p> <p>We engage with tenants at our skip events and we held 20 Skip events this year during July, August and September which were very well attended. We received great feedback. The tenants very much appreciated these and also the opportunities for engagement.</p> <p>It should be noted that we have been holding off on the all tenant STAR survey. [Survey of Tenants and Residents] When it is carried out it will give good feedback from tenants on service delivery. However, this is delayed due to the pandemic</p>		

		<p>and waiting for the Government to issue some expected guidance about how these are carried out.</p> <p>We have the newsletter, news pages, social media pages etc. There are lots of ways we already engage with tenants.</p> <p>We also have really strong communities who engage with each other well. For example, at the independent living site, they have getting together for bingo on the green, Christmas carols and people helping each other out so really coming together.</p> <p>We have successfully recruited two new tenant Board members who are very enthusiastic and really want to be involved. Our staff really do care about our tenants and residents. Really need to hold on to these great staff members. They look forward to engaging with the tenants and getting to know their needs.</p> <p>Examples of improvements we are exploring are a review of our area panel as we have lost many members. We will review whether we should have one area panel for Bridgnorth and one for Oswestry instead of one for both. Met with all of the members and in the next few weeks I want to sit with the area panel in person to see if there are any suggestions on how we can improve. Even the word 'area panel' can put people off I have found.</p> <p>Note that now the Customer Relationship Assistant, Sarah [Trivedi] is on board doing great work we will be talking to residents to gain their views, making sure service managers respond to tenants, learning from the complaints, following through with learning by ensuring changes are implemented.</p> <p>We do know that our communications function needs to be improved. There are c2000k Facebook members but we can't rely on speaking with tenants via social media as not all have this access. There is a need to look at the diversity of our tenants and explore if we are doing enough to include everyone.</p> <p>We are working with Shropshire Council and other landlords who are all working together regarding how to hear the voices of the tenants in Shropshire. There will be a survey of Shropshire tenants that will give us further evidence of the views of tenants to be followed up by the Conference for tenants in the Autumn.</p>		
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		<p>PH asked about Complaint response times. Their handling and outcome remains a concern, particularly in light of the White Paper and greater scrutiny. What are the plans to improve this, the report mentions centralisation of complaints?</p> <p>AA advised that we have just established a new team; EJ has become the Senior Customer Relationship Officer and that it took some time to recruit the Customer Relationship Assistant. Our focus is now on quality and responsiveness to complaints and now we have a dedicated person who can chase up people, manage response times and achieve our targets. We are also looking at updating our internet so it's easier for customers to find contacts. We are playing catch up [compared to pre-pandemic times] but now looking at satisfaction surveys, dealing with complaints and overall satisfaction. In total, our focus is on quality; what lessons have been learned, any themes? Lessons are opportunities to shape service improvement and this links back to White Paper themes on quality and responsiveness. We will then see what improvements are required to customer service quality.</p> <p>TDk From the Annual Report we will need to highlight getting key messages across at the Asset Assurance Board. We should then present as part of a PowerPoint document to get the key messages across from the report.</p> <p>The Board agreed the recommendation and:</p> <p>Noted the contents of the Annual Report, which will be presented at the next Shropshire Council Asset Assurance Board.</p>	<p>Presentation to accompany Annual Report at the AAB</p>	<p>SA</p>
11.	Q1 Budget Monitoring	<p>TDk handed over to Steve Ogram who summarised key issues.</p> <p>Appendix 1. The current forecast under spend is around £180k primarily due to staff vacancies.</p> <p>Appendix 3. The Housing Revenue Account projection is an overspend of £72k for the year due to a shortfall in income arising from increased void levels. This is part driven by an increase in property turnover following coronavirus and a number of properties allocated to the Council for Temporary Accommodation being returned. The Board have previously approved a supplementary estimate of £10,000 to help the Repairs Team deal with the backlog.</p>		

		<p>Note 3.2 section in the main report. A number of write-offs are requested for the Board to approve. In Section 2.3 Financial Regulations it says that any debts of £500-£1000 need to be reported to the Board for information and any in excess of £1000 require Board approval. All these have been subject to extensive debt recovery action (including use of debt collection agencies) and go back some years.</p> <p>TDk asked are we seeing, as with other organisations that the pressure is on the routine repairs budget and construction costs. He had seen procurement consultant reports stating that builders merchants costs have gone up 20% in the last year and he was surprised we are not seeing this cost pressure? Also. Are we seeing a demand surge increase in number of repairs jobs?</p> <p>SO said that we need to be aware of potential pressure on material costs, picking up soundings from contractors about how long prices can be held on contracts tendered. Not seeing large spike on repairs service costs at this time.</p> <p>AS added that we are not seeing a large surge in responsive repair job numbers. Pressure on voids, and from planned maintenance where contracts are in place, we are getting comments and feedback on material costs. Struggling with recruiting labour as more likely to make more money on new builds.</p> <p>The Board approved the recommendation to:</p> <p>Note the contents of the report. Approve the write off of debt as described in section 3.2.</p>		
12.	Q1 Performance	<p>TDk handed over to Jo Williams who introduced the report.</p> <p>There was a question from Paul Hayward about the report header that mentions 20/21 benchmarking club, but the table shows 19/20 benchmarking? Please clarify; I presume Covid impact has been factored in to any 20/21 benchmarking?</p> <p>JoW answered that the supplement report header does show 20/21 but the benchmarking results are the previous year's figures as we are still looking at those and we will have the updated figures soon from Housemark and then can update the report accordingly. It's a given that Covid has impacted across the sector, not just with us. We look at a traffic light system so no big surprises what we can see,</p>		

		<p>anticipate that for voids and complaints we may well be lagging, which we are aware of.</p> <p>The Board agreed to note the contents of the report.</p>		
13.	Development Subcommittee	<p>TDk handed over to James Wood.</p> <p>JW apologised for missing the meeting due to birth of his child. Will send update by email in the next week.</p> <p>TDk asked about section 106 bid where we were unsuccessful – who is winning these? Are they going to one particular association? Can we start to collect this information to see what the trends are?</p> <p>JW will discuss this with Jason.</p> <p>EJ asked can you clarify what section 106 bid is?</p> <p>SO explained how the developer will put a number of units up for market sale but a proportion will be up for affordable housing. Plots will be identified and then approach providers like us (STAR) and we make a bid which is a percentage of the market value. The developer decides who wins. We have been successful in the past – currently have 4 in Baschurch. Typically we bid 60-65% of the market value.</p> <p>The Board noted the contents of the minutes.</p>		

ITEMS 14-16 EXEMPT FROM PUBLIC DISCUSSION

		Date of next meeting: 23rd November 2021.		
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