

Minutes of Meeting

Meeting Name: Shropshire Towns & Rural Housing Limited

Meeting Location: Microsoft Teams

Date and Time: 22nd September 2020

Members present:

Chair – Simon Harris (Shropshire Council) SH
Steve Robinson (Independent) SR
James Wood (Independent) JW
Emma Jones (Staff) EJ

Paul Kelly (Shropshire Council) PK
Tony Deakin (independent) TDk
Paul Hayward (Co-Optee) PH
Mark Jones (Shropshire Council) Board Member

**Non-Members
Present:**

Sue Adams (STAR) SA
Melanie Smith (STAR) MS
Martin Whitelegg (STAR) MW
Jane Trethewey (Shropshire Council) JT

Steve Ogram (STAR) SO
Teresa Dagnall (STAR) TD
Jo Williams (STAR) JOW
Jamie Burns (Shropshire Council) JB

1.	Apologies	<p>Apologies were received from</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nicki Barker (Tenant) NB Paul Weston (Co-Optee) PW 		
2.	Declaration of Interests	<p>The Board were asked if they had any interests to declare on any items on the agenda.</p> <p>EJ declared an interest in Item 6. There were no other declarations of interest.</p>		
3.	Minutes from STAR Board Meeting 7 th July 2020	<p>All members confirmed that the previous minutes had been received and were an accurate reflection of the meeting.</p> <p>A copy of the minutes will be signed and placed on the minute book.</p>		
4.	Matters Arising	<p>The matters arising from the previous Board meeting have been circulated.</p> <p>There were two matters outstanding from the previous meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SO provided an update regarding the RTB receipts/grounds maintenance costs. This was raised at the last Board meeting where it was asked if charges in respect of grounds maintenance should be levied at people who have purchased a home through the right to buy scheme. We have unpooled grounds maintenance costs for a quarter of the housing stock where this has been easily identifiable, however, it is more problematic in general housing estates. We have looked at this in two ways; the first where we unpool a cost and take an average across 1000 homes. There is a significant range in annual charges between £14 to £198. The overall average is £53.42. The second way of looking at it is to look at the grounds maintenance budget in total and remove the seasonal element. This gave an average figure of £53.79 per property. Whilst we can say 		

		<p>that we have a reasonable estimate for the average cost the problem in levying a service charge where there isn't an existing unpooled charge. It would be difficult to determine and in many cases difficult to justify. SO believes it would be difficult if challenged as we have no means of evidencing the charge that directly relates to their property. Also, the numbers involved are not significant, in the region of £1,800 per year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking for volunteers to form working party to look at the Annual Action Plan (AAP). JW and PK volunteered to join. <p>There were no further matters arising.</p>		
5.	Board ToR and Governance Review	<p>SA has carried out a preliminary governance review prior to the full review in November. A few things have been identified. There is a vacancy for a tenant board member. Recruitment was put on hold during the pandemic but believes it is time to recruit to this role.</p> <p>SA has also carried out the annual review to the Terms of Reference for the Board, the Development and Finance, Audit & Risk (FAR) Subcommittees and the Remuneration Panel. The only suggested changes were to the FAR Subcommittee Terms and these are attached for consideration at Appendix 1.</p> <p>STAR were due to carry out an annual external review of the Board, however, this was also put on hold because of the pandemic. We would normally commission an independent company who specialise in board governance, who would come in and observe meetings etc., meet with members, review Board papers etc.</p> <p>JW felt that the Board needed to take a very proactive approach as COVID-19 is going to be with us for some time and the quicker the Board adapts will leave the Board less exposed to potential regulation issues down the road. JW felt that a full review being carried out virtually was the</p>		

		<p>way forward.</p> <p>After discussion, the Board agreed that due to the current situation a desk top review would be sufficient at this time and that a further review could be carried out at a later date.</p> <p>The Board approved the following recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit to the vacant Tenant Board Member role. • Approve the Changes to the FAR Subcommittee Terms of Reference at Appendix 1. • Consider the options and recommend whether and what external review of the Board should be carried out. 	Arrange desk top review of Board	SA
6.	Employee Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Policy	<p>The Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Policy & Procedure have both been reviewed and circulated for comment and approval.</p> <p>The Code has been updated to reflect changes in organisational policies, working practices and to further clarify acceptable standards of behaviour.</p> <p>The Disciplinary Policy & Procedure has been updated to reflect changes in the Code, but is also recommending that there are changes to the appeals process which directly impacts on the Board.</p> <p>Both documents have been shared with the Staff Forum and Trade Unions and no comments have been received.</p> <p>PH asked if STAR or the Council offer any independent employee assistance support to staff. MS advised all staff have offered counselling through NOSS if they require it, but no other independent support. Those staff who are members of a Trade Union will receive support via the Union.</p> <p>PH asked, for context, what have been the numbers of dismissals / appeals</p>		

		<p>over the past 12 months. MS confirmed there had been none, and there had only ever been one appeal against dismissal since STAR was formed in 2013.</p> <p>PH asked if it was proposed that the Director chairing the appeal against dismissal would be from a different service area to the employee and MS responded not necessarily. Due to the size of the organisation and the fact that there are only two Directors that may not always be possible. It would also depend on who had been the hearing officer initially. SA added that the change to allow other members of SMT to dismiss would give us more flexibility on this. The changes to the policy and procedure do give other SMT members delegation to dismiss.</p> <p>The Board approved the Code of Conduct and noted the changes to the Disciplinary Policy & Procedure.</p>		
7.	Value for Money Strategy	<p>A new Strategy has been drafted to run alongside the Business Plan to go through the next three years.</p> <p>PH asked if there was a VfM action plan to accompany the strategy that would allow the Board to monitor delivery. SO advised there is not a specific action plan, however the actions of the VfM Strategy are embedded within the Business Plan and within the Annual Action Plan. SO noted that a VfM Self-assessment comes to the Board and this is intended to come to Board in November.</p> <p>The ICT Strategy review was put on hold whilst we considered how the organisation may work going forward in light of the pandemic. This review is going to take place and it is hoped that the Strategy will be ready to come to Board in November. TD noted he would like to see this.</p> <p>The Board approved the Value for Money Strategy 2020 – 2023.</p>	<p>VfM Self-assessment & ICT Strategy to come to Board – proposed November 2020.</p>	SO

8.	STAR Survey Action Plan Report	<p>This relates to the biannual tenants survey (STAR Survey) and the work undertaken as a result of the actions that have arisen from the survey. There is a crossover between this action plan and other business improvement activities.</p> <p>PH noted that portal usage looks low at 350, 8% reported elsewhere. Digital transformation has been a key response to Covid and reduces costs. Should the enhancement to the portal happen sooner rather than later? SA advised that low portal usage has been discussed and SMT have considered changing the portal at some point as it does have limited functionality that may not make it attractive to use. MW confirmed that we had asked some companies to give information about costs and upgrading the portal, however, these are quite high and it has not been financially viable this year. We will assess this as part of the ICT Strategy development.</p> <p>SMT have discussed the ICT Strategy and we are currently pulling together proposals around how we may work going forward in the short and medium term. Hoping to bring this to Board in November.</p> <p>PH noted that a number of the 20/21 actions have been delayed due to Covid and asked if the target dates would be reviewed or if they would be achieved by the end March 2021. MW advised that the actions need to be completed by March 2021 and we will continue to do all that we can to achieve this and if not possible add to the programme of work for next year. Note that a new STAR survey will be commissioned in 2021.</p> <p>The Board noted the actions of the STAR survey action plan.</p>		
9.	Annual Report to the Council	<p>The Annual Report comes to Board ahead of being presented at the Asset Assurance Board meeting. It is a number of documents that the Board will have seen before.</p> <p>TDk asked if we have ever done any peer review of the number of KPIs</p>		

		<p>other ALMOs report to their councils and will the recent change in "Housing leadership" at the Council result in any changes.</p> <p>SA advised we have not done a peer review in terms of KPI's, they are the result of a discussion with us and the Council. There is a need to balance requirement for information with the amount of time taken to collect this. We strive to not have too many KPI's but enough for the Council to see we are fulfilling their requirements. This is reviewed annually.</p> <p>The Board noted the contents of the Annual Report to be presented to the Asset Assurance Board</p>		
10.	Q1 Budget	<p>This is the quarterly budget monitoring report covering Q1, reported with the caveat that this is very early days in the financial year. The report is usually for noting only, but there is a recommendation that some debt is written off.</p> <p>PH asked when the void clearance costs date from and what measures have been put in place to try to prevent future void clearance costs? TD advised that the costs dated to 2018/19. There is a Recharges Policy in place and debts are pursued by the Council's Debt Recovery team and then passed to a debt recovery agency. Once this process has been exhausted then we follow our debt write off policy.</p> <p>SH noted 3.1.6 in the report made reference to the skip events and asked what did we mean by smaller scale? MW confirmed there was a smaller number of events this year running in just September and October due to the COVID 19 pandemic.</p> <p>The Board noted the contents of the report and approved the write off of debt as described in section 3.2.</p>		
11.	Q1 Performance	<p>JOW joined the meeting to discuss the Q1 performance results.</p> <p>PH asked what the predicted void losses are as a result of Covid. SA noted</p>		

		<p>Item 13's report talks about void loss and STAR's current position. We found that Housemark have forecast that we could lose up to 4.1% in terms of voids, however we don't think it will be as bad as that looking at end of Q1 performance.</p> <p>PH asked how the team are monitoring call handling performance taking into account the Evolve mobile / landline issues and lack of performance information. JOW advised we can't currently monitor calls but are actively looking at IT systems going forward. Virtual hunt groups are in place and there have been no customer complaints in this area. The system is enabled for remote working and provides a total number of calls but does not drill down as much. SA added that we are looking at enhancements to the system to improve monitoring as part of our 'Future of Work' proposals.</p> <p>JW noted it is very difficult to quantify our performance in such exceptional times and it may be important for us to carefully to benchmark against not only previous year but previous period moving forward to help the board understand how we are performing as we adapt to the situation. JOW confirmed that annual benchmarking is provided within the performance supplement that is given to Board each quarter and is also provided in the quarterly management reports and there is also quarter on quarter comparisons.</p> <p>TDk asked if it would be possible to have a "traffic light" system so we focus on those KPIs where there is an issue. JOW advised this used to be how reports were presented to Board but the board requested exception reporting as there was too much information. Amber would be those targets not met but within tolerance, red would be not met and outside tolerance. This information is provided within the reports.</p> <p>The Board noted the contents of the report.</p>		
12.	Development Subcommittee	<p>JW ran through the highlights of the last subcommittee meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The committee are looking at future opportunities, there are no live 		

	01.09.20	<p>sites currently.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has been challenge around development with constraints around land owners, planning etc., we have come up with some measures and will be working with Jason to help drive forward some of the changes. • There are some actions required to progress Weston Ryhn that we will discuss at the next meeting. <p>SH noted have a lot of projects ongoing which would come to fruition first? SA noted that the scheme at Whittington is progressing. The rough sleeping 'next steps' bid has had a positive response. SO also noted we are looking to purchase Richmond House in Shrewsbury.</p> <p>The Board noted the contents of the minutes.</p>		
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ITEMS 13 – 15 EXEMPT FROM PUBLIC DISCUSSION