

BLACKPOOL SHAREHOLDER'S ADVISORY BOARD MEETING

20 OCTOBER 2020

BLACKPOOL COASTAL HOUSING

KPI Performance:

It has been some time since the last Board meeting so there are two sets of dashboard indicators attached, one is the outturn for 2019/20 and one is for the first quarter of 2020/21. On the outturn performance is positive but we have seen an impact of the COVID lockdown on two indicators. The average number of days to complete Disabled Facility Grant Works went out of target in quarter 4 as all works ceased due to an inability to access premises and a close down of contractors who carry out the work. As lockdown restrictions reduced, performance has returned to a more normal level although the number of days to complete works has been revised up slightly to cater for the ongoing need to alter procedures on site to ensure sites remain COVID safe.

Rent arrears as a percentage of collectable rent has risen above the 2019/20 target, again largely as people responded to COVID pressures either real or perceived. BCH has moved resource internally to increase the amount of financial advice to tenants to help them budget and maximise their income. The company has been hampered for the most intransigent cases where people refuse to pay rent and would normally seek possession of the property but the courts have until recently been closed to such cases. BCH has looked forward using national and company data to try and model the arrears trajectory, particularly following the end of the furlough scheme. As a result of the modelling the arrears indicator has been revised upwards for 2020/21. BCH has on rent collection performed above the sector average throughout the COVID period.

In addition to the dashboard indicators there has been an independent review of performance conducted by HQN (Housing Quality Network) as part of the lead up to the BCH contract review, this report features separately on the agenda.

Key Issues:

COVID19:

In common with the rest of the country the most significant issue BCH has faced since the last Board meeting has been the pandemic. As with all other businesses all staff were sent to work from home on 23 March 2020 and the company switched rapidly to its business continuity plan and adapted to try and meet the particular challenges of a pandemic. Key measures taken include:

- An immediate switch to home working which has proved resilient once initial ICT capacity issues were resolved.

- A focus on emergency repairs, supporting vulnerable tenants and provision of emergency housing. Tenants were understandably wary of letting staff in to properties to complete work but we established safe systems of work and were able to complete all emergency repairs reported.
- Housing staff were switched to support the COVID hubs established with the Council to support the most vulnerable residents and in addition staff made telephone contact with 2000 of our tenants who were known to be vulnerable.
- Staff in Emergency housing continues to run all hostel provision from general needs to the specialist care leaver provision through "Positive Steps". Working with Housing Options and Public Health William Lyons House was acquired and operational within three weeks as temporary accommodation for vulnerable young adults. Operations staff worked in turning 40 void properties around quickly to meet some of the highest levels of need from the street homeless population, this temporary provision continues to operate and be supported by housing staff.

Throughout the first phase of the pandemic staff have performed above and beyond expectations responding positively to stepping outside their normal job roles and in many cases outside their comfort zone. Sickness absence has been minimal and very few cases of COVID have been experienced (three to date) among the workforce. No staff were furloughed as the view was taken that all available resources should be targeted at supporting the Council response to the pandemic.

As the country has moved out of full lockdown BCH has been able to work at getting back to business as usual as far as possible. The day to day repairs backlog has been cleared and planned capital works are back on track albeit with additional communications and precautions to ensure work practices are safe for customers and staff. The slight increase in gas safety checks that had gone beyond 12 months, although never below 99.5%, is now back to normal levels with just three outstanding and being pursued through the usual mechanisms. The office space was assessed and equipped to be socially distant and able to be used albeit at a much reduced capacity as soon as allowed. The company can now allow up to 40 staff to use the office space through a booking system, this has proved useful to some staff needing to access third party software systems that are still being adapted to work on the cloud and be more accessible from remote locations. BCH has also encouraged staff who may have had additional pressures on space at home or who are struggling with isolation to spend some time in the office. The reception areas have remained closed but without any issues as one to one contact has been increased and there is an enhanced presence on social media. The community centres which support sheltered housing schemes have remained closed apart from use by staff to meet clients one to one where they have been made safe but clearly while the current restrictions prevent mixing in groups many groups have been suspended and much activity that would in normal times provide valuable social activity.

The company continues to remain resilient and has quickly adapted to the requirements of COVID. The company is working with staff and managers to make the current flexible working patterns as supportive and robust as possible. Two staff surveys have been undertaken since March 2020 and both have shown positive staff satisfaction with the way BCH has responded and supported them to continue to do their jobs.

Finance:

Budget performance has remained strong. The external audit has recently been completed giving the company a clean bill of health for 2019/20, one query was raised in relation to the current contract expiry date in March 2021 but the Council was able to supply a letter of comfort to the auditors regarding the ongoing contract review. Both the BCH budget and the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) returned a small surplus to balances. The company is still projecting a small surplus on what is a break even budget for the current year on the BCH budget of circa £29k. The current surplus is largely due to costs not being incurred as a result of COVID and encompass avoided court costs due to the moratorium on taking possession cases through the system and lower than budgeted travel costs. The HRA is currently slightly behind target due to increased rent arrears as a result of COVID, steps are being taken to prevent arrears rising and to recover outstanding amounts.

Development:

The redevelopment of Troutbeck is back on site following the initial lockdown. Time has been lost and while the contractors are performing well and seeking to recover lost time getting back to the original programme will be heavily dependent on not losing further time throughout the winter and avoiding any further lockdown that closes building sites

Grange Park site investigations are underway and a design team is to be appointed with a brief to design a social/affordable housing scheme led by the Council as opposed to a market led scheme which would have been predominantly for sale. A final decision on a preferred development option will be brought to the Executive later this year.

New Service Areas:

Positive Transitions continues to thrive and the company is in discussions with the Council's Commissioners about how the service can be expanded. The company completed the purchase of William Lyons House from Great Places as an additional 14 bed emergency housing provision for young adults. The building was acquired, refurbished, staffed and opened in record time to help with the efforts to ensure all at risk of homelessness during the pandemic could be housed. At the same time a 40 bed dispersed provision was made to meet the needs of the "street homeless" group, this service has been successful and will continue beyond COVID.

More Positive Together:

This scheme is funded jointly by BCH and ESIF and provides for a team to support tenants across Blackpool with the aim of getting people closer to work and into jobs and/or training. BCH is leading the Fylde coast cluster of social landlords and making significant progress with customers who are a

distance from the labour market. The initial programme set to complete last year has been extended and has been a valuable resource in keeping some of the most chaotic clients housed in emergency accommodation settled and stable in the dispersed units. Over the next year we will be discussing with the Council and other partners options for mainstreaming this type of support.

Council Policy:

Since the last Board meeting the Council adopted a policy on single use plastics and also agreed a resolution on climate change. Working with the Carbon Trust we have produced a baseline study that is now helping BCH to form an action plan designed to get closer to the zero carbon target. It is clear the biggest challenge will be the existing stock and the cost of changing things like heating systems.

Other Issues:

The Government's previous focus on the continuing and protracted Brexit debate inevitably reduced the focus on the domestic agenda and that policy issue was overtaken by COVID so limited progress has been made on the long promised housing white paper. Indications currently are that progress over the next year will be sought on the following areas,

- A sector wide common scorecard of key indicators that will allow the creation of social housing providers league tables. It is clear the Government intends stock owning Council's and their ALMO's who are currently regulated by local authority mechanisms will fit into a new regime under the regulator of social housing.
- There is likely to be a consultation on a new Decent Homes standard. The current standard was used to set a benchmark for all socially rented stock but has been a vague rather than prescriptive standard and is focused solely on the property and not on the surrounding area or neighbourhood. Blackpool when it established the ALMO and developed an investment programme set its own higher decent homes standard.