

At a extraordinary meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 27th FEBRUARY 2023 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Dixon, Edgeworth, Fagan, Mordey, Reed, Scanlan, Trueman and Warne.

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Louise Bassett, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Gentoo

Susie Thompson, Executive Director Housing, Gentoo

Joanne Gordon, Development Director, Gentoo

James Haste, Director of Property Maintenance, Gentoo

Members of the Press and Public

Also in attendance

Councillors Guy, F. Miller and Usher

Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services, Sunderland City Council

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Ali, Foster and Laws.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Housing Providers Consultation

The Scrutiny and Members Services Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which welcomed discussions with a number of housing providers on the housing issues facing the city.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Louise Bassett, Interim Chief Executive Officer was in attendance to represent Gentoo along with colleagues Susie Thompson, Executive Director Housing, Joanne Gordon, Development Director and James Haste, Director of Property Maintenance.

Representatives provided a PowerPoint presentation and stopped to take questions and queries after each section.

Ms Barrett provided an update on the challenges facing Gentoo tenants, the interim leadership structure/Board and Committee Members, their core purpose and tenant satisfaction levels for April 22 to January 23.

Councillor H. Trueman raised the issue that of late he was receiving many complaints from residents about the poor communication from Gentoo workers on the ground, in particular relating to the demolition of garages in Washington which was giving Members great concern.

Ms Bassett commented that she was sorry to hear this and Councillor Trueman raised a valid point. Communication was one of the biggest barriers they faced and they would take this back and try to do better in future. In relation to the demolition of garages, Ms Bassett advised that meetings had taken place and if there were any outstanding issues that Members had, then she would follow up on those.

Mr Haste informed that a new Officer had been recruited, heading up the Tenant Voice Team to pick up on such issues and whilst agreed they have a lot to improve upon with their systems it was being tackled with a lot of work ongoing.

Councillor Mordey referred to the number of MP referrals/complaints statistics and queried if they had any similar statistics for Councillors as they had frustrations over the appearance of a two-tier system where MP's queries were being dealt with more efficiently than Councillors and if it were possible for Councillors to have a dedicated email address they could use to forward on residents issues.

Ms Thompson advised that this issue had been raised and there was a dedicated email address already created for Councillors which they could circulate again to Members. Ms Bassett advised that they did respond to MP enquiries differently as they would not have come through the regular channel which have systems in place for recording, so they did not provide a different service intentionally and they were trying to tackle all enquiries the same now.

Councillor Dixon referred to the attendance of Ms Bassett's predecessor at a previous meeting of the Committee in which he had informed of a plan and enquired if this was to be deviated from and if there had been any changes in personnel since he had left and also requested if Officer could expand on what their statement of business as usual meant.

Ms Bassett advised that the Operating Director had left the organisation at the end of January but other than that the structure remained the same and that business as usual referred to the types of service that would be available to tenants.

Councillor Dixon commented that there was no radical change then and he found the previous report to be interesting and reassuring so he was pleased to see this work would be continuing.

Councillor Warne commented that the Neighbourhood Co-ordinators were the first point of contact for tenants and he had found that they were bereft of information pertaining to their own backyard and that in relation to the demolition of garages in Donwell, only half of the people owning these were being consulted with and the

neighbours were also not being informed. There was generally a lack of decent communication and the tenants had a right for far more expansive consultations.

Ms Bassett commented that communication was a constant challenge and she took full responsibility for this not being good enough and acknowledged that they may not communicate enough with their Neighbourhood Coordinators but they were working on changing this and to improve.

Councillor Warne advised that he would be grateful if Officers could include Neighbourhood Coordinators into their thinking so that they were better informed and also wished to raise the issue of the bungalows in Springwell Village which had been repaired and modernised, yet the repairs had been a disgrace and the residents who were retired, some with a level of infirmity had been dealt with very poorly by Gentoo. Ms Barrett advised that they would go back and look at the bungalows mentioned for further investigation.

Councillor Fagan enquired as to who monitored the email address given to Councillors as she was yet to receive replies or any feedback on issues that she had raised and suggested if an automated reply could be implemented. Ms Bassett apologised that a reply had not been received and advised that all tenants were supposed to receive contact within 24 hours of a complaint being made. The complaints were tracked so she would find out why Councillor Fagan's messages had not been responded to.

Councillor Usher advised that he experienced the same problems in the Redhill Ward and informed that the reporting system for the Council fed into Gentoo when it was within their jurisdiction, however he had given up on the system as Members didn't receive any feedback, the tenants received no feedback and there was no confirmation when jobs were completed. Councillor Usher commented that as a Software Engineer he was appalled at the systems used and there was a need for these to be sorted out.

Councillor Usher also commented that there were a great deal of changes of staff on the ground which nobody informed Members so there was no continuity when dealing with issues and there needed to be responsibility taken on this and a better way of communicating. Ms Bassett commented that it was clear their communication wasn't good enough in these regards.

Councillor Reed wished to highlight that the Neighbourhood Coordinator he had dealt with in his area was great and enquired as to Gentoo's policy for when tenants got in touch multiple times during a complaint and if they only responded once the issues were rectified. Ms Bassett advised that this would depend on the issue and its priority/urgent repair for example. Complaints should receive a call within 24 hours of when they were made.

Ms Thompson provided a section of the presentation on the Cost of Living, the task force created to offer support on this and the strategic partnerships with energy companies that had been implemented or had ongoing discussions about.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that it was great what Gentoo was doing to tackle this but it was awful that people were getting into this position and enquired what the

proposed rent increase was from Gentoo. Ms Thompson advised that it was the same as the Councils proposal of 7% increase.

Councillor Dixon enquired how Gentoo dealt with rent arrears and if they could explain the procedure. Ms Thompson advised that every person and case was dealt with individually based on its own merits and Officers would make sure that the individual was receiving all the external support that was available to them and their Money Matters Teams could look at reprofiling debts. They did take a more harsh stance with those tenants that refused to engage or ignored their Officers but they did do all they could to work with tenants.

Ms Thompson also informed that it was very costly to go through court proceedings so they would only take this approach as a last resort if the tenant was refusing to work with them.

In response to Councillor Dixon, Ms Thompson advised that if someone was struggling to pay their rent, Gentoo couldn't reduce this as it was a legally binding contract but they could change the amount paid to arrears etc and each case was considered on its own merits. In terms of trends, debts had not significantly changed from previous years and this may be down to the levels of support that were being given such as the implementation of Universal Credit Champions so the income collection hadn't taken any big hit.

The Chairman enquired if the Money Matters Team had seen an increase in demands for their services. Ms Thompson confirmed that there had been an increase in demand and they were operating a triage service now. 84% of people knew of the service with 64% of those answering yes to having to use the service in the next six months.

In response to Councillor Mordey query that if energy companies could wipe off debt, would Gentoo cancel rent arrears, Ms Thompson advised that if it was former tenant debt this could be, if it couldn't be recovered.

Councillor Reed referred to the data on complaints and queried if this could be broken down into geographical areas and also queried if those residents in Washington using the District Heating System were struggling more under the Heating costs issues than others.

Ms Thompson advised that it was across the board that people were struggling with energy concerns, not just one area and they had helped with additional top ups of credit where needed. Mr Haste advised that they could look at the geographical data and it was something that they were doing. Councillor Reed welcomed the work on this.

In relation to the presentation and work done on Anti-social behaviour, Councillor Edgeworth requested if Officers could expand on the funding of initiatives to deal with youth disorder and how it was determined in where they tackled instances. Ms Thompson advise that she sat on both the HALO and SARA boards and decisions were taken depending on where the issues were occurring. There were issues in the Hetton/Houghton area at present so this was where the Police were focussing their attention but there was no one size fits all approach as it depends on the issue so they work on anything where they can have an impact upon.

Councillor Edgeworth referred to the Thorney Close area in which a particular Officer had been visiting with Members to discuss what could be achieved in relation to youth activities etc however this person was moved on and enquired if the post still existed. Ms Thompson informed that she believed that such roles still existed and she would investigate this further.

Ms Bassett informed of the Young Person Team and that they struggled with engagement so if Members had any ideas they were most open for any suggestions.

In relation to Councillor Scanlan's enquiry on how successful they were in receiving rents direct from those tenants who were dependant on alcohol/substances. Ms Thompson advised that if the tenant was on Housing Benefit the rent would go straight to Gentoo but if they were moved over to Universal Credit then the tenant got the payment directly. If the tenant was drug/alcohol dependant and considered vulnerable then Gentoo could request that the payments be sent directly to them but the tenant had to be agreeable to this request.

In response to Councillor Fagan's enquiry, Ms Thompson advised that they did take references from previous landlords on new tenants for information such as if tenants had paid rent on time, if they had breached their tenancy in any way or if there had been any instances of ASB but they did accept that the references may not always be honest.

Councillor Reed queried how Gentoo defined anti-social behaviour and if this included more minor things such as parking disputes etc. Ms Thompson commented that parking issues caused a great deal of upset but they did not record these as they didn't own the roads and had no powers or control over this and tenants were not breaching their agreements. If tenants were causing a nuisance such as blocking drives then yes this would be dealt with but if creating an annoyance such as loud vehicles, this would be dealt with as a noise complaint and they would work in conjunction with environmental health within the Council.

At this juncture Mr Haste gave an update on the Damp/Mould situation and the work ongoing to tackle this. Mr Haste commented that he was aware that the issue had not been cracked yet and they still had a lot of work to do but he felt it was important to share what they were doing well and not so well on. There was still a big backlog of repairs being managed by the group.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that Washington as a new town was 53 years old and the build of the houses were quite unique with no double glazing for example, The providers were trying to get on top of this but there was the problem that sealing the properties up now more than ever with cavity wall insulation for example was creating a major problem in terms of mould etc.

Mr Haste agreed that the sector in general realised there was a balance between heating homes and ventilation which was a predicament that they understood they had a role to play in this until the issues were remedied.

Councillor Mordey enquired how Gentoo prioritised areas for their 5 year programme and that Hendon still had properties with old single glazed doors and tenants would see residents elsewhere getting improvements made to their properties and become frustrated

Mr Haste advised that their asset team prioritised based on building safety and a risk basis. A lot of work goes into how they pick properties as well as consideration of how they could get the most performance out of the money they had to spend so they were taking a more holistic approach now more than they ever had before.

Councillor Mordey enquired if there was any way that Members could feed into this process as they had a unique understanding and knowledge of their wards. Ms Bassett commented that they would like feedback on what they do as this was the only way they could get better and she was more than happy to set up a meeting to build this relationship further.

Councillor Mordey queried what the average time was from a complaint being submitted to a repair/completion. Mr Haste advised that this would be dependant on the tenant and if they were vulnerable for instance so they wouldn't like to give an exact timeframe as they had backlogs and they were tailoring their services knowing they have a backlog. Ms Bassett acknowledged that their systems were shockingly poor and they were working to fix these.

In response to Councillor Mordey's query over how long they expected clear to the backlogs, Mr Haste advised that he would like to send the information out on what they were doing to address this and explain what the business as usual should look like if Members were agreeable.

Councillor Mordey referred to the backlogs and queried if the causes of this had been due to Covid, the storms and then the emerging damp/mould issue. Mr Haste confirmed that these were indeed the causes and in addition they had experienced trade problems with difficulties in managing to backfill posts to carry out the work being a challenge.

Councillor Dixon referred to the tragic death of the child in Rochdale due to mould and enquired if the work Gentoo was doing was as a result of that or had this work been ongoing regardless. Mr Haste confirmed that they were already doing this work but that incident had realigned their priorities/refocussed their minds and made them want to understand where there were any vulnerabilities in their service.

Ms Bassett commented that damp and mould had always existed but the tragic news had heightened the issue across the whole sector and naturally they wanted to respond and address any problems.

In response to Councillor Dixons; query if they were generally happy with the standard of their properties, Mr Haste commented that most of the problems were low levels with one or two where they feel they could do better on but those instances they have relocated the tenants. They were adamant that they get better but the majority of cases were just low level repairs. Ms Bassett advised that they carried out half a million visits a year so they should be able to raise the alarm if any issues arose. Mr Haste added that the level of training provided to officers carrying out the visits was impressive and he was confident that they had a high level of competency in carrying out their role.

At this Juncture the Committee went on to consider the update on the Stock Condition section of the presentation and Councillor Mordey referred to the

investment to individual properties and queried if any assessments had been carried out on estates as some were coming up to 130 years old and if they were looking to clear estates.

Ms Thompson informed that they had a sustainability matrix which they fed the data on estates into every year, these were then ranked but didn't necessarily mean that the top ones were to be demolished and at this stage there were no plans for any estates to be demolished.

Ms Gordon advised on the need to be mindful that whilst they continued to lobby Homes England for a Regeneration Budget they didn't have one at present.

Councillor Warne wished for clarity that he could inform his constituents in Washington that all the eligible gentoo properties would have the double glazing installed by December 2023 as stated in the presentation. Ms Bassett confirmed that this was the intention and the only issue that may arise would be if the contractors ran into difficulties as we had seen recently with Tolent which would require sourcing alternatives, however they did have plans in place if such a scenario were to occur. In response to plans for Barmston/Sulgrave, Ms Bassett advised that she would come back to the Member with information on these.

Councillor Edgeworth raised the issue of garden fences still being down in the Grindon/Thorney Close area which was causing residents frustration and enquired when they could reasonably expect the new fences to be erected. Mr Haste advised that he would provide a detailed response to Members on this.

Councillor Fagan commented that residents were becoming frustrated as they had been told the delay in having their fences repaired was due to lack of resources but they were witnessing neighbouring estates being built by Gentoo with perfect new fences in the vicinity and enquired if these resources could not be used also.

Ms Gordon informed that unfortunately the resources were procured differently between Regeneration and Internal works. Ms Bassett commented that the length of time the fences had been down was not acceptable and she could understand residents frustrations so they would take this away for consideration but the demand had been incredible. They had a plan to deal with this and they would come back on this issue.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that he was not surprised fencing had become an issue as in previous years where budgets had to be tightly monitored, other priorities will have been higher than fencing which has meant it has been neglected in order to ensure other works were carried out.

The Chairman referred to the double glazing installs and enquired if tenants would also receive education on controlling damp/mould issues. Ms Bassett commented that she would investigate and pick up on this to make sure it was happening.

In response to the Chairman's query over how well the houses at Cherry Tree Gardens/Normandy Crescent had held up, Ms Thompson advised that the only issue that had occurred was around the technology and as it was cutting edge, once broken down it took longer to get repaired due to the parts taking longer to procure.

At this juncture Ms Gordon provided the Committee with a presentation on Gentoo's Affordable Housing offer.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dixon on if Gentoo planned to carry on the modern constructions used in Ryhope, Ms Gordon advised that they continued to work with the Sector and once they could meet their design requirements and costs came down then they would look at carrying out this practice again.

Councillor Dixon referred to the collapse of Tolent and enquired if this had come as a surprise. Ms Gordon informed that it had as Gentoo used Credit Safe which highlights cause of concern and nothing had come through in this regard. The team were experienced in dealing with such scenarios so they had engaged with the sector as quickly as they could and the sites underway that had been affected had already passed their inspection stage.

In response to Councillor Edgeworth's queries, Ms Gordon advised that the Gartland Road proposal was still a scheme that was proposed to be brought forward but it was just not in the next steps and in terms of an update on proposed builds, there was a more modest proposal for 732 homes this year and 900 over 5 years due to costs at present.

The Chairman referred to shared ownership properties and enquired if there had been any reduction in interest for this due to the increase in mortgage rates. Ms Gordon advised that they were still seeing interest and uptake but it was just that people were buying a smaller tranche.

Their being no further questions or comments, it was:-

1. RESOLVED that the information from Gentoo be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked Gentoo Officers and Members for their attendance and closed the meeting

(Signed) D. SNOWDON,
Chairman.