SOLIHULL COMMUNITY HOUSING

HOUSING OPERATIONS COMMITTEE 14 NOVEMBER 2022

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICE TRANSFORMATION AND BUSINESS SUPPORT

SCHape Panel Report

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 The attached report provides an overview of the Cost of Living Crisis SCHape Panel Review and sets out the recommendations made by the panel.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is recommended to:

(i) **DISCUSS** the report and recommendations

(ii) **AGREE** the next steps

3. Financial Implications

3.1 There are some financial implications to some of the recommendations. Where this is potentially the case, the Panel have asked that the recommendation be explored rather than implemented to take into account finances.

4. Equality and Diversity Implications

4.1 Some recommendations suggest improvement and the provision of support for those with protected characteristics.

5. Risk Management Implications

5.1 None.

6. Value for money and efficiency considerations/implications

6.1 None

7. Tenant Involvement/Consultation

7.1 This was a tenant led activity

8. Consistent with Strategic Vision

8.1 Always listening to customers: Taking the opportunity to listen to our customers is key to delivering services which are both effective and efficient

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SCHAPE
Residents Panel
Solihull Community Housing
Achieving Performance Excellence

Cost of Living crisis: A review of the support provided by SCH

1. Introduction

As a Panel we have developed a process whereby we choose a subject for review based on performance and feedback from residents. We focus on an area where there may be poorer performance or gaps in services and where the Panel could add value in terms of making recommendations for improvement.

Earlier this year we were approached by SCH with an ask to undertake a slightly different type of review. The impact of higher fuel bills and food costs was creating what has become known as 'the cost of living (CoL) crisis'. This has the potential to impact negatively on a huge number of residents and SCH were keen to understand residents' perspective on SCH's response to the crisis.

SCH provided an awareness session around the CoL and the current support in place. Following this the Panel agreed that this subject was really important to residents and agreed to carry out this review.

The review has been supported by the Engagement Team and various other officers and the Panel would like to thank those involved.

2. Overview of review process

Working session 1: Activity and initiatives showcase

The Panel received a series of presentations and Q&As from a number of officers

covering the following current services and activities that tackle issues relating to the CoL:

- Money Advice Team (MAT)
- Mental Health support
- Employment and skills
- Furniture recycling
- Partnership working (Localities)

Working session 2: Scope of review

A further update on the CoL crisis was provided to the Panel and a further, in-depth discussion was undertaken to determine any challenges to the provision of SCH services and identify gaps. The Panel agreed that the scope of the review should cover the five areas previously discussed with the addition of communications, as it was felt it was fundamental to get this right, in order to ensure that residents receive as much information as possible.

The Panel decided to use a workshop session at the conference to gather wider views of tenants to help inform the recommendations.

Working session 3: Tenant conference workshops

Two members of the Panel facilitated two workshop sessions with support from officers. Following a brief introduction to the six main topics, the session asked the following questions:

- Who do you think will be most vulnerable during the cost of living crisis?
- Are there any gaps/anything you feel is missing?
- What do you think the biggest issues will be?
- Do you think this is useful support from SCH?

Full feedback from the conference can be found at appendix B, but in summary, residents told us:

- Whilst most residents are vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis, there are groups who will be most at risk, and SCH should target support to these groups
- SCH needs to be in contact with the most vulnerable during the winter, like they did during covid and follow up
- Access to drying areas is really important to prevent damp and mould
- Focus on energy efficiency - repairs, improvement programmes, advice
- More signposting to benefits, food banks, swap shops for school uniforms etc

- Provide top tips such as cooking methods and using cheaper food

Working Session 4: Development of recommendations

Using information from the following sources, the panel developed a set of recommendations

- National, regional, local and organisational context and data
- Understanding the service delivery models, process and practices used at SCH
- Information provided by officers and subsequent Q&A sessions
- Feedback from the tenant conference workshops

In developing the recommendations, it was acknowledged by the panel that:

- There are significant financial constraints so additional funding for recommendations would be difficult.

3. Observations and recommendations

3.1 Money advice

Positive attributes and successes

- SCH has a strong offer that helps residents:
    - Identify benefits that they may be entitled to
    - Manage their money and budget for everyday costs
    - Access a hardship fund which helps those in crisis with food vouchers, fuel top ups & essential goods
    - Apply for charitable funds to help them to clear debts or reduce bills
    - Apply for Housing benefit

- SCH has good, qualified staff

Challenges

- SCH has seen an increase in requests for the service and in the current format and resource, the demand for the service is already outweighing the team's capacity
- SCH has recently lost two fixed term advisors
- Recruitment is a challenge as there is a demand for qualified advisors and fixed terms contracts are not attractive

Recommendations

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
1.Financial investment The panel would ideally like to see financial investment in the team to increase the number of advisors. The Panel acknowledge the financial constraints but would like consideration to be given to prioritise some additional funding, potentially from reserves.	• More of the most vulnerable residents would be able to access the service • Potentially reduce arrears and other tenancy failure • Mitigate some cases of poor mental health
2.Staff Contracts Provide permanent contracts to staff rather than fixed term where possible	• More successful recruitment & retention • Reduce repeat training costs and other investment in staff • Provide continuity of service
3.Upskilling of staff Upskill existing staff from other teams to carry out less specialist activity such as signposting and basic assessments	• Creates a larger pool of staff that can assist residents with low level issues • Frees up more specialist officers to support more complex cases
4. Admin support Assess the viability of providing additional admin support to the team from across the organisation to free up the team to focus on providing specialist support	• Utilises staff better, so freeing up specialist staff to support customers
5. Volunteers Explore the viability of training a pool of volunteers to deliver low level referral and signposting advice	• Increased capacity • Free up specialist staff for more complex cases
6. Pre tenancy work Provide more in-depth pre-tenancy work around budgeting	• Giving new tenants budgeting skills will help with rent arrears in the long term

	• Reduce the demand on the service
7. Targeted information Target information to reach groups that are more at risk	• Identifies customers at an earlier stage so could prevent them reaching crisis • Reduce demand on specialist services

3.2 Mental Health Support

Positive attributes and successes

- Fantastic that SCH has recognised the need to provide mental health support to residents and has funded a post to resource this
- Supporting staff to feel more confident in supporting customers with poor mental health
- Providing in depth support to a small number of customers with more complex mental health needs
- Some really successful outcomes already

Challenges

- Only one member of staff- demand completely outstrips capacity
- Impact of the pandemic on people's mental health is already increasing the demands for the services
- The number of customers struggling with their mental health is likely to increase due to the cost of living crisis

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
8. Financial investment The panel would ideally like to see financial investment to increase the resource that the mental health advisor has. The Panel acknowledge the financial constraints but would like consideration to be given to prioritise some additional funding, potentially from reserves.	• More of the most vulnerable residents would be able to access the service • Potentially reduce tenancy failure • Mitigate cases of poor mental health
9.Upskilling of staff Upskill existing staff from other teams to carry out less specialist activity such as signposting	• Give staff the confidence & tools so they can identify issues and assist customers

	• Frees up mental health advisor to support more complex cases • Increased capacity • Reduction in poor mental health
10.Training Provide awareness training across the whole organisation	• Well informed staff will be able to identify customers who need support
11. External services Promote other specialist services more widely and frequently	• Raise awareness to the services available • Provide choices for customers

3.3 Employment and skills

Positive attributes and successes

- There is an evident joined up approach with other partners
- SCH signpost people to local free training & qualifications, work experience & volunteering opportunities as well as live current job opportunities
- There is a successful SCH apprentice programme

Challenges

- Delivery has been restricted because of temporary reduction in resource
- The demand outweighs resources
- Lack of digital offer re. budgeting

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
12. Budgeting sessions Deliver group budgeting sessions at pre-tenancy stage	• Giving new tenants budgeting skills will help with rent arrears in the long term • Reduce the demand on the service
13. Volunteers Train volunteers to provide money advice signposting	• Increased capacity Free up specialist staff for more complex cases
14. Apprentices Develop admin-based apprentices to have the confidence to undertake low level calls to	• Improves their skills

residents at high risk of CoL impact	• Increases capacity
15. Digital Offer Develop a more prominent digital presence for residents to access employment, skills and training advice, support and activities	• More accessible information for residents

3.4 Furniture Project

Positive attributes and successes

- This is seen as a great initiative and opportunity to recycle useable items from void properties and through donations, to support residents who do not have essentials. By providing support people have more chance of having a successful tenancy
- Identified other partners working in the local area and have a good working relationship with them
- SCH has a simple process for donations as well as requests for help
- A number of staff in the Customer Experience team are able to drive work vans to move furniture items
- Small storage space available
- Quick turnaround to help people in dire need of items

Challenges

- No dedicated resource
  Demand outstrips supply- lack of resources has made it difficult to accept donations
- Difficult for void processes to support a gifting opportunity
- Storage is very limited

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
16. Resource Assess the viability of developing a network of volunteers to support the initiative	• Increase resources to support more donations
17. Voids Review the void process to support the recycling of useable goods (also referenced in void SCHape review)	• Bigger supply of goods for donating • Reduce void costs by reducing storage and disposal costs
18. Premises	• Ability to facilitate more donations

Explore options for bigger premises - through partners, unused garages etc as an interim measure	

3.5 Partnership working

Positive attributes and successes

- Monthly partnership (locality) meetings help to identify issues, target resources and offer support
- Good sharing of information, including local food banks
- More knowledge about what services are available across the borough
- Support through Solihull Council's Here to Help pages is strong
- Good network of voluntary and charitable organisations that SCH link in to

Challenges

- Not always a clear line of communication to make sure people know what is available and how to access it

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
19. Pop up sessions Host a series of pop-up sessions across the borough in places where residents frequent or can easily frequent, to raise awareness of the support available to residents	• Raise awareness • Support residents in need • Direct communication with residents • Raise profile of SCH • Deliver information more effectively
20. Communications Ensure there is a strong comms plan in place that uses a variety of ways to get the message out (See comms section)	
21. Targeted Support Provide targeted support to residents most at risk of impact from the CoL crisis. Via wellbeing calls and communications. Tailor the right type of information to the particular group or demographic	• Identifies customers at an earlier stage so could prevent them reaching crisis

3.6 Communications

Positive attributes and successes

- Newsletter and social media used well to spread the key messages and support
- Good support on the website

Challenges

- Very little tailored communications
- Need to look at wider methods of communication to reach a wider audience

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
22. Outreach surgeries Implement a programme of outreach surgeries (in conjunction with or as an alternative to the pop-ups). In conjunction with MAT, SCH mental health advisor and external partners. Consider upskilling other staff to support the surgeries	• Provides opportunities to start conversations with customers & offer advice and assistance • Reduce the number of residents reaching crisis • Well informed staff will provide a knowledgeable service
23. High rise communications Trial TV screens in high rises	• Provides information to customers who may not usually engage
24. Communications Ensure there is a strong comms plan in place that uses a variety of ways to get the message out	• Reaches more customers, including those who aren't online or may be illiterate
25. Targeted calls Make targeted phone calls to capture customers who never contact	• May identify issues that would otherwise go undetected
26. Top tips Provide top tips and signposting to help residents make their money go further	• Help residents make their money go further

3.7 Asset Management

Positive attributes and successes

SCHape acknowledge that there is a strong plan in place to tackle fuel poverty through the way SCH manage homes, including the asset management strategy and the Delivery Plan.

Challenges

There is a risk that damp and mould cases could increase

Recommendation	Benefits to SCH and customers
27. Targeted calls Make targeted phone calls/written communication to residents with a low EPC rating	• Provide tailored support to those most at risk of CoL and damp and mould
28. Damp and mould communications Increase communications around the prevention of damp and mould	• Reduce damp and mould cases
29. Drying facilities Assess the provision of drying facilities in high and low rise so residents can mitigate the risk of damp and mould	• Reduce damp and mould cases

4. Next steps

a. The Panel would ask SCH officers to consider the recommendations and work with the SCHape panel to develop an action plan of those recommendations that can be reasonably implemented. Timescales and responsible officers should be agreed, and the implementation of the agreed recommendations will be monitored by the Panel.

b. A debrief session will take place to assess what has gone well with the process and methods of the review and what could be improved for the next review. The Terms of Reference will be updated and the process we use be updated.