

# Cabinet Housing Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 25 September 2024

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**Present:**

**Councillors:**

Flo Clucas, Jan Foster, Richard Pineger, Julian Tooke and Suzanne Williams

**Cooptees:**

Ian Mason and Agnieszka Wisniewska

**Also in attendance:**

**Councillors:**

Rowena Hay

Gemma Bell (Director of Finance and Assets and Deputy S151 Officer), Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Dean Epton (Interim Service Improvement Lead), Claire Hughes (Director of Governance and Customer Services and Monitoring Officer), Martin Stacy (Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager), Caroline Walker (Head of Customer Services) and Rhian Watts (Democracy Officer)

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## 1 Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

**Objective:** To elect the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee, to serve until the next local election in 2026.

Councillor Tooke was nominated by Councillor Clucas and was elected as Chair of the Committee.

Councillor Tooke commented that the Committee will be redefining and improving how it considers housing over the next year. He explained that it was important that the Committee acts separately from CBC to provide independent scrutiny on how housing is managed. He highlighted that it was vital to remember that the work carried out is not about buildings, it's about homes and the people who live in them.

Councillor Pineger was nominated by Councillor Tooke and was elected as Vice-Chair of the Committee.

## **2 Apologies**

No apologies received.

## **3 Declarations of interest**

Councillor Pineger declared a related party interest as his wife is employed as the Health and Wellbeing Co-Ordinator for the west of Cheltenham by the Springbank Centre.

It was confirmed that being a tenant of a CBC owned property is not considered a conflict of interest.

## **4 Public and Member Questions**

There were none.

## **5 Regulator for Social Housing - Consumer Standards Update**

**Objective:** To provide a high-level overview of compliance with the Regulator's Consumer Standards and the development of an Improvement Plan to resolve areas of non-compliance.

The Chief Executive addressed the Committee and explained that Cheltenham Borough Homes had managed the Council's social housing for the past two decades and from the outside had appeared to be a high performing, well-functioning organisation as confirmed by an external review carried out in 2021. He confirmed that the decision to bring housing services back into the Council was to ensure they had direct management of safety and compliance in light of the new regulatory regime. As part of the transfer an extensive due diligence exercise had been carried out which had revealed areas of improvement needed, particularly in relation to health, safety and compliance. He highlighted that whilst hundreds of dedicated officers have worked tirelessly on trying to maintain and look after housing stock, we are not able to evidence our compliance and the decision had been made to self-refer to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) on what improvements are needed and how they will be addressed. He explained that we currently cannot demonstrate 100% compliance on the Safety and Quality Standard in some properties and expressed the Council's apologies to the tenants living in these homes. The Chief Executive gave his complete assurance that the organisation takes matters of health, safety and compliance and providing good, decent safe homes very seriously and stressed that significant action is already being taken to address these areas. He highlighted that the Council's collective aim, with the support and oversight of the Committee, is to deliver excellent homes and be an exemplar housing provider to the sector that continues to improve the services delivered and provide people with well maintained, safe and compliant homes.

The Head of Community Services provided the Committee with a presentation that outlined CBC's position against the four Consumer Standards. She confirmed that an Improvement Plan had been developed and progress would be reported to the Committee at future meetings.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- The importance of the Committee seeing the evidence behind the compliance with the Consumer Standards supported by clear explanations.
- Work to collate all people and property data onto the QL system is ongoing. In preparation for the stock condition surveys commencing the infrastructure has been built to allow automatic collation of the survey results. The appointment of a specialist resource will be proposed at the next Appointments and Remuneration Committee meeting to address both system and people barriers in the use of QL and ensure the system is being used to its' full potential. A significant piece of work is also being carried out to ensure both existing data and future data is stored efficiently so we can evidence compliance.
- On estates where non-Council owned homes sit alongside Council owned properties issues will be managed by the Council for leasehold properties where the Council is effectively responsible for maintenance of the block. Whilst the Council does not hold the same responsibility or authority over individual privately owned homes, issues can be managed through appropriate departments within the Council depending on the specific circumstances.
- During the planned review of the Tenant Handbook we need to ensure that the document is readable, accessible and easy to understand. It should lay out both our responsibilities to tenants and their responsibilities in line with the Consumer Standards. To support tenants who are not literate or who do not have English as a first language consideration should be given to the provision of an audio version or translated versions.

## **6 Quarter 1 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) Tracker Update**

**Objective:** Feedback and insight from the quarter 1 phone surveys with tenants carried out on behalf of CBC by Acuity. These surveys provide our results for the perception based Tenant Satisfaction Measures.

The Head of Community Services presented the report to the Committee and explained that it would be shared quarterly. She highlighted that performance is strong, with the Council being benchmarked in quartile one due to satisfaction above 80% in time taken to carry out repairs, keeping tenants informed and treating tenants fairly and with respect. She noted that areas for improvement had been identified with how we communicate our listening and acting to tenants, our management of anti-social behaviour (ASB), complaints handling and the maintenance and cleaning of communal areas. She explained that in the case of ASB and complaints handling those surveyed may not have used the service being reviewed and that an additional

transactional survey would be launched in October to balance our understanding of the perception with lived experiences.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- All customers who express dissatisfaction are followed up with a personal conversation that aims to resolve their concerns and change their perception of how we listen and act to their feedback. Work is also being undertaken with the Comms team to highlight the actions carried out through 'You Said, We Did' features in our tenant magazine.
- Communal areas are a fundamental part of tenants' homes. A tenant scrutiny activity has been carried out on the maintenance and cleaning of these areas and a number of recommendations have been made, which alongside the survey feedback will form a multi-team project. The Committee will review progress of this work in the future.
- The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) also recognises the importance of communal areas and this is reflected in the regulations where an issue in a communal area is reported as an issue per each home accessing that area.
- Work in communal areas is primarily managed by UBICO and a strong client-contractor relationship is maintained with regular meetings. UBICO have generally been responsive to areas of concern raised.
- Some concerns about communal areas relate to design issues rather than service issues, for example with bin storage areas. It is hoped that the efficiencies in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) achieved through bringing CBH back in-house will enable the Council to re-invest using the feedback that the surveys provide.
- ASB has been identified as a priority issue for both tenants and the Council. It is important that this is addressed through partnership working. A Community Safety Partnership has met which is built of key organisations including the Council and the Police. A proposal around management of ASB as a tenure neutral service to improve our offer to all Cheltenham residents is being developed.
- It was agreed that it would benefit Cabinet and Committee Members to visit estates to understand the areas and issues being discussed.
- Tenants need to be assured that they have a right to live in clean, well maintained and decent homes and communities. It is important that a welcoming culture is developed to ensure they feel empowered to raise issues and provide feedback. One of the Council's key commitments is to build a culture within the organisation that is people driven without judgement and provides a welcoming communal offer.

Councillor Jan Foster joined the meeting

## **7 Quarter 1 2024 - 25 Housing Complaints and Compliments Report**

**Objective:** To provide an overview of housing related complaints and compliments from quarter 1, identifying key areas of dissatisfaction and areas for learning and service improvement.

The Head of Community Services introduced the report and confirmed that the self-assessment carried out in June against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code had been approved by the Housing Ombudsman. She noted that the national profile of complaints is still leading to an upwards trend with 71 complaints received during the quarter, the majority of which had been upheld. In addition, progress has been made in partnership with the courts at redirecting disrepair claims to the internal complaints process, ensuring that where tenants receive compensation they are able to benefit rather than losing money to solicitors. She highlighted that complaints were seen by colleagues as learning opportunities rather than criticism and viewed positively within the organisation. This will be further supported by the introduction of transactional surveys in October. Main areas of concern mirror those seen in the perception surveys, focusing on communal areas and tenant communication. A Stage 2 panel review has also been completed.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- Following feedback from the Housing Ombudsman a Stage 2 panel will consist of a senior member of staff with the Cabinet Member for Housing kept informed as they are also the Member responsible for complaints.

## **8 Property Compliance Healthcheck**

**Objective:** To provide the Committee with an understanding of our property compliance status as of 31 July 2024 and the planned improvements needed to address areas of non-compliance. Appendix ii provides an additional information relating to the management of fire safety.

The Interim Service Improvement Lead provided the Committee with the following verbal update:

- Review carried out on the out-of-date fire risk actions. Some are recommendations rather than actions, which have now been removed from the main list to allow focus to be maintained on the priority actions. These recommendations will be considered again once this work has been completed. This has reduced the number of actions to 139 within three strategic areas:
  - o 74 outstanding actions relating to fire doors and windows, down from 89 – contracts are now in place and surveys started to address these replacements and repairs. Demand in the sector is still providing challenging lead times but it is anticipated that the high risk actions will be completed by December. A specialist is being recruited to manage the works being carried out on site.
  - o 57 outstanding actions relating to compartmentation, down from 66. Works have been issued to the contractor to start to plan in the work and it is anticipated this will commence in the next 2 weeks. Individual specific letters are being developed with the Comms team to tenants who will be affected by the work. Accessibility of the letter is being

considered and we will confirm whether any tenants require translations.

- 8 outstanding actions relating to escape routes, down from 10. Some of these are associated with the location of bin storage areas. Visits are taking place to review where these could be moved to.
- The 5-year electrical checks are down to 81 from 349. These are coming down at a consistent rate. One property has not been inspected in 10-years due to issues with access but is currently not tenanted.
- Asbestos surveys and remediation contracts are now in place and will be signed by the end of the week. Work on carrying out the asbestos checks will start in the next 2 weeks.
- 4 out of date actions, down from 9, relating to water safety. These are mainly due to access issues with communal water tanks in loft spaces. All outstanding actions are scheduled for completion by the end of the week.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- Where actions involve communal areas for multiple properties these should be reported by number of homes impacted.
- Actions relate to a range of issues including repairs, required replacements, missing certification, and compartmentation issues arising from cables, pipes etc. being run through cupboards and walls. The Committee would benefit from greater granularity, detail and examples in the report to enable them to understand what actions involve.
- Currently private landlords are required to carry out electrical surveys every 5-years, social landlords will be migrating to this from 10-year inspections in the new year. Our policy has already moved towards this requirement.
- Whilst there is insulation on some CBC properties this is not of the sort used at Grenfell. Intrusive surveys are being carried out to ensure that there are no issues with the external wall insulation that is present.
- If the Committee wish to have training sessions between meetings to raise awareness these can be provided.
- Whilst properties may be compliant issues may still exist for tenants living within them, so we need to ensure that tenants are able to evacuate. Work is being carried out to put together premises information to include details of tenants who cannot self-evacuate that can be provided to emergency services. Consideration is being given to how we can maintain communication with tenants through tenancy audits and encouraging proactive engagement to ensure information is correct throughout their tenancies.
- Properties with capped gas still require a Landlord Gas Safety Record (LGSR). We will be reviewing how we support tenants in capped properties and considering how issues can be resolved.
- Currently considering what information from the asbestos surveys will be brought into QL from the contractors' system to ensure that sufficient information is connected to the property. Currently tenants are provided with

full asbestos assessment on request, in the future the contractor will be required to provide them with a plain English version of this information.

- There were a larger number of fire risk actions as we have chosen to carry out some more intrusive type 3 risk assessments, these were also carried out in a short space time leading to deadline challenges. To address the timing issue some fire risk assessments are being brought forwards to allow a phased approach to surveys in the future.

## **9 Stock Condition Survey - Knowing Our Properties**

**Objective:** To raise awareness of existing issues with out-of-date stock condition surveys and the impact this has had on compliance with the Consumer Standards, and the actions being taken to resolve this issue.

The Interim Service Improvement Lead presented the report and confirmed that the survey would be going live in the following week. Test surveys have been carried out to allow strategic decisions to be carried out on how information is gathered and stored. Focus will be on completing a representative target of 20% including the blocks to inform the Asset Management Strategy and the 20-year HRA Business Plan. This sample will include a range of building types and ages. If issues are identified with particular property types within this sample, similar properties will form the next focus of the stock condition surveys.

## **10 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Monitoring Report - Quarter 1**

**Objective:** To provide a monitoring position statement for the HRA against the budget approved by Council on 23 February 2024, highlighting any key variances.

The Director of Finance and Assets presented the report and explained that it forecasts any variances on income and expenditure against the budget approved by Council for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). She noted that some of the variances relate to external factors, including continuing high interest rates, and internal factors such as the work on compliance. She confirmed that these have been offset by some of the savings made by bringing housing management colleagues back in-house and combining senior management teams. She highlighted that as an organisation we will be doing everything possible to ensure resources are in place to manage compliance. This includes a change in the bottom line of how the capital works are funded for this year with the revenue budget held centrally rather than a revenue contribution to allow the Consumer Standards Improvement Plan to be funded.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- The Finance team will consult with the Development team to review whether the budget for 320 Swindon Road and Monkscroft School is likely to be spent within the budgeted period. Flexibility is provided within the capital programme for the next years to allow budget to be carried forwards in case of slippage.

- The HRA capital programme was previously funded by borrowing by the Council being issued as a loan to the HRA with the interest cost also passed to the HRA. Last year the proportions of the programme funded by borrowing increased which has impacted interest costs. The expectation that fixed interest rates from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) would reduce has also taken longer than expected, which has led to us maintaining higher level temporary debt than originally planned. This caused a one-off higher debt payment. We are now able to take advantage of lower rate fixed deals and it is anticipated this will enable us to invest in tenants' priorities in the future.
- £11.1m has been budgeted for insulation over the next 3 years, it will be important to secure additional funds after 2028 to help reach the 2030 net zero target.

## **11 Updates from the Tenant and Leaseholder Panels (verbal)**

**Objective:** To highlight the ongoing activities of the Tenant and Leaseholder Panels and provide an additional opportunity for tenant and leaseholder voices to be heard.

The Tenant Representative confirmed that the Tenant Panel had held its first meetings. She explained that since April they have supported the transition of housing services back in-house and reviewed the recommendations made by Campbell Tickell, the gap analysis against the Consumer Standards, the Fencing Policy and the Single Equality Scheme. She noted that they will next be carrying out a scrutiny of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code.

## **12 Housing Committee Workplan**

The Committee requested the following additions to the Committee workplan:

- Oversight of the new build programme and development pipeline.
- A review of the ongoing project to improve the maintenance and cleaning of communal areas.
- A regular review of the housing risk register.
- A review of the Leasehold and Commonhold Bill following review by the Leaseholder Panel.

## **13 Items to be referred to Cabinet**

There were none.

## **14 Briefing Note - Housing Sector Insight**

**Objective:** To provide the Committee with an overview of recent developments in the housing sector and provide opportunities for horizon scanning.

## **15 Any other business**

Councillor Williams raised concerns about the risk of flooding experienced the previous week in Princess Elizabeth Way. The Chief Executive and Chair thanked



teams and community groups for the work carried out to protect properties and tenants. It was agreed that further consideration should be given to how vulnerable tenants are supported during periods of flooding and what additional support could be provided.