

# Cabinet Housing Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 13 November 2024

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**Present:**

**Councillors:**

Flo Clucas, Jan Foster, Richard Pineger and Suzanne Williams

**Cooptees:**

Ian Mason, Bozena Tarnawska and Agnieszka Wisniewska

**Also in attendance:**

Vicky Day (Head of Technical and Investment), Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Claire Hughes (Director of Governance and Customer Services and Monitoring Officer), Paul Leo (Interim Director Housing Transformation) and Caroline Walker (Director of Housing, Customer and Community Services)

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## **1 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Tooke.

## **2 Declarations of interest**

There were none.

## **3 Public and Member Questions**

There were none.

## **4 Minutes of the last meeting**

**RESOLVED (unanimously) THAT**

**The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2024 were signed as a correct record.**

## 5 CEO Briefing (Verbal)

**Objective:** An update from the Chief Executive on key issues which may be of interest to the Cabinet Housing Committee.

The Chief Executive addressed the Committee and explained that following the previous meeting tenants had been informed that a self-referral was being made to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) in relation to property and compliance with the Safety and Quality Consumer Standard. The RSH has now responded to the self-referral and are satisfied that matters are improving and under control, so they will be taking no further action and making no intervention at the current time. He emphasised that this does not change the organisational focus on driving improvements to health and safety, the ongoing progression of stock condition surveys, and ensuring compliance with the Consumer Standards to ensure we are prepared for our In Depth Assessment (IDA). The Chief Executive explained that the Consumer Standard Programme Board had met for the first time earlier in the day and approved the initiation documents to move forwards. He confirmed that this Board was comprised of Officers and Members, including the Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, and would provide oversight of the Improvement Programme with progress reported to the Cabinet Housing Committee.

The Chief Executive highlighted that the council have advertised for a key senior appointment for the Director of Housing – Investment, Repairs and Decarbonisation and recruitment was in progress. He congratulated Caroline Walker on her appointment as Director of Housing – Customer and Community Services.

The Chief Executive explained that during the initial transfer of housing back into the council a decision had been taken to not remove Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) branding immediately, to provide reassurance and demonstrate that a safe transition was being managed. Housing will now more noticeably use CBC branding in a meaningful way in tenant facing processes, particularly through communication with tenants. He highlighted that this will not be an immediate change but will take time. The Chief Executive that the council will also be starting to phase out old CBH email addresses to signal that we are now one organisation and resolve issues with operating two separate servers.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- Ensuring that tenant and leaseholder voices are properly heard will be central to our approach to resolving health and safety and other issues. The tenant and leaseholder panel will provide the primary forum for this engagement and feedback, but we will also be continuing to challenge ourselves on how we learn lessons from complaints, how we respond when things do not go right, and exploring the ways that we can demonstrate that we are listening and responding to tenants. This will be an ongoing process and the Cabinet Housing Committee will play an important role in identifying and driving improvements on how we involve tenants and leaseholders.
- The RSH have not taken a prescriptive approach to compliance with the Consumer Standards except where there are clear legal requirements. Whilst

policies and procedures have been moved into CBC as part of the transition, it will be important to take time to review these policies and procedures fully as part of a programme over time. This will enable us to identify and agree how compliance with the Consumer Standards will look for CBC.

## **6 Property Compliance Performance and stock condition project update**

**Objective:** To provide the Committee with an understanding of our property compliance status and the planned improvements needed to address areas of non-compliance.

The Head of Technical and Investment introduced the report and explained that a supplement had been provided on the 11 November to provide the Committee with up-to-date property compliance key performance indications (KPIs) up to the end of October. She highlighted that these showed an improved position from the last report. She noted that 119 fire actions were outstanding which will primarily be resolved once two contracts are brought online. The Head of Technical and Investment confirmed that stock condition surveys are now live and 155 had been completed, evidenced and will be quality checked. She explained that progress is escalating as initial issues have been resolved. Category 1 and 2 issues are being reported to the government's housing health and safety rating system (HHSRS).

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- Rand Associates are expected to have completed 20% of surveys, including a stratified sample across the stock, by February 2025. This will enable the team to extrapolate issues across the stock and identify areas of priority whilst the remaining surveys are undertaken.
- 62 properties have capped gas as of the end of October. All tenants within these properties have been contacted since the last Cabinet Housing Committee meeting to discuss their circumstances. In the majority of cases the tenants have chosen to have gas capped to avoid paying standing charges. Tenants have been referred to the Benefit and Money Advice team to aid them in accessing available support, have been informed they can request to have their gas uncapped at any point, and it has been agreed with them that they will be contacted quarterly to check their situation and wellbeing.
- Within the KPI report there are a number of unknowns listed against overdue electrical remedials and overdue asbestos issues. Whilst actions identified through inspections are managed through our repairs system currently we cannot evidence through our existing systems the links between these repairs, the inspection actions and completions. We are investigating how to build that information into our systems or the systems of contractors to ensure this reporting is available in the future.
- Approval of the Asbestos Survey and Remediation contract was received from the Cabinet Member Finance and Assets.
- Where a gas component impacts a number of individual properties within a block, this is reported per component within the appendix under

Domestic/Commercial LGSR but is reported by individual property impacted within the TSM for percentage of gas safety checks compliant.

- The Committee would benefit from more detail in relation to the specific details of outstanding high risk fire actions.
- Listed building planning applications have been submitted to address fire escape route actions. These have been given a high priority and it is not expected that there will be any issues.

## **7 Quarter 2 2024 - 25 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) Tracker Update**

**Objective:** Feedback and insight from the quarter 2 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 Director of Housing – Customer and Community Services presented the report to the Committee and explained that feedback showed noticeable consistency from quarter 1 with high satisfaction for the time taken to complete repairs, keeping tenants informed and treating tenants fairly and with respect. She highlighted that listening and acting, cleaning and maintenance of communal areas, and the management of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and complaints remain lower scoring areas. Since the last meeting focus groups have been created with individuals who have experienced ASB to understand improvements that could be made to the process, customers who raised dissatisfaction around ASB without reporting have been contacted to encourage reporting and understand what barriers may have prevented reporting, and Comms colleagues are supporting with raising awareness with tenants. These activities are creating positive conversations with tenants and enabling mapping of ASB we were not previously aware of to create a richer picture of ASB at the current time. Reviews are also being carried out of the rotas, schedules and equipment of cleaning crews to improve efficiency of cleaning communal areas. A trades person has also been assigned to regularly survey blocks and a block survey form has been re-introduced to allow tenants to report issues in real time. Committee Members welcomed these developments.

## **8 Quarter 2 2024 - 25 Housing Complaints and Compliments Report**

**Objective:** To provide an overview of housing related complaints and compliments from quarter 2, identifying key areas of dissatisfaction and areas for learning and service improvement.

The Director of Housing – Customer and Community Services presented the report to the Committee and highlighted that complaints had fallen from 67 in quarter 1 to 59 in quarter 2. She explained that a key focus of complaints in quarter 1 had been dissatisfaction with quality of work during repairs. A great deal of work and dialogue with the Repairs Team had seen complaints in this area fall from 21 complaints in quarter 1 to 12 complaints in quarter 2. The key area of focus in quarter 2 focuses on contractor related issues and poor communication with tenants. Time has been allocated across teams in early 2025 to address these issues. Communication will

also be considered during the development of a refreshed Customer Service Standard. The Tenant Panel have also been carrying out a scrutiny on the complaints handling process from a tenant perspective and a report on their findings is expected to be complete in December.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- The learning framework is an extremely useful tool for the organisation. Providing tenants with direct compensation encourages them to use the CBC complaints process, benefits the tenants, avoids potential additional costs from litigation, and provides low-cost learning points that can be used to improve the service provided.

## **9 Fencing, Hedgerow & Boundary Policy**

**Objective:** To review the policy for how the Council will address the repairs, maintenance and renewals of existing boundary fencing and respond to fencing issues raised by tenants.

The Director of Housing – Customer and Community Services presented the draft Fencing, Hedgerow and Boundary Policy to the Committee. She explained that this had been a major area for complaints earlier in the year as we were unable to evidence we were consistently responding to requests around fencing leading to dissatisfaction among tenants. She highlighted that the policy seeks to balance the budgetary restraints of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) whilst ensuring tenants receive a fair and consistent response that reflects the importance of fencing in creating safe and manageable spaces. She explained that a pragmatic repairs first approach will be taken that includes recognition of the importance for maintaining hedging as a more natural and sustainable boundary that supports biodiversity, with projects developed to support vulnerable tenants to maintain biodiversity.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- A number of specific issues with the maintenance of fences and hedges were raised, which will be followed up by teams following the meeting. The council offers their apologies to tenants that some repairs have been outstanding for a significant period.
- A capital budget of approximately £300k is in place annually for an ongoing programme of work around fencing, paths, and boundary walls. This sits alongside the repairs budget which will be used to manage day-to-day reactive repairs on fencing.
- Issues of tenant security are considered when prioritising repairs outside of scheduled programmes of work.
- It is significantly better from a biodiversity perspective to use native species of hedging rather than quicker growing privet and box hedges. However, this is a highly skilled area of work and can be difficult for tenants to maintain, leading to issues with pests. Without support in place many tenants would prefer to have hedging removed.

- Education opportunities should be provided to tenants to support them to maintain hedging themselves and understand the benefits that hedging provides, potentially in partnership with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.
- Additional issues in managing hedging may occur where it has been planted by Highways rather than CBC.
- It was recommended that, with the approval of Cabinet the Policy is reviewed in a year rather than the standard four years, to allow improvements to be introduced.
- It was felt that the Policy does not place hedging on equal terms with fencing, if only fencing is paid for by the council.
- A cost benefit analysis of hedging vs. fencing should be carried out as part of the recommendation to Cabinet including consideration of lifespan of both.
- It was recommended that the climate assessment be reassessed before it is presented to Cabinet.
- Feedback from the Committee's review should be included within the report to Cabinet recommending the Policy.

## **RESOLVED (unanimously) THAT**

**The draft Fencing, Hedgerow & Boundary Policy is recommended to Cabinet for the adoption following consideration of the comments made by the Committee.**

### **10 Strategic Housing Risk Register**

**Objective:** To review the strategic risks relating to housing from the Council's Risk Register.

The Director of Governance and Customer Services introduced the report and explained that the risks included are at a strategic level, with operational risk registers maintained separately within service areas. She highlighted that current key risks focus on stock condition surveys, regulatory and legal requirements, compliance, health and safety, tenant satisfaction and the housing revenue account (HRA). She noted that future reports will show any change in these risks. She confirmed that the RSH's Sector Risk Profile had been published and a link included within the report. She highlighted that key messages are around existing stock, service quality, development, sales, financial and treasury management.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points:

- The clarity and focused nature of the risk register clearly reflects the reality of where we currently are. Hopefully we will see scoring improve as stock condition surveys are completed.
- Pressures on the HRA and general fund are moving in the right direction as interest and inflation rates improving. Efficiencies achieved through becoming one organisation have also benefited both. Improving the long term viability of the HRA was one of the key drivers behind the decision to bring housing services back under the direct of the council to protect customer facing

services. It has also offered opportunities for colleagues to bring forward opportunities that have led to further efficiencies.

- The council's risk appetite sits with the Leader who has regularly confirmed that the council should be risk aware rather than risk averse. Cabinet holds responsibility for budget setting, with immediate term decisions considered against scenario modelling of the HRA and general fund.
- The Committee recommended that the description of the consequences under tenant satisfaction be strengthened. They also stressed that a clear distinction between tenant satisfaction and tenant voice should be made, either in the wording or through the creation of a separate risk.

## **11 Updates from the Tenant and Leaseholder Panels**

**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 explained that the Tenant Panel was half way through their scrutiny on how the housing service demonstrated learning from complaints following a fantastic presentation by the Complaints Officer. The Community Investment Officer was working with them to review data relating to complaints learning and prepare a report on the matter. The Panel had also reviewed the draft Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Policy, offered feedback and asked for clarification around some sections. They are currently supporting the development of a new Customer Voice Plan and welcomed the extension of the council's customer voice offer. In addition they will be attending property compliance training provided by Pennington Choices in December.

The Leaseholder Representative confirmed that 12 leaseholders had attended the first meeting and agreed to become members of the Leaseholder Panel. Initial discussions had identified communication between leaseholders and CBC as a key concern, particularly in relation to investment and planned repairs.

## **12 Review of the Housing Committee Forward Plan**

The Chair confirmed that the Cabinet Housing Committee Forward Plan is currently being reviewed due to the scheduling of additional meetings in February and April. An updated version will be provided at the January meeting.

The Committee asked that:

- Agreed budget dates be indicated within the Forward Plan in the future.
- Committee members be included in the distribution list for the Housing Delivery Group so they can be kept informed of new supply developments.

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

The Fencing, Hedgerow & Boundary Policy was recommended to the Cabinet.

## **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.

The Committee thanked Officers for the clear and useful synopsis of housing sector developments.