

Cabinet Housing Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 17 March 2025

Present:

Councillors:

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

Coopteers:

Ian Mason

Also in attendance:

Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Claire Hughes (Director of Governance, Housing and Communities) and Paul Leo (Interim Director Housing Transformation) and Kate Seeley (Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit)

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Bozena Tawnawska and Agnieszka Wisniewska.

2 Declarations of interest

There were none.

3 Public and Member Questions

There were none.

4 Minutes of the last meeting

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 2025.

RESOLVED THAT The minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 2025 were signed as a correct record.

5 CEO Briefing (Verbal Update)

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 confirmed that:

- The changes of line management discussed at a previous meeting had come into effect with housing now sitting under Claire Hughes as the Director of Governance, Housing and Communities. Further details will be provided at future meetings as the transformation progresses.
- 28% of stock condition surveys have now been completed and will be analysed to ensure we have the quality information needed to take core decisions around investment.
- All Gloucestershire councils will be submitting a joint letter to the government, subject to approval this week, setting out the interim proposals for local government reorganisation in Gloucestershire. There are broadly three proposals – a single countywide unitary in line with the current county boundary geography, two unitary authorities based on an East and West split, and a Greater Gloucester model based on an expanded Gloucester City footprint with two or three unitary models sitting underneath. Final proposals will be submitted in November and consultation will be taking place to decide whether all three proposals are submitted. Final determination by the government is currently scheduled for April/May 2026. Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) have voted to support the two unitary authority proposal.
- The Chief Executive had worked with an operational team to insulate a loft in the previous week. He highlighted the importance of seeing the impact of damp, mould and condensation on the house and tenants and the work being carried out to resolve the issue. He had also toured the Depot and discussed the potential for making things more efficient and improving the repairs process with colleagues. He thanked the team for showing the exemplary customer service delivered.

The committee's discussion raised the following points:

- They echoed the value of seeing the work being carried out on the ground after the committee had visited some empty properties in the previous week and the importance of listening to the colleagues carrying out the work. The way teams work in partnership with tenants was also praised.

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 Interim Housing Transformation Director addressed the Committee and provided an update on compliance figures for the end of February 2025:

- There are two homes with out-of-date gas certificates, an increase from one at the end of January. Legal action is being undertaken to gain access to both. One tenancy has been terminated and gas will be capped or certificated

once access is achieved. This means gas certification is 99.95% compliant but we are aiming to return to 100% as soon as possible.

- Capped gas supplies have remained consistent, with the majority occurring in void properties. Where properties are occupied contact is being maintained with the tenant and support being provided.
- Overdue fire risk actions are reducing slowly with 94 remaining, 18 of which are high risk. Delivery of the specially manufactured fire doors has begun and testing is taking place to ensure that they are working and can be certified. It is hoped that this will increase actions being closed more quickly.
- There are 14 properties remaining with electrical certificates over 5 years old. All these properties are within the legislative requirements of 10 years, but work is being progressed to bring it in line with the council's 5-year policy. Ten of these properties are voids, one property is awaiting repair, and injunctions are in place for two properties to gain access.
- Damp, mould and condensation has increased to 340 open cases, with no new category 1 cases identified. This is in line with expectations for this time of year and is expected to decrease in the Summer. Data is being used to predict where issues will occur to allow preventative action to be taken.
- Stock condition surveys will no longer be reported as part of the compliance report now that enough have been completed to carry out analysis for the planned maintenance programme.

The committee's discussion raised the following points:

- Where properties' gas is capped no carbon monoxide alarms are required.
- An ongoing piece of work is being carried out to ensure all reports are automated and to reduce the need for manual involvement in reports.
- A 'The Facts About Asbestos' leaflet delivered to tenants was praised for providing tenants with clear information. Asbestos is considered safe if not disturbed but it is important that contractors, tenants and leaseholders are aware of the potential risk if work is carried out. Over the next few years full surveys will be carried out and it is recommended that leaseholders do the same. It was suggested that consideration could be given to further highlighting asbestos risk within the corporate risk register.
- The stratified sample of stock condition surveys has been achieved and is currently awaiting analysis. Once completed there will be a consultation carried out to further review what investments should be progressed. However, whilst some programmes of work have been paused to allow this analysis to be completed a lot of other work is ongoing. Health and safety is still being carried out as a priority, work is also continuing connected to the Warm Homes Programme funding, major voids are being brought back into the stock, and where failing kitchens, bathrooms or components have been identified these are being replaced.
- The increase in DMC cases does reflect growing awareness of the support available for tenants following promotion exercises and also the time of year. Some issues are likely to reoccur due to families living in properties that are too small but wherever possible issues are resolved. Hopefully increased use of remote monitoring software in the future will allow issues to be more proactively managed as soon as they emerge.
- A text message has been sent to all residences about the availability of replacement key fobs.

- There have been issues across the country with key fobs due to networking issues following deterioration of mobile networks. This can mean that when new fobs are programmed, they do not initially work. Currently the council are investigating moving to a different mobile supplier.
- There are currently 140 voids. Contractors have been onsite for 10 major voids as of the beginning of March and are expected to finish between 4 and 5 properties a week. Another contractor will be going live in the next 6 weeks.
- A business case to use the workshop more effectively and to provide opportunities to explore apprenticeships is being considered. Considerations will include the initial investment required, ensuring colleagues have the right training and skills, material compliance, and the need for testing and certification. This has the potential to allow us to address actions relating to unusual design needs more quickly.

7 Consumer Standards Improvement Plan

Objective: To provide the Committee with a copy of the Improvement Plan developed to resolve areas of non-compliance with the Regulator of Social Housing's Consumer Standards.

The Director of Governance, Housing and Communities introduced the report and explained that the programme is slightly behind target, but progress is being made. She highlighted that:

- Early delays in the stock condition surveys are now being caught up. Analysis will be carried out of the stratified sample to inform the development of the planned maintenance programme.
- Progress has also been made on the mobilisation of the asbestos contract.
- Fire risk actions now have a fully automated process, reducing the risk of errors.
- A Compliance Monitoring Group has been established, including two independent appointments who will provide steer for the group over the next 6 months.
- Pennington Choices have been commissioned to carry out a full review of the compliance policies. The revised policies will be brought to the committee before approval at Cabinet.
- A review of the website is being carried out.
- A resident engagement officer has been recruited.
- A Tenant Engagement Strategy has been reviewed by the Tenant Panel and tenant engagement experts, TPAS. Feedback has been positive, and it is scheduled to come before committee in July. Councillor Clucas thanked colleagues for creating a strong and readable Tenant Engagement Strategy. She highlighted that it shows tenants they have a voice, a way of doing things, and can approach colleagues if that approach does not work for them.

8 Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit Report

Objective: To provide the Committee with an overview of the Counter Fraud Enforcement Unit's work on housing and tenancy fraud over the previous year.

The Investigation and Enforcement Manager introduced the report and explained that it gives a summary of the work carried out by the Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit (CFEU) over the past two years. She confirmed that previously they had reported to Cheltenham Borough Homes and will be presenting to the committee annually going forward. Work carried out included verification work, specific investigations referred to the CFEU, proactive data matching exercises, reviews of housing waiting lists and the National Fraud Initiative housing matches. The CFEU will also be delivering training for council colleagues over the next 2 months around general fraud, tenancy and housing fraud awareness, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, surveillance, and the use of social media as part of investigations. It is hoped this will enable former housing colleagues to carry out more investigations themselves within the council's regulatory powers.

The committee's discussion raised the following points:

- The subletting of social housing on Airbnb may potentially be an issue in Cheltenham, especially around Race Week. This can be difficult to investigate as Airbnb are not a UK based organisation and do not have to comply with information requests. London councils have used a court order to compel Airbnb to provide information about specific housing estates with known problems. The CFEU is part of the Tenancy Fraud Forum which have recently produced a report on the use of Airbnb and are encouraging the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) to take more of an interest in housing fraud, particularly as other social housing providers do not have the capacity that councils have to investigate the matter. Individual cases can be investigated by the CFEU if information is received, and a proactive investigation could be undertaken prior to Race Week.
- The regulations do not provide powers of access unless accompanied by police with a warrant, but it is possible to gain utility use data and bank statements to investigate potentially empty properties and subletting.
- Reviews of the housing waiting list confirm whether the information provided when people first applied is still correct as circumstances may have changed. These households may still remain on the waiting list, if appropriate, with a recommendation to move them on to a different priority level.
- Where an offender lacks mental capacity or has a relevant disability solicitors carry out a 2-stage test before recommending any criminal action to consider whether it meets the evidential standards and whether it meets the public interest test. The public interest test considers other mitigating factors around the fraud such as capacity, but that would not necessarily prevent action being taken.
- The CFEU is a shared service across the five partner councils within Gloucestershire (Gloucester City Council is the only exception). They work under a collaboration agreement with officers seconded to each council.
- The waiting list has increased to 3014 households, primarily due to the economic climate in recent times. This means it is more important than ever to ensure the right people are on the list and that properties are recovered where possible from those who should not have them or who are subletting them.

9 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 and Leaseholder Panel updates were noted.

10 Review of the Housing Committee Forward Plan

The committee reviewed the forward plan and agreed that the 11 June meeting agenda should be reviewed to ensure sufficient time is available.

11 Items to be referred to Cabinet

There were none.

12 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 briefing note was noted.