

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Housing
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HOUSING ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24

KEY DECISION

Authors Kerry Clifford
Sally Norman

Lead Officers Kerry Clifford
Richard Protheroe | 2938

Contact Officer Richard Protheroe | 2938

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 The Housing Annual Report provides an overview of the Council housing performance between 2023 and 2024, including the Regulator of Social Housing Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM). It notes achievements and indicates where progress has been made, setting out key actions to be implemented during 2024/25.
- 1.2 The Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report sets out the duty placed on the Council to submit such a report, alongside a self-assessment of the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code, to the Housing Ombudsman by 30th June 2024. It also provides an overview of complaints handling performance over the period 2023/24 and key actions to be implemented during 2024/25.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Housing Annual Report as seen at Appendix A be approved, and the planned measures to improve performance be endorsed.

- 2.2 That delegated authority is given to the Strategic Director (RP) to approve after consultation with the Portfolio Holder a fully designed 'tenant friendly' Annual Report and Housing Strategy that will set out the priorities of the housing service over the next 12 months. Both documents will be published in September 2024.
- 2.3 That the Cabinet notes the Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report, including three Housing Ombudsman maladministration judgements from 2023/24 and the actions taken by the Council in response, as seen in Appendix B.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Housing Annual Report 2023/24 (Appendix A) provides tenants with an overview of the housing related achievements the Council has made during the last 12 months and the priorities for 2024/25.
- 3.2 The report provides an update on the Council's performance in respect of the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM). This includes the measures the Council has put in place to strengthen its housing management services, to further improve the standard and quality of the Council's housing stock, including tackling damp and mould, reducing a repairs backlog that resulted from the pandemic; and increasing the number of homes that meet the Decent Homes Standard.
- 3.3 It also provides examples of the work the Council has undertaken to engage and support residents and communities, and how the organisation has used resident feedback and complaints information to help inform service improvements.
- 3.4 The Council's housing related achievements in 2023/24 should be considered in the context of another particularly challenging year for the public sector. This has included:
 - Increased regulatory requirements on social housing providers,
 - Little or no new burdens funding to help offset new housing legislative requirements, including the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety Act 2021.
 - The ongoing pressures from the cost of living, caused by rising inflation and interest rates, fuel, energy, materials, utility prices etc.
 - Staffing challenges as an outcome of the very competitive, employee-driven market and the impact on retention and recruitment of the right people and skills at all levels to provide core services and implement new government legislation.
 - Continuing reductions in council funding from central government, exacerbated by difficult business environment impacting business rates and inflation continuing to be unstable.
- 3.5 Following the Grenfell Fire tragedy in 2017, the Government introduced a wide range of regulatory and legislative measures to ensure that engagement with tenants and safety of council homes were prioritised by landlords.
- 3.6 The RSH is the Government body tasked with overseeing the regulation of the social housing sector, regulating both local authority and housing association landlords, collectively known as Registered Providers (RPs). The RSH adopts

an assurance-based co-regulation approach. This means that the local authority executive, usually the cabinet, in local authority landlords, or the board of the housing association are responsible for ensuring they comply with the regulatory standards set by RSH. Each RP is required to submit a return against the 22 TSM by 30 June each year.

- 3.7 The RSH published revisions to 4 Consumer Standards in February, which were enacted in April 2024. The standards have been updated to give more focus on the voice of tenants, the quality of homes and strengthening the powers of the Regulator of Social Housing, so that they are able to hold Registered Providers (RPs) to account. The revision of standards has meant that a number of the Council's housing strategies and policies are in the process of being reviewed to ensure that they meaningfully reflect the new requirements.
- 3.8 The Council's HRA has been subject to changes in rent policy (e.g., 1% rent reduction 2016/17-2019/20) since the Council paid £199 million to the government for the self-financing deal. The 1% rent reduction reduced the HRA's income by circa £250m over 30 years.
- 3.9 This is challenging in a very competitive, employee-driven market and there is a risk that not being able to retain, attract and recruit the right people and skills at all levels could continue to impact on the Council's capacity to deliver all of its priorities as well as provide core housing services and implement new government legislation. The Council is continually reviewing its recruitment and retention approaches to strive to ensure it maintains the right capacity, skills, values and experience amongst
- 3.10 Good quality, affordable and sustainable homes are essential for healthy, happy and secure lives. That is why the quality and standard of the 7,750 homes and 1440 leasehold properties the Council manages is so important.
- 3.11 The Council's previous Corporate Plan 'Future Town Future Council' (FTFC) was agreed by the Council in December 2016. In February 2021, the Council agreed to extend FTFC beyond its original 5-year term and in July 2021, the FTFC programme was consolidated into four external-facing programmes and one internal-facing enabling programme:
- Transforming Our Town
 - More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes
 - Cooperative Neighbourhoods
 - A Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town
 - Making Your Money Count
- 3.12 In June 2023, it was agreed that the significant investment in social housing (£24.6 million in 23/24) should be reflected in the FTFC priority 'More Social and Affordable Homes'. This priority was subsequently amended to 'More Social, Affordable & Good Quality Homes' for 2023/24.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AND OTHER OPTIONS

Housing Annual Report 2023/24

- 4.1 A summary of key housing highlights against the FTFC Programme over the past year have been included in the Housing Annual Report 2023/24 (see Appendix A). The report is an external-facing document that sets out the

Council's progress in delivering and improving housing services for Stevenage residents and achievements of the housing strategic priorities in the FTFC Corporate Plan.

- 4.2 The report also sets out a summary of the activities delivered across Repairs; Safety of Homes; Complaints Handling and Tenant Engagement as part of the housing improvement programme for 2023/24 and the areas of focus for 2024/25. The activities outlined are aligned to the Consumer Standards High Level Action Plan presented to the Executive in March 2024. Planned activities for 2024/25 are also included, however it is important to note that the list of activities is likely to remain fluid as new initiatives and opportunities arise.
- 4.3 Despite the significant challenges and difficult decisions that the Council has faced and will continue to face, the Council remains financially resilient and continues to deliver for its tenants, including:

Housing Repairs

- The council completed 19,780 repair jobs and in Quarter 4 reported the following:
 - 92% (3593) of 3906 non-emergency repairs were completed on time.
 - 91.5% (3980) of all repairs (4347) were completed on time.
 - 135 void property refurbishment works were completed, which has reduced the number of voids that are 'work in progress' to 38 during Q1 2024/25.
- In addition, further training and expansion of the Customer Service Centre(CSC) Knowledge Base has helped increase staff knowledge and access to timely information, which has reduced the average call response and handling times for repairs.
- A service review of both Voids and Repairs was completed in 2023/24 along with scrutiny reviews of the Repairs and Void Service by the Community Select Committee. The agreed recommendations have/will feed into improvement plans to be delivered over the next 12-18 months.
- In addition, the Council also commissioned independent reviews undertaken by specialist organisations with technical expertise in the areas of damp and mould, voids and repairs. Their findings have been translated into three of the five Housing Transformation Workstreams which identifies actions the Council is taking forward to improve services. The workstreams are provided at Appendix C.
- Following a review of current arrangements, new interim contractors have been appointed to support the Repairs Service, including for specialist works such as roofing, pending a procurement process to award longer-term contracts in 2024/25.
- A fencing programme has been put in place by the Housing Investment team, which carried out fencing works on 342 properties in 2023/24 and aims to clear the historic backlog of fencing repair jobs during 2024/25.
- Changes to ways of working for the Repairs Supervisors and Maintenance Surveyors have been introduced to increase first time fix rates, productivity, and customer satisfaction.
- Developed a 'Booking Hub' - a new online reporting repairs service, which will allow customers to select their own repair appointment times, which has been released in-house and testing is being carried out.

Safety of Homes

- The Council entered into the final year of its Major Refurbishment Programme (£50m+) raising the standard and quality of over 500 plus low to medium sized flat blocks.
- Building Safety and Investment Plans were approved by the Executive in July 2023 (10 buildings in scope including 2 new build schemes delivered in 2023/24)
- All building safety regulatory milestones have been met and 100% compliance across all safety measures (Gas, Fire, Water, Lift, Asbestos) was achieved in May 2024
- 94% of the Council's housing stock met the national Decent Homes Standard. This improvement in performance is as an outcome of the annual 3-star gas servicing contract which is now well established and ensures that where a boiler is deemed in poor condition and in need of replacement this will be actioned immediately, ahead of the replacement through the planned programme.

Complaints Management

- A new Corporate Complaints Policy was approved in line with the revised Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which including the appointed of a lead Member for Housing Complaints
- In Quarter 2 of 2023/234, the Council introduced bi – weekly member and officer complaints clinics with the purpose of reviewing trends and undertaking root cause analysis to help drive improvements and learning. The introduction of the complaint clinic has had a positive impact on effective triage and resolution of. Alongside the decrease in the number of complaints being made and the reduced call handling time it is clear to see the council's commitment to proactively address the causes of complaints demonstrated, and a significantly improved complaint handling picture overall.

Tenant Engagement

- Pre-engagement work with tenants was undertaken in preparation for the scoping of the Repairs & Maintenance Policy, this will be followed by a period of consultation with Tenants in Summer 2024
- Consultation has taken place with tenants living in high rise buildings to help inform our high rise building resident engagement strategy. Further consultation and tenant and leaseholder engagement will be undertaken prior to publication
- Commissioned TPAS to help the Council re-engineer its engagement framework to refresh and embed tenant voice throughout housing services. They have worked with 'engaged' and 'non-engaged' tenants through the discovery process
- Tenants were invited to participate in a Caretaking Service Review which allowed the Council to gain valuable insight into the perception of the service

- The Council has introduced transactional surveys for Complaint Handling and ASB to give officers and Members a deeper understanding of tenant views across these areas and to help drive improvement with satisfaction
- Resident consultation on a new Allocation Policy, due to go live in September 2024
- Cooperative Neighbourhood Newsletters were launched to summarise activities in each neighbourhood and promote the collaborative work between residents, Members and Officers to deliver targeted neighbourhood initiatives.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures

- 4.3. To help inform the RSH understanding of compliance, in April 2023 all Registered Providers with over 1000 social housing properties were required to start collecting 22 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) for annual reporting purposes. The central aims of the TSMs are to provide tenants with greater transparency about RP performance and inform the regulator about RP compliance with consumer standards. The TSM data must be submitted to the RSH by the 30 June 2024 and will be published by the RSH and the Council annually. The data will be used by the RSH to understand which RPs may be at higher risk of failing to deliver the outcomes of its standards.
- 4.4 The Housing Annual Report provides Members, tenants and leaseholders with an update on the Council's performance in relation to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM). It provides an opportunity to be transparent about the Council's performance and be clear about the measures that have been put in place to tackle damp and mould and the repairs backlog; and increase the numbers of homes made decent (in support of the statutory decent homes standard).
- 4.5 The TSMs are separated into two sets of measures: management data and perception measures. The 10 management data measures cover fulfilment of gas; fire; asbestos; water; and lift safety checks, the number of complaints and responses in timescale with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling requirements, number of ASB cases, number of repairs completed in timescale and the number of homes that do not meet the decent homes standard. As these areas of service delivery are managed internally the 10 measures were added to the Executive Corporate Performance Suite for 2023/24 for quarterly monitoring purposes.
- 4.6 The 12 perception measures have been obtained through a quarterly TSM survey, the questions cover tenants' overall satisfaction with the above 10 management data areas, as well as the Council's fulfilment of asset and communal area maintenance, and tenant engagement. An independent research company were commissioned to undertake the perception measure survey and a summary of findings is presented in the Housing Annual Report 23/24.
- 4.7 The TSM Survey findings as outlined in the Housing Annual Report indicate that the Council has an overall tenant satisfaction rating of 56%. This is lower than the local authority sector mid-year median of 68.7%. When considering overall satisfaction across the social housing sector, the Housemark Membership and Sector Performance mid-year report shows a significant decline over the last five years. A number of factors are believed to have influenced this trend, including Covid, economic downturn, cost living and the energy crisis etc.

Encouragingly the survey findings highlighted good performance in the following areas:

70.2% - Residents agree that the Council treats them fairly and with respect

69.9% - Residents are satisfied that their home is safe

62.7% - Residents are satisfied with the overall repairs service

- 4.8 It is worth noting that the satisfaction scores obtained through the perception survey will be significantly impacted by the size of the RP, the area in which they are based, and the methodology used to collect data. For example, satisfaction is anticipated to be notably lower within primarily urban areas or areas where there is dispersed housing stock. The survey method used will achieve higher scores if carried out face-to-face, as opposed to being undertaken online. It is therefore advised that the satisfaction scores should be interpreted with caution noting that comparisons of relative performance are likely to be more accurate against Registered Providers of a similar size who have used a similar survey method. Accordingly, the Executive Housing Working Group are in discussion with Housemark to benchmark the TSM data so that more meaningful comparisons of the survey results can be obtained. Taking this approach will ensure that the insight and key driver analysis obtained can be used meaningfully to improve tenant experience.
- 4.9 The management data outlined in the Housing Annual Report indicates that the Council performs consistently well across gas; fire; asbestos; water and lift compliance checks. This performance is consistent with the Council's commitment to prioritising the safety of tenants and proactively maintaining and managing its social housing stock.
- 4.10 Obtaining a clearer understanding of our performance in relation to other local authorities of a similar size will help identify where further improvement is required.
- 4.11 Alongside the benchmarking activities to gain insight into how the Council compares with similar sized authorities, there are a number of recommendations set out in the Housing Annual Report 2023/24 which will be explored alongside expansion of the existing housing improvement programme.

Complaints Management Improvement

- 4.12 A Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report for 2023/24 and an Improvement Plan, as seen in Appendix B has been produced and published in line with the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman. The report was considered by the Executive Housing Working Group during May 2024 and was published on the Council's website during June 2024. The Cabinet is asked to note the report and endorse the Improvement Plan.
- 4.13 Cabinet is also asked to note that within the report there are 3 Housing Ombudsman determinations, one relating to a judgment of severe maladministration and two judgements relating to maladministration. Links have been provided within the report to the Housing Ombudsman findings. On-going, a quarterly summary report on complaints handling, trends and learning will be reviewed by the Executive Housing Working Group and any future findings or determinations of severe maladministration or maladministration will be reported to Cabinet within quarterly performance reports.

Tenant Facing Housing Strategy

- 4.13 To improve transparency and understanding of the Council's performance and future priorities for the next 12 months, a tenant friendly housing strategy is being drafted and this report recommends that delegated authority is given to Strategic Director (RP) after consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing to approve and publish the Strategy in September 2024.
- 4.14 The Councils overall strategic aims, objectives and priorities are currently set within the Corporate Plan Making Stevenage Even Better 2024-2027. The Plan has 5 strategic priorities, one of which is More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes.
- 4.15 The strategic housing priorities are based upon resident and community group feedback provided since 2021. It builds on the long-term objectives of FTFC programmes and reflects the need to prioritise effective delivery of housing services in a challenging financial environment.
- 4.16 The priorities have been informed by responses provided through the Residents Survey (2021), the Tenants Survey (2021), and the Cooperative Neighbourhoods Resident Proptech Survey (CNRP) (2023).
- 4.17 The CNRP survey findings represented 3,500 residents' views across a range of topics, of which 24% were Council tenants and provided a strong local evidence base for change. Key priority areas identified included:
- Maintenance and appeal of local areas (e.g., littering & cleanliness, pathways and pavements)
 - Safety and crime (e.g., reducing Anti-Social Behaviour, drugs and young people hanging around neighbourhoods)
 - Green spaces and climate change (e.g., better parks, maintenance of green spaces, climate change activities to reduce carbon footprint and improve biodiversity)
 - Provision of good local Services (e.g., council house maintenance, customer services, waste collection and recycling, satisfaction with housing repairs)
 - Good local shops and facilities (e.g., diversity of retail and investment in town centre, new leisure facilities, youth initiatives and activities in neighbourhood areas to promote health & wellbeing)
- 4.18 As part of formal consultation activities, sixty-four per cent (64%) of residents and tenants agreed that provision of good quality tenancy, housing maintenance, repairs and homelessness services to residents was important.
- 4.19 The Council is committed to the delivery of its More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes Building New & Sustainable Homes priorities and is evidenced through the following two outcomes:
- Outcome 1: Building New & Sustainable Homes: The demand for local homes is in part met through the provision of more social, affordable, and good quality homes that meet improved sustainability standards.***
- Providing 529 new social and affordable homes by 2029/30 – delivering 1,000 new homes since 2014
 - Ensure that the Five Star Quality Housing Principles are fulfilled across the town,
 - Creating more affordable homes and improving local areas

- To help meet the demand for housing the Council will explore options to introduce shared ownership as a tenure type
- Continue to secure grant funding to support the new build programme through schemes such as the Homes England Affordable Homes Programme
- Identify and build new independent living schemes such as planned at Brent Court, in line with the Council's design commitments as set out in the Housing Older People Strategy
- Involving residents in the redevelopment of large neighbourhood centre regenerations schemes such as the Oval, so that residential, retail and community amenities deliver what people need
- Exploring new housing development sites through the Wholly Owned Company (WOC) and General
- Funding to ensure the generation of income for future social housing builds and services

Outcome 2: Maintaining Good Quality Homes: A good quality tenancy, housing maintenance, repairs and homelessness service is provided to residents.

- Setting rents and service charges at affordable levels for tenants and leaseholders (within national policy constraints) particularly in response to significant cost-of-living challenges brought about by high inflation, food, energy and living costs, whilst balancing this with the need to do more with less in response to additional housing regulatory and statutory requirements
- Investing £249m over the next ten years to improve the maintenance of our council homes, to ensure that tenants have good quality, safe and sustainable homes to live-in, particularly in response to the climate crisis. This includes:
 - Completion of the low to medium rise flat block refurbishment programme by 2025, and commencement of refurbishment works to the Council's five high rise flat blocks in 2024/25.
 - Delivery of the Decent Homes programme to achieve 100% of the stock meeting both National & Stevenage Standards, including the installation of 995 new kitchens or bathrooms, 1875 heating upgrades, 1500 window or door upgrades and 1400 properties receiving works to improve their energy efficiency over the next three years.
 - Tackling the climate change emergency by sourcing funding and investing in the right solutions to reduce energy costs and the overall carbon footprint of the Council's housing stock, including achieving a minimum Energy Efficiency Rating of Band C for all council homes by 2030.
 - Maintaining full compliance with all statutory and regulatory requirements to ensure tenants homes remain safe.
 - Implement improvements to the Council's Repairs and Voids service, to ensure it offers choices to tenants and delivers cost-effective repairs and improvements right first time.
 - Increase spending on housing management services, including increasing the number of tenancy audits, so that tenants can have

regular access to Housing Staff, so issues can be reported and mitigated earlier, and support provided to vulnerable tenants where required

- Fully establish the Council's Community Advice and Support Service to help deliver personalised advice and support for tenants
- Review service standards and implement a new engagement strategy that ensures tenants and leaseholders are treated with fairness and respect so that they can access services, raise complaints when necessary, influence decision making and hold the Council to account
- Devise and implement a new Rough Sleeper & Homelessness strategy 2024-2027 that ensure homeless residents are given access to temporary and emergency accommodation and timely wraparound support services
- Continue to deliver against all the requirements listed above whilst managing the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt effectively, with sufficient reserves being held to ensure the Council remains financially resilient

3.20 A Tenant Facing Housing Strategy will capture the above planned activity as well as other operational improvements. It is recommended that delegated authority is granted to the Strategic Director (RP) to approve the final design, after consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing. The aim is to publish the strategy in September 2024.

Monitoring Progress and Improvement

3.21 Members will be aware that the new Making Stevenage Even Better (MSEB) Corporate Plan was approved for implementation at Council on the 21 February 2024 (see Figure 1). Reporting against the housing strategic priorities and 3 cross-cutting themes will commence from quarter one 2024/25 and a key component of performance monitoring within housing services will be set out under the strategic priority of More Social, Affordable & Good Quality Homes. A finalised suite of Key Performance Indicators and Milestones will be presented to the Cabinet for agreement alongside this report in July 2024.



Fig 1.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1.1 There are no direct financial implications from the recommendations contained in this report. However, officers responsible for delivering the Housing Annual Report improvement activity set out within this report which has not already been included in the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2024/25, will be covered in the 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report or reported as part of the HRA MTFS refresh that will be presented to the Cabinet in October 2024.

5.2 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.2.1 There are no direct legal implications from the recommendations contained in this report. However, officers responsible for delivering the priorities over the coming year and implementing any improvement activity set out within this report will need to identify and consider any resulting legal implications.

5.3 EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

5.3.1 There are no direct equality, diversity and inclusion implications arising from this report. Where required, Equality Impact Assessments will be completed for programmes, projects, service changes and improvement activity identified.

5.4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

5.4.1 There are no direct significant risks to the Council in agreeing the recommendation(s). However, officers responsible for implementing any improvement activity set out within this report will need to consider any risk implications that arise.

5.4.2 The Council has an embedded approach to risk management that mitigates any adverse effect on delivery of the Council's objectives and internal control processes and provides good governance assurance.

5.5 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

5.5.1 The Council declared a climate change emergency in June 2019 with a resolution to work towards a target of achieving net zero emissions by 2030. There are no direct climate change implications arising from this report, except for those activities that seek to have a positive impact in this area, and the officers responsible for delivering the improvements will need to identify and address any climate change considerations in the implementation of activities.

5.6 OTHER CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

5.6.1 Implementing the priorities and improvement activity outlined in this report may impact on the development of future policy or procedure, which will be monitored through the formal policy/procedure sign-off process via the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

6 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- FTFC Corporate Plan 2016 to 2024
- Quarter 4 Corporate Performance Report 23/24

7 APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Housing Annual Report 23/24
- Appendix B: Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2023/24.