

LANDLORD SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD (EXECUTIVE WORKING GROUP)

30 November 2023

NOTES

Present:

CLlr Paul Rivers (Chair)
Terry Daubney, Waverley Tenants' Panel
(Vice Chair)
CLlr Jacquie Keen
CLlr Alan Morrison
CLlr John Robini
Chris Austin, Lucas Field Residents Group
Robert Stratford, Waverley Tenants Panel
Sally Purcell, Waverley Tenants Panel
Danielle Sleightholme, Waverley Tenants
Panel (Co-Optee)

Apologies:

Councillor Janet Crowe

In attendance:

CLlr Paul Follows
CLlr Steve Williams

43 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from CLlr Janet Crowe.

44 Notes of the previous meeting

The Chair noted a few amendments had been made to the minutes upon his request.

The Board agreed that the notes of the meeting held on 19th October 2023 and published to the Council's website were an accurate and complete record.

45 Declarations of interest

There were no Declarations received.

46 Questions from Members of Public

There were none received.

47 Questions from Members

There were no questions received.

48 Q2 Corporate Performance Report 2023-24

The Executive Head of Housing (Operations & Services), Andrew Smith, addressed the Board and introduced section 2.1.1 of the Q2 Corporate Performance Report 2023-24, noting that partnership working has been the focus for the management team and that the team is seeing increasing vulnerability in tenants and the number of tenants who require support.

The Executive Head of Housing (Operations & Services) acknowledged that there were a large number of red KPIs on Page 4 of Annex 1, however, he noted that these were generally moving in the right direction. He informed the Board that the Housing team are working on improving voids turnaround times and noted the improvement in responsive repairs and reassured Members that work with Ian Williams to improve the service is continuing.

Members referenced the Responsive repairs figures (H5a-H6b) on Page 4 of Annex 1 and expressed their disappointment with the figures. Cllr Keen questioned whether these responsive repairs were particularly difficult repairs, hence the increased repair times. The Chair further queried whether the Stock Condition Surveys were giving officers a lead in terms of future works that need to be planned and whether they are bringing up more repairs. Cllr Robini referenced part 2.5.3 of Annex 1 and asked for clarity on the increase in complexity of complaints.

The Compliance Manager, Matt Alexander, responded to some of these queries. He explained that he could not provide a full breakdown at this point but noted that there had been an increase in minor works i.e. works with more than one component or operative required. These would take more time, resources and organisation. He noted that another Repairs Inspector and a Damp and Mould Officer had been recruited and will be in post from January 2024 which will drive improvements in repairs. He agreed that the Stock Condition Surveys were producing a lot more repair works which had not formally been reported to the Council and this could be contributing to the figures. In terms of the increase in complexity of complaints in part 2.5.3, Annalisa Howson explained that complexity of investigations such as reviewing the structure of the building in cases of damp and mould are a substantial reason for the increase in response time.

The Board made reference to H6a in Annex 1 and queried whether these figures are such because they were not completed right the first time or whether these are cases that cannot be fixed the first time, so a return visit is needed. The Services Improvements Manager explained that the figures in H6a are based on a tenants survey to give a view on how tenants are experiencing the service, rather than the Contactor's view.

Cllr Robini raised concerns about the lack of affording housing and housing delivery in the Borough shown in the KPIs, specifically in Town Centres/high street areas and whether this had anything to do with Planning Policies or technicalities. The Executive Head of Housing (Operations & Services) responded and explained that Housing Delivery and Function is certainly a valid issue, however the lack of housing delivery schemes is attributed to build cost inflation and affordable homes needing to be viable before works proceed. He noted that there was significant pressure on affordable housing providers and that affordable homes are built to the correct standard. He further noted that Housing Register numbers will stay as they are unless new builds are occurring.

Annalisa Howson, Services Improvement Manager, reminded the Board that Housing Delivery is not within the remit of this Board.

Annalisa Howson encouraged the Board to comment and recommend any suggestions on the format in which these figures are brought to them. She noted that the Housing Team would be happy to restart monthly operational housing indicators with the Board in order for Members of the Board to receive information in a more timely fashion. Further, she noted that we could look at coming out of the Corporate template and developing a snapshot or dashboard on a monthly basis which is more user friendly.

The Leader informed the Board that changing or altering the Performance Indicators of the specified Service Area within the Corporate Performance Reports sits within the remit of the Executive and any recommendations regarding these would be welcomed and considered by the Executive.

Cllr Keen voiced her concern about the 'Right to Buy' scheme resulting in the Council losing their property stock which adds to the burden on social housing as our stock is diminishing. The Board acknowledged that this was a Central Government issue.

Annalisa Howson, Services Improvement Manager, provided the Board with an overview of the remainder of the Q2 Corporate Performance Report 2023-24, Housing Performance extract at Annex 1 and provided some key updates, including;

- 2.3, the Service Plans Progress Update indicates that all service plan actions are on track, however Annalisa advised that the Board may want a breakdown with more information in future.

- 2.4 Internal Audit actions looked at the outcomes of the Use and Occupation Charges audit which highlighted an anomaly with some of the data, therefore concluding that some policies needed to be tightened and training needed to be provided. The Succession Policy was reviewed which looks at inheriting a property when an occupant passes away – Annalisa noted that this can be brought to the Board in future if they would like.

- 2.5, Complaints Data highlighted a concern about the lack of resources to respond to complaints. It was noted that Amy Walton, the new Service Improvement Officer is now in post and will be providing additional support in providing responses to complaints in a timely fashion. A corporate review on how the Team manages complaints will be brought back to Board in the spring following the Housing Ombudsman and Local Govt. Ombudsman 'Joint Code of Practice' consultation.

- 2.6, the Finance position offers a breakdown of the HRA financial position, income and expenditure and forecast outturn.

The Board noted the report and had no further comments to make.

Rod Blackmore, on behalf of the Customer Experience Group (CEG) presented the CEG Recommendations to the Board, following the Aids & Adaptations Survey (October 2023). The Recommendations are set out in the document attached.

As the response rate the Aids & Adaptations Survey was only 12%, the CEG urged that officers consider ways to increase the response rate in future surveys i.e. to offer an opportunity to complete the survey via phone, email or in person. It was noted that the survey found that tenants were generally satisfied with the Aids and Adaptations once complete but raised issues with communications and length of time to complete works.

The Board queried whether the Council was statutorily required to carry out an adaptation that was too expensive or whether the tenant would be required to relocate. Matt Alexander confirmed that within the Policy there is a value/threshold and if the Aids and Adaptations would exceed the value it will be reviewed by a Committee within the WBC realm. The works will be reviewed and other options will be considered before coming to a decision. He also noted that there are other funding streams available such as Surrey County Council which could be available or utilised if the works would exceed the threshold.

The Board recognised the discrepancies in communication found in the survey and queried how the team would deal with this. Annalisa Howson advised that officers would need to look at agreeing an appropriate level of communication through a mutual agreement, i.e. weekly updates or updates only when there is a change to notify the tenant about. Annalisa explained that the core principle is to ensure that tenants remain well informed and are not left in the dark during this process, however the right balance is needed.

The Board noted the recommendations of the Customer Experience Group.

50 Housing Decant Policy

The Services Improvement Manager, Annalisa Howson, addressed the Board and presented the draft updated Decant Policy as set out in Annex 1. The Board has been asked to review and support the adoption and the implementation of the Policy and to consider and advise the Service Improvement Manager on the procedural queries raised in part 6.9 of the report. These include;

1. A goodwill gesture one-off payment to anyone who has had to move homes, on top of the compensation due to the inconvenience.
2. Within hotel accommodation WBC covers reasonable costs for food – the proposal was to set a limit/set amount of money per person per day and pay upfront rather than waiting for receipts.

Rob Stratford, Tenants Panel Member, relayed his experience with the decant process during the initiation of the Ockford Ridge retrofit redevelopment scheme. He noted that an older house was offered first, which was turned down and then he was moved to a show home. He endorsed the decant process including the disturbance payments administered by WBC and noted that the current payment system in place worked well.

Members raised concern about the name 'Decant' when referring to tenants and homes. Terry Daubney, Leader of the Tenant's Panel, recommended that the Policy

be renamed to 'Home-relocation Policy', which was endorsed by Members of the Board and the Executive Head of Housing (Operations & Services).

The Leader informed the Board that the Executive had similar discussions around the use of the word 'decant'. He advised that 'Decant' is a political term that is jargon and used across the sector and would need to be included, however, it would be possible to change the name of the Policy and keep 'decant' in brackets. The Chair agreed with the advice given and advised that the Housing Team takes on the Board's suggestion for re-naming the Policy.

Members queried how WBC deals with cases where tenants are re-located to a property that they feel is unsuitable. Annalisa Howson confirmed that this would be dealt with sensitively and Officers would build a relationship with the tenant and talk through the home options and payment arrangements as well as conducting a needs assessments.

Following discussions around the procedural queries raised in paragraph 6.9 of the report, Members of the Board were in favour of the proposal mentioned in 6.9.1, 'Payments in advance for subsistence'. The Board agreed that payments in advance as a set amount would help tenants who may be financially unable to fork money out for food and rely on re-imbursements in the future and emphasised that no one should be out of pocket. It was noted that this would also mitigate the impracticalities of saving receipts for every meal and submitting them. The Board also acknowledged that a payment in advance would allow tenants to allocate the funds more effectively.

Danielle Sleightholme, Tenants Panel Co-Optee, queried the experiences of the Tenants who influenced the development of the Policy in Annex 1. She further questioned whether the Board could see the procedure. Annalisa Howson informed the Board that the Policy was developed based on reviews and comments taken from tenants who had undergone an emergency decant and were dissatisfied with the service, which also allowed officers to review lessons learned. One of the issues picked up was the need to complete a comprehensive assessment of the Tenants' individual needs, particularly around Occupational Therapy referrals and disability. The Officer involved also consulted with the Tenant's panel when producing the Policy. Annalisa further explained that the procedure is an internal document and Tenant Satisfaction Surveys and feedback from tenants fed into the development of the procedures. Further, the way that procedures are developed is currently under review. She noted that the procedure can be shared with and discussed with the Tenants panel if requested.

The Board resolved to:

1. Support the adoption and implementation of the Decant Policy set out in Annex 1.
2. Recommend that officers duly consider the suggestion of the Board to re-name the Policy to the 'Home Re-location Policy'.
3. Recommend that the Services Improvement Manager duly considers the comments made by the Board pertaining to the procedural queries set out in part 6.9 of the report.

The Services Improvement Manager, Annalisa Howson addressed the Board and presented the progress of the Re-let Review since December 2022. Annalisa noted that progress has been made, however issues and conflicting priorities have caused the delay in the Review.

- Annalisa reminded the Board that re-lets are a comprehensive and complex process which involve different processes such as Health and safety checks and allocation processes. It was noted that there had been many changes since the Project 20 process in 2014 and officers are aware that the 20 day target has not been met since 2019. Annalisa explained that changes to customers' needs and expectations have been reviewed in light of this, such as standard of decorations, carpeting, health and safety issues, energy efficiency, heating and the void standards. She further noted that the relet process involves multiple elements and teams such as the Housing engagement Team, the voids Team, Contractors, the Rents Team, etc. Adequate resources are therefore essential to improve the length of re-let periods.
- Annalisa noted that there is a strong focus on prioritising the landlord-tenant relationship as the beginning of the tenancy is the first interaction with a new tenant and it is essential to ensure a positive start to the relationship.
- Annalisa noted that the proposal was to run the project in 3 phases; the first phase is complete and it identified the blockages to an efficient relet, the second phase (consultation) is part complete and the third stage to brainstorm improvements has been completed alongside phase 1.
- Annalisa presented a graph which demonstrated that, as of October 2023, the average was 44 days to turn around a home for re-let and there was a cumulative average of 30 days over the whole year. However, it was noted that 5 properties have been turned around in 25 days this year, which is a step in the right direction.
- The presentation discussed the cost of voids data analysis and showed an average cost of around £4,000 per property. Annalisa noted that increased funds were spent on new kitchens and bathrooms and a comparative cost analysis was completed. The analysis found that a lot of the costs were spent on removing previous tenants rubbish and gardening. In response, the Team have started providing a skip for tenants to remove their own waste if a tenant has given notice, quality of workmanship has been raised and there is now a dedicated tenant officer who can support them through that process. Officers noted that they would like to do more cost analysis to determine where savings can be made reasonably.

Annalisa noted that the next steps would be to look at cost analyses and more stringent budgets; to ensure economically viable options are in place especially with new kitchens and bathrooms. Officers will also review use of decoration vouchers and re-carpeting. Annalisa reiterated that Tenant Surveys and dialogue with contractors will continue to improve the service.

Cllr Keen expressed the importance of Tenant responsibility for looking after the home and recommended that there should be a formal responsibility on the tenant to leave the house in a reasonable condition. She further suggested that carpets in good condition should be left in place, except if the previous tenant had pets. Annalisa Howson confirmed that the dedicated tenant officer will work on increasing transparency about the rights and responsibility on tenants and the Landlord with regards to re-lets. She clarified that Re-carpeting is dependent on the quality of the carpet and there had been a proposal to budget carpeting to more financially vulnerable tenants and further mentioned that the HRA hardship fund has been utilised to help new tenants with re-carpeting.

In response to queries from the Board, Annalisa clarified that there is a Voids Standard which constitutes that the home must be in working order. She noted that there is a variation in how some tenants leave their properties and that WBC needs

to ensure they are covering the discrepancies or extra works that are needed to ensure the home meets the voids standard.

Danielle Sleightholme, Tenants panel Co-Optee, suggested that providing a skip should be standard practice, tenant involvement before the re-let work position would be useful to determine which work needs doing, making the process more tenant-led and that a basic re-decoration job would be very helpful during the re-let phase if the redecoration vouchers are to be discontinued.

Annalisa noted that WBC operates a choice based letting system; which means that the tenant can bid to express their interest in other properties in other areas. The Home Choice Team have a good relationship with tenants and can suggest other types of properties or areas to fit the tenants' requirements based on their bids.

The Board noted the Re-let Review update and thanked Annalisa Howson for her presentation.

The Chair then invited Cllr Steve Williams to provide an update to the Board.

Cllr Steve Williams addressed the Board and informed them that the Charity 'What Next? Godalming' had introduced an initiative to provide free surveys to residents across Waverley. He noted that a team of surveyors have been trained to undertake energy surveys and will take a thermal image of the house to determine where heat is leaking out and how energy loss can be dealt with i.e. draft excluders or extra insulation. Cllr Steve Williams suggested that the Tenants' newsletter and the Tenant's Panel extends the opportunity to WBC tenants.

Cllr Steve Williams advised that tenants contact 'What Next?' directly and details are to be circulated after the meeting.

52 Executive Head of Housing update

Executive Head of Housing, Andrew Smith, announced that he is leaving the Council in the new year.

The Board thanked Andrew for his efforts put into tenant relations and his hard work on projects such as Ockford Ridge.

53 Work programme

Annalisa Howson reminded the Board that the HRA mid-year review will be discussed at the HRA Finance session on 15 December 2023 and where we have been spending HRA funds. This will also prepare the Board Members for the budget setting meeting in January, including the projected rent increase and HRA planned works.

54 Date of next meeting

It was confirmed that the date of the next meeting will be Thursday 25 January 2024.