

HOUSING OPERATIONS BOARD

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2024

Present:

Councillor Julia McShane (Chair)
Councillor Bilal Akhtar
Councillor Philip Brooker
Councillor Maddy Redpath
The Deputy Mayor, Councillor Howard Smith
Patricia Ayling, Tenant Engagement Group
Pat Conroy, Tenant Engagement Group
Alan Wood, Tenant Engagement Group

Julian Higson – Joint Strategic Director of Housing, Communities & Environment
Annalisa Howson – Joint Assistant Director, Housing Services

Action By

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received from Councillor Amanda Creese, for whom Councillor Howard Smith substituted, and from Councillor Vanessa King, and Dale Askew.

12. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

13. MINUTES

The minutes of the first meeting of the Board held on 31 July 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

The following update on actions was noted:

Minute 6: Housing Service Complaints Handling Performance Report

- An advice leaflet on fencing had been drafted and would be brought back to the Board for comment.
- It was not possible for councillors to have access to the online complaints form due to data protection issues.

Annalisa
Howson

- Communications team was currently reviewing the accessibility of the online complaints form.
- The complaints report had been programmed into the Board's workplan.

Minute 8: AOB

- Annalisa confirmed that a training session for Board members, TEG members, and councillors on housing allocations had been requested and it was understood that it would take place on Wednesday 27 November.
- It was noted that allocation information for ex-services applicants was already included in the housing allocations scheme on the website together with a link to a Guide to Housing Options in England for ex-Service Personnel.

14. TERMS OF REFERENCE UPDATE

A copy of the Board's revised terms of reference, following the discussion at the 31 July meeting, had been included on the agenda for this meeting.

15. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS

The Board considered the latest update on the Council's Housing Improvement Plan (as at 19 September 2024). It was noted that good progress had been made in respect of the various actions within each of the workstreams. This update had also been discussed at the Executive Briefing held earlier in the day.

Julian informed the Board that the Housing Improvement Plan formed part of the wider corporate improvement plan, which was being overseen by an Independent Assurance Panel, who would be reporting on progress to the full Council every six months. The Panel had indicated that both plans were fit for purpose and a number of priority areas had been identified, which included:

- Capacity and staffing levels (including a fit for purpose

- staffing establishment)
- Risk Assurance Framework
- Procurement pipeline
- Complaints system
- Continued governance oversight through this Board and TEG

Housing staff were committed to the improvement plan and recognised the significant amount of work required to be carried out and welcomed the scrutiny of its work by this Board.

In response to a request for information on whether the service was fully staffed and whether a KPI on staffing levels could be reported to the Board, it was noted that the current staffing establishment was not considered to be fit for purpose and there continued to be an urgent need to bring in interim expertise, for example on health and safety, compliance and performance. There was, therefore, a need to focus on bringing in a fully fit for purpose permanent establishment.

It was anticipated that an agreed structure could be in place by the end of December, and that there might be opportunities for collaborative appointments within the new structure.

It was noted that some items in the Improvement Plan were due to be completed in September, and there were two items with no notes as regards progress update. The update would show where any item was not 'on track'. Weekly meetings were being held with workstream leads and the Head of Business Improvement to work through all outstanding actions.

The Board was also reminded that a monthly email was being sent to all councillors updating them on progress with the Housing and Corporate Improvement Plans.

In response to a query as to whether an action recommended by SOLACE (para 24) regarding the provision of housing stock data had been included on the Improvement Plan, Julian

confirmed that it had, and that progress was 'on track'. However, it was noted that no reference to para 24 had been included in the Improvement Plan. This would be clarified in future progress reports.

16. REGULATOR OF SOCIAL HOUSING - PROGRESS

Following the Council's self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) and the C3 assessment grading which meant that the Council did not meet the required standards, the Board noted that a second meeting with the RSH had been held earlier in the day. The meeting had focused on updating them on progress regarding building safety – in particular asbestos and fire risk assessments and electrical inspections.

The RSH was pleased with the progress and the targets set in respect of the various actions, although improvement was required in the way in which the data was presented.

17. PERFORMANCE - Q1 REPORT

The Board received a slide presentation from Annalisa on RSH compliance performance across the following areas:

- Fire Safety
- Gas Safety
- Electrical Safety
- Lift Safety
- Asbestos management, and
- Legionella (water safety)

Additional compliance areas were likely to follow, including damp and mould.

A copy of the slides was circulated to the Board after the meeting.

The Board expressed thanks for the update and were encouraged by the progress being made in these compliance areas.

In response to a query regarding how the Council communicates with tenants/leaseholders after testing in

respect of the compliance areas, Julian informed the Board that the Council was obliged to provide copies of gas safety certificates, but recognised that improvements were required across all compliance areas.

18. VOID REPORT

The Board considered a progress report, requested at its first meeting, on the status of void properties and the actions taken to reorganise the management of voids following the loss of staff and contractors in September 2023.

The report detailed the current position regarding the increased number of voids that had arisen and described the approach that would be undertaken by Housing Services to reduce this number and to reduce the average number of days that properties were vacant over the next 12 months.

The Board would receive regular updates to monitor the progress made by officers to manage and reduce the level of voids at each meeting.

Julian commented that there were still more voids than there should be, and the team would be working hard to return to more acceptable performance as regards void management. It was also noted that there remained a number of void properties with longer term issues, e.g. subsidence, which might require demolition/rebuild.

The aim was to ensure that the Council had a robust re-let process in order to meet local housing needs and to maximise rental income.

The Board noted that there were approximately 230 'normal' voids, and the Council would generally expect to let the same number of homes each year. It was essential that the Council focused its resources on the health and safety of its current tenants. Homes had been let this year through the Council's internal works team and a new contractor was due to start in October. A programme of works would be drawn up to look at the various structural issues affecting the longer-term voids.

It was also noted that every home re-let to an existing tenant would result in the creation of another void.

The Board agreed that a further progress report on Void Management should be presented to the next meeting, with updated appendices.

19. TENANT ENGAGEMENT GROUP FEEDBACK

Alan, as chair of TEG, reported that over the past few months there had been two visioning sessions with HQN, with a view to mapping TEG's vision and plans over the next 5-6 years. TEG had also been working with Meena Lota and were now receiving details of KPIs. TEG had met the day before this meeting and had welcomed a new member.

It was noted that TEG had held two open sessions with tenants – at the Hive and at Ripley, which was found to be very useful as tenants genuinely felt that their concerns were being heard, and more such sessions were planned.

It was also felt that another session with councillors would be beneficial.

The TEG AGM would be held on 29 October 2024 in the evening and would be another open session. The Council's Comms team would assist in promoting the AGM.

The chair thanked the TEG representatives for their input and work.

20. FORWARD PLAN

The Board noted the Forward Plan and were invited to suggest new topics for consideration at future meetings.

Annalisa reminded the Board that, at its next meeting, as well as the standing items, there would be an update on voids and Tenant Satisfaction Measures for review. Preliminary work had been ongoing on the HRA Business Plan, and external consultants were being brought in to support that work. It was suggested that a special meeting of the Board be held for the purpose of considering the draft HRA Business Plan.

21. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS: 2024-25

Noting that the next scheduled meeting of the Board would, again, clash with a meeting of the Licensing Committee, the Board agreed that the start time for its meetings would be brought forward to 5.30pm.

The dates and times of future meetings in 2024-25 were therefore as follows:

Wednesday 20 November 2024 at 5.30pm,

Wednesday 15 January 2025 at 5.30pm

Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 5.30pm

Venue: Meeting Room 6, Millmead House