

HOUSING OPERATIONS BOARD

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 15 JANUARY 2025

Present:

Councillor Julia McShane (chair)
Councillor Bilal Akhtar
Councillor Amanda Creese
Councillor Vanessa King
Councillor Maddy Redpath
Patricia Ayling, Tenant Engagement Group
Alan Wood, Tenant Engagement Group

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

Action By

22. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received from Councillor Philip Brooker, Dale Askew and Pat Conroy.

23. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

24. MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting of the Board held on 25 September 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

The following update on actions was noted:

Minute 15: Housing Improvement Plan Progress

In response to a question as to progress with the staffing structure, Julian confirmed that the target date of end of December 2024 had slipped because we were not yet in a position to know what a fit-for-purpose structure looked like

until we received the next version of the improvement plan following receipt of feedback from the Housing Quality Network. Julian reassured the Group that the Council was fortunate to have excellent interims. It was anticipated that a revised target date would be included in the new version of the improvement plan, when that becomes available in March.

Minute 19: Tenant Engagement Group Feedback

It was noted that the further session with councillors had not yet been arranged.

25. FENCING GUIDELINES FOR TENANTS

The Board received and noted the new Fencing Guidelines for Tenants.

26. UPDATE ON HRA BUSINESS PLAN

The Board received a presentation on the new HRA Business Plan from Julia Hovells, Associate Director of Savills Affordable Housing Consultancy.

A copy of the slides would be circulated to the Board members after the meeting.

It was noted that the average capital investment per property over the 30-year period of the Business Plan was £66,000.

In response to a question as to whether the business plan would cover circumstances where developers fail to identify social housing providers willing to build social housing, Julian noted that the stock would decrease if the Council does not continue to build or acquire new homes. The Council was currently being approached by developers inviting the Council to take over the affordable housing element of their developments. The Business Plan would set out criteria to be applied that would determine whether the Council would do this in terms of the right housing at the right price. It was also possible for developers to make commuted payments to the Council in lieu of the provision of social housing in these circumstances.

In response to a question as to whether the Council had conducted condition surveys on all of the housing stock, and why decarbonisation was not part of the business plan, Julian informed the Board that the Council had a continuous rolling programme of stock condition surveys with data validation being undertaken on a sample of surveys. As regards decarbonisation, it was stated that no other authority included this in their business plans because of the huge expense. It was therefore a matter for central government to consider in terms of appropriate funding.

27. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE

The Board considered the latest update on the Council's Housing Improvement Plan. It was noted that significant progress was being made in respect of addressing the priorities identified in the SOLACE review and the Independent Assurance Panel recommendations.

Annalisa
Howson

Key achievements included leadership stabilisation, enhanced governance, compliance improvements, and the introduction of performance monitoring mechanisms. A six-month update on the Housing Improvement Plan had been presented to Full Council on 3 December 2024.

A further update report on the Improvement Plan, which would include the HQN recommendations, would be considered at the next Board meeting in March.

The Board

RESOLVED:

- (1) To note the progress made in the Housing Improvement Plan as outlined in the report.
- (2) To note the continued focus on key next steps, including addressing voids backlog, refreshing the plan with HQN recommendations, and completing the housing staffing structure review.

28. TENANT SATISFACTION SURVEY REPORT

The Board received a report setting out the results of our first tenant perception surveys conducted in June/July 2024. It was noted that there had been a year's delay in starting the

Annalisa
Howson

process and this formed part of the Council's self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) in March 2024.

The RSH had introduced tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs) so tenants could see how their landlord was performing in comparison with others, making it easier for social housing tenants to hold their landlord to account in several key performance areas. The TSMs would also act as a source of information for the RSH to help identify the areas where landlords might need to improve things for tenants.

The TSMs covered five areas:

- Keeping properties in good repair
- Maintaining building safety
- Effective complaints handling
- Respectful and helpful tenant engagement
- Responsible neighbourhood management

The Council had commissioned Acuity Research & Practice, an independent data research company with expertise in the social housing field, to undertake our surveys. By the close of the surveys, 596 responses had been received, 401 by telephone interview and 195 online.

The report also included an action plan setting out how the Council intended to address the feedback raised by tenants.

It was noted that, of the 12 satisfaction measures, the Council's handling of complaints received only 22% satisfaction, which was reflected across the sector. However, the Board noted the action that was proposed to improve performance in this area including the proposed appointment of a Complaints Lead to the Customer Services team who would work closely with the Housing Complaints Co-ordinator. A new process had also been introduced in the housing complaints procedure so that when complaints come through to the Housing service the relevant manager was now required to contact the complainant within 24 hours in respect of emergencies (and 48 hours for other circumstances)

and agree a plan of action to address the complaint.

Management was also looking at all complaints every fortnight to try and understand what the complaints are actually about in terms of service failures rather than just receiving reports about trends of complaints.

Officers had also worked very hard to deal with the backlog of complaints.

It was noted that councillors received complaints from residents regarding the impact of neighbouring void properties.

It was suggested that the Council's performance against the TSMs could be benchmarked in order to understand how the Council was progressing in terms of tenant satisfaction. Annalisa confirmed that although the Regulator had not yet produced a comprehensive suite of results of TSMs for 2024-25, there had been some benchmarking among Surrey councils, which could be reported back to the Board.

In response to a question as to the rationale behind setting the priorities for the different actions, in particular the assessment of improving anti-social behaviour (ASB) as only "medium priority", the Board noted that this was because the Council did not receive a high number of ASB complaints and those that were received were generally of a low-level nature. The ASB policy had recently been updated in line with the Housing Ombudsman's recommendations.

Having considered the report, the Board

RESOLVED:

- (1) To note the contents of the report and to support the approach taken by officers to review the feedback received from the tenant surveys.
- (2) To note the Council's 2024-25 Tenant Perception Survey Results (Appendix 1).
- (3) To receive 6-monthly updates against the TSM action plan.

29. UPDATE ON HOUSING STRATEGY CONSULTATION

Annalisa circulated a flyer which set out details of the current review of, and consultation on, the Council’s Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy. The consultation would end on 31 January 2025 and, to date, 348 online responses had been received.

Board members were encouraged to respond to the consultation.

The strategies would be presented to the Board for comments before they are submitted to the Council’s Executive for formal approval.

30. ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION (DECANT) POLICY

The Board was informed that there were a number of outdated housing policies which required comprehensive review to ensure that they aligned with current legislation and regulations. The Board considered a report on a proposed new Alternative Accommodation (Decant) Policy which would be referred to the Executive for approval. The Board was invited to consider the policy and pass on any comments to the Executive.

Annalisa
Howson

The Decant policy had set out how the Council would assist tenants who had to move out of their homes on a temporary or permanent basis, either due to an emergency situation, where there are planned major works, or as a result of demolition.

The reviewed policy would ensure that decants were carried out in a clear, consistent, and equitable manner.

It was suggested that paragraph 2.1 of the draft Policy should be amended to read:

“Decanting is a term used to explain the process where residents must move temporarily or permanently from their homes because of health and safety concerns, the property is uninhabitable (*for example*, due to fire or flood), the property is going to be disposed of or works cannot be carried out whilst the tenants are still residing at the property.”

In making an offer to a tenant, each case would be considered on its own merits and individual circumstances of a tenant and their families would be taken into account.

31. REGULATOR OF SOCIAL HOUSING PROGRESS UPDATE

The Board noted that the Council was continuing with its monthly engagement with the Regulator who were satisfied with the data that the Council was providing, and the progress being made in respect of the various compliance areas.

Annalisa
Howson

32. VOID REPORT UPDATE

The Board considered a written progress report summary on Voids Management as at 31 December 2024, which was circulated at the meeting.

Annalisa
Howson

It was noted that, overall, the total number of voids had reduced since the last report.

It was also noted that during the three-month period from September to December 2024, the Council had let 79 properties, completed works on 48 properties, but had acquired 88 new void properties.

The report had highlighted as one the next key steps, the introduction of a new Voids dashboard and Key Performance Indicators in order to improve the reporting process.

It was suggested that the Voids progress report be included on every Board agenda in future and that it should be one of the first substantive items on each agenda.

33. TENANT ENGAGEMENT GROUP UPDATE

Alan, as chair of TEG, reported that since their last meeting two new members had joined with, potentially seven new members likely to join at this month's TEG meeting.

It was noted that TEG now had two vice-chairs, one covering the tenancy side and the other covering leaseholders. The chair welcomed Conor Stredder, Resident Engagement Officer to his first Board meeting.

34. FORWARD PLAN UPDATE

The Board noted the Forward Plan and were invited to suggest new topics for consideration at future meetings, including projects that arise from the Improvement Plan.

Annalisa
Howson

Annalisa informed the Board that there were a suite of housing related policies that needed to come forward for formal approval by the Council's Executive. Annalisa suggested that two Board members could be appointed to undertake scrutiny of these draft policies, with help from officers, and then bring them back to the Board with their recommendations.

It was noted that the draft policies would also need to be considered by the TEG.

The HRA budget would be presented to the next Board meeting.

Noting the significant business proposed for the agenda for the next Board meeting, officers would see whether any items could be deferred to May or whether an additional meeting should be convened in April.

The chair asked that the format of the Forward Plan be changed so that it was set out in a manner similar to the Overview and Scrutiny Committees' work programme.

35. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS: 2025

The dates and times of future meetings in 2025 were noted as follows:

Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 5.30pm

Wednesday 14 May 2025 at 5.30pm

Wednesday 9 July 2025 at 5.30pm

Wednesday 24 September 2025 at 5.30pm

Wednesday 19 November 2025 at 5.30pm

Venue for each meeting: Meeting Room 6, Millmead House