

Council Housing Management Board

Thursday 5th December 2024

Meeting summary

Attendees:

(CW) Councillor Christine Warner – Chair and Cabinet Member for Homes, Planning and Safer Communities.
(KM) Councillor Keith Miller
(KK) Councillor Katie Kendrick
(AB) Allan Batty – Senior Housing Policy Officer, Cheshire West, and Chester Council
(JT) Jobina Thomas – Policy Assistant, Cheshire West, and Chester Council
(LH) Lucy Heath – Head of Housing, Cheshire West, and Chester Council
(AS) Anthony Spurway – Tenant Board member
(PD) Paul Doherty – Independent Board member
(JL) Janet Lawton – ForHousing
(RSH) Ria Siddall-Hardwick – Commercial Manager, Cheshire West, and Chester Council
(SC) Stephen Caine – Compliance Officer, Forhousing
(HS) Holly Southern – Contract and Compliance Inspector, Cheshire West, and Chester Council
(NH) Nigel Hickmott – Tenant Board member
(SE) Stuart Ellis – Finance Manager, Cheshire West, and Chester Council

Apologies:

Karen Craig
Councillor Martin Loftus
Councillor Patrica Parkes
Gemma Davies
Gareth Frankland
Victoria Gabriela
Jo Worthington
Brian McGaw

1. Welcome

The fifth Council Housing Management Board took place with Board members being welcomed by the Chair Councillor Christine Warner, Cabinet Member for Homes, Planning and Safer Communities.

CW introduced and welcomed two new members to their first Board meeting namely Holly Southern and Stuart Ellis who were joining the Board to provide health and safety/compliance and finance expertise respectively. CW explained that this

followed HQN's advice to strengthen the Board in the areas of finance and health and safety/compliance.

2. Matters arising from last meeting.

The Board discussed the matters arising from the last meeting of which three of the items arising from the last Board meeting have been completed and two items are in the process of being completed. The matters arising are detailed below:

Item arising	Update
KC/RC to create an appendix of all the narrative cases of near misses.	Completed - Please see appendix to this report
RC to arrange a drop in with Cllr Lisa Denson regarding Groom Towers.	Completed - RC has contacted Cllr Denson and a meeting has been arranged.
KC to investigate and produce a report detailing how engagement has changed over the last seven years.	Completed - 2017/2018 – 374 (not unique due to no PMF being in place. Note high numbers involved due to review of Supported Housing Service with 148 tenants/customers involved and the development of Service Standard with 147 tenants being involved) 2019/2020 – 99 (not unique due to no PMF being in place) 2020/2021 – 42 (not unique due to no PMF being in place. Low numbers due to covid restrictions) PMF (unique) 2021/2022 – 58 - Low numbers due to covid 2022/2023 – 136 2023/2024 - 184 2024/2025 – 129 YTD (note not including November)
Karen Craig to provide more insight about the TSMs at the June Board.	This will now be picked up by the Housing Policy Officer working in partnership with KC.
New webpage depicting capital works for 2024-25 to go live early April 2024.	This has been delayed due to advice being sought from Communication Team on how best to take this forward.

3. Cabinet Member Update

CW explained to the Board that she continues to feedback to her Cabinet colleagues all matters arising from the Council Housing Management Board so to keep them informed of the work the Board are doing with Council and ForHousing officers.

4. Regulatory Compliance and Performance Board Report covering:

- **Contract Performance**

The Board were asked if they had any questions in relation to the key performance measures featured in their Board Report, the following questions were asked by the Board:

Q1: PMF-01 is out of target but within tolerance and mentions the need to provide support to those tenants who will migrate over to Universal Credit payments, what is the support being provided and what are the future predictions for Q4?

JL explained that support is being provided to tenants on an ongoing basis and this will have an impact in Q4 however, it does not have as much of an impact as first expected. JL stated that she is confident that it will at most stay level due to the tenant being engaged and supported throughout the payment process.

RSH asked about the current Rent Setting Consultation that the UK Government is consulting on. AB updated the Board that he had a meeting with Craig Ellis at (ForHousing) yesterday to discuss this and Craig and his team will review our comments and add to this as they see necessary. AB explained that he will then ensure that our views are part of the Council's formal response to the consultation.

JL reassured the Board that support is there and will be provided on an ongoing basis inline with their own predicted forecasts they have carried out. JL continued to explain that CE has conducted training with colleagues that will be assisting and providing tenants with financial support.

Action: AB to submit the Council's formal response to the Governments Rent Setting Consultation once he has received feedback from Craig Ellis at ForHousing.

Q2: Over half of the measures are out of tolerance and out of target, can ForHousing provide the Board with some reassurance that these measures will improve?

JL outlined that out of 13 KPI's, four are out of target but within tolerance and three are out of target and tolerance. JL reassured the Board, that ForHousing always strive to be on target but the measures that are within tolerance need to be celebrated given the economic environment.

Regarding the three measures that are out of target, ForHousing have confidence that PMF-14, relating to the percentage of tenants being satisfied with the Capital Investment Programme will soon be within target. JL clarified that the number of dissatisfied individuals is small (only five out of 140 people surveyed) and once they find the cause of the dissatisfaction, ForHousing always work to rectify it, feeding back to the contractor to upkeep satisfaction.

The other two measures that are out of target, PMF-12 and PMF-13, are both TSM measures and are therefore perception measures. JL is aware that the percentages are low in comparison to the national benchmark (85% this year and so settled on an interim target of 70%) and their target is to improve this next year to 80%. JL stated that Q2 had seen an improvement but being realistic it was unlikely these targets would meet the target but JL said that she and her team will strive to be within tolerance.

JL clarified that perception is obviously impacted by many factors which are out of ForHousings control. JL explained that tenants are asked to make a comment on the service, which is then analysed and fed back to the appropriate parties and constantly being improved or resolved.

JL updated the Board that PMF-01, relating to the current rent collected as a percentage of rent owed, was expected to be within tolerance by yearend. JL explained though that this is a high target of 100% however, the Q2 result was 98.74% which was within tolerance.

JL said that she was also confident that ForHousing will reach target on PMF-06, relating to the re-let time (calendar days). JL explained that ForHousing has put in place an improvement plan with their contractor which has resulted in the voids work being better managed. JL also explained that the number of voids had reduced significantly to 27 at the end of September, from 46 at the end of June. JL stated that PMF-10, relating to the percentage of all appointed jobs where appointment was kept, will be kept within tolerance, and will become green by yearend.

CW clarified with JL that it was JLs ambition was to have all the measures that are red (out of target and tolerance) to become yellow (out of target but within tolerance) and all that are yellow to become green (on target) with JL agreeing with this.

- **Stock Quality, Decency, Repairs and Maintenance and Adaptations update**

The Board were asked if they had any questions in relation to the stock quality, decency, repairs and maintenance and adaptations update, with questions being as follows:

Q3: Regarding PMF-11, the percentage of properties achieving the decent homes standard, is this out of target but within tolerance due to the caveat of not having completed the stock condition survey?

CW asked for a time frame on the stock condition surveys and asked that KM's suggestion of using a quality tool to batch sample, for example 2% to provide an indicator was being implemented. RSH updated the Board that a contractor has been appointed to conduct the surveys, but it has not been started on-site yet.

KM explained that it might be worth issuing a letter containing the key questions from the stock condition survey out to each rental tenant to ask tenants to complete and return the information. KM felt this would allow the Council to be proactive in

gaining a general sense of what the survey results will be now rather than waiting for the contractor to commence on site.

RSH raised the concern that although this is a good idea in principal, this wouldn't really help as tenants don't have the practical expertise to correctly survey our stock. KM clarified that the survey would take a more 'yes/no' approach.

RSH states that we already know basic information, and this has already been generated via the annual capital programmes and the life survey however, the official stock condition surveys would help to identify hazards, damp, and mould and survey the internal and external elements of the property.

JL also clarified that the chosen contractor is well known for their own data software which is unique to their business. They will conduct a batch sample of the first fifty void properties which will allow for a quicker checklist which will then determine the rest of the stock condition survey.

CW stated that a sample will be done by the contractor anyway and then asked if the Council can ensure 100% completion by December 2026? RSH and LH reassured the Board that they will make attempts to reach the target and justified the use of cloned data if no access becomes an issue.

JL clarifies that the contractor target is 300 properties a month so by the end of this fiscal year, 20% of the survey would be completed. The target deadline will be March 2026.

KM asked if a 5% batch sample could be conducted for the Board.

AB emphasised to the Board that Housing Quality Network (HQN) advised that the contractor cannot do a rush job as this information is what will be used to shape our investment going forward and therefore all measures need to be taken to ensure that the surveys are done accurately.

KK asked if there was a start date finalised for the contractor and JL explained that some will be completed by the end of this year. AB assured the Board that 50% of surveys would be completed by the end of 2025 with all the stock being inspected by end of 2026.

Q4: We are seeing a lot of complaints regarding PMF13, relating to the percentage of tenants satisfied with repairs & maintenance services. It is out of target. How are you working to rectify this?

JL explained that Liberty was acquired by Waites at the beginning of October and as part of the sales agreement, it was discussed that an improvement project would be established alongside Waites to improve the repairs and maintenance process. She clarified that is usually the front end that causes complaints particularly around planning and operatives.

The expected outcome of the improvement project (mobilised on the 1st of April) will not be seen this year but next year. The local Liberty team has not changed so operational level systems are all the same and continuing to be improved via suggestions of local practices.

LH asked ForHousing regarding their work with Waites in the next fiscal year and if there will be an opportunity for council tenants to be involved alongside the ForHousing tenants?

JL answered that there would ideally be two ForHousing tenants on a repair and maintenance group as opposed to a steering group.

Action: JL will ask regarding if council tenants can be involved in the decision-making process and in what capacity/format. Further below, it is clarified that AS and KM be added.

Q5: 24 tenants are with a certificate that is over 10 years old, will they be priority in this process?

The response is yes with the explanation that within the years 5-6 and 6-7, there was a significant gap within the numbers. JL continues that this is because ForHousing conducted a push in 2016-2017 due to the contract changing and the gap is due to the renewals all coming up at the same time.

LH highlighted that there is a potential breach of the regulations regarding the number of outstanding electrical certified 5 years and over. RSH responds that they require more of an understanding of the 351 outstanding and the position of those.

She clarifies that the current process that ForHousing undertake is that four access attempts are to be made to obtain the certificate.

There is a total of 50 that require the issuing a final warning letter from CWaC and the next step is an injunction (with costs incurred). This has been agreed with Legal as it would require more external resources for potential injunctions if they do not provide access with the final warning by ForHousing but CWaC has approved the content and language of the final warning letter.

This is an attempt at remedy despite the reluctance to go to Legal. She highlights that what was lacking prior was a process that would be taken past ForHousing's involvement. Now there is one established, with a shared site being set up which allows for ForHousing to send over no access packs, Legal's approval and then the establishing of a contract.

KK queries that out of the 300 figures, other than the 50 final warnings, at what stage in the process are the others at?

LH and RSH informs KK that the others are at various stages which change daily to due access being granted at different times.

SC state that this is different to ForHousing's route under S20 and S24 (which is not as clean and more expensive). It is the same process as outlined above except the fourth visit is a chaperone visit with a ForHousing representative and contractors which is considered the final visit (the cost of the fifth visit will have to be discussed separately).

AB asks that the Board approve once the procedure has been established.

LH notify the Board that they may receive pushback due to the legal action that is involved/. She clarifies that the wording in the final letter is strong, but CWAC feel like they have no other choice but to be strong in this matter. They have given tenants many opportunities to grant access, and it is a safety issue at the end of the day.

Action: AB asked that either SC or JL send their electrical process to AB and RSH so they can start to establish their own process regarding the above.

5. Rent setting presentation 2025/26

AB presented the Housing Revenue Account Rent Setting Presentation

Q6: How does the rental increase affect leaseholders, have their service charges increased by 2.7%?

SE clarified that service charges are calculated by ForHousing, and the council tenant does not pay a separate service charge. AB supports this and states that it is already accounted.

RSH added that leaseholders are paying for the work that is being conducted. They are paying for routine repairs, guttering and the maintenance of communal areas which is calculated through the previous year's costs.

JL stated that leaseholders will contribute to the capital works programmes which will be extra, due to Section 20.

AB explained that the Government is currently consulting on how social rents will be set from 2026 onwards for the next 5 years. AB confirmed that it will be the same model as the past Conservative government measure which was CPI in September plus 1%. The closing date for the consultation is the 15th of December which was sent out prior and approved by the Board. AB mentioned that he is just waiting for feedback from CE before submitting on behalf of the Board.

CW asked for a show of hands before agreeing with AB that the Board will approve a 2.7% rental increase for 2025/26 so she can recommend this increase to her Cabinet colleagues. All members of the Board approved the 2.7% increase and CW agreed to recommend this to Cabinet.

Action: CW to recommend to Cabinet a rental increase of 2.7% for 2025/26.

Q7: Can the Board see the end of year financial audit and the expenditure of all services? That includes the total sum, yearly audit, and VAT amount.

SE responded that he can provide a detailed breakdown of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which can include an analysis for specific details on the accounts. SE continued to explain that the HRA has no VAT so whatever the contractor adds will be paid back. There is also no VAT charged on housing rent.

RSH gave an overview regarding value for money in that this applied to the capital works programme only and this would be evidenced through the contractor procurement and tender process via the tender reports.

SE reminded the Board that this year will have exceptional costs due to consultation costs from HQN, subscriptions from Housing Regulations which is all part of the new regulatory regime. AB added that we now need to pay for the Housing Ombudsman which has a bearing on us as a social landlord and the increased responsibilities that come with it. AS is reassured that we must live within our means due to the HRA account.

Q8: Is the HRA under the same scrutiny as the general fund?

SE explained that the HRA account is under even more scrutiny than the general fund due to the tight regulations that prevent money being exchanged between funds and accounts. When asked if the old £26 million overall rental income for 2025/26 was the net figure with SE stating that it was the rent collected figure.

KM referenced the HRA account mid-year table featured in the Board Report and asked if an additional column be inputted for the Budget/Actuals for 25-26. SE and AB assure KM that it can be added onto the main report and not in the appendix due to wanting to maintain clarity for the regulator.

Action: AB/SE to ensure that the Financial Context table featured in the Board Report detail an additional “actual column”.

6. Complaint Panel Update

KM provided context to the Board regarding the complaint panel and how he is the chair of the panel which had its second meeting in October 2024. He presented two observations to the Board as follows:

- Firstly, the recurring theme of responsive repairs. He asks the Board if Liberty is not accepting feedback and asks how members of the complaints panel can contact Liberty.
- Secondly, the panels observation is the number of complaints due to a lack of communication from the service provider continued to increase. KM explained that 35 out of 77 Stage 1 complaints in Quarter 2 (approximately 45%) was due to a lack of communication and not keeping the customer informed on planned works. KM and the panel felt this recurring theme needed to improve urgently and suggested introducing a percentage reduction target to ForHousing for this measure. .

AB reassured the Board that ForHousing are putting things in place however, these changes take time to come into fruition.

JL's suggestion to have two Board Members on the Waites led repair and maintenance group. JL recommended that one of the conditions of the sale is that Waites and ForHousing will work on improving complaints.

CW suggested that KM and AS be nominated for the Waites panel. KM encouraged this co-production and stated that it would require ForHousing's input for an achievable target for reporting back in March 2025. KM clarified that the complaints panel worked in conjunction with ForHousing with ForHousing being the contractors and Liberty conducting the repairs.

JL reassures the Board that Waite's focus is the tenant and their satisfaction and echoes that the Board will see improvements with time. CW asked if JL would put forward a target that could be achieved by the end of the fiscal year for the board to approve. LH reaffirms that the number of complaints is interlinked with the KPI's as when they improve, so will PMF-13 and 14.

Action: JL to set the target and come back to the Board with the number they could realistically achieve. KC to consult with CWAC on deciding a number.

Action: AB to let the Board know as soon as it is decided to gather feedback on their opinions.

RSH outlined that ForHousing need to have a conversation with Liberty to review the complaints they are receiving. From a resource perspective, to drive down complaints, the operatives need to get to the repairs quicker and do them better and conduct follow-ons in a timely manner. She asked JL if Liberty has the resources their end to enable them to reach the proposed target.

HS asked what the changes in the processes are going to be. JL clarified that if it is specific to delays, the number of complaints should automatically drop by April.

AB informed the Board that he has tasked KC to create a way of informing the board the changes that have been made to processes etc as a consequence of complaints.

Action: KC to capture all changes to working practices etc as a consequence of complaints.

JL clarified that ForHousing has no choice but to focus on the complaints, from the regulatory obligations (right of disrepair) that they must abide by, to the involvement of the ombudsman, the importance of complaints has been highlighted repeatedly. She also reminds the Board that they are only a finite team. The whole sector is under strain to acquire resources and good quality operatives. The reason more complaints are coming in is due to the shift in the sector since the implementation of Awaab's law where tenants are more knowledgeable about their rights and are quicker to report issues. She outlines that it is the same with MP enquiries as MP's have encouraged their constituents to be vocal about issues. This leads to a change in expectations and a change in tolerance.

AB asked HQN to look at ForHousing's complaint handling, to which they were very complimentary. They agree that there are pressures now, but it is all about preventative measures being undertaken.

LH reminded the Board that the upcoming transparency workshop run by HQN will manage this and we will discuss this further with HQN next week.

7. Board Terms of Reference

CW introduced this agenda item by stating that the terms of reference for the board have been altered slightly to include the recommendations from HQN as well as to reflect the evolution of the Board as it continues.

AB echoed the advice from HQN who suggested strengthening the board in terms of compliance, health and safety and finance. As per the Board Away Day, TPAS agreed with the board to no longer have sub-committees but instead create specific task and finish groups.

CW asked for a show of hands to agree the updated terms of reference with all board members agreeing and approving the changes.

8. Council Housing Management Consultation

AB provided an update on the above which is currently out for consultation, the end date of the consultation is the 15th of December 2024.

AB provides some key statistics:

- 737 responses have been received to date broken down as 435 digital responses and 302 paper copies, this represents a 13.5% response rate.
- 74 tenants have expressed an interest in becoming more involved with decision making and management.
- 75% preference for Option 2 - inhouse model with the repairs and maintenance services being outsourced.
- Out of the overall Tenant Satisfaction Measures, 36% are 'very unsatisfied' or 'unsatisfied'.
- The reoccurring positive themes include praise for staff, communal area upkeep, gas and safety check routines and some repairs.
- The reoccurring negative themes include repairs and maintenance delays, the need for multiple follow ups, poorly completed works, ASBO, drug use, lack of communication and accountability, damp and mould, perceived inequality, and preferential treatment for some tenants. There were also negative sentiments due to prolonging disrepairs.

CW was pleased with the response so far although it would be good if the final response rate was 15%. AB confirmed that he will then take a paper to the Council's Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee which will survey results alongside feedback report completed. LH explained that In July 2025 there will be another assessment of the two options to make a recommendation to Cabinet.

CW to feedback to Cabinet that the deadline has been extended to July. She also adds that the results of the consultation will be taken to the informal cabinet in March.

Action: CW to notify her Cabinet colleagues that Cabinet will be asked to approve a recommendation in July 2025 not March.

9. Regulatory Framework Self-Assessment update

AB updated the Board that the Quality and Safety workshop went well with four absolute priorities and two pages of other priorities being identified. AB confirmed that he has now sent KC and JL the list of actions to go through and create a

timeline for achievement. The deadline to complete the absolute priorities is the end of December 2024.

AB continued to explain that on the 16 December there will be an in-person meeting where AB would deliver a presentation to include the absolute priorities.

AB continued to explain to the Board that the Council will continue to work closely with HQN to decide whether we need to make a self-referral or not. AB stated that based on the data as of now, there is no need to self-refer however, this may change as we undertake the other three workshops.

10. Any other business

AS wished to congratulate the Ellesmere Port Community Group winners.

11. Items for next meeting

Is to be held on Thursday 17 April 2025.

Our council housing vision

“We aim to provide affordable homes of the right type and quality to meet the housing needs of those who are unable to meet their own needs in the housing market now and in the future. We will work in partnership to support our tenants to prosper and improve their wellbeing and ensure neighbourhoods and communities are sustainable, safe, and pleasant.”