

Council Housing Management Board

Thursday 7 December 2023.

Meeting summary

Attendees:

Councillor Christine Warner – Chair and Cabinet Member for Homes, Planning and Safer Communities.

Antony Spurway – Vice Chair – tenant board member

Councillor Martin Loftus – Shadow Member for Homes, Planning and Safer Communities

Brian McGaw – tenant board member

Victoria Gabriela – tenant board member

Nigel Hickmott – tenant board member

Jane Murray – tenant board member

Councillor Keith Miller

Jo Worthington – independent board member (attended virtually)

Allan Batty – Cheshire West and Chester Council

Alison Amesbury – Cheshire West and Chester Council

Ria Carey – Cheshire West and Chester Council

Janet Lawton – ForHousing

James Latham – ForHousing

Apologies:

Councillor Katie Kendrick

Paul Doherty – independent board member

1. Welcome

1.1 The second 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.

2. Matters arising from last meeting.

A number of matters arose from the last Council Housing Management Board which took place on Thursday 6 October 2023 as follows.

2.1 Approval of the Council Housing Management Board Terms of Reference

At the last Council Housing Management Board suggestions for amendments were discussed and agreed with a view that Board would approve the revised version of the Terms of Reference at December Board.

The Chair asked for all Board members to approve the revised Terms of Reference with all members agreeing to adopt the new Terms of Reference.

2.2 Further information about leaseholder income

At the last Council Housing Management Board Cllr Kendrick asked for more information about leaseholder income, it was agreed that ForHousing would provide Cllr Kendrick with this information outside of the Board. ForHousing confirmed that all requested leaseholder income was provided to Cllr Kendrick on 12 October 2023.

3. Council Housing Asset Management Strategy

3.1 Consultation

A presentation was presented to the Board detailing the headline findings from the formal consultation on the draft Council Housing Asset Management Strategy which ran from Monday 11 September up to and including Sunday 3 December 2023.

The headline findings were as follows:

- 81% either agreed or strongly agreed with the aim of the draft Council Housing Asset Management Strategy.
- 85% either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed six objectives detailed in the strategy.
- 82% either agreed or strongly agreed with the homes are fit for purpose commitments.
- 83% either agreed or strongly agreed with the homes that are safe to live in commitments.
- 75% either agreed or strongly agreed with the meeting housing needs commitments.
- 73% either agreed or strongly agreed with the social and environmental wellbeing commitments.
- 65% either agreed or strongly agreed with the reducing carbon emissions and environmental impact commitments.
- 70% either agreed or strongly agreed with the financial control commitments.

3.2 Investment Plan Priorities and Q&A session

ForHousing gave an overview of the different categories and priorities for investing in and improving our homes that are shown in the Table at the end of the draft Council Housing Asset Management Strategy. The Board were also able to ask ForHousing questions as follows:

Q. Tenant Board members wanted to know why ForHousing were blocking up internal bathroom windows.

A. ForHousing explained that this is being undertaken to comply with the Fire Regulation Act and was to allow safe escape and prevent radiant heat escaping.

Q. Tenant Board members also wanted to know whether safety works in common areas should be dealt with as a greater priority.

A. ForHousing explained that the new Building Safety Team is responsible for overseeing all health and safety relating to all our housing stock. Any health and safety issues would be picked up by day-to-day repairs and progressed in order of priority and potential risk posed.

Q. Cllr Warner asked if the new Decent Homes Standard would alter the investment plan priorities.

A. ForHousing explained that this is unlikely but the new Decent Homes Standard would likely to include energy performance which has already been included within the current investment plan detailed in the Council Housing Asset Management Strategy.

Q. Cllr Loftus commented how the proposed spend of £10m on boundaries seemed very high.

A. ForHousing and the Council explained that this related to the neighbourhood schemes and replacement of fencing, paving, etc. Following consultation with tenants back in 2015, tenants said that more money needed to be spent improving the outside of tenant's homes and the wider community. It was also mentioned how there had been no investment in this regard for many years.

Q. Cllr Miller asked whether boundary works could be carried out to other properties i.e. non-Housing Revenue Account properties.

A. The Council explained that unfortunately not due to Housing Revenue Account being ringfenced i.e. rental income can only be spent on tenants.

Q. Tenant Board Members asked how can tenants know that their homes are safe, most notably around fire safety.

A. ForHousing explained that there is an extensive inspection regime with highly trained technical staff and specialist contractors that carry out inspections regularly and undertake work as required. ForHousing also confirmed that they carry out post inspections of completed works and track all Fire Regulation Act actions.

A wider discussion took place which suggested providing information to tenants such as the last inspection of communal areas via a notice board in communal areas. It was agreed that ForHousing would investigate this further and look at how best to provide this information to tenants. Also, Cheshire Fire carries out inspections and works closely with the Building Safety team. Also, a leaflet is due to go out to tenants living in all flats.

Action: ForHousing to investigate ways of providing information to tenants around health and safety inspections and report at the next Board in March 2024 of their recommendations.

3.3 Publicising future capital works

The Council made reference to wanting to better publicise future capital works via the ForHousing and CWAC websites.

Action: ForHousing and CWAC contract manager to work together to develop a new webpage that details all future capital works for financial year 2024/25 with a view this goes live end of February 2024.

4. Budget and rent setting

A presentation was provided to the Board which explained that all rental income received from tenants must go into the Housing Revenue Account which is ring-fenced meaning that rental income can only be spent on services provided for and behalf of tenants. The presentation also explained that the Government has issued guidelines on how much rents can be increased by namely: CPI for September for the previous year plus 1%, meaning that rents can be increased by 7.7% in 2024/25. The presentation also detailed recent legislation around building safety and our response whilst also explaining that any rental increase below 7.7% would impact on the capital programme meaning that there would be a significant reduction in the amount of refurbishment programme and neighbourhood scheme developments undertaken.

The presentation also detailed the support available for tenants and how this was detailed in the letters that are sent to all tenants advising them of the rent increase. All Board members agreed that the different types of support must be promoted widely to tenants. Cllr Miller asked what the pathway to tenants seeking support from ForHousing looked like with ForHousing explaining that all rent coordinators know their tenants and work closely with tenants to maximise their income and offer advice and support where required. ForHousing also explained that they work very closely with the Department of Work and Pensions and have two accredited Money Advisors who can provide advice and support. Following the presentation, the Board were then asked to approve the recommendation to increase rent by 7.7% with all Board members approving the 7.7% increase. The Board agreed to recommend to Cabinet that rents are increased by 7.7% in line with the Government issued guideline for all social landlords.

Action: Cllr Warner as Board Chair and Cabinet Member for Homes, Planning and Safer Communities to recommend to Cabinet that rents are increased 7.7%.

5. Performance update

ForHousing provided an update on performance and confirmed that of the 12 KPIs eight were within target, three were within tolerance and one had missed target and would remain the case for the rest of the current financial year. In terms of KPI1 rent collected, the actual performance is better for quarter 2 for previous years whilst KPI6 performance had dipped due to outliers for example 33 The Witterings. One tenant board member commented on 4 Wilkinson Street North being empty despite being allocated back in October 2023.

A general discussion took place between the Board and staff from both ForHousing and CWAC on what more we can do to support and improve satisfaction with repairs? Cllr Miller mentioned that he would be happy to carry out post inspections

of void works and would liaise with ForHousing to progress the same. Cllr Loftus asked whether respondents are asked why they are dissatisfied, ForHousing confirmed that this isn't done any longer and explained that complaints are reviewed but immediate post-inspection is best place to resolve. ForHousing agreed to carry out an analysis of the trends.

Action: ForHousing to add a narrative column to the KPI Summary Report for Board for any amber/red indicators.

Action: ForHousing agreed to carry out an analysis of the trends in relation to the measure around tenant satisfaction for repairs.

6. Any other business

6.1 Next Board Meeting

Is to be held on Thursday 21 March 2024 with agenda items agreed as follows:

- Consumer Standards
- Regulatory Inspection Framework
- Complaints update – process, latest figures stage 1 and 2, role of Complaints Panel

6.2 Be Proud Awards Ceremony

Congratulations go to Anthony Spurway and Nigel Hickmott (tenant Board members) who are receiving awards.

6.3 Assistance Dogs

Cllr Miller mentioned he had been contacted by a leaseholder who had been told that they are unable to have an assistance dog in Churchill Court due to the property being within a block of flats. It was agreed that ForHousing would pick this up with Cllr Miller outside of the Board.

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”.