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Cabinet Housing Panel
31 January 2024

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Wednesday 31 January 2024 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors G.Moore (Chairman)
M.Birleson (Vice-Chairman)

J.Cragg, R.Lass, T.Rowse, F.Thomson, A.Scott,
S.Tunstall, R.Trigg and J.Weston

ALSO Chris Andrews – Residents Panel
PRESENT: Ardita McHugh – Residents Panel

OFFICIALS C Barnes, Executive Director (Place)
PRESENT: S.McDaid, Service Director (Resident & Neighbourhood)
E. Manzie, Service Manager, Property Maintenance and Climate
A.Willey, Resident Involvement Manager
L.Bradbury, Housing Portfolio Manager
R Misir, Democratic Services Officer

31. APOLOGIES & SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr S Goldwater.

32. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2023 were approved as a correct record.

33. NOTIFICATION OF URGENT BUSINESS TO BE CONSIDERED UNDER ITEM 10

There were no items of urgent business.

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Thomson declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of being a Member of Hertfordshire County Council.

35. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME AND PETITIONS

There were no public questions or petitions.

36. COUNCIL HOUSING RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY 2024-2027

Members were shown a presentation which is attached to these minutes.

Officers explained this was a new strategy which Cabinet would be asked to approve which set out how the Council would engage with residents, tenants and leaseholders in Council homes and how it wanted them to be involved in influencing, shaping and scrutinising its services, policies and performance. Resident involvement was a key theme in the standards set by the social housing regulator; while this was currently under review, it was likely to be replaced by similar standards in a new consumer standard.

The strategy set out the Council's vision for resident engagement as well as its commitment towards that in order to develop more partnership working and improved communications. There was already an effective working relationship with the Residents Panel and the Council wanted to increase wider participation so residents could better shape services. There was also a role for residents to provide feedback on performance, and a key theme was about keeping them updated about housing issues they were raising.

Around a year ago, residents had been surveyed about their priorities which included repairs, estate management and grounds maintenance, better communication about planned maintenance and repairs, and more information about events being held for residents in Council homes. The Residents Panel had provided helpful feedback which was included in the draft strategy; this included an annual review rather than one every three years. There was a key role for the Panel which the strategy would make clearer. The Panel had scrutinised estate management last year with clear feedback that was similar to what tenants had said when surveyed; these two pieces of feedback would be taken on board before the draft strategy (including making some of the wording clearer) was finalised.

Members raised the following points:

- It was asked how residents would provide feedback. Officers said the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures survey we are now required to run annually would go out to a random sample of 3,000 tenants who would be asked to provide details of issues of concern and their levels of satisfaction. If approved, the strategy would be promoted via the Residents Panel, on the Council's website and the Community Edit newsletter amongst others.
- A member felt that although the strategy sought to improve communication, the approach taken seemed one-way (residents feeding back to the Council) whereas it could be a vehicle for better two-way communication including, for example, engaging with issues that might cause residents concern such as net zero policies in order that they were more likely to embrace them. Officers said two-way

- communication would be made clearer in the strategy and with regard to net zero, there would be more community days taking place.
- Responding to a query about community days, officers said there had been 4 in the last year. These had included waste cage events where arrangements were made to remove refuse and bulky waste; fire brigade, police and Morgan Sindall representatives had been in attendance to provide advice to residents as well as Residents Panel members. There had been litter picks and formal action was taken as a result of evidence found in fly-tipping; and housing staff had checked progress on some repairs. Planning is taking place for a series of events this year and this information would be shared with councillors.
 - A member asked about tenants being supported to make neighbourhood improvement bids and asked who would lead on that and how, noting this information did not seem readily available on the website. Officers explained the bids were run through the Neighbourhoods Team; residents could approach their neighbourhood officer and make suggestions about how the small annual budget could be used, eg for benches, cycle storage etc. There was information in the tenants' handbook which the Residents Panel was currently reviewing. Information was on the website but could be clearer and would be reviewed in order to boost more knowledge about neighbourhood improvement bids which neighbourhood officers promoted when they met with residents. The Community Edit newsletter came out three times a year and always included information about the bids.
 - A member commented that the report referenced 'estate management' as a priority of residents whereas it meant something different in some areas; she felt it would be helpful to refer to it as 'estates management' in a housing context.
 - A member asked about the annual review would work in practice. Officers said the strategy would evolve so it was appropriate for it to be reviewed annually at least on an initial basis; feedback from residents and councillors would be taken on board, and it was intended it would come back to Cabinet Housing Panel (CHP) when it was due for review in a year. The input of the Residents Panel would form part of that review.
 - There was a query about how to involve harder to reach individuals. Officers acknowledged this was a challenge, noting the variance in people's ability to commit and acknowledged the commitment of Residents Panel members. There was also a virtual panel with whom information could be shared in order to obtain feedback. Officers were working with the Residents Panel on an annual work programme and this might generate interest from other residents interested in specific issues. This was a work in progress which would continue to evolve. It had recently been agreed that the Residents Panel would have a Facebook group which they would publicise with support from the Communications team in order to promote their work with the Council; they had also started having a presence at some Council events.

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- A member asked whether there would be a separate leaseholder consultation. Officers noted there are currently over 1,500 leaseholders and were considering how to enhance engagement.
- Members commended the strategy and reflected positively on the fact that representatives of the Residents Panel were in attendance.

RESOLVED

(unanimous):

- a) Members considered and noted the strategy; and
- b) Recommended approval of the Resident Involvement strategy to Cabinet.

37. TENANCY STRATEGY 2024-2029 AND TENANCY POLICY

Members were shown a presentation which is attached to these minutes. The strategy and policy were revisions of the existing version and the changes were track changed in the agenda pack. The strategy set out the Council's commitment to providing high quality housing, ensuring thriving neighbourhoods and sustainable communities, and the approach of the Council in this area towards tenancies as well as the expected approaches of social housing providers. Under the Localism Act, the Council was required to consult with registered providers, social landlords and others who were required by law to have regard to the Council's tenancy strategy in terms of how they set their tenancies and their terms and conditions. If CHP was to unanimously agree the draft strategy and policy and the Executive Member for Housing approved the start of a consultation, it was intended that there would be a four week public consultation; there would also be an informal consultation with private landlords and agents through the accreditation scheme although this was not required by law.

The tenancy strategy covered the types of tenancies that were available. It was the Council's aim to provide secure lifetime tenancies (one of the four key objectives of the strategy) and although there were occasions when this was not possible eg when it needed to make temporary arrangements, fixed term tenancies were no longer offered. The Council wanted to ensure tenants understood their responsibilities and how to sustain their tenancies; additionally, if their tenancy was to end, they should be signposted towards services if they were potentially homeless.

The policy was more focused on the Council and set out arrangements for tenancy management including how tenancy sustainment was supported, tackling tenancy fraud and how the Council managed discretionary succession rights.

Members commented as follows:

- There was a query about discretionary succession rights; a member reflected that it was distressing when a parent died which would be

compounded by the potential loss of one's home and asked how such residents would be supported. Officers responded that each case would be looked at individually with regard to their personal circumstances and cases would be looked at by the Exceptional Circumstances panel if necessary. There were legal requirements for succession and a property could only be succeeded once but the circumstances of the living resident would be taken into account.

- A member reflected on the importance of the strategy and policy and asked whether they would come back to CHP for review. Officers explained there would be a consultation over the next four weeks and would probably go to Cabinet for approval; if that was the case, an update would be provided to CHP.
- A member commented positively on the section about demoted tenancies and asked if it was possible for housing associations to follow the Council's lead in not demoting tenancies. Officers acknowledged that while the strategy set out the Council's expectations, there were limitations in what it could ask of other providers. However the Council tried to encourage and engage with registered providers to offer tenants the best they could, and officers cited work between the housing allocations team and providers.
- There was a query about how this policy and strategy linked with tenants' responsibilities. Officers said tenancy agreements were being revised and referenced CHP's recent consideration of the pets policy. Tenancy agreements set out the responsibilities of both the Council as a landlord and tenants; this was a work in progress and would be considered by CHP. The member suggested the policy make reference to the tenancy agreement and officers agreed that it would.
- It was felt it would be helpful to include a link to the allocations policy and officers agreed this would be done.
- A member noted that the government this week had announced a consultation on reforms to social housing allocations and wondered how this would impact the work. Officers were not yet sure of the detail and did not feel this work would impact significantly on the policy.
- A member asked how many registered housing providers there were in the borough and officers agreed to find this out.

RESOLVED

CHP:

- a) Considered and noted the draft tenancy policy and draft tenancy strategy; and
- b) Agreed that the Executive Member for Housing approve commencement of the public consultation in accordance with their delegated authority.

38. HOUSING COMPLIANCE UPDATE

The report set out the compliance position as at 12 January 2024 and officers noted that fire regulation assessment (FRAs) actions were not listed as a result

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of the Council conducting new FRAs. All actions had been completed last year with the exception of some fire doors which remained an ongoing programme. The majority of actions currently being picked up were in relation to compartmentation surveys and fire door surveys and the contractor was expected to complete this work in the next few months. Domestic electrical testing was still slightly non-compliant and there were some access issues in relation to this and domestic gas testing and officers advised there were still some delays in the court process in order to gain access.

A member asked whether instances of non-access were repeat cases and asked how this was managed. Officers said a pattern was emerging which was not just about access to gas and electricity testing but also with repairs; appropriate information had been included in the tenants' handbook which the Residents Panel was now reviewing and a new process was being written for cases of no-access.

RESOLVED:

CHP noted the content of the report.

39. HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT - QUARTER 3 2023/24

The report provided a summary of performance across the Council's housing services across Quarter 3 and officers advised voids were taking longer during the quarter than previously. This was in part due to higher lettable standards (the quality standards voids should meet once repaired and refurbished) meaning it was taking longer to achieve those standards; additionally, once a property became void, there was an opportunity to carry out more extensive repairs or works so the new tenant had a good quality home.

The figures for damp and mould in the report were from Q3. Officers provided an update as follows: at 24 January 2024, there were 1,355 damp and mould cases, of which 1,117 had had a first inspection. There had been 628 damp and mould washes, 75 were left to be inspected and 103 were cancelled as they did not relate to damp and mould. Of the 1,117 cases that had had a first inspection, 466 needed further works. 786 cases had been completed. Asked whether there was a mould map showing hotspots within the borough, officers explained there was no particular hotspot.

A member noted the report referenced a low response in comparison to the number of surveys sent out in terms of customer satisfaction with planned works. Officers said they were looking at other avenues such as text messages and online surveys that could potentially increase the response rate.

A member observed that in respect of BPI 126, the commentary for Q3 looked similar to that of Q2 and asked whether the commentary could include the highest period of time that housing options applicants had to wait to be assigned an officer; he was concerned there was a move from a definitive measure of 14 days to an average wait time. Officers advised the average was provided for additional context rather than just providing a figure. The most common reason

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for a delay was down to the Council needing information about income or an assessment to be done which meant it had to request and then receive information from the resident in question; officers could look at what the longest cases were and include detail of that in subsequent reports.

In respect of BPIs 133 and 134, a member asked whether actual figures could be shown rather than the number of cases per 1,000 Council properties. Officers replied that this would be shown as a percentage in the next year and the commentary would include the number of cases.

RESOLVED:

CHP noted the content of the report.

Meeting ended at 8.25 pm

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Minute Item 36

Resident Involvement Strategy

Resident Involvement Strategy 2024-2027

- This is a new Strategy
- The recommendation is for Cabinet to approve the strategy
- Sets out how we intend to engage with and involve our tenants and leaseholders in council housing with influencing and scrutinising our housing related policies, services and performance.
- Resident involvement in our services is a key theme in the consumer standards (‘Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard’) set by the Regulator of Social Housing – this is likely to be replaced by similar requirements in a new consumer standard (Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard)

Resident Involvement Strategy 2024-2027

- The strategy sets out our:
 - Vision for engagement
 - Our commitments (such as more effective communications, partnership working, widening participation, measuring performance and keeping residents updated)
 - Resident priorities
 - Repairs, estate management and customer service were identified by respondents as areas that could be improved
 - Respondents also wanted better communication around repairs, planned maintenance and more about news and events

Resident Involvement Strategy 2024-2027

- Feedback on draft strategy from Resident's Panel
 - Suggests annual review (rather than 3 years)
 - Role of Resident's Panel in assisting with Residents Involvement Strategy needs more information
 - In resident's priorities section – to also reflect feedback from residents found in the work the Panel undertook on estate management
 - Some amends to make the wording clearer

Tenancy Strategy and Tenancy Policy



Tenancy Strategy and Tenancy Policy

- Revision of existing Strategy and Policy
- Sets out the Council's commitment, as a provider of social housing, to provision of high-quality housing, thriving neighbourhoods and sustainable communities and expected approach towards tenancies
- We are required to consult with Registered Providers (Housing Associations) – as they are required in law to have regard to it
- If CHP unanimous agree the draft policy and strategy – Executive Member for Housing can approve going to public consultation
- Plan to consult from 2 February 2024 for 4 weeks and will include private landlords and agents via PAL scheme

Tenancy Strategy

- The strategy covers:
 - The kinds of tenancies they grant
 - The circumstances in which they will grant tenancies of a particular type
 - Where they grant tenancies for a fixed term, the length of those terms
 - The circumstances in which a tenancy may or may not be reissued at the end of the fixed term, in the same property or in a different property.
- The 4 key objectives of the Tenancy Strategy are:
 - **Secure life-time tenancies are our preferred approach**
 - Tenants have a clear understanding of their tenancy
 - Enable tenants to keep their tenancy for as long as they need them
 - If a tenancy ends or is under threat of ending, tenants are assisted to prevent homelessness

Tenancy Policy

- Council's preference is for lifetime secure tenancies
- The Tenancy Policy sets out in the council's approach to tenancy management
- Also identifies how the council will support tenancy sustainment, tackle tenancy fraud, and manage discretionary succession rights.
- In particular, the policy sets out more detail regarding the following:
 - The granting of Secure Council tenancies
 - Legal Assignment and Succession and demotions
 - Mutual Exchange
 - Fixed term Tenancies
 - This policy also explains the type of tenancy we will offer to new and existing tenants of WHBC

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