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Cabinet Housing Panel
11 June 2024

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Tuesday 11 June 2024 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors A.Scott (Chair)
T.Rowse (Vice-Chairman)

J.Cragg, R.Trigg, J.Weston, L.Chesterman,
J.Otumunye, A.Nix, S.Khan, P.Zukowskyj and
B.Fitzsimon

ALSO Councillor G. Moore, Executive Member for Housing
PRESENT:

OFFICIALS C Barnes, Executive Director (Place)
PRESENT: S.McDaid, Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)
A.Willey, Resident Involvement Manager
J.White, Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood)
E.Manzie, Service Manager, Property Maintenance and Climate
R. Misir, Senior Democratic Services Officer

The Executive Director (Place) gave a short presentation attached to these minutes to provide some context about the work of Cabinet Housing Panel (CHP): it considered items relating to the Council's housing functions both in terms of council housing stock and also in terms of maintenance, housing needs and allocations, housing development, the income and home ownership teams, private sector housing, independent living and housing strategy work. The panel met quarterly and included representatives from the Residents' Panel. It considered results of performance reports, monitored the progress of a number of housing-related strategies and plans, and received updates on the Council's housing development programme. Work was managed via the work programme. CHP also received periodic updates on issues such as the delivery of the Affordable Homes programme, and members were welcome to identify areas where they wanted to receive further information.

40. APOLOGIES & SUBSTITUTIONS

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Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R Lass for whom Councillor B Fitzsimon substituted, Councillor M Birleson, and from Chris Andrews (Residents' Panel).

41. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2024 were approved as a correct record.

42. NOTIFICATION OF URGENT BUSINESS TO BE CONSIDERED UNDER ITEM 11

There were no items of urgent business.

The Panel agreed to vary the item of business so that the Work Programme was the last substantive item to be considered on the agenda. These minutes reflect the order set out in the agenda.

43. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr P Zukowskyj declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of being a Member of Hertfordshire County Council. Cllr A Nix declared that she was a Council tenant.

44. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME AND PETITIONS

There were no public questions or petitions.

45. WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

The Panel received the work programme for 2024/25.

A member noted the action plan in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures report was a critical area for CHP and therefore when the panel met again it should monitor progress of the plan in order to be confident things were progressing and any challenges to the delivery of components in the plan could be addressed. The Panel should also consider what those components might look like; for example Appendix A of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures report said that once the 100% house stock condition survey had been completed, findings would be analysed, prioritised and incorporated into planned work programmes and the timescale for this was April 2025. However the member felt that looking at the stock condition survey as it developed could inform maintenance programmes, and commentary relating to that would be valuable. One of the timescales set out in the report for reviewing the repairs service processes had passed and two other elements were due to be completed before the next panel meeting so when CHP next met, the position should be clearer and members should be able to challenge how things would move forward and actions arising from the review. If operational or policy changes were needed then it would be CHP recommending those changes to Cabinet. Officers agreed this was sensible; they would be reviewing

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the action plan and it was appropriate for CHP to provide feedback on it. CHP agreed the work plan subject to the modification outlined above.

46. PERFORMANCE REPORT

Officers presented the report which provided a summary of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and commentary across the Council's housing services. The KPIs were monitored quarterly by Senior Management Team and Cabinet at the Council's performance clinic meetings.

A member asked about voids performance noting it seemed to be out of sync with targets; while it was inevitable major voids were taking longer, it seemed less understandable if fewer repairs were needed for normal voids. Officers advised that there had been some improvement in the quality of voids the Council was getting back but it was still not getting them back as quickly as it would like. This was partly due to the works required as some repairs were substantial and staff were working with the contractor to try and reduce timescales. CHP had previously discussed targets and officers would consider benchmarking with other providers to see whether the targets needed to be revised.

A member asked who set the targets, reflecting that BPI 31 (percentage of housing repairs where work was completed right first time) seemed low at 70%. Officers said the target was set out in the contract and was being exceeded. There were some jobs that could not be completed the first time such as roofing works, and the targets would increase as the contract, which was in its early stages, went on. The member felt that if a roof was to be surveyed and then appropriate works carried out successfully, this should count as being completed right first time and asked if that was different from how this KPI was measured. Officers confirmed that the definition in the contract was 'first time fix' which was why the target was lower. Targets were generally agreed by Cabinet and Council although some were set in line with the Council's contracts. Members commented that perhaps the phraseology should be amended, rather than targets changing.

It was confirmed that when there were issues about accessing homes for electricity and gas testing, tenants were charged for legal costs where necessary.

RESOLVED:
Members noted the report.

47. HOUSING COMPLIANCE REPORT

Officers presented the report which set out the compliance position as at 31 May 2024. There were two areas that were not 100% compliant – domestic testing of electricity and gas – due to access issues.

RESOLVED

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Members noted the report.

48. TENANT STRATEGY AND POLICY

Officers introduced the report and gave a short presentation attached to these minutes.

During the discussion, a member asked what happened when a parent and adult child had a Council tenancy and one of them died. Officers explained they would look at what the tenancy agreement said as there was usually provision for this; if there was not, then the situation would be dealt with as empathically as possible and consideration would be given to discretionary policies around succession. A member noted the policy stated a parent and child would not necessarily have a joint tenancy unless both were assessed as having a housing need under statute and asked if that meant succession in those circumstances was discretionary. Officers confirmed they acted within the law and the tenancy agreement, so if there was not scope for this within the agreement they would look at the succession policy which was currently being reviewed and which meant discretion could be applied in certain circumstances. A member cited an instance when a resident had to wait for a couple of months before being informed whether a succession process could take place and asked if there was a way of easing the situation given the situation was already very stressful. Officers explained the tenancy would need to be formally ended via a notice to quit which had a duration of four weeks and in that period staff should be in contact with the occupier; a licence to occupy could be issued so the surviving tenant knew they could remain in the property until a decision was made about succession. Sometimes the Council needed to do right-sizing depending on the accommodation and the needs of the resident. It was recognised the process was a legal one and serving notice to quit could appear as though eviction was imminent but the tenancy needed to be ended in order to move forward.

A member noted the equality impact assessment stated there was a neutral impact on all groups with protected characteristics. Officers accepted the point and said they had struggled to find hard evidence to make a positive or negative assessment about this. The member asked about the diversity of Council tenants compared with residents of the borough as a whole; officers responded that it was intended to carry out work on this during the year as the data on tenancies was not as comprehensive as it could be in terms of disability for example.

A member commented that the Council did not use demoted tenancies and asked if it had been agreed there were better ways of dealing with antisocial behaviour (ASB). Officers said the Council had a range of tools when dealing with ASB that was caused by or affected its tenants including injunctions or community protection notices and ultimately could repossess the property. Some housing providers used introductory and demoted tenancies but the Council wanted tenants to have security of tenure (lifetime secure tenancies) and would use its enforcement powers when necessary.

RESOLVED

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- (a) Cabinet Housing Panel recommended to Cabinet the introduction of the Tenancy Policy and Tenancy Strategy; and
- (b) Requested that Cabinet recommend approval of the Policy and Strategy to Full Council.

49. TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES 2023/24

Officers introduced the report which provided the results of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) for 2023/24 and went through a presentation attached to these minutes.

A member asked whether older people tended to have a higher satisfaction rating because they did not have to take time off work for appointments. Officers did not know this for sure as the questions asked used standard wording that had to be used by all local authorities and housing associations; supplementary questions could then be asked and the issue of working residents needing to take time off work for appointments could be explored in future surveys.

A member referenced residents asking about the stock conditions survey. Officers said information was on the Council website and they would check on the status of social media communications.

A member asked about KPIs in relation to complaints for future surveys and about complaints to the Ombudsman. Officers advised that targets had not been set in the action plan as this was the first year; the Council sought to be better next year than now. Trends would be apparent over time, targets would be set as further data became available, and officers noted issues around complaints and response times were included in performance reports. Complaints to the Ombudsman were reported on although there were not targets for this and officers were working to improve timeliness of responses.

There was a query about whether a cleaning contract was in place for all communal areas in flats. Officers stated some blocks received ad-hoc cleans rather than a scheduled clean and this was being addressed as part of the action plan.

Commenting on the fact that 1% of homes did not meet the Decent Homes standard, officers said some of these were properties where there was non-compliance in terms of access meaning that a legal process was being progressed, and the others were homes in which decarbonisation works were taking place.

Satisfaction levels for housing services were at 60% and a member asked how this compared with other local authorities. This was not yet known as all councils and housing associations needed to submit their data to the regulator by the end of June 2024 but Welwyn Hatfield's data was known to be similar to a couple of other nearby local authorities.

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A member asked about the gap between satisfaction ratings in the report and Morgan Sindall's rant and rave which showed around 85% satisfaction levels. Officers noted that while both surveys measured satisfaction, they were asking slightly different things at different times which needed to be unpicked. The member asked if there were plans to ensure that Morgan Sindall shared ownership of the results of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey and officers confirmed this would be the case

In terms of handling ASB cases, the report noted it was likely dissatisfaction was about matters the Council did not have powers to deal with. A member asked if a clear definition of ASB in the context of the questionnaire could be provided in the future. Officers agreed further context could be provided and advised that more questions about ASB would be asked in the next quarter's survey.

A member asked about recruiting more tenants to the residents' panel. Officers explained that the residents' panel and staff promoted the panel at community events and it was positive some new tenants had joined the panel over the last few meetings.

RESOLVED

Cabinet Housing Panel:

- a) Noted the Tenant Satisfaction Measure results, both those generated from the perception survey and those generated from management information; and
- b) Noted the action plan (set out in Appendix B of the report) to address the findings of the survey results.

Meeting ended at 8.47 pm



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