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Cabinet Housing Panel
7 August 2024

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Wednesday 7 August 2024 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors A.Scott (Chair)

M.Birleson, J.Cragg, R.Lass, J.Weston, L.Chesterman,
J.Otumunye, A.Nix, S.Khan, P.Zukowskyj, R.Platt and
S.Thusu

ALSO Councillor G Moore, Executive Member for Housing
PRESENT:

OFFICIALS S.McDaid, Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)
PRESENT: C.Cade, Governance Services Manager
J.Guthrie, Assistant Director (Leisure, Community and Cultural
Services)
J.White, Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood)
D.Trewick, Housing Options Manager

50. APOLOGIES & SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Roger Trigg for whom Councillor Sunny Thusu attended as a substitute, and from Councillor Tim Rowse for whom Councillor Russ Platt attended as a substitute.

51. MINUTES

It was proposed that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2024 were amended so that the sentence under the 'Tenant Satisfaction Measures 2023/24' item that read '*The member asked if there were plans to gain ownership of the Morgan Sindall satisfaction survey and officers confirmed this*' now read '*The member asked if there were plans to ensure that Morgan Sindall shared ownership of the results of the tenants satisfaction survey and officers confirmed this would be the case.*' The minutes were agreed subject to the proposed amendment.

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A member raised a number of queries about who was responsible for the actions from the last meeting. It was confirmed that the responsible officers were the Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) and the Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood).

A number of points of clarity were raised at this point in the meeting and officers' responses are set out in summary below:

- For the stock conditions survey, officers received a weekly list of the surveys undertaken. The two main themes were damaged or missing carbon monoxide detectors, and damp and mould which were acted upon as a priority.
- Officers had not yet started benchmarking against other local authorities; voids would be considered later during the meeting, and benchmarking would take place as part of that work.
- Responding to the issue about a licence to occupy particularly when there had been a bereavement in a family household, the Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) advised that serving notice could give the appearance that the tenancy had ended; it needed to be legally ended but the affected resident could be issued a licence to occupy and officers needed to ensure the resident understood the process and that the new tenancy agreement would be temporary as the Council would support them in looking for new accommodation that was appropriate in size. A member commented that at the previous meeting it had appeared as though a licence to occupy was not always issued and it had been asked whether the policy should be revised to ensure such a licence was a standard approach. Officers said this should be the approach; the Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) would ensure it was understood. She would also see that officers would also be clear in circumstances when there was not agreement that the resident had the right to occupy the property and it would need to be taken back; it was important that there was clear communication with the occupier, and residents would always be signposted so they could obtain legal advice.
- Additional questions about ASB had been included in the current tenant satisfaction survey. The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) was currently working with staff to ensure a consistent approach in how ASB complaints were logged and that residents were clear about what the Council could and could not take action about.

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

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There were no items of urgent business.

53. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Thusu and Zukowskyj declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of being Members of Hertfordshire County Council. Cllr Nix declared that she was a Council tenant.

54. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME AND PETITIONS

There were no public questions or petitions.

55. PRESENTATION ON HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING

The Housing Options Manager gave a presentation which is attached to these minutes.

Following the presentation, a member asked for further details in terms of London boroughs paying incentives. Officers advised that this was often financial – some councils did not have their own temporary accommodation and relied on the private sector and London authorities would attach payment to a landlord in order to work with them. Several councils were facing a serious financial situation partly due to temporary accommodation costs. Most of the resources available to the team came from the annual government grant and Homeless Prevention Grant which were finite, so if there was a race to maximise incentives the money could soon disappear. Officers had trialled ideas including such financial incentives but there had not been significant interest. Other incentives that had been explored were guaranteeing rent; landlords who had experienced tenancies ending with rent owed or damage to the property and a scheme promoted by government utilised a niche insurance whereby landlords were offered guarantees against rent arrears and property damages. The Council had worked to promote this and landlords who had used the scheme found the process straightforward.

A member asked about the form of housing (private or social) that people approaching the team had been in – it was agreed the Housing Options manager would provide details of this after the meeting - and how this compared to neighbouring authorities. The Housing Options Manager explained he met regularly with his local counterparts who had similar headline figures. There was a mix of types of councils locally and officers had spoken to some in Hertfordshire as well as in Kent and Essex to understand their best practices.

ACTION: Housing Options Manager.

Post meeting note:

“Of the total number of those that approached, 2523 households, of which:

- *26 were owner occupiers*
- *543 were privately rented*
- *185 council tenants*
- *70 housing association tenants*

In comparison, for some additional context:

- *721 were living with friends or family.*
- *560 were no fixed abode of some description.”*

A member asked about the removal of S21 of the Housing Act 1988. Officers noted this was still in the early stages with the new government and it seemed as though the repeal of S21 would take place which would be likely to see a reduction in no-fault evictions, although as other homelessness figures were rising this would not necessarily mean a reduction on current numbers.

A member commended the work of the Housing Options team who were very helpful. She commented that it was dispiriting when residents did not see themselves progressing up the list for housing and suggested there was scope for how this was explained to them. Another member supported this, noting the Council used a housing needs register rather than a housing waiting list and this could be better communicated. She proposed an article be written in One Magazine about housing needs and how they were managed, as the magazine reached all homes in the borough. Officers responded that they regularly included information in One Magazine but it was difficult to get the balance right in getting these points across and also providing a lot of information. The magazine had asked residents to let the Council know about rough sleepers they were aware of, and also stated where people could obtain housing advice.

A member reflected on challenges such as increased rough sleeping and the lack of move-on accommodation and social housing, and felt it would be useful for CHP to consider key performance indicators so it could monitor the situation.

Responding to a question from a member, officers clarified that 408 people had needed accommodation in the last calendar year; this did not necessarily equate to 408 bed spaces but demand exceeded current provision, so private sector accommodation needed to be used to deal with the overspill at any given time.

56. QUARTER 1 2024/25 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) introduced the report which summarised the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and commentary across the Council's housing services for Quarter 1 (2024/25). Some KPIs were amber and therefore slightly under target: timescales for emergency repairs; properties without valid gas or electric safety certificates which were due to no access and the Council needing to go through a court process; and around 6% of repairs not being completed due to no access. There were also some red KPIs: overall customer satisfaction with planned work; the number of disrepair cases was higher than officers would like although staff worked regularly on them; the percentage of non-emergency repairs completed in target; and the timescales for voids and major voids.

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The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) spoke in respect of voids which were not in line with targets. Refurbishments were carried out by Morgan Sindall with whom officers had agreed a 16 week improvement plan that would start the following week. Weekly reports would be provided so that officers could see the new voids figures and also how Morgan Sindall was reducing legacy voids. There would also be an internal review into how internal processes were managed. People would not necessarily be put into potentially long-term voids as decisions needed to be made about whether those properties were likely to be demolished, for example, or held for decant as part of a long-term regeneration plan etc. The Assistant Director wanted to be able to show CHP how voids figures were comprised from different categories of void, i.e. when it was expected a straightforward void would be delivered, and how effective processes were when there were complicating factors. Officers would be working with cross-party members on a deep-dive of voids including figures, benchmarking, and what 'good' would look like. This work would be reported back to CHP.

A member was disappointed Morgan Sindall still had not dealt with legacy voids. More detail was needed in terms of voids and he noted the financial cost to the Council. While the improvement plan was welcome, he felt the KPI should be expanded to look at specific problems. Another member supported this and felt KPIs could be more meaningful if there was further detail. Officers did not disagree and advised more detail would usually be provided when performance dropped in order to better understand the reasons why; there were a number of steps in terms of voids and the Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) had spoken with staff about looking at performance indicators for each step in the process.

It was confirmed current voids reporting did not include flats at Queensway House.

A member referenced BPI 38 – average void property relet time for major voids – and commented that if much more work was now taking place but existing targets were used those targets were not likely to be met, and suggested targets be reviewed. Officers said future reports would identify what would be looked at this year and what targets should realistically be by the end of the year; this would need unpacking in terms of identifying key issues and how long it would take to improve them.

A member said performance against BPI 133 (disrepair cases) seemed worse than last year. Officers said a tenant could claim disrepair themselves or use a legal firm which could take a sizeable part of any successful claim and the Council had no control over this, so it needed to minimise the housing condition claims made, primarily around damp and mould. The stock conditions survey was a very useful tool in addressing this. It appeared the majority of claims were being made by legal firms. The member felt the number of disrepair cases upheld would be a better target to measure performance and it was agreed the Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) would add this to the performance indicator.

ACTION: Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood)

A member asked why there was no data from previous years for BPI 151 (non-emergency repairs) and was advised this was a new indicator. He asked about the direction of travel. The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change said the cross-party maintenance group had looked at the data, was aware the position was slightly worse than it had been and regularly discussed it. This was an issue about contractor performance and the Council was working on an improvement plan with them.

A member commented on the red KPI about overall customer satisfaction with planned works, noting the low response rate might mean that satisfied tenants had not completed the survey they had been sent.

A member asked if work had been done in respect of residents who had not returned customer satisfaction surveys (BPI 129). The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) said the number of questions had been reduced and the contractor had agreed a prize draw would take place as an incentive. Residents would also receive a card with a QR code to access the survey. The member felt it would be helpful to door-knock a sample of those who had not responded to understand why they had not completed it. Another member felt people would be unlikely to complete it unless they were particularly pleased or dissatisfied.

A member asked about BPI 37 (void property relet time for standard Council homes) as it seemed the time to relet standard voids had more than doubled; this represented a loss of income for the Council and also represented costs in terms of people on the waiting list living in temporary accommodation. He asked if this was factored into calculations. The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) would pick this up when she came to do the analysis as part of the issue was about ensuring right-sizing. The member said there was a budget for the contractor to manage voids and a separate budget for delivering temporary accommodation; the meeting had heard earlier that the latter had caused financial difficulties for some local authorities so it was a missed opportunity not to prioritise this and it should be considered more holistically. It might be that focusing more finances on voids would reduce the cost of temporary accommodation.

ACTION: Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood)

The Executive Member for Housing advised there had been a number of recent discussions about performance and voids and she supported officers' decision to pull back and review performance as quality homes were not just a quick fix.

The Panel noted the report.

57. HOUSING COMPLIANCE UPDATE

The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) provided detail about the number of cases where legal action was being taken due to the Council being unable to access properties for domestic testing of gas (4) and electricity (132).

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She advised that when contractors were unable to gain access, neighbourhood officers became involved and this was followed up by letters; the Council wanted to work with residents before legal action became necessary and this provided an opportunity to identify any vulnerabilities staff had not been aware of.

A member felt health and wellbeing implications should be identified in the report and it was agreed this would be the case in future.

A member noted the report identified potential reputational damage if the Council did not remain in a compliant position and asked if there were other risks. Officers agreed that if that were the case, the social housing regulator could take enforcement action and this would be reflected in future reports.

A member commended the team on their continued work in this area.

The Panel noted the report.

58. TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES SURVEY 2023/24 ACTION PLAN - UPDATE

The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) gave a presentation on the action plan update as a result of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures survey which is attached to these minutes.

A member commended the work that had taken place and was pleased communal cleaning arrangements were being reviewed so that all blocks had a scheduled clean and would have grounds maintenance inspections.

The timescales column set out in the appendix represented indicative start times. A member proposed having start and end times where appropriate and officers confirmed this would take effect from the next report.

Action 5 was to review repairs service processes. A member noted that in May 2024 contractors had provided a plan in relation to this which he felt should have been seen by CHP. The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) said the cross-party group would want to see it; she did not anticipate any difficulties with it coming to CHP as she did not think there were any confidentiality concerns. The member said that if an area of the repairs service needed to be performance-reviewed, CHP should see the plan to address those issues. The Assistant Director (Homes and Neighbourhood) advised that there was a tracker for agreed outputs and she would see the next meeting received an update on the contractor's progress.

ACTION: Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)

Action 6 related to communication with tenants. The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) agreed the annual communications plan would be shared with CHP.

ACTION: Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)

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A member noted the revised complaints policy had been to Cabinet the previous day and asked whether it had gone to a panel first and the Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) confirmed it had.

Action 8 (complaints) referenced the annual Housing Ombudsman statement being considered at Overview and Scrutiny Committee and a member wondered why this would not also come to CHP. The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) noted the statement did not just refer to housing complaints as it was from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman as well as the Housing Ombudsman. It was agreed the housing related issues would be considered by CHP.

ACTION: Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)

A member reflected that a lot of work had been identified which raised questions about resources and he asked whether this was felt to be achievable. The Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change) felt it was right to be ambitious for the borough's tenants and felt the work could be achieved; it was important not just to respond to the Tenant Satisfaction Measures survey but to respond in terms of consumer regulations and standards.

The Panel noted the report.

Meeting ended at 9.15 pm



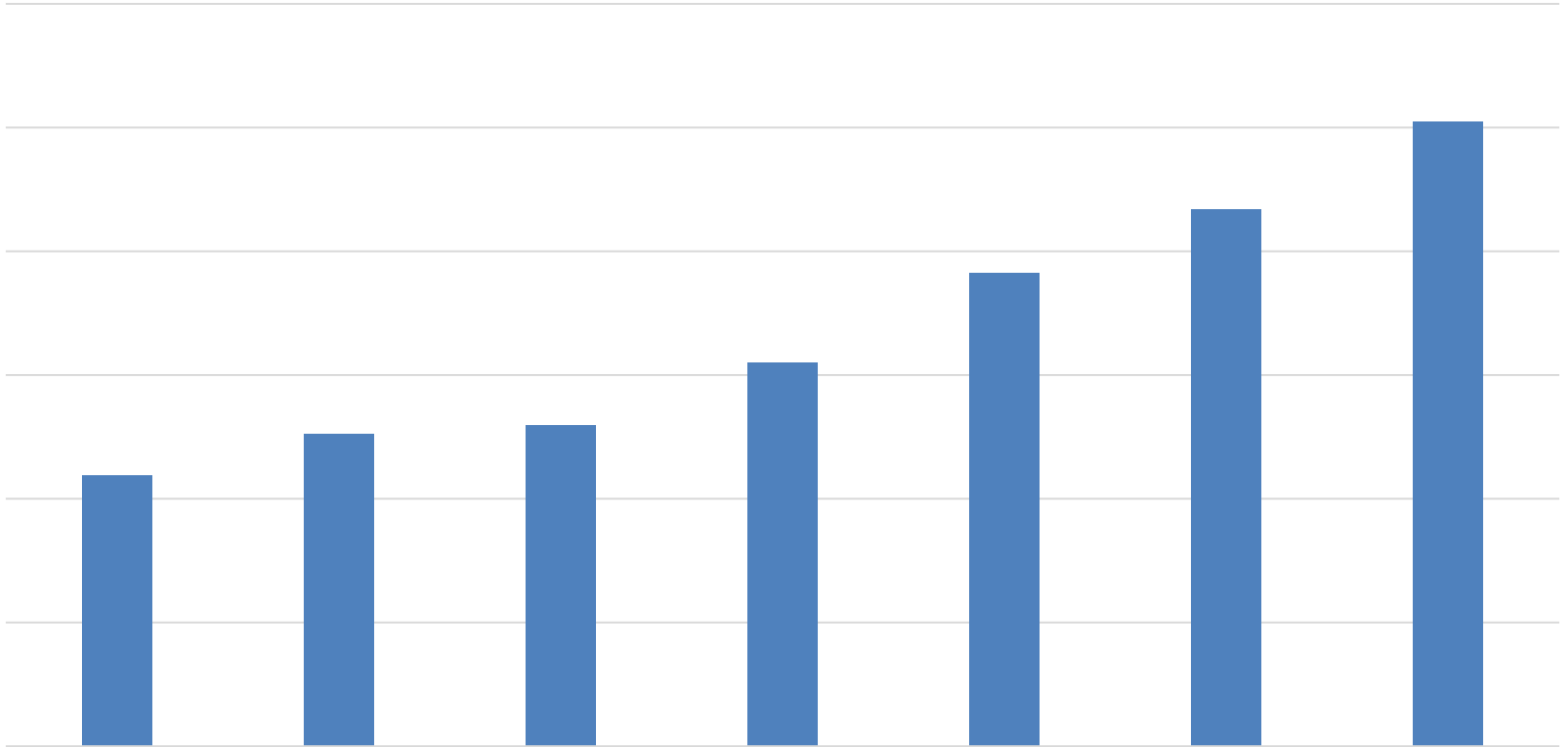
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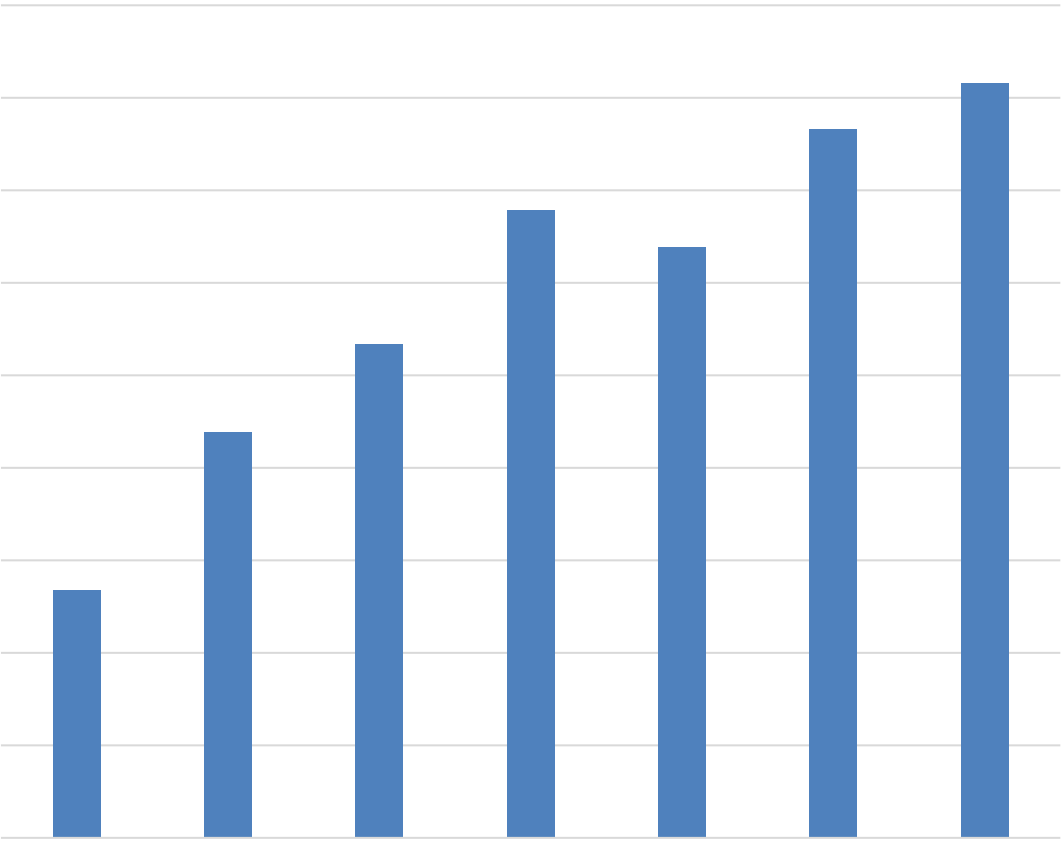












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