

To: Overview and Scrutiny Commission
7 April 2021

Registered providers of social housing Overview and Scrutiny Review Report
Cllr John Porter, Chair Environment and Communities Panel

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To present to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission the findings of the Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel's review into registered providers of social housing and ask them to endorse their recommendations.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 **That the findings of the panel and the recommendations as set out in the report (attached as Appendix A) and paragraph 5.2 are endorsed.**

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Commission directed the Environment and Communities Panel to conduct a review into registered providers of social housing in Bracknell Forest. All permanent social housing in the borough is provided by registered providers who play a significant role in shaping places, fostering communities and contributing to the health and wellbeing of the area.
- 3.2 The review aimed to understand the stated service provision from registered providers and compare this with the experience of residents, looking for the best ways to support residents if required. The review also looked at how the registered providers engage with their residents to foster community health and wellbeing, identifying gaps and opportunities to improve. The review maintained a focus on developing good relationships with local registered providers for the benefit of residents and communities.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel assessed several options as part of the review.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 The Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel carried out the review into registered providers of social housing as part of the overview and scrutiny work programme. The review activity took place between December 2020 and February 2021, reviewing a wide range of evidence and speaking to relevant witnesses. The panel spoke to the three largest and the sixth largest registered providers locally, representing 85% of social housing in Bracknell. They also spoke to seven residents, covering a mix of tenures across the three largest providers. The findings and recommendations are set out in the attached report
- 5.2 The recommendations are listed below:

- That the Executive commissions member development training that supports strong community leadership for residents in social housing, including the governance of registered providers and the role of environmental health in investigating hazards and enforcing statutory checks. Training to be delivered by December 2021.
- That the Executive establishes a quarterly all-member briefing for councillors delivered jointly by Housing officers and the Public Protection Partnership to discuss housing activities across tenure, initiatives and any matters arising by October 2021.
- That the council provides information on its website about what tenants should expect from their landlords, including statutory health and safety requirements by July 2021.
- That the Assistant Director: Customer Experience, Digital and ICT establishes relationships with digital departments in the registered providers to identify opportunities to align digital transformation programmes where practical, and to share learning and good practice by December 2021.
- That the Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing writes to the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government to express Bracknell Forest's support for the strong, proactive consumer regulatory regime set out in the Social Housing White Paper by May 2021.

6 Commentary from Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Chair, Councillor John Porter

- 6.1 This review was prompted by residents contacting councillors for intervention following unsatisfactory responses from their registered providers of social housing. The panel wanted to understand what residents should expect, what they were experiencing and what processes were available to seek improvements. The review also wanted to focus on opportunities to enhance relationships between communities, registered providers and the council.
- 6.2 The panel recognised a lot of good practice within the registered providers and were very encouraged by their level of engagement with this review. Their openness contributed to a much better understanding amongst panel members and their commitment to continued good relationships with the council was clear. The panel identified opportunities for registered providers to improve their service to residents, which are detailed in the report.
- 6.3 The panel were pleased to find that environmental health officers will investigate any complaint against a landlord regardless of social rent, private rent or shared ownership, putting social housing on a level with other tenures. As the panel heard evidence of ongoing issues for residents, this was a key finding of the review which can immediately help residents in difficulties and any councillors supporting them.

7 Response from Assistant Directors

7.1 Response from Assistant Director: Early Help and Communities

- 7.1.1 The review has clarified the current regulatory regime for registered providers of social housing (also known as housing associations) and has highlighted changes to the regime proposed in the Social Housing White Paper. The review has also assisted members of the panel to understand the role which the council can and cannot take in respect of housing management issues arising in social housing provision in the borough.
- 7.1.2 Training for members more widely is welcomed and will help to ensure the most effective routes to resolution of issues for residents in social housing seeking advocacy support from their local councillors. Improving information on the council's website for tenants (and landlords/potential landlords) empowers local residents and should play a part in ensuring that those in rented accommodation live in accommodation which is safe and legislatively compliant. There are limited resource implications for housing in supporting these recommendations

7.2 Response from Assistant Director: Contract Services

- 7.2.1 The review and report have clarified areas of responsibility in relation to registered providers of social housing and where the Public Protection Partnership will investigate resident or member concerns. The recommendation for quarterly member briefing sessions so that they can raise specific concerns will improve links with the environmental health team and ensure issues are addressed efficiently. These quarterly sessions will be supplemented by the recommended member development training which is particularly helpful in identifying the role of our Environmental Health Officers and where they can support residents. The recommendations align with existing plans and will be delivered within existing PPP resources.

7.3 Response from Assistant Director: Customer Experience, Digital and ICT

- 7.3.1 This recommendation sits well with the work programme emerging from the new Digital & ICT, and Customer Experience Strategies, and the Ways of Working Programme. A closer relationship with registered providers in relation to digital access will support the redevelopment of our website and the aim to achieve simplified access to services, as well as reducing unnecessary hand-offs for residents. It will also be useful to look at opportunities for sharing development of ICT infrastructure or digital services with borough partners.
- 7.3.2 The Heads of Customer Services and Digital, alongside the Assistant Director, will be tasked with building relationships with providers, identifying opportunities for joint working, and sharing best practice from their sectors to enable shared learning and development. This will be monitored through the Ways of Working programme board and officers' one to ones and appraisals.

8 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 8.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Financial Advice

- 8.2 It is not envisaged that there will be any material financial impact arising from the proposed recommendations.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 8.3 An initial equalities screening has been completed and is attached at Appendix B.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 8.4 There is still a perception that the council is responsible for the management, maintenance and repair of social housing, meaning that complaints may be misdirected and that resident satisfaction with housing performance may be lower. Setting clear expectations on the respective responsibilities of landlords and the council and on enforcement options should create a more direct path to resolution and reduce frustration for residents.
- 8.5 Part of a councillor's role is supporting residents and improving communities. By understanding more about the responsibilities of registered providers and the enforcement options for social housing, councillors are in a better position to advocate effectively for their residents. This aligns with the member development strategy focus on community leadership.

Background Papers

None

Contact for further information

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