

Overview and Scrutiny Panel Recommendations Report

REVIEW TITLE	O&S PANEL	DATE
Registered Providers of Social Housing Review	Environment and Communities	7 April 2021

“This review began due to residents contacting councillors for intervention following unsatisfactory responses from their registered providers of social housing. The panel wanted to review the stated service provision from registered providers and compare this with the experience of a sample of their residents. We also looked at how the registered providers engage with their residents to foster community health and wellbeing, especially during Covid-19. In addition, the panel looked for opportunities to support productive relationships between the registered providers and housing and environmental health officers at the council.”



**Councillor John Porter, Chair:
Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

Recommendations

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.

Key findings

The panel recommends that all registered providers review their complaints procedures to create clear and unambiguous timelines for resolution that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound for all levels of complaints. Registered providers are reminded of the requirement of Protocol 1, Article 1 (protection of property, entitlement to peaceful enjoyment) of the Human Rights Act 1998.

The panel suggests that registered providers consider the effectiveness of their general communications to residents, particularly regarding community events and opportunities.

Good practice

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.

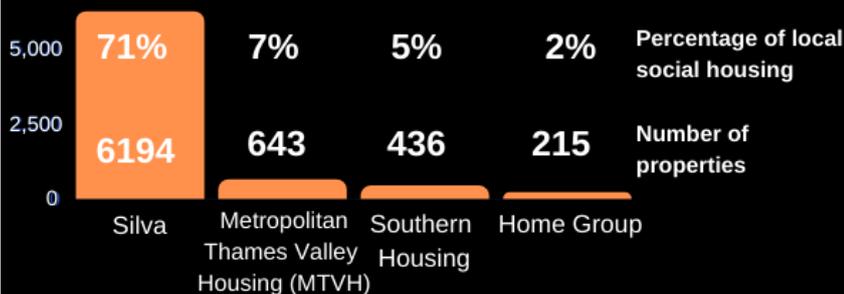
Registered providers demonstrated the following good practice in support of community wellbeing:

- membership of TPAS (a tenant engagement service) to support and train residents who are keen to engage with their communities, and
- resident-led initiatives, such as Southern Group's newsletter which is created and delivered by residents, which the panel agreed creates stronger bonds in the community.

Registered providers described very good working relationships with council officers. The willingness of registered providers to work openly with Bracknell Forest Council and other partners for the benefit of their residents was a real positive observed throughout this review.

Background information

REGISTERED PROVIDERS



Did you know?

There are 18 registered providers of social housing in Bracknell Forest. In total, they provide 8785 social rent, affordable rent and shared ownership properties

We spoke to 4 of them, representing 7488 properties or 85% of Bracknell's total.

The white paper on social housing sets out a new charter for social housing residents



To be safe in your home



To know how your landlord is performing



To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly



To be treated with respect



To have your voice heard by your landlord



To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in



To be supported to take your first step to ownership

Review findings

How well are residents' needs being met by registered providers?

Basic needs are met as all the registered providers (RPs) the panel spoke to confirmed that all their homes meet the decent homes standard. They all have a complaints process that is available to residents. Most of the residents who gave evidence knew about the complaints procedures, and they were all aware of the different ways to contact their landlord.

The panel noted there are no timeframes for resolution in the RPs' complaints procedures. Residents described having to chase issues, multiple teams being involved, lost reports and long periods of no contact from their RP. The panel observed this can cause anxiety, uncertainty and in some cases has a significant effect on the mental health of residents. The panel recommends that clear timelines for resolution are established to give residents more certainty that their concerns will be addressed.

Residents gave examples of unsatisfactory repair or maintenance works, which is also reflected in the complaints to the Public Protection Partnership (PPP). The RPs inspect a percentage of works to ensure quality but clearly some issues remain. In some cases, this may be down to differing expectations of the final outcome.

The panel had concerns over the completion of statutory gas safety checks as one resident mentioned a missed gas check. They were reassured by the robust compliance processes described by the RPs when questioned about this, and later confirmed that the property had been inspected. The review learnt that there is no statutory frequency for electrical safety checks in properties managed by RPs but notes that good practice recommends a full inspection and test at least every five years and on every change of occupancy. The panel recommends that the council provides guidance on what tenants can expect from their landlord on the council website.

All the RPs carry out satisfaction surveys after a repair or customer contact, and most do annual or quarterly surveys. In the most recent quarter, Silva had an overall satisfaction score of 89% (exceeding their target of 85%). In their 2019/2020 survey, Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTVH) had a customer satisfaction for renters (their largest group of residents) of 70%. The panel were pleased to hear that surveys are carried out and commented that both of these represented very good results.

Apart from one, all the RPs who gave evidence are members of TPAS, a not-for-profit tenant engagement service, which provides support and training for tenants who want to get more involved. It also provides residents with opportunities for peer networking and insights into what other RPs are doing. The panel recognised the benefits that membership of TPAS brings for both residents and RPs.

The review heard that RPs are increasingly using digital methods for customer contact and communications. Bobby Mulheir, Assistant Director Customer Experience, Digital and IT at Bracknell Forest, explained the council's approach to digital engagement and how this might interact with RP activities. The panel recommends that officers look for opportunities to align digital transformation programmes and share good practice.

Registered providers communicate with their residents using:



social media



their website



email



newsletters

How do registered providers engage with residents to foster community health and wellbeing?

RPs use the initial property viewing to tell residents about the area, facilities and activities. They noted that most of their new residents already live in Bracknell and are familiar with the area. They also use approval interviews and settling in visits to identify any support needs such as education, training or employment advice, furniture assistance information or referrals to support agencies.

All of the RPs have funds and initiatives to support community wellbeing. These include fun days, skip days, litter picks, a hoarding support group, a garden assistance scheme and Community Connectors – a role created at Southern Housing to bring together residents who want to be more involved in their community. They have invested over £12,000 establishing these connectors in Bracknell.

Residents of Southern Housing produce and deliver their own newsletter. They note that resident-to-resident contact (pre-Covid) has increased local understanding and brought communities together. The panel were impressed by this initiative and the level of social cohesion described.

Residents gave mixed responses about whether they felt part of a community. Overall, there wasn't a strong sense of community cohesion and the residents we spoke to hadn't been involved in community events. They all felt that social events were beneficial and that communication about them could be improved. The panel recognised the benefits of resident-led initiatives and suggests that RPs review their approach to community communications.

In response to Covid, all the RPs are making welfare phone calls to vulnerable customers and providing tailored support, including help with shopping and medicines, weekly phone calls to combat isolation, support with energy bills, digital equipment to get online or wellbeing activities such as games for children. MTVH have supported 951 residents so far and Silva report that their safeguarding referrals are at their highest ever.

The panel recognised this important layer of support for vulnerable residents in these very difficult times.

What are the governance and enforcement arrangements regarding registered providers?

Bracknell Forest Council does not hold any housing stock¹ and all social housing in the borough is provided by RPs. RPs must be registered with the Regulator of Social Housing whose remit is set by Government. Local authorities have no jurisdiction over or ability to monitor the performance of RPs. The panel also heard that the council has no ability to influence the choice of RP for new developments.

The panel noted that the current regulatory approach puts little emphasis on consumer standards, with no clear benchmarking on performance across RPs. The panel agreed that visible performance metrics create accountability so this review welcomes the White Paper on Social Housing for the strong, proactive focus it puts on consumer standards, including easily accessible tenant satisfaction measures.

Environmental health officers from the Public Protection Partnership (PPP) are responsible for enforcing health and safety standards with RPs. They have a duty to investigate any complaint raised with them, regardless of tenure. Most of their cases involve inadequate responses from landlords or unsatisfactory works from contractors. They assess risks using the [Housing Health and Safety Rating System](#) and the 29 hazards included within it. The PPP reported good success rates once they are in contact with the RP.

The role of the PPP in investigating social housing complaints was a key finding of this review. They will take on any complaint where the complainant feels they are not getting support from their landlord (whether RP or private). Councillors are encouraged to direct any residents needing this type of support to the PPP.

The panel observed that governance and enforcement is complex and involves officers across central government, the PPP and housing. They felt they could now signpost and advocate for residents more effectively. The recommended training will help all councillors understand this complex area, allowing them to better support residents having difficulties. This report doesn't pre-empt the detailed training, but a quick guide to supporting residents' complaints is included at the end.

¹ The Council does hold a portfolio of residential property which is used primarily for temporary accommodation with some being used to permanently accommodate people with learning disabilities in shared houses.

Due to the interactions, this review also recommends regular briefings across housing and PPP to keep councillors updated on current issues.

Most of the RPs described good working relationships with Bracknell Forest Council, and many were involved in multi-agency groups to ensure a holistic approach.

All of the RPs involved in the review were very open to developing further relationships with the council. This panel has established valuable contacts in the RPs and details have been shared with all councillors and relevant officers.

“After interviewing the main registered providers in the borough, the panel are confident that the results of our scrutiny will bring changes and better communications, not only between the registered providers and their clients but between the providers and Bracknell Forest Council.”

Cllr Tina McKenzie-Boyle, Vice chair

Quick guide to residents’ complaints about rented and shared ownership properties

		Social rent	Private rent
1	Residents should raise any issues about their property, environment or personal safety using the landlord’s published complaints procedure in the first instance.	yes	yes
2	If it is not resolved, the issue should be reported to the following for further investigation: PPP for health and safety and environmental issues, Community Safety Team for anti social behaviour.	yes	yes
3	If the RP doesn’t resolve the issue the resident can escalate it to the Housing Ombudsman (this is not a requirement to proceed to step 4)	yes	no
4	If the issue is still not resolved, residents may consider taking their landlord to court under the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018	yes	yes

I would firstly like to thank my vice chair Cllr Mrs McKenzie-Boyle for her support, as well as all the members of the panel who helped form a fantastic report due to their enthusiasm and knowledge. Our thanks also go to the registered providers who gave honest and open information about their organisational structure and commitment to ensuring a continued excellent working relationship with the officers of Bracknell Forest. I would also like to thank the residents who gave an insight into their relationships with the registered providers. Finally I would like to give praise on behalf of all the panel to Jen Lawson who has supported this review with her hard work and passion.

Councillor John Porter, Chair: Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Review panel

Councillor Ian Kirke	Councillor Moira Gaw
Councillor Isabel Mattick	Councillor Robert Angell
Councillor John Porter (Chair)	Councillor Sandra Ingham
Councillor Mary Temperton	Councillor Tina McKenzie-Boyle (Vice chair)
Councillor Michael Brossard	Councillor Tricia Brown

Contributors to the review

Bobby Mulheir	Assistant Director: Customer Experience, Digital and ICT
Damian James	Assistant Director: Contract Services
Home Group Alan Daniels-Smith Ronika Cunningham Kayleigh Gorrell	Local Housing Manager Group Engagement Manager Community Housing Assistant
Jen Lawson	Governance & Scrutiny Officer
Lisa Jones	Senior Housing Resources Officer
Mary Glome	Principle Environmental Health Officer, Public Protection Partnership (PPP)
Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing Glyn Jones Kelly Adjetey	Regional Director, North London & Central Area Manager
Residents from Silva, Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and Southern Housing	
Rosalynd Gater	Strategic Manager, PPP
Sarah Gee	Assistant Director: Early Help and Communities
Sean Murphy	PPP Manager
Silva Andrew McDonald Tom Mason	Lead Customer Relations Partner (Tenancy) Lead Customer relations Partner (Revenue)
Southern Housing Group Tony Hughes Alice Webster Emma Barnett-Warden Jeremy Barkway	Head of Home Management – North Region Community Investment Services Manager Area Services Manager Partnerships Manager – New Business & Regeneration
Victoria Blades	Housing Enabling Officer

