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**Meeting of the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee – 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

**Report of the Deputy Chief Executive**

**Priorities for the Housing and Communities Directorate**

**Purpose**

1. This report draws together for the Committee information on the UK Government White Paper on Social Housing published in November 2020, a report from Ark Consultancy on the outcomes from a tenants survey and the priority recommendations from an experienced housing consultant, Duncan Forbes, who was commissioned in October 2021 to carry out a review of the Directorate of Housing and Communities and propose an improvement plan.

**Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the Committee receive and comment on the report.

**Background**

**3. UK Government White Paper**

In November 2020, the UK Government published “The charter for Social Housing Residents: social housing white paper”. The link to the White Paper can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-charter-for-social-housing-residents-social-housing-white-paper/the-charter-for-social-housing-residents-social-housing-white-paper#executive-summary>.

4. The stated aim of the White Paper is to ensure that social housing customers are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes, and to put things right when things go wrong. The White Paper sets out new regulatory arrangements for social landlords including local authorities. The Regulator of Social Housing, which now regulates local authority housing provision, will be responsible for a new stronger proactive consumer regulatory regime which will strengthen the formal standards against which the Council is regulated and requiring the Council to:

- Be transparent about their performance and decision-making – so that tenants and the regulator can hold the Council to account.
- Put things right when they go wrong.
- Listen to tenants through effective engagement.

5. The Charter for tenants has seven commitments to tenants against which the Council will be judged:

1. **To be safe in your home.**
2. **To know how your landlord is performing**, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.
3. **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly**, with access to a strong ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.
4. **To be treated with respect**, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
5. **To have your voice heard by your landlord**, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board. The government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.
6. **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in**, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
7. **To be supported to take your first step to ownership**, so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow

6. The areas for improvement, set out later in this report, have been developed to enable the Council to deliver the expectations set out in the White Paper.

7. The Ark Consultancy report

In response to the increased expectations in the White Paper, the former Director of Housing and Communities commissioned Ark Consultancy to review the Council's Involvement and Empowerment arrangements. The presentation setting out the outcome of that review is attached as Appendix 1.

8. The results are best summarised on slide 7 in Appendix 1. In a nutshell, the overall summary is this:

- The Council is currently performing below the performance of landlords providing comparative benchmark levels in all the areas surveyed.
- A lot of tenants were undecided.
- The two weakest areas where the gap between the performance in Dudley and the benchmarks were in relation to complaints and the provision of information to tenants.

9. As you can see from the second page, this was an online survey and there were 225 responses. This gives a 95% confidence level in the result with a 6% margin of error. Statistically, therefore, the survey is not as statistically reliable as we would wish.

So whilst the precise figures in this survey may not be as reliable as we would wish there are three reasons why the overall message from it should be accepted and we should get on and act on it as reasonably accurate.

A STAR survey was carried out in 2018 and had 3,349 tenants responding. Tenant satisfaction levels in many aspects of the Council's housing service were in the early to mid 80%s. But when it came to satisfaction with the Council's communication with tenants, and how well the Council listened to tenant's views, tenants only rated the Council in the 60%s i.e. it was an identified area of weakness in the 2018 survey.

There is a lot of anecdotal feedback from tenants that we aren't good at communicating with them and not good at listening to their views, so the results are consistent with the day to day messages we get from tenants.

Even if there is a 6% margin of error and even if that were to swing every indicator 6% better (which there is no guarantee it would) that would not take us up to the benchmark on ANY of the issues surveyed.

10. The areas for improvement set out later in this report have therefore been developed to take account of and address these findings.

Departmental review

11. As the Committee is aware, the Directorate has experienced a high turnover of senior management during the last few years and there is currently no Director in post and interim Heads of Service for Neighbourhoods and Communities and for Community Safety.

With this gap in senior leadership of the Directorate and increasing feedback reaching me from the Cabinet Member, customers and from other elected members about their frustrations over delays and the handling of cases within the Directorate, I decided to commission an external review. In October 2021, I commissioned Duncan Forbes, who is a highly experienced housing professional, to carry out a Strategic Review and make recommendations for an Improvement Plan.

12. Duncan has presented his recommendations for immediate priorities to be addressed within the Directorate to myself and the Cabinet Member, and has discussed these with the Heads of Service.
13. The review has identified that there are many services provided right across the Directorate which are being delivered to a good or excellent standard, as evidenced by some of our performance data, and there are willing and committed staff who are keen to deliver an excellent service. The review has identified a number of high-level elements that need improvement within the Directorate:

- A need for a stable high quality senior leadership team within the Directorate and the senior leaders working as a team on strategic issues.
- A strengthened approach to policy and strategy development learning and applying lessons from across the UK.
- Improved collaboration between services to provide seamless services.
- Strengthened change management arrangements so that changes are progressed satisfactorily with clear accountabilities.
- Improved engagement of staff and tenants in the design and implementation of improvements and changes to services.
- Improved two-way communication with staff and tenants.
- Improved follow through to ensure proposed changes are actually completed particularly around staffing structures.
- Improved systems for handling customer service issues, complaints and member/MP enquiries.
- More effective systems and processes for handling issues that involve multiple services.

### Next steps

14. These high level areas for improvement all add up to the need for a significant change in culture; something that will take many months and some years to implement fully. More immediately, Duncan has recommended that we adopt a managed programme of change starting this month and led by the Directorate Management Team (DMT). The programme will consist of a series of cross service projects which will address specific areas for improvement. DMT will lead the projects and do so in a manner which demonstrates a change of approach and models the change in culture required. Most of these projects are quite considerable in themselves and will take some time and resources to complete. It will be the role of the DMT to approve the scope of each project and then oversee the resourcing and timescale in a way that ensures projects are progressed satisfactorily at the optimum speed without burning out those staff who are responsible for delivering the change alongside the rest of their work.

Note that no timescales for completion are being given for any of these projects. That is because the new cultural approach we want to promote involves a collaborative approach to scope and define the work, progress it and conclude it engaging with key stakeholders such as customers, staff and members along the way. It is also vital to balance the resources required for each of these projects alongside the delivery of day to day services. Demand for housing and community services has grown and we need to ensure that the staff can handle that demand as a top priority. The Committee can rest assured that some of these projects have already started this month and that each of these projects will be progressed as rapidly as resources allow, and that we will be able to report on progress at each Committee.

The areas for improvement are selected to focus on:

- The concerns raised by customers and elected members.
- The new charter in the White Paper.
- The actions arising from the Ark report.



## The priorities to commence in this quarter

### 15. Building and Supporting our Staff Team

- Finalising the Directorate structure for services and recruiting permanent Director and Heads of Service; transferring services to the new structure.
- Completing changes already agreed for transfer of responsibilities between Asset Management and Maintenance.
- Reviewing structure and resources for the Anti-Social Behaviour team and Tenancy Management team to strengthen our capacity to deliver high quality services, and to improve how we operate.
- Designing and implementing a communication plan with staff about the change projects.
- Feeding in the accommodation needs of the Directorate into wider corporate review of office and depot assets.

### 16. Improving resident and councillor satisfaction

- Reviewing how we handle customer enquiries, Member and MP enquiries and complaints, and redesigning the system to improve performance and remove duplication of effort. Ensure users of these services are informed about the new arrangements.
- Agree service standards with Green Care and ensure these are delivered and the service can be monitored effectively by tenants and housing staff.
- Review the rubbish disposal and block cleaning arrangements for all blocks with a view to improving the arrangements and services provided.
- Review roles and responsibilities within the Neighbourhood and Estates Team to enable them to provide an improved customer service and closer links with communities as a key “front of house” service for the Directorate on our estates.
- Within 2022-23 service plans all other services to identify how they will change their approach to working with the Neighbourhood and Estates team to support them in their role as the link with local communities.
- Develop and implement a new approach to communicating with our tenants about their homes and the landlord service. This could include looking at ways to develop an existing council tenant newsletter (Home Affairs) which is distributed quarterly and exploring the potential for a regular e-newsletter (using existing and well-established council systems) to keep tenants informed.
- Develop a repairs and works charter setting out standards for all contractors and staff when carrying out works in or visiting tenants homes.

### 17. Engaging with tenants and communities

Note that this priority will be something we will ensure we include in any project where it is relevant, e.g. when we review roles and responsibilities within the Neighbourhood and Estates Team, as we review communication arrangements with tenants, as we improve our arrangements for fire safety and as we plan the delivery of our asset management strategy.

- Start the process of developing ward profiles and pilot this in one area before rolling out more widely next financial year.
- Review revenue and capital budgets for locally based spend.
- Discuss how to progress the decisions required by members on the allocation of the Capital investment programme following extensive consultation by Ark Consultancy with our tenants in flats and to do so in a way that continues to involve our residents and involves our Neighbourhood and Estates team.
- Develop the virtual network of residents to extend our consultation arrangements.

18. Improving value for money

- Complete garage review including how garages are managed and let.
- Review process for handling complaints from solicitors about disrepair.
- Start a review of the voids process.
- Review home checks process.

19. Improving residents safety

- Review roles and responsibilities for the various functions involved in fire safety.
- Agree information and guidance to be given to residents of high rise blocks and launch an information campaign for residents.
- Review all safety policies including those for fire safety and ensure that risk assessments are in place for key component failures.
- Ensure that the “no access” process for safety inspections is operating quickly and effectively.
- Check the quality of work on the fire door installation project.
- Review out of hours arrangements.

20. **Demonstrating progress**

As the DMT scope each project in more detail, we will be able to determine measures which can demonstrate that improvements have been secured. We will be able to provide progress reports and ultimately the outcomes to the Cabinet Member and to this Committee.

In particular, when we have adapted the processes for member enquiries to a system which we consider should provide an improved service, we will test this out by carrying out a survey of elected members to test their experience with the new system.

Likewise, for example, after we have run a communication campaign with high rise tenants about their safety, we will carry out a quick electronic survey with some of these tenants to check that they feel better informed about safety issues and more confident that we are managing their safety effectively. One key piece of work will be to develop the wider online network of residents whom we can regularly ask for comments on service improvements and feedback.

## 21. **Consultation**

The Cabinet Member, Chief Executive and Heads of Service have been consulted on the priorities and they have been adjusted in the light of the consultation. Consultation with staff will have taken place by the time of the Committee.

## **Finance**

22. At this stage, there are no additional costs in the changes proposed but we expect that a wholesale review of the cleaning arrangements and void management, for example, will require a dedicated lead with no other responsibilities. As we scope these projects we will identify what resource is required and any costs will be managed within existing Directorate budgets.

## **Law**

23. The proposed actions will help ensure the Council's compliance with safety legislation, and the obligations of landlords, and ensure compliance with the new regulatory requirements proposed in the White Paper when these are enacted.

## **Risk Management**

24. This is a major programme of change and there is a risk that there will be insufficient resources to deliver the programme given the urgency of securing some of these changes. This risk will be managed by the Directorate Management Team which will review the resources and prioritisation of the programme.

## **Equality Impact**

25. There are no specific equality implications.
26. There are no specific implications of this report in relation to children and young people and they have not been consulted or involved in developing the proposals.

## **Human Resources/Organisational Development**

27. There are significant Human Resources and Organisational Development implications in this programme of change which will involve some restructuring and changes in roles and responsibilities as well as a programme of culture change and staff training. The Human Resources and Organisational Development team will be closely consulted at each stage as the programme is developed and implemented.

## **Commercial/Procurement**

28. The proposals should result in an improvement in our relationship with customers. The repairs charter may require changes to our procurement arrangements and contracts as these are renewed.

## **Council Priorities**

29. These proposals will support the achievement of healthy, resilient and safe communities and the Housing aspects of the Dudley Council Plan 2019-22. It will support the workforce element of the Future Council Programme. The proposals should significantly benefit communities by improving the engagement of residents with the Council and improving their safety.
30. One factor to be considered as part of the future Capital investment programme is how the Council can respond to the Climate and Environmental Emergency and progress the journey to zero carbon for the Council's housing stock.



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## **Appendices**

### **List of Background Documents**

*Appendix 1* – Ark Consultancy presentation: Tenant Involvement & Empowerment Survey Outcomes

This report is based on a more detailed list of priorities.