

HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME – JULY 2024

Executive Summary

Following a self-referral, the Regulator for Social Housing issued the Council with a regulatory notice on 14 December 2023 for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety. Subsequently, the Executive agreed to add an additional theme of Housing Improvement and Recovery to the Council's wider Improvement and Recovery Plan.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the aims and content of the Housing Improvement Programme and to provide an opportunity to scrutinise the actions being taken and progress made. The desired outcome is that through increased scrutiny and oversight, residents will benefit from an improved service and the risks around building safety will be reduced.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That the report be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers:	Housing Improvement Programme Highlight Report (July 2024) Housing Compliance KPIs Regulatory Notice (December 2023): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-borough-council/regulatory-notice-working-borough-council-14-december-2023
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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Due to the need for significant improvements to the housing stock and service to meet the required standards, officers self-referred to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) in July 2023. RSH is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the then Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities [Regulator of Social Housing - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk). Since the self-referral, officers have engaged regularly with the Regulator and plans were initiated to work on the required improvements.
- 1.2 Following the self-referral, the Regulator for Social Housing issued the Council with a regulatory notice on 14 December 2023 for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety. The notice stated that the council did not have effective systems in place to manage its health and safety responsibilities, specifically the timely resolution of fire safety remedial actions and compliance with new carbon monoxide and smoke detector installation regulations.
- 1.3 Following statutory government intervention and the issuing of a Section 114 Notice, the Council had established an Improvement and Recovery Plan. In response to the Regulatory Notice, the Executive approved a fifth theme to focus on Housing recovery and improvement.
- 1.4 The objective of the Housing Recovery and Improvement theme is to ensure the service is compliant with all the housing regulatory standards, delivering an efficient, reliable, and modern service that meets our statutory requirements, and supports strong neighbourhoods and communities for our residents.

2.0 Purpose and Outcome

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview to the Committee of the aims and content of the Housing Improvement Programme and to provide an opportunity to scrutinise the actions being taken and progress made.
- 2.2 The desired outcome is that through increased scrutiny and oversight, residents will benefit from an improved service and the risks around building safety will be reduced.

3.0 Background and Process

- 3.1 The initial focus of this theme has been establishing the programme, engaging external support, and project planning. The programme is made up of seven workstreams:
 - Homes and Safety
 - Finance
 - Tenants and Communities
 - Data and Insights
 - Resident Engagement and Consultation
 - Tools and Ways of Working
 - Staff and Developing Culture
- 3.2 A Housing Improvement Programme Board has been established, which is chaired by the Strategic Director – Communities and attended by workstream leads and the lead commissioner for the Housing Improvement Programme, Mervyn Greer. The first programme board was held in February 2024 with meetings held monthly.
- 3.3 Highlight reports are presented monthly to the Council's Improvement and Recovery Board. The two workstreams of most significance for Improvement and Recovery Board oversight are Homes and safety, following referral to the regulator, and Finance, due to the importance of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) in whole Council budget setting.

4.0 Progress Update

- 4.1 Understandably, programme delivery so far has prioritised the highest risk area of building safety as part of the '**Homes and Safety**' workstream. Many projects in this workstream have seen good progress, with the status having moved from Red to Amber since the programme launched.
- 4.2 There has been a particular focus and progress on remedial actions highlighted in the Fire Risk Assessments (FRA). The Council has one contractor underway with remedial works at the Council's sheltered housing schemes and 25 general needs blocks. A number of housing management actions to reduce fire safety hazards have also been completed. The Council has appointed Bailey Partnership to project manage and quality assure the fire safety remedial works, including the procurement of contractors to complete the remaining remedial works.
- 4.3 A new compliance system, C365, is currently being rolled out to track completion of fire safety actions and potentially other areas of compliance. This is necessary to ensure that delivery of fire safety actions is auditable and assurance data can be provided. An overall review of all areas of compliance is currently being undertaken by Ark Consultancy.
- 4.4 A programme of Decent Homes work is underway for 2024/25. A 100% stock condition survey has been commissioned from Ridge and Partners, which is anticipated to be complete by December 2024. This will give the Council more up-to-date and robust data on the future investment needs of its housing stock and associated cost, which will support longer-term planning.
- 4.5 The '**Finance**' workstream has set a balanced HRA budget for 2024/25. Consultants, Housing Finance Associates Ltd, have been appointed to support the development of the 30-year HRA business plan, with the initial modelling results almost complete. The HRA remains in a precarious position with limited reserves and a significant overspend already emerging in 2024/25. The business plan will need to be stress-tested to ascertain the long-term financial viability and affordability of the HRA.
- 4.6 As part of the '**Resident Engagement and Consultation**' workstream, the focus has been on undertaking the tenant satisfaction survey to support the submission of Tenant Satisfaction Measures (covered elsewhere on the agenda). A Resident Engagement Team Leader has been appointed and has made good progress in implementing a new Complaints Procedure, undertaking a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and arranging mandatory complaints handling training to all housing staff. A series of drop-in events are planned out in the community over the summer to inform the development of Resident Engagement Strategy.
- 4.7 The '**Tenants and Communities**' workstream has been impacted by challenges in terms of staffing vacancies. Nevertheless, there has been some improvement in terms of rent collection and void turnaround times. It is hoped that there will be further improvement once a stable team is in place. A review has been undertaken to identify and prioritise the policies and procedures that need to be refreshed and this work is planned over the next 6-9 months. A detailed review of service delivery against regulatory standards is planned over the coming months. A review against the rent standard has been completed with work underway on developing a Rent Setting Policy and undertaking a data cleansing exercise to ensure tenants have not been overcharged.
- 4.8 The '**Data and insights**' and '**Tools and Ways of working**' workstreams have to date focused on the compilation of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures and commissioning the implementation of the Capita housing IT system upgrade and C365 compliance system. The Capita upgrade work has progressed more slowly than desired, partially due to contractual challenges, but there is now a plan in place to improve the pace. The work requires a review of existing data and processes in order to ensure the new system meets current needs. Work has begun on developing a performance dashboard and benchmarking with peers via Housemark. There is

an increased focus on performance reporting within the service to support service delivery and meet regulatory standards.

- 4.9 The '**Staffing and Culture**' workstream has focused on building engagement with staff on where they want the service to be in the next year. Monthly all housing staff meetings are now occurring Agreed approaches to next steps with management team, which breakout sessions held around "Communications and Engagement" and "Positivity and Morale". These meetings have also been used to get wider input to action planning around the TSMs. A key focus will be to involve staff from different levels and parts of the service to support development of new policies and procedures.
- 4.10 The full highlight report for the Housing Improvement Programme for July 2024 is included as Appendix 1 to this report.

5.0 Regulator Engagement

- 5.1 Since the Regulatory Notice was issued, senior officers have been meeting monthly with the Regulator of Social Housing. The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Chief Executive and Lead Commissioner for the Housing theme have also each attended one meeting.
- 5.2 Engagement with the regulator has focused on ensuring that action is being taken to address the failures identified in the notice, particularly around fire safety. The Regulator is also seeking to understand the root causes for previous failures and the improvements in resourcing, processes and systems that will prevent them occurring again.
- 5.3 Each month, officers provide the Regulator with an update on progress in completing the fire safety actions (covered elsewhere on this agenda), monthly key performance information on compliance (June 2024 figures included as Appendix 2 this report) and the monthly highlight report.

6.0 Implications

Legal

- 6.1 None arising from this report.

Resources (including finance)

- 6.2 None arising from this report.

Risk (Corporate Governance)

- 6.3 The risks associated with delivering the Housing Improvement Programme are monitored monthly through the board with the 'top 5' risks reported to the Improvement and Recovery Board.
- 6.4 A risk-based approach has also been used to prioritise the focus of resource and activity across and within workstreams.

Scrutiny

- 6.5 This report provides an opportunity to scrutinise the actions being taken and progress made to improve the housing service.

Decision Scope

6.6 The Committee is invited to note the approach and content of the Housing Improvement Programme and to scrutinise the actions being taken and progress made to improve the housing service.

7.0 Engagement and Consultation

7.1 This programme includes a workstream for Resident Engagement and Consultation as described above.

7.2 The results of the recent Tenant Satisfaction Survey will be used as a baseline for measuring the effectiveness of the programme, with surveys to be conducted annually.

7.3 The Resident and Landlord Panel also receives regular verbal updates on the programme.

REPORT ENDS