

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 15 September 2020

Report by: Head of Housing and Health

Report title: Enhancing the Council's working arrangements with Registered Providers – Report of the Social Housing Task and Finish Group

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary

- This report makes a series of recommendations for how East Herts Council can enhance the way it works with local registered providers of affordable housing to maximise the quality of housing services for those wishing or needing to rent or buy an affordable home or who are already an affordable housing tenant in East Herts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE that:

- (A) the recommendations for how the Council can enhance its working arrangements with registered providers, presented at paragraph 2.6, be recommended to the Executive;**
- (B) a recommendation be made to the Executive that the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods works with the Head of Housing and Health to implement the recommendations before the end of 2021/22;**
- (C) should the Executive approve the Overview and Scrutiny committee's recommended actions, the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods be invited to report on progress to**

the Overview and Scrutiny committee towards the end of 2021/22.

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 This report proposes a detailed set of actions which the Social Housing Task and Finish Group believes would enhance the working arrangements between the council and registered providers. The report recommends that these actions are presented to the Executive for adoption and implementation by the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods within the coming financial year.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 At its meeting of 5th November 2019 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to establish a Social Housing Task and Finish Group to investigate how the council and elected members could enhance the working arrangements between the council and registered providers (RPs), support tenants and help improve service standards in the sector. The Committee's decision to focus on this area was, in part, informed by feedback from tenants of RPs (often referred to as housing associations) about a variety of issues that concerned them.
- 2.2 At the same Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting Councillors John Wylie, Norma Symonds, Mary Brady and Mione Goldspink were selected to serve on the Task and Finish Group. Councillor Norma Symonds was subsequently nominated to chair the Task and Finish Group.
- 2.3 It is worth noting that there are some 16 RPs operating in East Herts with, between them, just over 8,000 general needs, sheltered and supported rented homes and shared ownership properties in the district. See **Appendix A** for the full list of RPs operating in East Herts.

2.4 Coming together on 19th December 2019, the members of the Task and Finish Group agreed the following approach:

Overall aims

- Investigate RPs' views of working with East Herts by inviting at least two RPs, most likely the largest in the district, Network and Clarion, to meet members of the Social Housing Task and Finish Group to talk through issues.
- Investigate how the council and elected members could support tenants and prospective tenants and improve service standards.
- Hear at first hand the views of tenants of the two largest RPs in East Herts, that is, Network and Clarion.

2.5 Although subsequently impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic, the Task and Finish Group was able to meet face-to-face with four tenants from Network and Clarion on 10th March 2020, face-to-face with a senior Officer from Network Homes on 16th March 2020 and via video conference with senior Officers of Clarion Housing on 25th June and 30th June 2020. The Head of Housing and Health or Service Manager – Housing Services attended each meeting. The notes from these sessions could be found at **Appendices B to D** respectively.

2.6 The aims of the Task and Finish Group were not, of course, to simply scrutinise these two RPs' activities, rather the purpose was to establish a series of recommendations with broader relevance to enhancing how the council works with all RPs in the district. Thus, the following recommendations have been formulated:

Rec 1 That council Officers and registered providers make it easier for elected members to understand key registered provider policies and raise issues directly with the registered providers

- 1.a That each registered provider be asked to provide a dedicated e-mail address for elected members to use to directly raise issues.
- 1.b That East Herts Council Officers work with their registered provider counterparts to draw up a short briefing note for members on the options available to registered providers to take to tackle anti-social behaviour perpetrated by their tenants or tenants' household members or visitors.

Rec 2 That dialogue between the council and registered providers is maximised to promote high standards of management and development

- 2.a That East Herts Council reinstates regular Housing Forum meetings to cover both housing management and housing development matters.
- 2.b That East Herts Council works with registered providers on maximising the environmental sustainability of registered providers' existing and new homes.

Rec 3 That the process of bidding for and moving into a new registered provider home is made as straightforward as possible

- 3.a That registered providers be asked to commit to reviewing the process of advertising the first lets of their new build homes through East Herts Council's choice-based lettings system so as to minimise the time between advertising the property and it becoming ready to move into.
- 3.b That East Herts Council encourages all registered providers operating in the district to provide a 'welcome pack' for incoming tenants and carry out at least one follow-up 'settling in' visit to discuss key policies, local amenities and the like.

Rec 4 Housing and Planning Officers to review how the Housing service's in-depth knowledge of affordable housing need can be most effectively shared with developers at the pre-application stage to maximise the delivery of the size, type and tenure of affordable homes that are most needed locally.

- 2.7 It is proposed that these recommendations are presented to the Executive with an accompanying recommendation that the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods works with the Head of Housing and Health to incorporate these items into the Housing Service's action plan for implementation in the remainder of 2020/21 and 2021/22.
- 2.8 It is further proposed that a recommendation is made that the Executive for Neighbourhoods being invited to attend a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny committee towards the end of 2021/22 to report back on progress in implementing the recommendations.
- 2.9 It is worth noting that as Appendices C – E show, the meeting with tenants and RP Officers elicited a number of extremely useful issues and actions specifically regarding how Network and Clarion operate which council Officers are following up separately with each RP.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 The over-riding purpose of establishing the Social Housing Task and Finish Group was to enable representatives of the Overview and Scrutiny committee to gain an insight into the working relationships between RPs and the council with the explicit aim of identifying how the council and elected members could support tenants and prospective tenants and improve the service standards they experience.
- 3.2 A series of detailed recommendations to meet these aims arising from members discussions with tenants and RP

Officers is presented in this report.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 Note the points raised during the Task and Finish Group's investigation but not make any recommendations for action. NOT RECOMMENDED as members of the Task and Finish Group were tasked with identifying ways of improving services and working arrangements and have identified a detailed set of proposals to put to the Executive which it is believed will make a positive difference to tenants' and prospective tenants' experience.
- 4.2 Focus exclusively on the operational matters regarding Network Homes and Clarion Housing identified during the investigation. NOT RECOMMENDED as while these important matters can be followed up during the regular liaison meetings between council and RP Officers, choosing not to make broader recommendations applicable to the wider body of RPs operating in East Herts would represent a missed opportunity to make a tangible difference to how the sector operates in the district.
- 4.3 Make a series of recommendations to be put to the Executive. RECOMMENDED as this the appropriate route for seeking to secure that the findings of the Task and Finish Group are approved and actioned by the Executive.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 There could be a reputational risk should the Overview and Scrutiny committee having conducted a detailed investigation drawing on the time and input of both RP tenants and Officers chooses not to recommend any actions for the Executive based on any of the issues identified.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 All members of the Task and Finish Group have been actively involved in the investigation and approval of recommendations being made on the basis of their findings.

Community Safety

Yes – a key recommendation is that East Herts Council Officers work with their registered provider counterparts to draw up a short briefing note for members on the options available to registered providers to take to tackle anti-social behaviour perpetrated by their tenants or tenants' household members or visitors. It is believed that attempts to minimise anti-social behaviour will have positive impacts on community safety.

Data Protection

No – no personal information has been processed as part of this investigation.

Equalities

Yes – any actions taken by the council or registered providers will be subject to the relevant organisation's equalities duties and policies. Of note, when East Herts Council works with registered providers operating in the district to encourage them to provide a 'welcome pack' for incoming tenants and carry out at least one follow-up 'settling in' visit to discuss key policies and local amenities, the council will emphasise the need to ensure that such information is made available in formats, and visits carried out in ways, that pay due respect to ensuring those with protected characteristics can access the information and support provided.

Environmental Sustainability

Yes – the recommendation that East Herts Council works with registered providers on maximising the environmental sustainability of registered providers' existing and new homes will further the council's climate change commitments and sustainability agenda.

Financial

No – acting on the recommendations in this report can be done within existing council budgets.

Health and Safety

None arising directly from this report.

Human Resources

None arising directly from this report.

Human Rights

None arising directly from this report.

Legal

None arising directly from this report.

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material,

Appendix A – list of RPs with properties in East Herts

Appendix B – notes of the Task and Finish Group’s meeting with RP tenants

Appendix C – notes of the Task and Finish Group’s meeting with a senior Officer from Network Homes

Appendix D – notes of the Task and Finish Group’s meeting with senior Officers from Clarion Housing

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