

Appendix A

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH GROUP HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON WEDNESDAY 29 OCTOBER 2025, AT 3.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor S Nicholls (Chair), Councillors R Carter, S Marlow, and M Swainston

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Katherine Gilcreest - Housing Lead

1. APOLOGIES: None

2. Purpose of group and OCS agreed work programme

The Chair opened the Task & Finish Group by outlining the work programme agreed by OSC and the purpose of this work.

The Task and Finish Group discussed issues they were aware of where communication issues had led to reduced customer experience and the purpose of the group was to scrutinise how improvements could be made.

The Task and Finish Group discussed the scope of the review and discussed the partners who could provide insight into their experience and the benefit this would offer.

3. Analysis report of Housing Association responses

Katherine Gilcreest (KG) presented a report to the group outlining the response from the survey sent to registered providers about their current communication methods. The response rate to the survey was low but this was due to the methodology which only contacted organisations via the contact methods advertised on their websites. The group reviewed the survey and agreed the following:

Action/s:

KG to amend the survey to provide only yes or no options to questions 9 and 12 and include an additional question about the role of elected members

KG to re-circulate survey using the local contacts for organisations to increase response rate

KG to provide Task and Finish Group with a map at Ward level showing the Register Providers

4. Suggested expert witnesses

The group discussed who could provide information to the group to inform recommendations. The following agencies were highlighted as those who the Task & Finish Group would like to present information about current processes, areas of good practice and areas for improvement:

Environmental Health

Citizens Advice

Housing Regulator

Community Safety

1 large housing provider (proposed SNG)

2 smaller housing providers (Braughing Housing Association Limited and English Rural Housing Association Limited)

Action/s:

KG to contact the above and programme in for the following 2 meetings.

5. Dates of future meetings

Dates for the future Task and Finish Group meetings were agreed.

These were agreed as:

17 November, 3.00pm

4 December, 3.00pm

6 January, 3.00pm

The group agreed the meetings were preferable in person and should be in Wallfields.

Action/s:

KG to send invites to those organisations listed under item 4 for meetings scheduled in November and December with the January meeting held for the group to agree recommendations taken from the information presented.

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH GROUP
MEETING ROOM 1.15, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON WEDNESDAY
17 NOVEMBER 2025, AT 3.00 PM**

PRESENT: Councillor S Nicholls (Chair) Councillors R Carter, S Marlow, and M Swainston

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Katherine Gilcreest - Housing Lead

1. Apologies

There were no apologies

2. Update on approaches to partners and consider changes to programme

Katherine provided an update. Agreed to extend the time of the meeting on the 4 December to start at 2.00pm to enable more witnesses to attend

3. Expert witness- Environmental Heath

Witness was Nanci Pomfrett, Environmental Health Officer who works on residential properties. Nanci began by giving an overview of the approaches well from a communications point of view. Gave the example of SNG, who have a nominated email box for environmental health notices. Where this isn't in place it will depend on those involved. Communication can be difficult when there is a change in staff or when it is an organisation that is not regularly worked with.

Nanci also said when her team get updates on cases this was really helpful. Most of her work is with surveyors and this could vary depending on the surveyor and their relationship. Nanci talked about her relationship with Clarion and this approach worked well in this model.

Cllr Nicholls asked about Ombudsman service. Nanci advised that they do not have much contact with the Ombudsman and they will tend to deal with providers direct.

Cllr Carter asked if private landlords in East Herts tend to be big or small? Nanci responded they are largely smaller landlords with 1 or 2 properties

Cllr Marlow asked about staff workloads and asked how quickly Environmental Health can get into properties. Nanci advised that this can depend on workloads but the key issue was on the speed of response from the landlord. They will always try to get in as quickly as possible.

Cllr Nicholls asked how big an issue is communication with providers? Nanci advised that most cases are Clarion and SNG due to their stock numbers and the age of their stock due to the stock transfer from the Council to them but they have strong relationships with both. Nanci also highlighted that Environmental Health are more likely to go down the enforcement route with RSLs as they are large organisations. Nanci advised it is common for the response to be about how the tenant is using the property. It was agreed that clearer instructions to tenants and landlords will help. This will be done through the website initially and then the advice can be promoted once website is updated.

Cllr Marlow asked about how Environmental Health see their relationship with housing providers, is this an enforcement role or more of teamwork? Nanci advised this can vary, but once there is a relationship it tends to evolve into a teamwork position. Ultimately it is about achieving a safe outcome for the tenant.

Cllr Carter asked about tracking of cases and how this is done. Nanci advised she would provide her case number to the housing provider and ask for their details and record these. Effectively both the housing provider and environmental health would have a case which each would track.

Cllr Nicholls asked what powers Environmental Health have to enforce things like Category 1 hazards. Nanci advised they most commonly use improvement notices as these are an effective way to get issues resolved. They can also use works in default, but these are rarely, if ever required. The most common Cat.1 hazards are damp and mould but the scale of the issues that are witnessed in the district are not the level of issues seen in the media in other areas.

There was a discussion about Section 21 Notices, as the Government has now announced the timetable for the Renters Rights reforms. These can be served up to 1 May 2026. There was a discussion about retaliatory evictions and whether the changes to legislation will have an impact on this. It was confirmed this is new legislation and staff were being trained. Members briefings on Renters Rights will be delivered in the New Year.

Members asked if they should be coming to Environmental Health before a direct approach to a housing provider. Nanci confirmed this would be helpful as they would have the information about what the landlord is doing and should be doing and will be able to offer advice about next steps

Cllr Swainston asked if Members can have some positive impact- as this has been effective with new developments in Stortford Fields where Member involvement has prompted improvements for residents. It was agreed by Nanci that Members can play an important role in advocating for residents and ensuring they get a good service.

Nanci advised that communication causes issue for advocates more generally. Professional's enquiries in-box which could include members are not routine, but where organisations have these, it makes it much easier.

There was a discussion about Members Enquiries work at the moment. It was discussed that Infreemation is helpful but it sometimes Members want to make a pre-enquiry of a service to see if a case is known and

the best approach. Nanci agreed to provide the Environmental Health email address so enquiries about whether cases are known can be directed here and then on response Members can decide if they need to log a Members enquiry.

Action: Nanci to circulate the EH general email (complete)
The in-box for Environmental Health is
Environmental.Health@eastherts.gov.uk

Members identified that a Providers Map would be useful, as it is not always clear who a specific property is owned by and residents do not always know who their landlord is.

Action: Creation of a provider's map
Cllr Carter asked about hoarding. Nanci advised they would use the Public Health Act. Mainly these are privately owned properties. These take a long time and lots of work needs to take place to build confidence. Use Public Health Act to remove the filthy waste. Mental Health issue. Often use the fire brigade as this builds trust. Cllr Marlowe mentioned there was previously a Hoarding Forum which was really useful but fell away and the only way to get support for complex cases. Katherine asked Nanci about Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM run by Hertfordshire CC) and Environmental Health links to this. EH not currently linked to this process, so this could be an area to be explored to ensure there is a partnership approach around complex cases which include hoarding. This is called a Team Around Me (TAM) approach and information about this can be found at [Making Every Adult Matter Approach and Team Around Me Guidance | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

4. Any other business

No further business

5. Close

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH GROUP
MEETING ROOM 1.15, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON 4 DECEMBER
2025, AT 3.00 PM**

PRESENT: Councillor S Nicholls (Chair) Councillors R Carter, S Marlow, and M Swainston

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Katherine Gilcreest - Housing, Julie Promfrett- Community Safety & ASB Manger, Katie Lewis- ASB Officer, Nanci Promfrett- Environmental Health, Elizabeth Lill- SNG, Jonathan Munger- SNG, Jane Wilson- Citizens Advice

1. Apologies and Introductions

No apologies

Councillor Sue Nicholls explained the background to the Task & Finish Group and the aims of the group. Councillor Nicholls went through the terms of reference for the group and thanked those who were in attendance for their involvement.

2. Community Safety and Antisocial Behaviour

Julie Promfrett and Katie Lewis presented to the Task & Finish Group the strengths and challenges with current communications between residents, Members, housing association and the Council in terms of their service. These were provided in a written document. The team also provided their suggestions for improvements which were:

- When housing associations new to the area take over a housing scheme that they are asked to provide direct contacts. It was asked if this could be included as a requirement through the s106/nominations agreement process
- That there is clarity on timescales for the response to complaints and other key issues, to save contact regarding when a response will be received
- They can offer training to housing associations on the processes used in East Herts for resolving community safety issues and the support available. This would include the ASBAG process being communicated before there are issues
- A Teams Channel to provide this information and ask for advice

Councillor Sue Nicholls asked what the Community Safety team felt the role of Members is. The Community Safety Team replied that their view is to support and sign-post and make them aware as quickly as possible.

Members also asked what if anything can be included in formal agreements with registered providers about expectations about their engagement with council services. Katherine Gilcreest agreed to get some advice about this from Legal and Planning colleagues.

3. SNG

Elizabeth Lill and Jonathan Munger attended from SNG and provided information about how SNG were responding to the challenge of improving communications with residents, councils and Members. Their general approach is that while they are a national organisation they work on a neighbourhood level. Their presentation was circulated.

Members asked them what SNG saw as the key challenges to communications. SNG responded that there have been 5 key issues for them:

1. Restructure- moving to SNG means that they are now an organisation with over 80,000 homes and while this comes with massive benefits it can cause challenges in terms of

communication. SNG have an engagement model based on a localities structure and their office in Hertford means that largely the restructure has had as little impact as possible, but there have been issues with staff changes. The restructure is now complete though, so this is positive

2. Customers with complex needs- SNG are seeing a greater proportion of customers who have very complex needs and are aware that resources are limited across partners who are needed to support these customers, particularly mental health and adult social care services. This is having a knock-on impact on service delivery and the time taken to resolve cases and get customers the support they need
3. Court delays- there are long wait times which often causes customer frustration but outside of the control of the housing provider.
4. Repairs- SNG have recently changed their repairs and maintenance contractor and there has been a period of imbedding of the new processes. Weekly contract monitoring meetings have been taking place and performance is starting to improve, but this has caused issues. There are plans to use technology to enable tenants to raise, track and rate the repairs service which are not in place yet, but will see an improvement to resident experience when implemented.
5. Phone waiting times- there have been 5 new starters in the customer service team who are now trained and taking calls, which has had a positive impact on wait times. A further 6 new staff have been recruited and once trained will improve this further.

Members asked about the different contact methods customers use to contact SNG and SNG advised they can do this via phone, email, My Portal and they have a dedicated Complaints and Member Enquiry email. The Member email was shared which is MemberEnquiriesSNH@sng.org.uk It was acknowledged by officers that customer confidence is impacted by past experience.

Councillor Marlow asked about if SNG were using AI in their communications with residents? Jonathan advised that SNG are using a live chat facility in repairs to help triage reports, but most calls are chasing jobs which have already been raised. The live mapping of repairs is due to be delivered by contractors but not in place yet and this will help with this issue.

Councillor Carter asked about what would constitute a dementia friendly

approach for SNG and whether staff had received any specific training. Elizabeth responded that staff had received 'slipping through the net training' designed to identify, record and refer residents where there were concerns to specialist support.

Members also asked if SNG felt they had enough opportunities to promote good practice and learn from others. Elizabeth responded that they take part in many partnership meetings, but these are often focused on a single resident and more about case management. SNG would welcome this opportunity.

4. Housing Ombudsman and Regulator of Social Housing

Katherine Gilcreest explained that the Housing Ombudsman responded to complaints from customers about specific service delivery issues while the Regulator of Social Housing was responsible for the regulation of registered housing providers (register social landlords/housing associations) through an inspection and compliance regime at an organisational level.

The RSH provided some video links about their work and how they carryout their regulation function. The links to these are:

<https://youtu.be/cQLz3JnC2dA> what the RSH does

<https://youtu.be/vzmRVvNulyI> how to make a referral

The Housing Ombudsman also provided a video about their service and how they investigate complaints escalated to them when a customer feels their complaint has not been resolved to their satisfaction by the housing provider:

The Housing Ombudsman <https://youtu.be/cR7pnYt5eQs>

The Ombudsman also provided a presentation about research they completed which identified that communications were a key issue in around 68% of complaints investigated by the Ombudsman. This research also identified the areas organisations should consider when wanting to improve their communications with residents. This research has been shared.

The RSH and Ombudsman Service have provided a contact for the Task & Finish Group to raise any further questions they have about their work.

5. CAB

Councillor Sue Nicholls explained the terms of reference for the Task & Finish Group and that the group was looking at recommendations to improve communications for the benefit of residents

Jane Wilson from CAB advised that their key concern is communications with the Council and the call waiting time for housing providers. CAB have no dedicated advisor lines or methods of contact. Jane reported that CAB face a 7 week wait for email response from the council in response to enquiries and often face issues relating to requiring an authority to discuss. Many of the enquiries relate to benefit and council tax enquiries. CAB also face the challenge that call handlers can't answer the enquiry and need to pass this on. This is difficult when CAB have a client with them, and they are unable to provide advice as they can't do simple things like confirm benefit entitlement or council tax arrears. Jane also explained that CAB sees customers who are struggling with making on-line applications and the office not being open every day means they are unable to get the support they need. CAB have a positive relationship with Trinity Night Shelter though, which is positive. The action which would help the most would be an agreement that CAB could use conference call facility and join meetings with customers, so customers could give their authority in real time and issues were dealt with quickly.

Members were concerned about what they were hearing and felt more should be done to support CAB as they are a funded service and a vital service for lots of residents. It was discussed that the proposition about office space at Wallfields was currently under discussion and would improve communication greatly. It was also agreed that direct contacts would be shared with CAB for the most common areas of enquiries. It was also agreed Jane would share the email addresses CAB are currently using which have long response times, so discussions could be had within the council about how this could be improved. Councillor Nicholls advised that although council tax and housing benefit enquiries were outside of the remit of the Task & Finish Group these issues were important to resolve. It was also suggested that CAB could be invited to ASBAG to improve relationships and awareness of other organisations who can offer support to customers. There is also the upcoming Rents Rights coordination group which could be helpful in this regard and CAB had already been identified as a key partner- KG to explore these options with the Community Safety Team and Environmental Health Team who lead on these forums.

6. Any other business and next steps

Last meeting of the Task & Finish Group scheduled for Tuesday 6 January 3.30pm-5.00pm. Invite Jonathan Geall

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH GROUP

MEETING ROOM Lea Room, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON 6 JANUARY 2026, AT 3.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor S Nicholls (Chair) Councillors R Carter, S Marlow, and M Swainston

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Katherine Gilcreest - Housing

7. Apologies and Introductions

No apologies.

8. Terms of Reference

Councillor Sue Nicholls reviewed the terms of reference with the group, to ensure that any recommendations were in-line with the agreed remit.

9. Reflections from meetings

All agreed that it had been a worthwhile process and been enlightening. Speaking to officers and those who engaged has been interesting. Very surprising how many housing providers there were in East Herts, which brings challenges in terms of communications, differing processes and building relationships.

CAB raised issues with communication and relationship which were outside the scope of the review but important to resolve.

Discussion around seeking further information from providers who did not respond to the survey. Maybe providing a copy of the report to those who didn't engage. All agreed that this work should be part of an on-going conversation.

Councillor Marlow want to establish relationships with officers on the ground and to do this needed up to date contacts. The first recommendation should be a letter out to all providers again requesting how members can contact to resolve case work and resident enquiries and to build positive working relationships.

Councillor Nicholls wanted to ensure the expectations around clear communications were part of contracts and formal agreements with providers. Councillor Nicholls also wanted to have expectations around vulnerable people and the forecasting of future issues

Councillor Carter raised the issue of mapping and that it is still challenging for members to know which provider is responsible for a particular development or home. It would be helpful to use technology to map where providers have stock and link to providers contact details and information, which would be a good way to limit the need of constant review of contact information.

10. Recommendations for OSC

The Chair of the group highlighted all the recommendations made through the previous meetings. These included:

1. Make members aware of the Ombudsman service and information available regarding complaints service to assist dealing with intractable issues
2. Contact all providers to establish a named neighbourhood contact for officers, members and key partners
3. A training offer to registered providers about East Herts processes and procedures so providers can use the support of members, council officers and partners to support residents and resolve issues. A key example of this is the Antisocial Behaviour Action Group which is well used by many housing providers to coordinate work around community issues but often participation is in response to an issue, which limits the opportunity for preventative work

4. That steps to improve communication are included in formal agreements with providers new to East Herts so there are clear expectations about who providers should engage with from the start
5. Engagement with developers so it is clear as early as possible who is likely to be managing new developments, so relationships can be developed
6. Encourage register provider involvement in multi-agency meetings, even if they have no current cases. Examples of these included the Antisocial Behaviour Action Group where understanding the process can help identify preventative and proactive work. There should also be groups where providers can be involved which are not case specific, like the Renters Rights Coordination Group, and the promotion/use of groups like this could help to strengthen relationships and encourage joint work
7. The member and registered provider meetings with Clarion and SNG are welcome mechanisms to work through issues and share updates, but it is unlikely to be practical to do this with all providers operating in East Herts at a Council level. Suggestion of developing a newsletter for registered providers with useful information about others working in East Herts (including ward members) and publicising methods of engagement and relationship building
8. There are many different contact lists for registered providers held across council teams, depending on the service area. This means that officers are often contacted by other officers asking for a contact. One spreadsheet about property ownership in East Herts held on Teams which officers can access would reduce unnecessary contact and escalation
9. Improve the current housing association contact list held on the East Herts website to make this more user friendly for residents and members. Develop an online mapping tool showing where estates are owned by specific registered providers, linking to their websites so contact details remain current
10. Share findings and report with all housing providers so there is a understand of the issues
11. Communication to residents so they are aware that this issue has been highlighted as one of importance to members and to publicise the steps being proposed to improve communication
12. Provide clear guidance on tenant's rights on the East Herts website, particularly considering the changes due to the Renters Rights Act. Changes to the website are in train due to Renters Right already and changes to make the website more user friendly

were endorsed by the task and finish group who would like to be involved in this work as it develops

It was recognised by the Task & Finish Group that it was necessary to improve communication processes between Citizen's Advice and the council. Communications had become largely via email which was difficult in terms of responsiveness and did not result in the good working relationship which was desired. Suggestions included council staff attending sites to meet jointly, use of joint conference calls with residents, colocation, the sharing of housing provider details, involving CAB in Renters Rights Coordination Group and ASBAG to improve communications and joint work. It was recognised that this issue was outside the scope of this review and therefore would be taken forward separately

It was recognised by the Task & Finish Group that improvements to communication would most likely be achieved by practical measures.

It was also recognised that all service providers need to consider those residents with additional needs who need reasonable adjustments. It was emphasised that a key role of Members is to advocate for residents, particularly those least able to support themselves. This can be achieved by providing advice to Members. In the area of Environmental Health for example it was advised to check with the team if a case was known/open to them before approaching a registered provider. The Task & Finish Group said that as members they would welcome training and clarification in terms of service areas which generate higher volumes of enquiries to aid them in their casework. The Chair provided an example of a service charge enquiry to a housing provider where intervention resulted in a reduction of that charge, but this approach was only due to having dealt with a similar issue the previous year. It would be positive to have a mechanism to share this learning.

The Task & Finish Group also discussed how internal communications between officers and members could be improved. There was discussion about if/when direct contact might be appropriate and the group suggested guidance on this. This was also felt to be outside of the remit of this review but wanted to raise the suggestion of a future review into the effectiveness of member enquiries processes to consider this.