

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Quality of housing provided by social landlords

Final report



Introduction

The Quality of Social Housing Properties has been raised by residents for a number of years and was identified as an important task group topic. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee wanted to engage with Registered Providers to understand their policies and procedures for Customer Service, Communication and Engagement, Property Maintenance and Standards, and Neighbourhood issues, whilst also respecting tenants' views on how these impacted upon them.

The Task Group was established in January 18 and met nine times between January 2018 and February 2019. This report details information about the witnesses with whom the Task Group met, the information the Task Group received including a commissioned tenants survey, and the conclusions that the Task Group reached. It also includes a list of recommendations that the Task Group wish to put forward to the Executive Cabinet for their consideration and implementation.

I would like to thank my fellow members of the Task Group for their dedication and contributions. I would also like to thank those Registered Providers and officers of the council who gave presentations and information at the meetings. Their contribution allowed the Task Group to gain a greater understanding of the topic, and this will ensure that Tenants feel respected and empower them to be valued members of the community.



Councillor Matthew Lynch - Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group

Recommendations

For Chorley Council

1. To run a Members Learning Session on housing issues at the beginning of each Municipal Year.
2. To promote the take up of Disabled Facilities Grants with RP's.
3. To lobby the Government for greater regulation of RP's.
4. For the following to be considered for inclusion within a new Chorley Good Homes Charter - a charter that RPs are encouraged to sign up to. The charter could include Customer Service, Property Maintenance and Standards Engagement and Communication, and Neighbourhoods.

Customer Service

5. Customer representation should be involved in the complaints process.
6. To provide a VIP mail service or a point of contact at a senior level to enable Councillors to represent their constituents on housing issues.
7. Dealing with complaints
 - a. Residents must be able to obtain high quality, timely and local responses to complaints that they raise.
 - b. To acknowledge letters within 5 working days and respond fully within 7 working days. If this is not possible to write to tell residents why and to let them know how long it is expected to take to respond fully.
 - c. To answer the phone within 20 seconds.
 - d. To respond within 1 working day to emails (this may be an automated acknowledgement).
 - e. There should be a clear, concise and user-friendly complaints procedure which is advertised on the website and available to all tenants.
 - f. Residents should have a nominated person to deal with an official complaint.
8. To undertake and publish annual satisfaction surveys from local residents and use this information to improve services.
9. The Council to be proactive in supporting residents in dealing with RP's.

Communication and engagement

10. To use all forms of communication, e.g. emails, website, apps, texts, newsletters, noticeboards and face to face.
11. Following consultation with residents for large- and small-scale investment information should be provided about planned maintenance 14 days in advance.
12. To create a resident's association for Chorley Borough and invite all Chorley RP's.
13. To establish a social sector housing forum for Chorley Borough and invite all Chorley RP's and Chorley Borough Councillors.
14. To provide a quarterly update to Members, including planned maintenance, updates and events etc.
15. To undertake walks of RP managed areas with ward Councillors, annually as a minimum.
16. To have available and promote to residents a Local Residents Engagement Strategy.

Property maintenance and standards

17. Properties should meet the Decent Homes Standard (or equivalent), which requires social properties to be free of hazards that pose a risk to residents, to be in a reasonable state of repair, to have reasonably modern facilities and services such as kitchens and bathrooms and efficient heating effective insulation and damp proofing. This should be monitored.
18. To have 60% of properties energy efficient in two years.
19. For non-emergency repairs a visit should be undertaken in 2 working days and completed within five working days and guaranteed for a year. This will be measured by a key performance indicator.
20. There should be a standard for emergency repairs, from point of report to fully completed repair should be completed within 2 days and guaranteed for a year.
21. To install smoke alarms on every storey, and carbon monoxide alarms in every room containing solid fuel burning and gas appliances.
22. The exterior of the properties should be included when considering health and safety responsibilities of RP's.
23. To decorate and undertake large scale maintenance when a property is void where possible, when a new kitchen, bathroom or boiler is required in the next year.
24. To endeavour to use locally based and appropriately qualified tradespeople where possible.

Neighbourhood issues

25. To demonstrate value for money and full transparency in relation to service charges, their administration and show how residents can be involved in what the service charge is spent on.
26. To be proactive in organising community sessions (these could include litter picks and community events) and encourage residents to take ownership of their properties and their community environment locally.
27. To increase parking provision for tenants where there is the greatest need, following consultation with residents.
28. To engage in a proactive and preventative approach to resolve issues and work with residents, partners and neighbourhoods to show the safety of the community is paramount.
29. To assist and support tenants to fulfil the obligations of their tenancy agreements, and where appropriate enforce tenancy agreements as a last resort.

For Registered Providers

30. To adopt the Chorley Good Homes Charter, following its creation by Chorley Council, to ensure consistency of housing services across the Borough.
31. To support the Youth Zone with the aim of reducing anti-social behaviour.

Membership of the Task Group

Councillor Matthew Lynch (Chair) (from May 18)

Councillor Jane Fitzsimons (Chair) (from January 18 to May 18)

Councillor Yvonne Hargreaves

Councillor Margaret Lees

Councillor June Molyneux

Councillor Alistair Morwood

Councillor Steve Murfitt

Councillor Mick Muncaster (until May 18)

Councillor Kim Snape

Officer Support

Fiona Hepburn, Housing Solutions Manager

Ruth Rimmington, Democratic and Member Services Team Leader

Scoping the review

The objectives were:

1. To work with Registered Providers to improve the quality of social housing and customer service in Chorley
2. To engage with tenants and consider their views of property standards
3. To share best practice across Chorley

The desired outcomes were:

1. To evidence the quality of social housing in Chorley
2. To work with Registered Providers to develop a Chorley Healthy Homes Charter – to encourage standards that are above the Decent Homes Standard
3. To work with Registered Providers to ensure excellent customer service
4. To make recommendations for improvements to the Executive Cabinet

Terms of Reference:

1. To understand the role and powers of the council in monitoring the quality of housing provided by social landlords
2. To establish if there are issues regarding the quality of social housing in Chorley

Witnesses

The following witnesses met with the task group and shared information:

Jane Hurley, Operations Manager - West, Places for People (PfP)

Richard Houghton, Director of Operations (CCH)

Scott Butterfield and James Mulvaney from in:fusion Research

Councillor Alistair Bradley, Executive Leader, Chorley Council

Gary Hall, Chief Executive, Chorley Council

Councillor Jane Fitzsimons, Executive Member Homes & Housing, Chorley Council

Chris Sinnott, Deputy Director and Director (Early Intervention and Support)

Evidence submitted by

The following witnesses submitted written evidence for the task group to consider:

Richard Houghton, Director of Operations (CCH)

Jane Hurley, Operations Manager - West, Places for People (PfP)

Joanne Danaher, Head of Neighbourhoods & Leasehold (Onward)

Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP

Chorley Help the Homeless

Background

In October 2017 it was agreed that a Task Group investigate this issue commencing in January 2018 with Councillor Jane Fitzsimons as the Chair. Councillor Fitzsimons became an Executive Member in May 2018 and so the Chair of the Task Group became Councillor Matthew Lynch.

Members had received complaints from residents about this topic, but there seemed to be inconsistencies in the cases reported and perception of acceptable standards. Members wished to evidence whether there are unacceptable standards in housing provided by social landlords and to make recommendations for improvements where appropriate.

Chorley Community Housing (CCH) and Places for People are the two largest landlords managing most of the social housing in borough.

The Council interacts regularly with the Registered Providers (RPs) in terms of securing new properties via the Select Move Choice based lettings scheme, Community Safety Partnership working, Planning and Community Engagement.

The Homes and Communities Agency, relaunched as Homes England, are the regulators of RPs. Their objective as social housing regulators is to work alongside RPs performing their functions in a way that minimises interference.

RPs are regulated to make sure that they're well managed and financially secure, to maintain confidence, protecting homes for tenants, however the council have limited information in terms of how this is enforced by Homes England or what powers, if any, they have when issues are reported.

There have been a number of changes introduced nationally which the RPs claim are impacting on their business models. In particular, the Welfare Reform changes which have been introduced over a number of years. RPs have seen an impact on the pattern of demand for properties and revenue streams seeing a reduction of 1% each year for four years which commences April 2016.

Decent Homes Standards

Members considered the Decent Homes Standards, although these are no longer in force. In 2000 the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions published its Housing Green Paper, Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All. It requested a step change in the quality of the stock and the performance of social landlords with a committed to ensuring that all social housing is of a decent standard within 10 years.

The Decent Homes Standard was a technical standard introduced by government which underpinned the Decent Homes Programme which aimed to provide a minimum standard of housing conditions for all those who are housed in the public sector. The standard evolved and the criteria against which 'decency' is measured were set early in the programme and changed in 2006 by the introduction of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) under the Housing Act 2004.

Absence of Category 1 hazards under the HHSRS became the test of criterion, replacing the previous statutory 'fitness' standard. The then government were of the opinion that the tough new statutory assessment of housing standards raised the bar to drive further housing improvements which also led to an increased number of homes that could be considered to contain hazards. This replaced any tangible standards measures which were seen in the decent homes standards.

For purpose of background information and understanding, the decent homes standards guidance which provided a framework for RPs to assess standards within their stock, are:

- The property should meet the HHSRS
- To be in a reasonable state of repair
- To have reasonably modern facilities and services
- To have efficient heating and effective insulation

Some examples of how properties can be deemed not a decent standard by an RP.

- Hazards in the home such as persistent damp or a heating or electrical system that is in poor condition. (This is based risk and the Council can undertake enforcement)
- Bathroom has not been improved in the last 30 years
- Kitchen has an inadequate layout or not enough space
- It isn't warm because of an inefficient heating system or ineffective insulation

Select Move choice-based lettings system

Members discussed the Select Move choice-based lettings system and noted that the system has operated in Chorley from March 2011. It includes RPs from Chorley, namely Accent, CCH, New Progress, Contour, and Places for People. The scheme operates a single waiting list and advertising and letting of at least 75% of their void housing stock on the system. One of the main priorities for the Council over a number of years has been to ensure a significant proportion of social housing continues to be available and is accessed for those applicants in housing need with a local connection to Chorley. The relationship with the RPs is through the Select Move Steering Group governed by a memorandum of understanding which has been instrumental in maintaining a decent level of percentages of properties to continue to be advertised to those in need.

Although the Council work regularly with RPs in regard to allocations and community involvement, it has limited knowledge of the full extent of the standards within Chorley, good or bad. This is due to level of involvement from the Council when new tenants are signed up. The Councils Housing Options Team's priorities have been to secure properties for people in need with a local connection, so they view allocations as a success and do very little follow up on move in, which is mainly due to resources.

Regulatory Services

The Council will be involved with property standards or take action if a property is deemed to have risk that contravenes the HHSRS. This can be frustrating for tenants as issues that were brought to the attention of the housing team can be on cleanliness and décor, so no real access to challenge.

In 2017 Regulatory Services (RS) received 23 housing standards complaints relating to RP properties (2 were about the same issue affecting adjoining properties). 10 properties were visited, the others were dealt with by contacting the tenant and the RP (usually this is where the tenant is not satisfied with the timescale for repairs provided), and RS will confirm the repairs are on schedule and close the case.

In January 18, RS served notice on CCH regarding pests at 2 properties. They had 13 complaints in 2016 and 7 in 2015 logged on council systems, however this will not include any call backs that were dealt with straight away and not inputted on IT systems. RS figures give a very limited view of standards as the threshold is high to trigger a case and it does not reflect complaints or enquires made direct to the RP.

Tenant Survey

Members agreed to undertake a survey of a random sample of 4,000 tenants of the five Registered Providers with the most properties in Chorley: CCH, Places for People, Accent, Contour and New Progress. This included smaller estates within Chorley.

The survey included questions on the following themes:

1. Customer Service
2. Property Maintenance and Standards
3. Engagement and Communication
4. Neighbourhood
5. Future Property Needs

Member Survey

Members of the Council gave feedback on their casework relating to social housing. The types of query are predominantly property maintenance and standards related. Most Members who responded advised that the number of complaints has stayed about the same in the last three years. In relation to relationships with Registered Providers Members gave varied responses, the majority highlighting that the quality of provision varies from area to area across the borough.

Interviews

The Task Group interviewed Jayne Hurley (Places for People) and Richard Houghton (Chorley Community Housing).

One RP has undertaken a survey of all of their properties. The Group has taken this as a positive step and notes that it is up to RPs to achieve an acceptable standard for their properties.

Tenant Survey results

The survey was posted to 4,000 tenants, with an option to respond online. The survey represents around two thirds of the properties owned by Registered Providers. The survey ran for a four-week period commencing in May, with 731 responses in total (18.3%). This is considered a solid response rate for this type of survey.

The response rates per provider were:

20.5% Chorley Community Housing

15.9% Places for People

18.1% Accent

13.4% New Progress

12.1% Onward

Customer service

81.9% of tenants were satisfied with the initial speed of response with their RP.

72.1% of tenants were satisfied with the speed of progress/ resolution with their RP.

83.9% of tenants were satisfied with the helpfulness of staff at their RP.

79.5% of tenants were satisfied overall with how their contact is dealt with their RP.

The majority of the comments relate to maintenance.

“Whenever I need to report a repair, I am met with politeness and helpful advice to deal with any emergency”, “When you ring up about a repair it takes so long it can take up to a month before they come out and look at it. Then a couple of weeks before they do the job”.

Property standards and maintenance

72.9% of tenants were satisfied with the standard of their property when they moved in.

73.4% of tenants were satisfied with the general grounds maintenance and cleaning service for their communal areas.

77.8% of tenants were satisfied with the overall quality of their property.

75.8% of tenants were satisfied with the repairs and maintenance carried out on their property.

The majority of the comments relate to issues with repairs.

“Nothing has been replaced in my property in 13 years. The standards have slipped a lot”, “Although the quality of the build of the property was excellent. There was however some confusion over the snagging that needed doing - any that took place - that was of poor quality & not in line with the standard of the property. Poor finish on numerous things”.

Engagement and communication

72.7% of tenants agree that their RP keep them well informed about their services.

60.5% of tenants agree that their RP provides opportunities for them to have their say.

52.7% of tenants agree that their RP listens and acts on feedback.

The majority of comments relate to a lack of communication and complaints not having been dealt with.

“I would like our landlord to be more communicative and listen to tenants on what we need and improvements”, “They send out yearly information and I know I can contact them if I require any. I am happy with the service”.

There were comments relating to possible improvements.

“It can sometimes be hard to get hold of the housing association maybe text messaging service where you can text a concern or need would be better”,

“Many elderly are not computer or tech savvy. They need old-fashioned personal contact or contact by letter”, “Since we stopped having residents meetings I do not feel “in touch” with my landlord. Having lived here for so long my original agreement must be really outdate but I have never been offered an update”, “We used to get a newsletter every 3-4 months which had lots of information on it. But sadly we don't receive them anymore. I feel very strongly that communication within our housing association could be better much room for improvement”.

Neighbourhoods

85.0% of tenants agree that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.
88.6% of tenants agree that they feel safe in their neighbourhood during the day.
76.3% of tenants agree that they feel safe in their neighbourhood during the night.
66.0% of tenants agree that anti-social behaviour is dealt with in their neighbourhood.

The majority of comments relate to their area being a nice place to live.

“My neighbourhood is very good with the exception of just two sets of neighbours”, “Until recently it was a nice, friendly quiet neighbourhood”, “This neighbourhood is supposed to be for over 55 year old. Last year a person in her 40s got a flat and has become a nuisance with her attitude”.

Satisfaction with Registered Providers

84.4% Chorley Community Housing
70.9% Accent
67.2% Places for People

The majority of comments relate to satisfaction with maintenance and repairs.

“Service is excellent. Properties are maintained to a high standard but allowed to make your property your own personal space”, “Repairs are done but not within a reasonable timescale”, “Basically paying for services which we don't get! And management fees for nothing!”

Future property needs

81.1% of tenants agree that their property meets their needs overall.
83.5% Chorley Community Housing
77.1% Places for People
77.0% Accent

The majority of comments relate to looking for a new property elsewhere, in a quieter area or a different sized property. Elderly tenants have raised the issue of wanting a garden.

“Due to my age will probably need ground floor flat for my wife & I”, “Although we are happy with our flat and neighbours we would like to move into a bungalow with a small garden”, “I am content with my flat and hope to live here for many years”.

In conclusion, there are generally high levels of agreement throughout the survey results. Tenants would like to see maintenance and repairs completed quicker and older and disabled tenants were more likely to highlight requests to modifications to

their properties or a change of property to meet their needs.

The survey was sent to a random sample across the whole Borough and it is possible for further analysis to be undertaken to identify the geographical areas where respondents lived, and by age and length of tenancy.

Conclusion

The Council is ahead of the curve in terms of the aspirations of the Housing Green Paper and contributing to the aspirations of the Chorley Housing Company.

The Council has no powers to enforce change, but the Group has looked at working practices of RP's to gauge best practice and issues which need to be addressed on behalf of Chorley residents.

There have been a number of changes introduced nationally which the RPs claim are impacting on their business models. In particular, the Welfare Reform changes which have been introduced over a number of years.

RP's must recognise when a tenant is causing detriment to the community and be proactive with early intervention to resolve issues, although whilst the Council and RP's can fulfil their duties and obligations all tenants have a community responsibility to invest in their local community and environment.