

## Minutes of a meeting of the EAP Prosperous Communities

At 10.00 am on Wednesday 8th November, 2023 in the Council Chamber, The Cube, George Street, Corby NN17 1QG

### Present:-

#### Members

Councillor Matt Binley  
Councillor Mark Rowley  
Councillor Tim Allebone  
Councillor Lyn Buckingham

Councillor Graham Lawman  
Councillor Andy Mercer  
Councillor Elliot Prentice  
Councillor Malcolm Ward

#### Officers

Evonne Coleman-Thomas - Assistant Director, Strategic Housing, Development and Property Services

### 17 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from David Watts.

### 18 **Members' Declarations of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest received.

### 19 **Housing Services Update**

The Assistant Director for Strategic Housing, Development and Property Services, Evonne Coleman-Thomas attended the meeting and provided a presentation that offered the panel a wide-ranging update on Housing Services, including the following elements:

- Homelessness Prevention
- Housing/Tenancy Services
- Repairs and Maintenance
- Development and Enabling
- Housing Policy/Strategy

The panel were provided with details of the housing officers that supported the Assistant Director in her role and noted a variety of factors that impacted service provision. These included the need to be compliant with government legislation and additional regulations imposed in the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the ongoing cost of living crisis where any detrimental influence on the ability of the Council to maximise rental income directly affected its ability to operate the service.

The meeting heard that the Council wished to empower and enable its residents to take decisions and influence their housing service, and details were provided of the

newly introduced Regulator for Social Housing that aimed to promote a viable, efficient and well-governed sector that could deliver and maintain homes of appropriate quality meeting a range of needs. The Council was required to report and monitor a series of Key Performance Indicators to the regulator to ensure service quality.

In addition, the meeting noted an additional forthcoming requirement that would require all housing staff delivering the service to hold a professional qualification. This requirement was viewed positively in terms of increasing professionalism as well as aiding development of staff, however, it was noted that no additional funding had been provided by the government to allow for qualifications to be obtained.

In regard to homelessness, it was heard that there had been a huge increase in the number of people approaching the Council in this instance, with the Covid pandemic being a large factor in the increasing numbers. The authority had a duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act to provide advice, guidance and support even if there was no duty to house an individual.

In terms of Planning and Development it was noted that the Council aimed to utilise available legislation to build more affordable housing in appropriate area and hold to S106 agreements that required developers to deliver such housing.

A series of key statistics were provided to the meeting regarding the Council's housing stock, with over 8000 properties across Corby and Kettering most of which was post-war and therefore in need of modernisation and improvement to remain safe and liveable.

The meeting noted a total of 268 new tenancies issued in the first six months of 2023 which represented a 41% increase for the same period in the previous year. In regard to empty void properties, the current target for re-letting was 56 days, the service having reduced actual timescales from 62 days to a current average of 51.6 days.

The meeting heard that a backlog of over 5500 housing repairs that had accrued largely as a result of the pandemic had been reduced to a total of 2856 as at September with all responsive repairs completed, with only a very small number outside of the usual timescales.

Statistics for homelessness approaches were provided, with members noting the increase in trajectory and advised that a post-Christmas spike in numbers was almost certain. Additional legislation for "no fault" evictions would provide protection for tenants across the rental sector.

It was noted that the Council currently spent £150,000 a month on temporary accommodation, a figure it aimed to drastically reduce by developing its housing portfolio and using these additional properties to place families in need. A total of 30 properties had been purchased to date, with bids on a further 12 as a result of government funding specifically provided to support Afghan and Ukrainian refugee families. Once that programme had ended, it was planned to amalgamate these properties into the Council's housing stock.

The meeting noted that Right to Buy applications had an impact on housing stock as properties were lost to private ownership, however a drop-off in applications had been noted that was indicative of the position of the mortgage market and the cost-of-living crisis.

The panel was advised that the Council's target for rent collection was 97%, with this currently being exceeded, a strong performance in light of the financial pressures affecting tenants in the existing financial climate. The Council did all it could to support its tenants to stay in their tenancies, although it was noted there was a very small cohort where rent payments were not forthcoming and details were provided of current rent arrears, the target for which was 2.5%.

The Assistant Director provided the meeting with a list of her priorities going forward, these were:

- STAR survey – the first tenant survey since the Council came into existence with proscribed questions to understand how residents felt about the service
- Tenant Engagement – How engagement was delivered, using the value and knowledge of elected members regarding their residents
- Housing Restructure - Review the structure and roles of the housing service to ensure it was an agile, professional organization
- Strategy and Policies – To merge and align a number of legacy policies and adopt best practice while delivering key strategies.
- Development - Work to produce a viable and deliverable development pipeline of new properties

The meeting was then provided with the opportunity to ask questions of the Assistant Director for Strategic Housing, Development and Property Services.

Cllr Tim Allebone noted that there was balancing act to be undertaken between Right to Buy sales and the building of new Council properties and that the situation was not sustainable unless new properties were coming into the Council's housing stock. In response, the Assistant Director stated that there was an aim to utilise partner developments for new Council properties and to continue to hold S106 developers to account while querying empty properties in the private sector and their usage.

Cllr Graham Lawman queried the scheme to rent or lease empty properties from the private sector and how members could report these once they came to the attention of councillors. Cllr Lawman also queries where the Council was in the process of harmonisation of its two neighbourhood accounts, the average time taken to undertake the backlog of housing repairs. Cllr Lawman also queried whether there was an anticipated spike in the numbers involved in the scheme to house Afghan/Ukrainian refugees.

The Assistant Director responded to note that discussions had commenced regarding the possibility of Compulsory Purchase Orders being used to purchase empty private sector housing using capital funding and also the opportunity of obtaining grant funding for landlords to bring their properties up to standard. A piece of work was underway to identify and look at the circumstances of empty properties across North Northamptonshire. An Empty Homes Strategy was in the process of being developed cross-linked to the Housing Strategy. An increase in refugee numbers was expected, although additional funding to cover this from government was unknown at this stage. HRA harmonisation was an ongoing process, with a number of policy and ICT systems requiring alignment.

The Chair spoke to advise members that empty properties that came to their attention could be reported through the member enquiry system. A total of 1200 properties had already been identified as empty.

Cllr Andy Mercer queried the methods employed by the Council in recovery of rent arrears and sought assurance that there was a sequence of escalation in place. Cllr Mercer also referred to “cuckooing” where vulnerable people were exploited by criminals who used their properties as a base to commit offences and sought information regarding Council policies to detect and deal with this issue. Cllr Mercer also queried whether that Council had any mechanism to influence Housing Associations in tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) in their properties.

In response, the Assistant Director stated that the rent arrears procedure was due to be reviewed and realigned and provided assurance that there was a scheme of escalation and support offered to tenants with eviction of tenants as a very last resort. Regarding cuckooing, two cases had been identified in the Council area and in both cases the vulnerable person had been removed and the Council had taken back possession of the property. Adult Social Care were often involved as there may be safeguarding issues involved. In relation to the query regarding ASB, it was heard that the Council had little influence over landlords and Housing Associations regarding such behaviours in their properties. In severe cases the Council could seek injunctions, but realistically powers lay with police and environmental wardens.

Cllr Matt Binley provided clarification for the processes regarding ASB and the involvement of the private sector housing team.

Cllr Lyn Buckingham spoke to query whether emergency responses for repairs had reduced and whether the figures included boiler breakdowns. Cllr Buckingham raised an issue regarding a lack of support for people in temporary accommodation including, arrears, possessions storage and travel issues. Cllr Buckingham also raised utilisation of the skills of strategic partnerships and the Social Housing Charter to look at range of solutions to housing problems.

The Assistant Director responded to Cllr Buckingham by noting that the emergency repairs covered a wide range of issues, but all had been completed and there had been no increase in figures. Gas certification was referenced and further work on the repairs would be undertaken. In terms of Temporary Accommodation (TA), there were residents in crisis at the time of accommodation, preventative work was needed to stop people becoming homeless initially. An intensive housing support model would be developed to provide support to tenants and those in TA. Once the housing structure was in place, additional work with strategic partnerships could be undertaken.

Cllr Malcolm Ward queried the tenant engagement policy and tenancy survey and queried whether any other work would be taken in this regard.

The Assistant Director noted that a lot of Council tenants engaged with the authority when they had a problem, but there should not be an assumption that because they had not made contact there were no issues. A menu of engagement options was required, with more engagement officers required with such engagement being the responsibility of the whole housing team.

Cllr Mercer then spoke to query whether there were any plans to add housing to the Council's stock outside of Corby and Kettering areas. Cllr Mercer also questioned whether any work had been undertaken to assess the viability of housing developments to challenge assessments by developers that schemes with affordable housing sect as part of the planning permission were not viable.

The final question to the Assistant Director was the Council's duty to house an individual it had evicted, particularly in relation to ASB and how to ensure such a position did not arise.

The Assistant Director noted that the Council recognised the whole North Northamptonshire area when looking at purchasing and development of new properties. In terms of S106 agreements, the Council had powers to push back against developer's assertions regarding levels of affordable homes on their developments, with more joint working between Housing and Planning teams on the matter. Should a resident be evicted, the Council had a duty to investigate the claim and the circumstance of having lost the last secure accommodation. The legislation allowed the Council to make a decision regarding intentionality, with no duty to rehouse should the eviction have been demonstrably caused as result of a tenant's behaviour.

Cllr Graham Lawman noted the Council had options of moving housing stock to a registered provider or arms-length management organisation to improve the quality of housing stock and residents' lives and asked whether this would be considered in future. The Chair noted that this could form the basis of a future EAP agenda item.

Cllr Elliot Prentice queried numbers of tenants evicted from Council properties and whether there was a timescale involved before they became eligible for further housing assistance.

The Assistant Director noted low number of tenants evicted and stated that guidance and support was offered to all those approaching the Council for assistance.

Cllr Buckingham queried the incoming dog ban, specifically with reference to XL Bully dogs. Cllr Buckingham also noted the impact on budgets as a result of the requirement for all staff to hold professional qualifications.

The Assistant Director stated that tenants would need to continue to comply with tenancy agreements regarding dogs, banning a specific breed would not necessarily breach tenancy and issues would be considered on case-by-case basis. Training funding was being considered, the Apprenticeship Levy could potentially be utilised to reduce cost, but there were also timing and staffing implications.

Cllr Matt Binley spoke and thanked the Assistant Director for attending and providing a presentation. Cllr Binley made comments on a number of the questions asked by members.

Cllr Binley noted five potential uses for Right to Buy receipts, not just housing development, including purchase or new properties or to rejuvenate existing housing stock and this was an area to be considered when producing the Social Housing Strategy.

Cllr Binley noted an undue level of emergency repairs that were not emergencies once assessed, with such callouts impacting day to day repairs. Cllr Binley queried whether there was any recourse regarding incorrect reporting from tenants.

Cllr Binley referenced the single Housing Revenue Account operated by the Council and long-term empty properties as well as temporary accommodation provision and whether the Council was looking at any new provisions within the area. Cllr Binley also queried whether the Council was fully prepared for the upcoming Severe Weather Emergency Protocols (SWEP) provision.

The Assistant Director noted that recharging could be served for properties consistently calling out repairs as emergencies when they were not. A more robust approach was required to tackling tenants that were abusing their properties. In terms of temporary accommodation, a review of this was being undertaken looking at best practice elsewhere to provide the best possible offer. The Council was ready for SWEP and there was a plan to reduce hotel usage for temporary accommodation purposes.

Cllr Binley made reference to the Council Housing Income Management Policy, noting that the Council was working with tenants to deal with rent arrears rather than going through the motion of eviction. Cllr Binley sought clarification in terms of repair backlogs that Avondale Grange had been worked on as a left behind area and communications had been provided to tenants to reduce the number of potential failed visits. In addition, Cllr Binley queried whether the Council was on track to complete the backlog in the current financial year and whether it could roll over into the new year.

The Assistant Director confirmed that it would roll over into the new financial year and communications regarding repairs had been circulated to tenants.

Cllr Binley then sought assurance regarding issues with damp and mould in properties and RAAC concrete, both issues that had been in national headlines in recent times.

The Assistant Director noted that there might be an increase in damp issues within Council housing stock because of the weather, weekly monitoring was taking place, and that treatment took time to work. The properties when built had not been designed for modern living and careful management of the stock was needed to avoid issues in this regard. Regarding RAAC concrete, a piece of work had been undertaken to ensure that no Council housing properties were affected.

Cllr Binley queried figures for void properties and whether there were any plans for a strategy to be developed to tackle these. Cllr Binley also referred to the tenant satisfaction survey and whether everything was on track for this to be circulated.

The Assistant Director noted that details of the survey would be contained within the newsletter sent to all tenants in January and that a weekly meeting to look at the position of void properties took place between the housing management team and the repairs team. Additional budget was sought to allow for further work to be undertaken to tackle outstanding void properties.

The Executive Forward Plan for November 2023 to February 2024 was noted.

**21 Forward Plan of Items for the EAP**

The forward list of items for the EAP was considered with the following items added for future consideration:

- Kettering Leisure Village Business Case to be considered jointly with Scrutiny
- Housing Strategy
- Rough Sleeper Strategy
- Private Sector Housing Policy

**22 Close of Meeting**

There being no further business, the Chair thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

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Chair

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Date

The meeting closed at 12.23 pm