

## Slough Borough Council

<b>Report To:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>
<b>Date:</b>	18 September 2023
<b>Subject:</b>	Housing Service and Improvement Plan Proposals
<b>Lead Member:</b>	Cllr Puja Bedi
<b>Chief Officer:</b>	Pat Hayes
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Chris Stratford
<b>Ward(s):</b>	All
<b>Key Decision:</b>	NO
<b>Exempt:</b>	NO
<b>Decision Subject to Call In:</b>	YES
<b>Appendices:</b>	A - Improvement Plan Proposals

### 1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report sets the core service risks and challenges that currently exist in the Housing Service, including housing management, repairs, and accommodation provision.
- 1.2 The report also identifies the necessary high level improvement plan proposals to manage and improve services. Members are asked to note that the improvement plan will be reviewed regularly and updates to Cabinet.

### 2. Recommendations:

Cabinet is recommended to:

Approve the improvement plan proposals contained in appendix A.

Note and comment on the work already undertaken to reduce operational risks and improve overall service quality and performance.

Agree to receive six monthly update reports relating to the improvement plan objectives.

#### Reason:

The housing directorate continues to manage significant challenges providing a range of core services to its tenants and leaseholders, and in the wider context in respect of accommodation services especially relating to homelessness and the management of Temporary Accommodation (TA). If not addressed, this could lead to potential breaches of statutory and regulatory requirements and further reductions in service standards and quality. There is therefore an urgent need to resolve the issues through timely action by the Council to ensure compliance with statutory duties and the achievement of good

practice housing services. This report aims to identify initial work completed so far, currently underway, and proposed to complete the objective of achieving excellent housing services for tenants and leaseholders.

### **Commissioner Review**

Housing Services Improvement Plan: With changes in regulation and accountability coming through proposed legislation, Officers decision to self-refer the Housing Service to the Regulator showed a level of openness and presented an ideal opportunity for the Council to learn from best practice elsewhere and build a learning methodology into its improvement plan. This report sets out the proposal to build on this review and put in place strengthened governance and management controls, improved engagement, robust asset management plans, measured by key performance indicators, and develop business plans and budgets to ensure that the council provides good quality core housing management service that it can afford and provides value for money for its tenants and leaseholders.

### **3. Report**

- 3.1** The Report identifies the core service challenges and sets out the attached improvement plan which will remain in place until all actions are complete. The initial review period will be for 12 months to ensure the Council meets its statutory and service objectives to ensure compliance with the new Consumer Standards set out by the Regulatory of Social Housing (the Regulator), which include the Home, Tenancy, Neighbourhood and Community, Tenant Involvement and Empowerment and Tenant Satisfaction Measures standards.
- 3.2** Progress will be monitored at a senior officer level on a regular basis, with the Lead Member kept apprised of progress through monthly meetings. In addition, it is proposed to bring six monthly updates to Cabinet to ensure scrutiny by members of the progress made, which in turn ensures member 'ownership' and responsibility for action. It is also necessary that tenants and leaseholders have an opportunity to influence and craft service improvements. This will be achieved utilising a more proactive resident Board involvement and frequent tenant and leaseholder surveys. The re procuring of major contracts such as the RMI will also include arrangements to consult with residents around quality issues.
- 3.3** In preparing for this approach Officers decided to refer the housing service to the Regulator in February of this year and received confirmation that no regulatory action was necessary at that stage after the Regulator had scrutinised the approach adopted to managing and monitoring the core compliance activities such as electrical, gas, water, asbestos management etc and which was likely to impact on the tenants' wellbeing and lead to potential breaches of the standards and statutory requirements. The core operational challenges and proposals for action are detailed as follows.
- 4** **Renewal of the Asset Housing Management Plan:** A fundamental part of providing an accurate HRA Business Plan (BP) is to have a well-developed and informed Housing Asset Management Plan (AMP) in place. This document will have informed by robust stock condition data and will have been developed through a costed elemental property replacement plan. These links ensure that the final investment priority outcomes and inputs into the HRA BP are accurate and form the basis of a robust business planning process.

4.1 An updated plan will need to be developed to enable this new AMP to be formulated and implemented in the most efficient and effective way and this is best achieved by engaging a property consultant to review key elements of the current AMP and provide an updated version. The costs of this update will be met through existing budgets. Clearly any significant revised priorities and requirements for funding will need to be included in an updated 30-year BP which would be presented to Cabinet for consideration.

5 **Poor Housing Maintenance service performance:** Members are aware of the issues with performance of the current contractor and contract management was considered as part of a Scrutiny Panel task and finish group report. Whilst there are some operational factors that has made the contract more challenging from the contractor's perspective, a recovery plan agreed last year has failed to make the required improvements in performance. The current Repairs maintenance and Improvement contract is due to come to an end in December 2024 and therefore Council needs to start planning for the re-tendering of the contract now. Officers have engaged the necessary consultancy support to assist with this complex process and the necessary detailed report and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet in November. The Cabinet report will cover specifically the issue of extending the current RMI contract to complete by 31 March 2025 to provide more room to complete all procurement requirements and not have a change of contractor at the end of a calendar year. This report will cover all the necessary options available to the Council in retendering the contract and will cover the following key elements.

- Review of all the current contract documentation
- Customer satisfaction levels
- Complaint levels
- New contract structure and options
- Revision of Client-side project management Resources
- Market testing against proposed contract structure
- Survey and consultation process and findings
- Workshop and review meetings and output assessments
- Tender process options, timelines, and preferred contract duration
- Likely cost impacts for revised contract objectives
- Contract mobilisation strategy.

6 **Damp and Mould Challenge** There is as part of the ongoing contract an urgent need however to address particularly the issues associated with damp and mould in council owned homes. The initial assessment of the number of homes potentially impacted by this issue was significantly underestimated. We now know presently 1020 homes are impacted out of a total stock of 5899 and will require an initial assessment, in some cases immediate action and then corrective works to remove the problem on a sustainable basis. The contractor continues to struggle to cope with demand and initially complete urgent visits to those risk assessed referrals. Officers are now in the process of establishing a 'task force' approach this includes the introduction of a dedicated gang to respond to damp and mould referrals and a quick reaction element to this resource for serious risk cases, to damp and mould referrals to improve response times, introduction of new technology sensors to

monitor property performance, and the necessary planning towards more necessary works to improve ventilation in homes, heating, and insulation.

- 6.1** Officers are also now engaging further with NHS colleagues to identify those properties where clients and especially young children occupy damp and or mould properties so very focused joint medical and housing responses can be developed reducing still further potential risks to children with conditions such as asthma.

There is however a need to re consider stock condition data and confirm how accurate the current information is and then develop a full decarbonisation strategy, so it is possible to accurately assess the ongoing HRA Business Plan impacts. The necessary technical appraisal work will commence shortly, and the appropriate reports presented to members as part of the budget impacts for the HRA from 24/25.

- 7** **Garage site conditions and management Strategy** The current condition of the garage stock is poor with 864 garage voids either requiring urgent repair, major works, or demolition. This has resulted in, loss of critical income, increased Anti-Social Behaviour, and health and safety challenges and risks. A full review of garage sites has been completed and this detail is now being compared and integrated with the previously produced garage site strategy completed approximately two years ago. A new strategy to demolish, repair, and dispose of sites will emerge in the winter of 2023 and be presented to members for consideration and approval.

- 8** **Limited IT capability:** Currently the full integration of the new NEC housing system remains incomplete. This leaves significant IT data and information gaps across the housing service. The necessary resources to complete the interrogation of data and full registration of applicants onto the housing register for example is now almost complete and the housing register and allocation module is scheduled to go live in August 23. A plan of phased integration work has also been agreed and this will be reviewed urgently to ensure the correct priorities are being implemented across all the system modules this is being managed by a newly appointed Project Manager and newly constituted project board. A review of KPI data will be carried out once service modules are operational and a new suite of reports generated. Costs to complete the integration of the new system are contained in the approved HRA BP for 23/24, with completion expected in the first quarter of 2024.

- 9** **Homelessness Service:** The homelessness service performance on prevention work and decision-making especially within statutory timescales is an area of focus. Additional resources targeted at preventative activity is beginning to have an impact on caseloads and a comprehensive audit of the TA stock to establish actual usage to potentially reduce the cost base has been completed. A target of saving some £500k in the 23/24 financial year has been agreed and financial monitoring is now in place. The Council also needs to explore further opportunities to discharge its duties via improved nomination agreements with social landlords and establish new longer term leasing arrangements to secure more sustainable private rented leased stock. New resources to secure improvements and overall performance in the accommodation service has been introduced and is under further review and once

the new NEC IT solution is fully implemented significant improvements in management performance and reporting can be expected in the early part of 2024.

- 10 Management of TA is poor:** The management of the Councils circa 700 private TA units is presently failing. This includes a lack of compliance and management checks to ensure landlord documentation is up to date. This is primarily caused by the generic nature of the TA Officer job descriptions, and poor deployment of resources, the poor property management regime, and lack of contact with both the agents or landlord and clients occupying the TA units, this ultimately leads to higher costs. This is a legacy challenge that needs fully resolving over time.
- 10.1** This in turn impacts on the number of units required to meet demand, and length of time clients spend in TA. A special project office role has been created and is currently deployed to work with accommodation TA staff to review the condition and number of TA units required to effectively manage this stock and this combination of more progressive and focused compliance activity and the intensive audit activity is expected to have an impact on costs and the ongoing quality of management.
- 10.2** Currently the accommodation budget is running an overspend of more than £1m, which is a significant strain on the General Fund. Once clarity on numbers in occupation is confirmed, which is expected shortly, a reduction in overall TA property numbers is achieved, and stronger compliance and management is in place the expected full year anticipated savings objective should be achieved. This is also strongly linked to the improved preventative work now being established which should overall reduce referrals to TA and maintain a reduction in TA requirements and subsequent costs. It should be noted that this is a demand lead service and therefore the activity needs to be closely monitored as demand can fluctuate causing costs to change on a regular basis.
- 11 The Rough Sleeper Initiative had failed to meet intended objectives in 22/23:** The Council is presently part of the Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI). This includes the provision of additional targeted government funding to recruit specialist staff, develop partnership arrangements with voluntary groups, develop improved outreach services, increase short term accommodation options, and meet financial spend targets agreed with Government.
- 11.1** The year one funding requirements and objectives identified had failed to be delivered during the year and an underspend of circa £100k resulted. This had been raised at a January meeting of the monitoring group with government officers and the Council had been advised it needed to take corrective action. Accordingly, Officers have worked closely with the Government support team and produced a new focused work plan tied to a set of revised new spending and service outcomes. This has now been fully scrutinised by government and a new additional funding allocation has been awarded for the 23/24 financial year.
- 11.2** This new and improved funding to meet the agreed workplan and allowance for additional specialist staff to be recruited and deployed, along with at least one new accommodation proposal is now in and being developed. Accordingly, the new work plan has begun to be implemented and working with the government officers close monitoring of progress is now under way. Members will be fully advised of final

outcomes and progress prior to the close of the current years funding stream coming to an end in March 2024.

- 12 De Classified Housing Schemes Review:** The Council declassified as sheltered accommodation 9 Housing schemes approximately 11 years ago. Whilst those people who qualify for Social Care support do have personal alarm cover and support packages in place today many of those who continue to occupy the blocks who have aged further do not have these arrangements. It is also clear like many other areas; Slough is expected to see a rise in its elderly population over the coming decade and without any formal specialist housing provision it is essential that the declassified schemes are reviewed again to see what scope exists to fully establish them as specialist facilities for the elderly in the future. This review would also include those dispersed stock of bungalows and other flatted accommodation which house a majority elderly clients to see how these could be integrated into a wider strategy for improving housing options to elderly clients.
- 12.1** This review is anticipated to take six months to complete and will also involve the review of the necessary specialist housing management support required to re-establish and sustain these specialist schemes. The review will ensure that any new services provided are not impacted by unforeseen benefit issues associated with care and support needs but will potentially make use of existing common room facilities where they exist and now lying redundant, personal alarm facilities, new and improved internal soft furnishings, improved insulation, and green initiatives to reduce energy bills, and improved access where appropriate to adapted facilities and more secure living environments.
- 12.2** Whilst additional capital costs will be identified as part of the review these will be included in future HRA major works allocations from 24/25 onwards and any service elements which are introduced to improve the overall service offer these will be covered by service charge arrangements. The review will involve full resident consultation and will therefore mean the detailed review and appraisal report will come forward during the early part of 2024/25.
- 13 Fire Safety Management:** Overall the housing service has adopted a reasonable and pragmatic approach to fire safety management. Focus has been on the necessary compliance activity associated especially with the two remaining high rise blocks still retained and managed by the Council and the necessary fire protection works for these blocks is progressing well. It is however clear that the overall fire safety and management strategy is less well developed across medium and low-rise accommodation, and some housing management areas relating to recommendations coming out of Fire risk assessments (FRA) need further work. Accordingly, a more proactive response has been introduced to ensure full compliance is achieved and maintained in the future. This proactive work includes the following.
- Introduction of a zero-tolerance approach to the inappropriate storage of combustible items under communal stair wells and communal area passageways. Residents have been written to about the new policy approach which has been fully implemented.

- Review of alarm effectiveness in respect of hard of hearing, deaf, and blind clients occupying flatted accommodation. This will be managed more effectively by greater use of new technology solutions.
- Better informed understanding of vulnerable occupiers of flatted accommodation and how these residents are best evacuated under fire conditions. This includes review of information on site for fire officers improved details and personal information on the location and nature of vulnerabilities, and new fully compliant fire boxes located in agreed positions for easy access by fire crews.
- On de designated schemes direct monitoring of fire alarm facilities by 24-hour emergency alarm call centre. This facility has the potential to carryout audio conversations with individual flats. This will be expanded should the review of de designated schemes result in specialist facilities being re-established. This will be established in the next 3 months.
- Installation of new fully compliant information boards in all communal points within flatted accommodation. This includes new service protocols and processes to ensure updated information is available in a timely manner.
- Review of signage in all blocks to ensure full compliance on identification of fire evacuation routes and information.
- Review of all emergency lighting in blocks to ensure fully compliant and maintenance regimes are appropriate.
- Continued work activities to review fire door compliance and revised maintenance schedules to inspect and service all necessary fire compliance requirements to doors in blocks.
- Identification of an appropriate designated responsible 'person' for all building safety requirements across all appropriate Council owned social housing buildings.
- New process arrangements to ensure all FRA recommendations are reviewed and implemented in accordance with the timelines and priorities identified in such reports.

**13.1** Whilst there is progress being made to implement and introduce all the necessary changes to provide for full compliance across all fire safety challenges, the regulation and legislative agenda continues to change and emerge. The new Building Safety Act 2022 has placed additional responsibilities on building owners with specific deadlines for example higher risk building to be registered by 30 September 2023 and accountable persons in relation to high rise and medium rise residential buildings. The new Building Safety Regulator will sit within the Health and Safety Executive and is responsible for overseeing the safety and standards of buildings and leading implementation of the new regulatory framework for high rise buildings. Officers will closely monitor and carefully manage fire safety management issues and will ensure the adoption in a timely manner all necessary safety recommendations made in the future. The necessary compliance KPI and reporting arrangements will be put in place as the NEC system is further developed and rolled out and regular reporting to members on these key safety matters will be reported to members on a quarterly basis from March 2024.

**14 Home Ownership Management:** This area of service has been underdeveloped and has been struggling to cope with RTB demands, enquiry traffic, complaints, and leasehold Section 20 processes, including dealing with service charge challenges, and confirming final demand totals for services provided. Recently action has been

taken to introduce additional interim officer resources and a new Home Ownership Manager has been appointed to review key processes, best use of new staffing resources, and a new focus on complaint backlogs and increasing customer service standards.

- 14.1** There is now a clear separation of this service from the Strategic Housing need's function and the previous Head of Service role responsible for Home Ownership and Strategic Housing is now subject to review.
- 14.2** The process of developing particularly the leasehold service will now be taken forward and a staffing structure which brings together leasehold needs and aligns the function more closely with income recovery of leasehold services and debt management which is presently managed via the finance service will be pursued. The re focused service objectives currently in place will deliver the necessary initial stabilisation of the service standards and begin to bring about positive change and performance improvements. Full KPI reporting will commence once the new NEC Housing system becomes fully operational.
- 15 Tenant and Resident Engagement Service and Strategy:** This element of the housing service has been provided on a very limited basis up to date. This engagement process has been almost entirely reliant on the established resident board, and this has had limited resource and influence across the housing service. In recognition of this the process has started to refresh the resident board and introduce new staffing resources to support the necessary tenant engagement activities to ensure compliance with the Regulator's requirements to engage and involve tenants and leaseholders in respect of influencing and shaping housing services and setting agreed priorities.
- 15.1** A new tenant engagement officer has now been added to the Tenancy Management service and it is now intended to further review resources to sustain and develop tenant engagement into the future. A new tenant and resident strategy will be presented to members for approval in December of this year and this will include a report indicating the further HRA financial and staffing resources proposed to sustain the Councils ability to work with tenants and leaseholders and meet full compliance against the Housing Regulator regulatory requirements.

## **16 Options considered:**

- 16.1** The Council has statutory and service quality duties in relation to management of its housing stock and in relation to housing needs and homelessness. Options to manage these services within the existing resource have been considered and need ongoing review and improvement in certain operational areas.
- 16.2** The necessary options for dealing with the operational risks and challenges have been carefully considered and reviewed and where necessary action to reduce risks and improve service outcomes have begun to be implemented. The high-level Improvement Plan identifies the nature and scale of the issues to be tackled over the coming weeks and months. More detailed work plans for each of the risks and challenges including further detailed options and processes for improving the service offer will be implemented and kept under review and further reports submitted for members to consider as required. This is a significant journey towards change which includes further work to achieve full compliance, and of course raise

service standards across all service areas. This journey will take time and will be managed and implemented carefully and with full transparency involving both tenants and members who will where necessary be asked to endorse and approve the changes required. The necessary further reports will contain the detail and specific implications of key decisions to be made.

## **17 Background:**

**17.1** Change is required to ensure the Council meets its duties and improves the housing service standards. Some of the issues have arisen because of the Our Futures restructure, which split the housing functions across different directorates. The senior leadership restructure agreed by members in Summer 2022 ensured that the housing services were reunited in one directorate and a new Executive Director has been in post since the Autumn 2022. The work now underway is the more detailed objectives that now need to be agreed and approved to take the new structure and recognise the additional changes necessary to sustain improvement and improve the quality services at the same time recognising the necessary compliance agenda and new regulatory framework housing is now expected to work within.

## **18 Financial implications:**

**18.1** The adoption of the improvement plan proposals considers the necessary financial implications that can be identified at this stage.

**18.2** Most of these impacts are in relation to the HRA funded elements of the service, and these are where possible already contained in the 23/24 approved HRA budget. Clearly as more detailed work is completed, the full financial implications will need to be considered and any pressures and mitigations identified. The largest potential new financial implications relate to the setting up of a new Repairs Maintenance and Improvement contract. The impact on the HRA and subsequently on tenants will need to be carefully considered.

**18.3** Given there are existing pressures within the general fund in relation to the cost of providing current levels of temporary accommodation, the service needs to consider options available to reduce and contain those costs or find alternative savings proposals. both during 2023/24 and for future budget demand. The council does need to meet its legal obligations especially associated with homelessness, and the service will need to consider how resources are prioritised to meet those obligations alongside other council priorities as part of the medium-term financial planning and budget setting process for future years.

## **19 Legal implications:**

**19.1** The Council has various housing powers and duties, which can be broadly split into its responsibilities as a landlord and provider of social housing and its responsibilities to prevent and respond to homelessness and housing need.

**19.2** The Council owns its own housing stock, and this is allocated in accordance with its published Allocations Policy. Tenancies will be offered in accordance with the Housing Act 1985 and will have a greater level of security than private sector or non-secure tenancies. As a landlord of residential tenancies, the Council has implied repairing obligations under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, including to keep in repair the structure and exterior of the dwelling-house, the installations for

the supply of water, gas and electricity and for sanitation and the installations for space heating and heating water.

- 19.3** In addition, under the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 there is an implied covenant that the property is fit for human habitation at the time the tenancy is granted and that it will remain fit during the term of the tenancy. This requires an effective inspection regime before new lettings and regular inspections throughout the term of a tenancy. For flats or communal buildings, the implied covenant applies to communal areas. Dwellings will be considered unfit for human habitation if they are so far defective in one more of several conditions or prescribed hazards, including repair, freedom from damp, lighting, ventilation, water and drainage, food preparation facilities, excess cold or heat, asbestos, carbon monoxide, noise, falls, fire, or structure collapse.
- 19.4** The Building Safety Act 2022 is new legislation which established a framework for building safety both during design and construction and in occupation. The Act creates the Building Safety Regulator, which will be part of the existing Health and Safety Executive. Its functions include overseeing the safety and standards of buildings and leading the implementation of the new regulatory framework for high rise buildings. The Accountable Person is the duty holder for occupied buildings and is required to register existing buildings with the new Regulator.
- 19.5** The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 created the Regulator of Social Housing as a corporate body independent of Government. The Regulator must perform its functions with a view to achieving an economic regulation objective and a consumer regulation objective. In Guidance, Regulating the Standards, local authority providers of social housing are expected to comply with the Rent Standard and the consumer standards, which include standards in relation to home, neighbourhood and community, tenancy and tenant involvement and empowerment. Local authorities are expected to submit returns to the Regulator incorporating data on stock and rent levels.
- 19.6** The Council has duties under the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to assess and provide support to prevent homelessness and support those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The legislation is supported by comprehensive guidance in the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities. To access housing support, an individual must be eligible, in priority need and not intentionally homeless. A significant category of ineligible persons is those subject to immigration control. The assessment process is a critical part of the system to ensure that housing support is targeted at the right level and to those who are eligible.
- 19.7** If a person is owed a duty to be housed, the Council is obligated to provide accommodation, however this will be of a temporary nature whilst the Council seeks to discharge its duty. The duty can be discharged by the individual refusing or ceasing to occupy the accommodation offered, the individual accepting a more permanent offer of housing, which for most applicants can include an offer of a private sector tenancy or that the individual ceases to be eligible or becomes intentionally homeless. Individuals and their household can remain in temporary accommodation for significant periods due to a shortage of both social housing and suitable private sector accommodation.
- 19.8** In addition to duties to offer temporary accommodation under the Housing Act 1996, the Council also has duties to take reasonable steps to help applicants to secure

that accommodation does not cease to be available (known as the prevention duty). For those applicants who are not deemed to be in priority need or who are deemed to be intentionally homeless, the Council has a duty to help the applicant to secure accommodation for at least six months (the relief duty).

## **20 Risk management implications**

**20.1** Some of the risks identified in the report are significant and could lead to a failure to meet statutory and regulatory requirements if not adequately managed. Individual risk assessments relating to the operational issues will be fully completed as part of the proposed improvement plan attached to this report. These risk and service improvement assessments will provide the basis for prioritising each action so that appropriate management protocols are put in place to mitigate as far as possible. Currently the services impacted by risk or service improvement requirements will be part of an agreed transformation process.

## **21 Environmental implications:**

**21.1** The issues relating to those matters impacting on the environment and the improved living standards relating to dealing with mould and damp may have environmental considerations. Other environmental impacts could be associated with dealing with garage sites especially where asbestos materials may be identified. These will be fully assessed and managed in accordance with appropriate regulations and legal H&S requirements as assessed at the time. Other potential environmental impacts will be identified and managed where necessary.

## **22 Equality implications**

**22.1** The PSED set out the requirement of members to have due regard to the need to Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010. Advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups; and Foster good relations between people from different groups.

**Background Papers - None**