# Minutes of City Housing Liaison Board

# Thursday 26th January 2023, 16:30 p.m. -18.30 p.m.

# Microsoft Teams

| **Present: Members: Name** | **Surname** | **Housing Liaison Board** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Eric | Shipton | Sutton Coldfield |
| Jeff | Horton | Hall Green |
| Malcolm | Nicholls | Druids Heath |
| Tony | Coles | Washwood Heath |
| Michael | Dodd | Quinton |
| Dadirai | Tsopo | Harborne |
| Diana | Horton-Griffiths | Bartley Green |
| Carl | McCooty | South Yardley |
| Collette | Bailey | Aston |
| Bruce | Pitt | Kings Norton |
| Samantha | Vaughan | Perry Barr |
| Lesley | Beresford | Kingstanding |
| **Officers/Councillors** |  |  |
| Councillor Zakar | Choudhry |  |
| Councillor Richard | Parkin |  |
| Paul | Langford | Interim City Housing Director |
| Louise | Fletcher | Senior Service Manager - Tenant Engagement |
| John | Jamieson | Head of Housing Management |
| Asha | Patel | Repairs & Maintenance project lead |
| Gwendalyn | Mayo | Senior Housing Modernisation & Strategy Manager |
| Tracey | Holsey | Head of Income Collection, Revenues & Benefits |
| Matthew | Morrison | Technical Operation Manager |
| Guy | Chaundy | Assistant Director |
| Colin | Hanno | Engagement Manager |
| Winnie | Edwards | Change Management Officer |
| Jean | Campbell | RI & TMO Support Officer |
| **Apologies** |  |  |
| Jennifer | Walters | Lozells |
| Val | Carter | Sheldon |
| Derek | Novel | Acocks Green |
| Rishi | Spolia | Interim Head of Housing Management |

1. **Apologies and Welcome**

**0.2 Introduction to the Meeting**

**Eric Shipton** welcomed all to the meeting**.**

**Paul Langford** stated the HRA Business Plan/2023 Rent setting will be delivered at the Extraordinary CHLB meeting to be held on 1st February 2023. Paul will be assisted by the team to update the CHLB members regarding the overall plan for HRA investment 2023 onwards.

**0.3 Minutes of last Meeting**

Minutes of the last meeting were check for points of accuracy. The minutes were approved by the CHLB members

**0.4 Matters Arising**

**0.5 Chairs Comments**

**Eric Shipton** stated the Performance Monitoring Group report is very good. Working as partners we are making progress after the review of some of the systems and the management area. We are confident they will be up and running soon.

CHLB members who were present at the Constitution meeting, please read the notes, especially the highlighted sections, we need to make some progress on this.

**0.6 - Income Services Update by Diane Jones, Tracy Holsey & Matthew Morrison**

The key themes of the presentation are below:

* **BCC Rent** collection within target, funds rejected due to incorrect direct debit information has been reduced. Universal Credit, Housing Benefit. Communicate with tenants for the reason rent not paid on time.
* **Income Service Actions:** Welfare Co-ordinators at JCP working closely with DWP. Offer Support e.g., Food Vouchers, Debt Advisors
* **Collecting rent arrears and what are the main problems?**
* contact tenants, Offer and signpost to support services/grants and apply for direct payments from benefits
* **How large does the debt need to be before action is taken i.e., eviction** Reviews tenant case. Dependant on tenant's circumstances. Ensure all support paths are exhausted.

For further details see the full presentation slides.

**Collette Bailey** asked regarding phone calls received by the Rent service, the information given by the caller in order to access tenant account data. What checks are made by the Rent service before tenant information is disclosed? Also, if a tenant wishes to make an additional payment how is this done?

**Diane Jones** responded we ask questions/check regarding data protection/identity, we ask people to confirm their name, address, postcode, date of birth as we have that information. If a tenant wants to make payments, we will transfer them to a payment line or we ask them to log into their BCC accounts.

**Diane Horton-Griffiths** asked regarding Universal Credit payment which are paid four weeks in arrears. What proportion of tenants are in full time employment but are still in rent arrear? How does the Rent Service know if any of these people could pay their rent?

**Diane Jones** responded when the arrears reach a certain point, we become aware that the tenants is in full time employment this is when they get to the eviction stage. We contact the tenants if they are not paying their rents. BCC plan to improve the data in order to understand, the tenants better. We aim to target the tenants who we are aware are in full-time employment, who may be able to make increased rent payments. We aim to contact before seasonal events e.g., Christmas, summer holidays, we also, acknowledge different religious times of the year where potentially people have more money, more disposable income. Also, to make contact prior to events in September when the new School terms starts.

**Dadirai Tsopo** asked as you stated a substantial amount of the rent arrears is attributable to Universal Credit claimants, BCC may have to find ways to make improvements. Regarding the tenants who will not pay their rent. It would be useful if analytics can show this data/information.

The tenants who can pay, can they be pursued on a regular basis, so that they make the rent payments? A method should be sought to recover the unpaid rent that is due to Universal Credit. There are people who can pay the rent, but the data is important for BCC to be able to follow up the tenants that will not pay their rent.

**Matthew Morrison** explained we are looking to improve the data that we hold so we can understand, the tenants better. We aim to target the tenants we know are in full time employment because they may be able to make increased payments. We also acknowledge there are different religious times of the year where potentially people have more money/more disposable income. We aim to make contact with people prior to events.

**Eric Shipton** asked do you treat groups differently if they are not paying/cannot pay the rent when it comes to the eviction stage?

**Diane Jones** responded we look at previous history for example if they had a Homeless Prevention fund payment before and again have reached the eviction stage. We do not have the resource, or the funds to assist again. We look at all cases, we treat all cases equally.

**Collett Bailey** asked regarding Universal Credit the process to check the claimant information need to begin much earlier instead of waiting 5-6 weeks to begin the claimants’ checks which causes further delays/arears in rent payment.

**Tracy Holsey** responded it is part of the DWP’s method of allowing people to managing their own budget, if the claimant had a new job, they would have to wait 4 weeks before the person receives the first pay packet. A tenant who is vulnerable can make the decision to ask the DWP to pay the rent directly to the Rent Service before 8 weeks. Also, the Rent Service can use the claimants’ details to request the DWP pay the rent directly to the Rent Service. We work with the DWP and Job Centre, to ensure the claimants rent is paid. Also, the letters which detail the rent increase information is received at the DWP/Job Centre. Welfare Officers are the first point of contact for tenants and will explain the information. The tenant can also, phone the Contact Centre for information. Another point of contact is the Locality Managers who will visit the tenants.

**Eric Shipton** asked due to all the debts, the Government have said if there is no possibility of recovering the historic debt, should the debt be wiped out. Would this be possible with the unpaid rent. I understand that BCC borrows money against the housing stock as part of the borrowing process, are the rent arrears taken into consideration? Is the level of rent arrears one of the reasons for not being able to get funding for new properties.

**Tracy Holsey** responded we will write to tenants, the debt will be sent to a debt collection agency, we will try to recovery the debt. The debt information is held on our systems, if a former tenant makes a new application to the Housing Register, we will have the previous rent arrears information.

**0.7 - Asset Management Strategy by Gwendalyn Mayo & Asha Patel**

The key themes of the presentation are below:

* **The Council’s Housing Priorities -** Delivering high quality homes in safe, sustainable neighbourhoods. Empowering tenants to live fulfilled lives in homes that promote health and wellbeing
* **Delivering Green, Environmentally Friendly Homes -** make homes more energy-efficient, warmer, and cheaper to heat and run. Applying government funding to benefit homes within Birmingham.
* **Tenants Live in High Quality Homes in Safe, Sustainable Neighbourhoods.** Decent Homes Standard – compliance with the standard is (currently at 61%). Significant additional investment on Fire Safety.

**Financial Pressures**

* Building and Fire Safety to end of 2029 - £58m.
* R20 funding to receive government grant - £118m
* Decent Homes Standard works backlog - £370m
* **Your opinion:** Based on the financial pressures and limited investment, what would your top 3 investment priorities be and why?
* Tenant Focus groups to be held in February 2023, the results of the focus groups will form part of the Asset Management Strategy.

For further details see the full presentation slides.

**Eric Shipton** stated the central heating system that will replace the current heating system must be quiet, efficient, and not expensive to operate. Also, will BCC carry out tests in certain parts of the city before the retrofitting of properties begin.

**Guy Chaundy** responded the technology for, energy efficiency, intervention is changing on a regular basis. BCC is working with the supply chain to ensure we provide a fuel efficient, energy efficient, low cost to run solution for our properties heating systems.

**Dadirai Tsopo** asked regarding Sell Croft Flats, Welsh House Farm estate, Harborne. The residents consider the properties are not safe. The conditions are full of mould both in and outside of the building. The flats are not warm. There are vents that are open and when the weather is snowing. The snow comes into some of the lobbies. About 12 months ago I raised this issue, I was promised that somebody would look at the issues raised and give a report. Also, when the properties would be looked at and repaired. Please let me know when will the flats be looked at because the conditions are horrendous. In my opinion they are possibly, the worst high-rise buildings we have in the city of Birmingham.

**Asha Patel** responded regarding thehigh-rise blocks we recognize there is a huge amount of complexity around many of our high-rise blocks and buildings. Some are due to construction; some are due to desirability or location. To obtain an assessment of each of the tower blocks we need to identify the viability of the tower blocks. On a technical basis we need to inspect the tower blocks to understand If there are any inherent issues within the structure or the fabric of the building that are causing the damp and mould. We encourage tenants within the properties that they log/report the repair issue with the Contact Centre. We will look at the repair from our normal repairing obligations. As part of the strategy, we are also looking at an options appraisal. We will also conduct a stock condition survey on about 10% of properties each year. This is a lengthy process, but we can target those areas that are causing concern. We will look at the issues that you raised. Also, we will be embarking on an appraisal program of the high-rise tower blocks to identify if they are viable for the future, whether investment is the right opportunity. Also, what type of investment and what needs to be done. This is a long term solution.

**Dadirai Tsopo** raised the residents are cold and they are living in damp conditions. The residents were featured on the BBC News due to the conditions in the flats. There are always a number of Fortem repairs vehicles outside the properties daily, this is costing BCC a lot of money. We are concerned that a decision needs to be made regarding these flats. We currently have a cost-of-living crisis the residents have said they feel forgotten as we are still living in dump conditions. An appraisal and a definite strategy should be in place also to ensure the residents are informed.

**Asha Patel** responded we recognize the concerns of tenants which are raised, particularly within the media. In the short term we will look at the repair’s obligations. An appraisal is a long-term perspective Regarding the number of repair vehicles there may be planned maintenance program in the area.

**Diane Horton-Griffiths** stated some of BCC properties are now in such a state of disrepair. Diane raised concern regarding the problems that were highlighted in the media. The deterioration of properties has been over a number of years this has been allowed to go on, the repairs will involve a lot of work. Why had something not been done earlier? Is this now a result of the intervention of the housing minister relating to levelling up? Did the housing officers not go around the properties enough times?

**Eric Shipton** stated all the Fire Safety regulations have changed BCC had to inspect all of the high-rise properties for fire safety. There has been no funding towards fire safety from the Government. BCC has spent money; we have been ahead of the rest of the country in our fire safety and installation of sprinklers systems. The funds from the HRA account have been used.

**Asha Patel** responded there has been reductions in funding from the Government. There is high demand for properties, BCC stock is between 50-70 years old housing stock. Also, due to lack of investment, the components have got worse. Funds have been diverted due to the Grenfell tragedy. This has put further pressure on the capital budget, BCC have been unable to invest in other areas. BCC’s first priority was to keep the tenants safe. No funds have been received from the Government to wards fire safety.

**Guy Chaundy** stated the Decent Homes standard there was the change in the financing system for the Housing Revenue Account which allowed BCC to borrow more funds. BCC has lost the major repairs allowance that was paid by the Government. Previously BCC achieved 100% decent homes standard target. The decent homes standard levels are now 60%. BCC had to divert investment to essential building safety and fire safety work. BCC is in the process of developing an Asset Management Strategy. BCC is also, in the process of developing a new Housing Revenue Account business plan which will provide additional investment this will be put into the housing stock.

**Collette Bailey** asked regarding storage heaters are BCC planning to change some of the storage heaters because they are old and they keep breaking down, some do not work? Another tenant was told the storage heater could not be repaired. The storage heater cost a lot of money to heat the home.

**Asha Patel** responded there are old storage heaters, it will depend on the entire heating system within the tower block. BCC stock condition surveys will identify if one or an entire heating system needs to be replaced. The properties will potentially have different heating systems. BCC needs to achieve the commitments for route to zero. BCC needs to identify the best long-term solution for proving a heating system for the property or the tower block. If the heating solution is completely obsolete and is unable to be repaired or replaced. BCC would consider alternatives, but we are limited because the infrastructure around a storage heating system is set up in the property.

**Any Other Business**

**Diane Horton-Griffiths** asked regarding the return toface to face CHLB meetings. Has a decision been made?

**Eric Shipton** responded all the CHLB reps were notified and asked to contact the Resident Involvement team and let them know your preference whether members preferred, face to face, hybrid or a mixture of both. The RI team were still waiting for some responses if you have not voted, please contact the RI team

**Diane Horton-Griffiths** asked regarding BCC staff working from home, and when will working from home stop. Diane states it is difficult to contact BCC staff.

**Eric Shipton** stated the BCC management make decisions on where people work and how.

**Guy Chaundy** stated BCC has a target operating model on how BCC operates services. BCC staff are more visible on the estates. Also, where there is a specific meeting, this can be done face to face. There is no 100% call back into all the offices. It has been shown that staff working from home has some benefits. The benefits include how BCC operate efficiently as a service. It is possible BCC will move towards a hybrid arrangement this will involve some time working in the office also working from home, but to ensure there is staff visible on the estates.

**Carl McCooty** stated regarding sheltered housing Wendy O’Malley attended the HLB meeting and gave an update which was very informative. Wendy was able to answer the HLB members queries.

For a copy of the presentations please e-mail ResidentInvolvement@birmingham.gov.uk

**Eric Shipton** thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

**The next meeting of the City Housing Liaison Board will be held on:**

**Date: Thursday, 23rd March 2023: Time: 4:30pm - 6:30pm**