

Report to: Housing Review Board



Date of Meeting 13 January 2022

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

The Social Housing White Paper & Government's new Charter for Social Housing Residents

Report summary:

The Green Paper reported to the Board in September 2019 has now emerged as a White Paper, the content of which is the subject of this report.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That the Board note the contents of the report and resolve that the areas for further action identified in the report be examined and taken forward by the Housing Leadership Team.

Reason for recommendation:

To update the Board regarding the emergence of the White Paper and seek the Board's commitment to listen and support officers and tenants to see the actions through.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Medium Impact

Risk: Low Risk; This builds upon the work already undertaken within the Housing Service

Links to background

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
 - A greener East Devon
 - A resilient economy
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Report

1 Background (& the Green Paper)

1.1 The Social Housing White Paper was finally published on 17 November 2020, 27 months after the Social Housing Green Paper (“A new deal for social housing”) and exactly 41 months and three days after the catastrophic fire at Grenfell Tower. Green Papers are consultation documents, White Papers are statements of policy intent that will require legislation. The White Paper’s ‘Charter for Social Housing Residents’ aims to set out a new vision for the way that social housing residents are treated. It is a comprehensive and valuable document.

1.2 The Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment reported to the Board in March 2019 at the Green Paper stage drawing your attention to the National Housing Federation (NHF) publication and consultation Together with Tenants, which had been produced in response to the Green Paper and the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy. Whilst the document was intended for housing associations it was agreed there was much of value to our Housing Review Board agenda, and that we would follow the progress of the NHF project & import good practice recommendations that are relevant to East Devon.

1.3 Since then the whole housing sector has been waiting for the follow up to the Green Paper which has been somewhat delayed by but the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities. There has however been some progress in some specific areas.

1.4 For example we've seen progress on safe and decent homes with the Homes Act and the complex work that's started on implementing the recommendations of the Hackett review through the Fire Safety Order and the Building Safety Act. We've been impressed by the strategic new approach from the Housing Ombudsman service, and very much welcomed the more proactive stance and the early and effective joint working with the Social Housing Regulator (SHR).

1.5 Our Housing Services Manager has been working closely with some of our involved residents on this paper and we are pleased to have residents help us present the report to the Board today. As we start to take this work forward and ensure we are addressing the points the White Paper raises we want to ensure residents are involved at the very start of this journey to help us shape and inform our position.

2 The White Paper

2.1 The publication of the White Paper though is crucial and we are keen to move forward with momentum and pace. It brings with it a Charter for Social Housing Residents that covers what every social housing resident should be able to expect, set out in 7 themes which, as you can see, go wider and are more specific than have previously been associated with resident involvement. ANNEX 1

These are:

1. **To be safe in your home.** The SHR will work with the industry and social housing providers to ensure every home is safe and secure. For the first time providers will be required to identify a “Nominated Person” to comply with all health and safety requirements. This mirrors the proposals in the Building Safety Act to have a named Accountable Person responsible for higher-risk buildings.
2. **To know how your landlord is performing,** including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money and why decisions are being made. This is so you can hold your landlord to account. Tenants need this if they are to hold us to account and will therefore be involved in setting indicators that they believe will show the health of the service, but the SHR has prepared a list from the Green Paper consultation as a starting point. This will go hand in hand with the publication of data so that performance can be considered alongside the size of the organisation, including management costs and staff/executive salaries so that tenants can see how much they are contributing to these. Regardless of their size, landlords will be required to identify a “Responsible Person” who will ensure compliance with the consumer standards. They will drive performance and culture within the organisation. In smaller landlords this could be the Chief Executive, but in any event it is expected to be someone at a strategic level. Again, this reflects the proposals in the Building Safety Act for accountable persons to be identified in respect of higher-risk buildings, and the proposal elsewhere in the White Paper that a Nominated Person should lead on safety. The SHR has said it will not be producing league tables, but as results will be published it is possible we landlords & our customers will interpret them this way.
3. **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly,** with access to a strong Ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed. Complaints should be treated as feedback and we must learn not to be defensive about receiving them which may represent something of a culture change, but staff should be able to operate within an environment where they can acknowledge something went wrong without feeling they have set a precedent. We should demonstrate our learning via all possible channels (magazine to tenants, social media, and website) so tenants can see for themselves the difference they have made. In general terms the regulator deals with compliance issues and the ombudsman deals with fairness. The new code has promoted positivity and consistency and been well received by tenants; we have measured our complaints handling arrangements against the new guidance and found them to be largely compliant. We are aiming to respond in line with our corporate complaints procedure (20 working days), with the aim of achieving the suggested limits of 10 working days wherever possible. In practise though this means Housing has to just 5 working days to respond and sometimes this is just not long enough to carry out the research and run reports required to get the full history and circumstances on record.
4. **To be treated with respect,** backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants. While co regulation will continue there will be greater emphasis by the SHR on inspection. Having not been subject to inspection since we hosted the audit inspection of Housing Revenue Account activities in 2008 we can expect to be inspected at least once in every four years now as we have over 1,000 homes. Landlords should also have policies in place on tackling domestic abuse and it is likely that the consumer standards will be updated to include this requirement. This section of the charter also includes proposals to broaden the skills mix and diversity of board members, and ensure that more board members have consumer regulation experience.
5. **To have your voice heard by your landlord,** for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its board. The government will provide access to help, if you want it, for you to learn new skills to ensure your landlord listens. So we need to be able to show we have sought out tenant views and considered how to improve tenant engagement. Our Resident Involvement Strategy 2020 will now undergo a sense check to make sure it is fit for

purpose within this new charter, but it is important to note the charter also proposes a review of professional training and development to consider the appropriate qualifications and standards for social housing staff. With this in mind, our Managers will need to consider the training their own teams receive on engagement and ensure that this, too, is fit for purpose.

6. **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in**, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair. This section acknowledges the importance of safe and vibrant communal areas and green spaces for mental health and wellbeing, something that has been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic.

The key headline in the charter is the proposal to review the Decent Homes standard, which was first put in place in 2001. It will be reviewed to see if it should be updated to reflect changes such as climate change and changes in energy sources. Other measures in this section include:

- To review professional training to see how well housing staff are equipped to work with people with mental health needs
- To clarify the roles of agencies involved in tackling anti-social behaviour and signpost tenants to those agencies who can give them the most appropriate help
- To review the way that homes are allocated so that housing is allocated in the fairest way possible and achieves the best outcomes for local places and communities.

Pets are mentioned in this section. The charter recognises that pets are important to mental health and well-being and that landlords should adopt fair and reasonable policies with regard to pets. Blanket bans without good reason are unlikely to be tolerated. Fortunately we have reviewed our Pets Policy with tenants earlier this year, and no blanket ban has been included.

7. **To be supported to take your first step to ownership**, so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow. This section describes the steps that have been taken to increase the supply of affordable housing and then outlines the various schemes that will allow tenants to take their first step on the ownership ladder. A full evaluation of the Midlands Right to Buy pilot will be published in due course.

3 Early Thoughts

3.1 This White Paper and the Charter for Social Housing Residents will bring a return to proactive and inspected consumer regulation for everyone in the sector and we believe it should prove to be a positive step for tenants, for landlords and all stakeholders.

3.2 There is an emphasis on named individuals having responsibility for delivery to tenants which is welcomed as it will hold us to account for our commitments more readily.

3.3 We share the disappointment and frustration though that the White Paper isn't stronger on the importance of genuinely affordable social housing and ensuring supply is forthcoming.

3.4 And finally, we all know that the Green Paper set out an ambition to tackle stigma about social housing tenants and to support professionalism in housing management. The Chartered Institute of Housing have already started work on modernising professional standards in housing management, and been working with the tenant-led 'See The Person' campaign to tackle stigma within the housing profession. We hope this will help to bring cultural change but it requires more than words. Leadership from within the organisation is required, and this is where the Board can help.

3.5 It is clear that EDDC does intend to take tenant involvement seriously, and we do have a positive track record in this respect. We were the first social landlord in the country to develop a tenant compact, we have received praise for our Housing Matters magazine to tenants, and for its predecessor the Housing Standard, we were the first local authority in the

South West to invite tenants onto the Housing Review Board and we have had tenants from other parts of the country visit us to meet with our Tenant Scrutiny Panel and Designated Tenant Complaints Panel so they could follow suit and set up similar arrangements for themselves. That said, we have not always been successful in following through on objectives set, and there is more work to do in terms of our culture across the Housing Service.

3.6 We want to see this White Paper drive forward the much-needed culture change at all levels in the Housing Service, so it becomes part of the management and front line delivery of all Housing Service teams going forward.

3.7 We look forward to a future where tenants live in safe and decent homes; shape the services that are provided to them; and are clear where they go if things go wrong.

4 Next Steps

4.1 We need to make sure we get the basics right and must engage tenants in a way that works for them.

4.2 We should look particularly at customer satisfaction with the service in question but also 'customer ease' of getting a response. We will work with tenants to develop a suite of satisfaction measures that they want to see, that they think will show the health of the service and each of the teams within it.

4.3 We will start the conversation with tenants across all parts of the service: Tenants need us to be making this happen, not the Ombudsman or SHR.

4.4 We have now reviewed the action plan of our Resident Involvement Strategy with the tenant monitoring group which indicates where we have maintained strength and resilience over the past 18 months, and where we need to adapt to the new world in order to achieve these commitments agreed by the Board in September 2019. The Board recommended at that meeting that we should follow the progress of the NHF project and weave its findings into our strategy of involvement for the future, which we did.

4.5 It was recognised that the strategy offer is sustainable for both residents and staff alike but, like its predecessors, this strategy continues to shift the emphasis and responsibility of resident involvement from the Tenant Participation team towards all Housing staff, as is expected by accepted good practise, and required for effective involvement to result. We believe it has the right structure to deliver the expectations of the White Paper, and that the requirements of the charter are catered for within the strategy. That said, there is much work to be undertaken by individual teams to engage with tenants to achieve the recommendations for their individual service area.

4.6 It was recognised, however, that it is time now to look at and provide more digital options, and also to make best use of the 'tenant portal' element of our housing system when it is brought on line. What matters most to tenants is not just the strategy, but that we deliver on our promises contained within it. To this end the commitment of the Board, and strong leadership across Housing teams, as well as an improved focus on digital inclusion and involvement opportunities (for example around setting of standards and performance indicators across all teams) will enable us to build on our firm foundations and improve our offer to younger families and residents, in particular.

4.7 Together with the Designated Tenant Complaints Panel we must make it really easy for tenants to make a complaint, and regularly publish details of who to contact, phone numbers and email addresses, etc. We will look at the various ways we currently have to do this and also consider where there are gaps, especially in our digital arrangements. We could consider having a 'rant and rave bot' giving tenants the ability to have a rant and we react to that, rather than having to go through the more lengthy process of making a formal complaint. We must find ways to learn from our complaints & publish these to show tenant input (individually & through the panel) has made a difference.

4.8 We welcome the appointment of the Responsible Person to drive performance in these areas, working with the Board to achieve the culture change expectations of the White Paper and Charter for Social Housing Residents.

Financial implications:

There are no specific financial implications on which to comment at this stage.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications requiring comment.
