



Fife Council Annual Assurance Statement 2023

The People & Communities Scrutiny Committee at a meeting on the 31st August 2023 sought appropriate assurance that Fife Council Housing Service comply with all relevant requirements of the Scottish Housing Regulatory Framework; all relevant standards and outcomes in the Scottish Social Housing Charter; and all relevant legislative duties. Evidence has been considered through a regular cycle of performance reporting and liaison with tenant organisations to support the required level of assurance.

On review of the evidence provided principally through the Annual Return on the Charter 2022-23, it can be confirmed the Council recognises material non-compliance in the following standards and outcomes of the Scottish Social Housing Charter for tenants, people who are homeless and other service users. These areas are a focus for performance improvement throughout 2023-24:

Areas of Non-Compliance: General

Homelessness

Statistics highlight an increase in homelessness presentations nationally and this trend is evident in Fife although the pressure on temporary accommodation is disproportionate and more severe than the increase in new presentations. Temporary Accommodation continues to operate under significant pressure which translates as occasional breaches of statutory duty and regular breaches of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order. The Service continues to focus on homelessness pressures and meeting statutory duties but have identified significant service pressures to the Scottish Housing Regulator, Scottish Government, ALACHO and SOLACE as part of a national profile of housing pressures. The improvement actions identified for delivery in 2023-24 are to:

- Continue enhanced monitoring, reporting and escalation arrangements for temporary accommodation allocations to maintain 100% compliance.
- Finalise the implementation plan for the Kirkcaldy Sheriff Court Judgement and continue promoting rapid rehousing through scatter flat flipping to minimise customer transitions.
- Continue to implement a plan to decommission or re-provision existing unsuitable accommodation and significantly reduce the use of B&B / hotel type accommodation.
- Continue to develop, enhance and mature a revised frontline housing options service focussed on homelessness prevention as part of a wider Task Force approach to prepare for a Homelessness Prevention Duty.
- Proactively redevelop the housing advice framework to focus on housing options and homelessness prevention to promote informed housing choices and pathways.
- Modernise our TurnKey approach to managing the change of tenancy process for mainstream and temporary tenancies.
- Continue to deliver Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan commitments.

Voids Management

There is a commitment to return to top quartile performance for the management of empty homes following the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic. Performance over the last year has also been affected by a range of contextual factors which include:

- The need to re-provision temporary accommodation and divert a significant number of properties to meet statutory homelessness duties.
- Decommissioning the legacy Housing Management Information System and replacing this with a new CX system during 2022.
- The implementation of a revised Housing Options Frontline Structure replacing Housing Access Officer and Homelessness Officer roles.

The improvement actions identified for delivery in 2023-24 are to:

- Specialise the Voids Management Team within Housing Services with a direct line of accountability to the Head of Service.
- Refocus housing allocations to reduce pressures on allocating officers and improve outcomes for priority groups.
- Harmonise the change of tenancy process for mainstream and temporary tenancies linked to the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan.
- Further develop the new CX Housing Management Information System to improve workflows, performance reporting and accountability within the change of tenancy process.
- Review the Letting Standard with a revised focus on customer engagement and programmed post-let works.

Tenant and Resident Safety

With regards to tenant and resident safety, compliance is recorded against water safety, lift safety and asbestos. A robust programme of work is in place to address the following tenant and resident safety requirements where Fife Council are not fully compliant. These areas will be closely monitored to ensure compliance moving forward.

Gas Safety

The Council recognises there was non-compliance in eight cases where gas safety checks were not carried out within timescale, thus breaching a statutory duty. Failures were linked to a change in the Housing Management Information System, where a new system was introduced during 2022. To prevent future failures, the improvement actions identified for delivery in 2023-24 are to:

- Maintain weekly meetings of the Gas Safety Governance Group, including weekly monitoring and reporting of gas safety cases below 12 weeks.
- Continue integrated working with Area Housing Teams to communicate and support tenants with arranging gas safety inspections, to eliminate no access.
- Work with Business Support to eliminate any system issues which prevent properties from being included in scheduled appointments.

Fire and Electrical Safety

Interlinked fire and smoke alarms and a full electrical safety inspection certificate are both elements forming part of the Tolerable Standard and failure to meet this criterion, results in a

property Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) failure. Around 200 properties do not comply with fire and smoke alarm requirements which is a direct result of refused property access. Due to issues with the Housing Asset Management System holding an incorrect stock figure, it is unclear the exact number of properties without a valid electrical safety certificate. However, Fife Council conduct in excess of 6,000 electrical safety checks per annum and have recently conducted a risk-based work programme to eliminate properties with degrading wiring where there is a potential risk to Health & Safety. System improvements will be prioritised to ensure this can be accurately reported on moving forward. The improvement actions identified for 2023-24 are to:

- Progress work through the recently established 'no access team' to communicate and support tenants to gain access to properties, allowing necessary works to take place.
- Implement improvements to the Housing Asset Management System, through BTS upgrade project, to ensure an accurate stock figure is reflected which also allows anniversary dates to be recorded for all property electrical safety certificates.
- Ensure close working with Building Services to realign resources from degraded wiring to focus on electrical safety testing and certify accurate information is recorded.

Damp and Mould

Fife Council recently conducted a formal review of the approach to tackling dampness, condensation and black mould in Council housing as this is recognised a major risk to health. An improved approach has been established for dealing with dampness and mould, which saw the development of the following service principles and priorities:

- Stop blaming tenants and work together to mitigate the issue.
- Be proactive as opposed to waiting for tenants to complain.
- Single point of contact for getting in touch with the team.
- Fast and effective response to enquiries and complaints.

Condensation and dampness referrals have increased significantly in recent months. To improve services during 2023-24, a number of staff resources have been diverted to focus on providing specialist advice, whilst a new Building Services Team undertake dampness mitigation work alongside external specialists Richardson & Starling. This adds substantial pressure to Housing Revenue and Capital budgets, however the legal, health and reputational risks of failing to effectively tackle the issue, ensure this remains a top priority for Fife Council.

Pressures

The Committee also considered pressure areas for 2023-24 and the improvement actions put in place to mitigate these.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Future Financial Viability

At a time of high CPI inflation and other inflationary pressures on housing workstreams, the financial viability of the HRA, expressed through the 30-year HRA Business Plan is placed under increased risk. In line with the cost-of-living crisis and hardship felt by many tenants, rent increases are likely to continue below inflation levels. This restricts the Council's borrowing ability to fund new build programmes and stock improvement to meet SHQS and EESSH. To ensure HRA viability in future years, a robust HRA Business Plan review process will be implemented, alongside reviewing service efficiencies and consideration of service deferrals in non-statutory areas as required.

Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing 2 (ESSH2)

The current estimated costs of Fife Council delivering ESSH2 by 2032 is £325m which places significant pressures on the HRA. Investment of this magnitude on focused energy efficiency improvements will have a detrimental impact on existing component plans for non-energy related assets such as kitchens, bathrooms, electrical upgrades etc. and the current targets for new build housing. It is recognised by the Fife ESSH2 board, that additional grant, Energy Company Obligation (ECO) or Scottish Government funding streams will need to be identified to mitigate the impact ESSH2 delivery has on the HRA. It is noted that the outcome of a review of ESSH2 delivery being conducted by the Scottish Government is expected by autumn 2023 and will be critical to re-assess the overall affordability of ESSH2 for the council.

Resettlement

The Resettlement Core Group continues to co-ordinate and deliver a range of accommodation based and wider support services to a large number of individuals arriving into Fife from different international backgrounds. This involves supporting a dynamic community of over 500 households in hotels, host and sponsor accommodation across Fife. These accommodation arrangements are recognised as fragile and short term with the default support service being homelessness. Housing Services have taken action to establish a permanent Project Team with a specific focus on supporting arrivals through UK and Scottish Government Resettlement and Humanitarian Schemes working as part of the national framework. There is no significant impact on homelessness services at this time, but the situation is being monitored closely at local and national level in recognition of the significant risk to statutory services a change in policy or approach could have.

Depressed Housing Turnover (allocations policy impact)

The pandemic had a significant impact on housing turnover and there has only recently been some early signs of recovery. Depressed turnover diminishes the ability to meet homelessness and other priority needs, representing one of the largest risks to statutory duty and meeting needs. Monitoring arrangements are in place and the Council is committed to increasing supply through Affordable Housing Programmes, property acquisitions, generating new supply through a transfer led approach to housing allocations amongst other schemes to promote access to alternative tenures. An Allocations Policy Review Scoping Paper is being developed for consideration by Cabinet Committee later in the year, this will be aligned to a Fife Housing Register Partnership commitment around access to housing and refocussed priorities.

Equalities / Human Rights

Fife Council recognises that it has responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998. It is committed to promoting equality, addressing discrimination and providing housing as a human right. Examples of how we achieve this are through:

- Promoting customer and tenant participation in decision making working collaboratively with our Tenant and Resident Associations and Tenant Forum, achieving Gold Accreditation by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) for excellence in tenant participation.
- Collecting equalities data on our staff, tenants, service users and being clear on how we use that data.
- Completing equality impact assessments for all new strategies, policies and programmes prior to approval through Committee.

- Providing accessible information on performance through our website, dedicated publications, and the tenant magazine, Down Your Street.
- Understanding the needs of tenants and service users through housing need and demand assessments, customer surveys, workshops, etc.
- Safeguarding people with protected characteristics – through the provision of gypsy travellers' sites, temporary accommodation, older persons housing and refuge provision.
- Providing housing as a human right through our work in the resettlement schemes.
- Eliminating discrimination and promoting diversity through extensive staff training, including equality and diversity, equality in recruitment, mental health, gender equality, etc.

People & Communities Scrutiny Committee Date: 31st August 2023

Councillor Judy Hamilton

Spokesperson Housing and Building Services

Councillor Eugene Clarke

Convenor People & Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date: 05 September 2023

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