

Title of Report	HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD AND SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH MOULD AND DAMP RECOMMENDATIONS	
Presented by	Councillor Andrew Woodman Housing, Property and Customer Services Portfolio Holder PH Briefed ████	
Background Papers	<u>Corporate Scrutiny Report (Feb 24) - Task & Finish</u> <u>Corporate Scrutiny Report (Nov 23) – Housing Performance</u>	Public Report: Yes Key Decision: No
Financial Implications	Financial implications are summarised with further details in respect of policies, communications and benchmarking recommendations, considered in the Housing Revenue Account Budget 2024/25 and the Appointment of Housing Contractors report both of which are presented at this meeting. Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	There are no legal implications directly from this report. Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	Ensuring the Council’s Housing Service is fit for purpose is a key driver of the actions set out in this report. Plans are in development via third parties and the in-housing resourcing to deliver these. Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Purpose of Report	To respond to the Corporate Scrutiny Task and Finish Report on Mould and Damp, and also to update Cabinet on wider actions to improve the Housing Service.	
Reason for Decision	To comply with the constitution regarding a Task and Finish Report, and to update Cabinet on wider work to improve the Housing Service.	
Recommendations	THAT CABINET: 1. THANKS THE SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR ITS WORK INTO THE EXAMINATION OF MOULD AND DAMP DURING THE LAST QUARTER.	

	<p>2. AGREES THE RESPONSES TO THAT REPORT AS SET OUT IN PARAGRAPH 2.2 OF THIS REPORT</p> <p>3. NOTES AND ENDORSES THE ACTIONS BY THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER WITH THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF HOUSING IN ADDRESSING THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE HOUSING SERVICE, AS SET OUT IN PARAGRAPH 3.3 ONWARDS IN THIS REPORT.</p>
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1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This report provides an update on improvements within the Housing Service and addresses the conclusion of the work of the Scrutiny Task and Finish group in relation to mould and damp.

2.0 MOULD & DAMP TASK & FINISH INVESTIGATION

2.1 At the meeting of Cabinet on 25 April 2023, several questions were asked in relation to cases of mould and damp within the Council’s housing stock. During discussion the Leader of the Council requested that Corporate Scrutiny Committee form a Task and Finish Group to review the matter following the local elections in May 2023. This work took place in quarter 3 of this financial year and was reported and endorsed by Corporate Scrutiny Committee on the 4 January 2024. A copy of the report including its recommendations are set out in Annex A to this report and can be accessed via the link in the header of this report.

2.2 The Task and Finish Group developed five recommendations for Cabinet to consider. These are set out below with a suggested officer response.

Task and Finish Group Recommendation 1

“A stand-alone policy on damp and mould is produced and agreed as soon as possible”

Cabinet Response : Agreed - It is accepted that a separate policy for damp and mould would provide greater clarity for tenants. The service will develop a draft policy as suggested and consult with tenants and members of the Task and Finish Group. This policy will be delivered within Q1 of 2024/25.

Task and Finish Group Recommendation 2

“Steps are taken to improve the materials provided to tenants about damp and mould drawing on best practice as outlined in this report”.

Cabinet Response : Agreed - The service has already redrafted some elements of the communication material to tenants but will take on board the comments from the Task and Finish Group and its comments on the form and style of these. This will launch alongside the new policy once developed as set out above.

Task and Finish Group Recommendation 3

“The Council participates in benchmarking of damp and mould cases as soon as such benchmarking is available through Housemark and build the results into its standard reporting arrangements.”

Cabinet Response : Agreed – this was always the intention to ensure that the Council are aware of where its service sits within the wider work of all housing providers. This action is, however, dependant on third party data publication but will be included as an indicator within the Housing Service Plan which forms part of the wider performance management framework of the Council.

Task and Finish Group Recommendation 4

“The Housing Service is instructed to scope a specification to use external contractors to supplement the inhouse workforce capacity to specifically address the damp and mould cases and associated repairs and works and to proceed to procure a preferred contractor.”

Cabinet Response : Agreed – supplementing in-house resources via third party has been under consideration for some time. Elsewhere on this Cabinet meeting’s agenda the appointment of a contractor for such services (and to address overall levels of high work in progress jobs) is to be considered. Subject to that item being agreed by Cabinet, work to mobilise the contractor should commence in February 2024.

Task and Finish Group Recommendation 5

Cabinet notes the outcome of the review and identifies if it wants the Task and Finish Group to continue its work on damp and mould in any capacity

Cabinet Response : The work of the Group is noted and gratefully received. Regarding further specific action, the proposed policy in Recommendation 1 above will come back to the Task and Finish group in due course to provide comment on. Cabinet is also aware that a further update on Housing Repairs progress is due to come to the Committee later this year. In that report officers will also provide an update on progress with these actions. As such Cabinet is content that the work has been completed and nothing in addition to those set out in this response is required at the current time.

- 2.3** Assuming Cabinet as a whole agrees the proposed recommendations, these will be reported to the Committee via an Information Paper to ensure members are aware of the decision taken.

3.0 HOUSING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT

- 3.1** Whilst reporting on the Task and Finish work, it is also worthy of updating Cabinet on the work to improve the Council’s housing service overall. A series of update reports have been received by Corporate Scrutiny regarding the challenges and services provided by the service. The most recent in November last year and a link to this is provided in the header to this report.

- 3.2** In essence, that report sets out the challenges facing the service and the actions that are being taken to address these. At a high level these are:

- Demand – the service’s biggest current challenge is that demand is outstripping supply of resources. This largely stems from the cessation of works during the Covid pandemic of circa £12-18m which is leading to a work-in-progress backlog of circa 5,500 work orders (the backlog would normally be in the region of approximately 500).
- Resources - recruitment for the in-house team has always been challenging. The Council is trying to recruit to particular trades in a highly contested marketplace which

post Covid has seen a step change. With a number of people reducing their hours or leaving the maintenance sector, in turn making them harder to recruit. This is a recognised national and cross sector issue affecting most providers from house building companies through to private and social landlords alike and is not unique to the Council.

- Inflationary cost pressures - whilst earlier this year there were some supply issues for key components, this has improved. However, the significant increase in inflation has impacted on both the cost of goods (from building supplies through to issues such as glass, doors and windows). But it is also having an impact on any services via third parties, for example, support contractors and outsourced services (such as the majority of Gas works). There still remains some volatility in supply.
- Availability of robust data – some key data (for example asbestos surveys) are required to ensure the smooth planning of non-urgent works. An Asset Management team restructure has been undertaken but there remain the resourcing issues identified above. In view of this, a complete stock condition survey has been commissioned to enable the data on Council properties to be refreshed, and in doing so this will improve knowledge of these. Improved work specification and scheduling should follow.

3.3 The main actions being taken to address these include:

- Appointment of various new contracts to ensure the Council is able to continue to provide key services. Importantly (and a feature of a separate report on this meeting's agenda), is the appointment of a consultant to provide services to supplement the in-house resource to tackle the "work in progress" backlog.
- Changes to the IT systems to ensure that these are fit for service providing a better outcome for tenants by improving processes.
- Engaging more with tenants and with Council staff to ensure a culture of customer service is embedded.
- Updating a number of policies (and plans for more) to ensure policies and procedures are up to date and fit with current practise, expectations and regulations.
- HRA Budget for 2024/5 has been aligned to ensure the delivery of these actions.

3.4 To oversee these changes an initial action plan has been developed (Annex B). This has been endorsed by Corporate Scrutiny. This will be further refined as the programme of change develops. To oversee these changes the Cabinet Member working with the Strategic Director and Head of Service will be implementing a 'Housing Improvement Board'. The purpose of the board will be to:

- To create and then deliver the full housing improvement plan
- To provide oversight, guidance, and rigour to the improvement of the housing service and hold the service to account for delivery against the Housing Improvement Plan
- To ensure there is a sufficient focus and resources within and supporting the housing service to drive forward the changes needed to deliver the improvement plan
- To monitor Risks within the Board's remit and to help in providing assurance on delivery of the planned improvements.

It is envisaged the board will first meet before Easter 2024, once the mobilisation of key contracts set out above has commenced. Reporting through the normal CDP reporting mechanisms will continue and a further update report to Corporate Scrutiny is planned for later this year.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The costs of producing the policies, communications and benchmarking for recommendations 1 to 3 will be contained within the budgets for 2024/25 which will be presented under a separate item at this meeting.
- 4.2 The external contractor procurement is part of the Housing Contracts report also being presented to this meeting. The damp and mould work is incorporated into this contract which also covers other backlog works referenced in 3.2 above. There is specific 2024/25 revenue budget growth of £2m requested for the backlog works in the HRA Budget and Rents Report 2024/25 to 20028/29, which is also being presented at this meeting. In the same report there is a £2m increase in capital budgets in 2024/25 for the Homes Improvement Programme to cover the backlog of works.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communities and Housing - A Well Run Council
Policy Considerations:	None specific – however, a planned Damp and Mould policy is recommended within the report.
Safeguarding:	None specific but this is a key part of delivery of the service overall.
Equalities/Diversity:	None Specific but will be considered in detailed action – such as the development of policy
Customer Impact:	The changes envisaged in the report will impact on improving the service to customers
Economic and Social Impact:	None direct – however the service does seek to use local contractors and suppliers where possible
Environment, Climate Change and Zero Carbon:	The Housing Asset Management Plan is key to the delivery of the Council's Climate Change and Zero Carbon commitments. Actions set out in this report all are assisting to deliver the Housing Management Plan and improvements to our overall housing stock and tenants' day to day lives.
Consultation/Community/Tenant Engagement:	None specific – however, in development of the proposed policy tenant engagement will be undertaken
Risks:	The actions outlined in this report will assist in mitigating the risk of noncompliance with current legalisation/regulation and will ensure that a good service is being delivered to tenants.
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