



HOUSING

Foundations for the future

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**BRENTWOOD
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Housing Department of the Council, in common with many other Councils, is under intense pressure from external factors. For Brentwood this has been exasperated by the need in recent years for services to transform and modernise against a background of reductions in resources, people and funding.

Despite all of this, the Council is in a good starting position. However, in order to continue making the necessary improvements in services and delivering our aim of a flagship service to be proud of it needs to focus on the following over the next 6 months:

- Operational Services Review - Sheltered Housing and Estates Management
- Communication & Reports
- Internal Audit recommendation implementations

A vital element to the success in achieving a flagship service is the engagement and empowerment of staff. It is key that best practice is identified and encouraged, that's staff feel part of the solution rather than the problem, and that they are informed and involved. Any changes will be evidenced and measured to ensure all activities are effective, proactive, and successful.

There is no question that the journey over the next six months will be challenging given competing priorities and day to day effective management of the service. Nevertheless, is essential to achieving success.

BACKGROUND

National Context

There is a housing crisis across the Country with less affordable housing being available for those in the most need. Shelter have produced a report on the future of social housing reporting that they believe we need 3.1m more social homes in the UK. There have been cross party debates in Parliament on the issue. It is clear there is much to be done to be able to provide decent homes that are of a good standard, safe and secure where the young, elderly and vulnerable can live and communities can flourish.

100 Years of Council Housing

July marked the 100th anniversary of the Addison Act, more commonly known as The Housing Act 1919 which paved the way for council house building on a large scale. Now is the time to reflect, review and re-focus on this important anniversary and make sure the Council are moving in the right direction to ensure we are providing what our communities need and that we get our house in order so that we provide a level of service that is appreciated by residents, admired by peers and something to be proud of.

The Past

It is accepted that there have been some past issues within housing that have had a detrimental effect on the service. Some of which are highlighted below:

Poor Repairs & Maintenance Contract	Non compliance of housing stock	Loss of repairs team	The introduction of universal credit
Low staff morale	Staffing strategies in estates management	Lack of staff training	Introduction of the HRA Act 2017

Some of which have been necessitated by budget cuts, others by lack of investment in personnel and associated training.

Improvements Achieved

Despite some of the challenges faced within the service there have been some positive achievements in a number of areas which are encouraging. Some of these include:

Housing Services

Ongoing development of garage sites

Review of RTB Receipts

Review of Community Alarms

Review of S106 monies

Housing Away Day

Homelessness & Allocations

Locata IT procurement/enhancements

Brookfield Close denats

Joint working on Domestic Abuse

Direct document delivery system for Housing Register

Repairs & Maintenance

Mobilisation of the new Axis R&M contract

Compliance Review

Keystone integration

Training on water hygiene, asbestos and CDM Regs

New improved lettings standard

Tenancy Services

Introduction of CAMP Policy

Subscription to Housemark

Photobook - allowing tenants to report issues directly

Fully staffed estates management team

Improved working with Corporate Enforcement

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Housing is a large and complex service area that has experienced a number of significant challenges in recent times some of which will require resources, staff time, training and development, support from Members and residents. All of these will play a key part in order to bring about the required change and ensure we are providing homes of a decent standard that meet the needs of our tenants and provide safe and affordable living in the borough.

Below is a list of some of those challenges:



Budget pressures



Universal Credit



Development Plans



Compliance

THE FUTURE

There are many challenges ahead some of which are complex and will require significant input and time to deliver. However, we are working towards getting our house in order and with any quality home is starts with a solid foundation.



The Next Six Months

Therefore, it is our intention over the next six months to start the work on our foundations. To be able to be in the best position possible to achieve our aim of a flagship housing service we need to ensure we have the right people in the right position doing to the right job in the right way!

Operational Service Review

We will be undertaking an operational service review focusing on two key sections within housing:



Estates Management



Sheltered Housing

Whilst it is accepted that there are a number of challenges facing housing, some of which have been identified in this report, it is our belief that the service we deliver to our tenants, residents, partners and Members is one of the most important areas of business. If we get that element right i.e. the foundations, then we will be in the best place possible to be able to drive forward some of the key challenges and improvements required to reach our aim of being a flagship service.

The Sheltered Housing Review will focus on:

- Scheme Audits - Each scheme will be inspected, and a list of improvements, replacements and requirements will be developed to inform the individual needs of each scheme. This will take account of staff consultations and residents views.
- Roles & Responsibilities - ensuring that the sheltered staff are supported, have the necessary tools to be able to do their jobs effectively and they comply with service standards.
- Document/Process Audit - all documents to be reviewed and updated or introduced where required.

- **Engagement** - It is essential to bring back the love into our sheltered schemes and engagement is key to this being achieved. A new engagement program is being developed and below is just some of the new things that will be introduced over the coming months:

- ✓ Sheltered Newsletter
- ✓ Adopt A Scheme
- ✓ Scheme Welcome Book
- ✓ Tenants survey
- ✓ Scheme of the Year
- ✓ Events & activities
- ✓ Regular meet the team including the Director

The Estate Management Review will focus on:

- Estate Inspections - Each housing block will be inspected by the Director and a programme of activity agreed. It is important that we set the standard and despite a lack of resources there are improvements that can be made which will be addressed through this process. This will not interfere or hinder with any compliance or planned maintenance but will work alongside these to ensure residents voices are heard and we begin our journey to providing those decent, safe, affordable homes in thriving communities that are respected and appreciated.
- Roles & Responsibilities - ensuring that the staff are supported, have the necessary tools to be able to do their jobs effectively and they comply with service standards.
- Document/Process Audit - all documents to be reviewed and updated or introduced where required.
- Arrears Review - understanding the impact of Universal Credit and reviewing our processes to ensure we are proactive and robust in this area.
- **Engagement** - A new engagement program will be developed working with Tenants Talkback over the coming months:

- ✓ Community Days of Action
- ✓ Tenants survey
- ✓ Housing Awards

Communication & Reporting

As identified in this report communication is a vital part of the journey towards a flag ship housing service. Sometimes it is challenging meeting all the priorities and maintaining a robust and effective communication and reporting process. However, it is important that housing is open, honest and accountable ensuring that Members, stakeholders and residents are kept informed.

It is recognised that due to pressures of introducing the new operational arrangements and the resource required to ensure the procurement for the new repairs and maintenance contract with Axis was a success, communications between all parties including residents was not as strong as it could have been. This will improve greatly with them moving into the new town hall alongside the housing repairs teams.

We will need to ensure that appropriate levels of communication and reports are established and maintained, and this will form part of the work over the six months to ensure this happened. It will include:

-  Formal meetings with the Chair of Housing on a regular basis.
-  Weekly senior management meetings reviewing the past week, any issues over the weekend and what lies ahead for the coming week.
-  Regular meetings with Axis which will be operationally on a weekly basis and contract review/performance monthly.
-  A program of briefings for Members on key areas of business.
-  A robust program of staff meetings including regular 1-2-1's, team meetings, and manager meetings.

The above list is some of the improvements that will be made in addition to the regular meetings with sheltered residents and tenants talkback.

Audit Recommendations

We will continue to review and implement internal audit recommendations, focusing on priority areas such as Compliance.

CONCLUSION

It is believed that the work detailed in this report can be achieved within six months and will set the foundation for building a flagship housing service to be proud of. There will also be a new staff recognition scheme introduced in order boost staff morale and reward those staff who do a good job.

Strong and effective leadership is vital in achieving our aims and this is a focus for the newly appointed Director. A new weekly Senior Management Tasking has been established whereby the Director will meet with senior staff to consider what has happened in the previous week, any issues arising over the weekend and priorities/plans for the forthcoming week. This helps keep focus, ensure all managers are informed, any issues are addressed in a timely and effective manner, and collaboration is encouraged.

There is also work underway to deliver a series of Member briefings whereby Managers and Team Leaders will present to Members key briefings on what is being achieved. This will assist with keeping Members informed of activities being undertaken by housing services teams.

The work with AXIS is progressing well, but this is a new contract and will need a great deal of effort by Council staff to ensure benefits are realised and this will be a major priority.

Schedules detailing progress against targets will be established and shared, subject to confidentiality, in an easily digestible format.