

Agenda Item IMD1

INDIVIDUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION

REFERENCE IMD: 2024/06

TITLE	IEMD – Competence and Conduct for Social Housing Managers
DECISION TO BE MADE BY	Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Housing - Stephen Conway
DATE, MEETING ROOM and TIME	19 March 2024 LGF3, 11:30am
WARD	(All Wards);
DIRECTOR / KEY OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framalico

PURPOSE OF REPORT (Inc Strategic Outcomes)

To approve Wokingham Borough Council and Loddon Homes' response to the Government's consultation titled 'Competence and Conduct Standard for social housing', for submission by 4th April 2024. This consultation seeks feedback from local authorities regarding government's proposals to introduce a new, regulatory standard relating to the competence and conduct of social housing staff.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive Member for Housing and Partnerships authorises Wokingham Borough Council to respond to this consultation as set out in Enclosure I of this report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report summarises the response which Wokingham Borough Council intends to submit to central Government through this consultation. The proposed regulatory standard aims to enhance the service quality with the introduction of a code of conduct policy within the social housing sector. Our proposed response addresses concerns including funding, timeframes for qualification attainment, procedures for non-compliance, training requirements, time commitment, wellbeing for staff and requests more guidance on the proposed code of conduct.

Background

The government is committed to ensuring that every social housing resident has access to decent, safe, and secure housing, along with high-quality services from their landlords. However, shortcomings in these areas persist for many residents across the country. In response, the government has intensified efforts to improve standards in the social housing sector, particularly following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and the avoidable death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020 due to black mould in his social housing flat, the need to improve standards and professionalism within the sector became an urgent government priority.

Evidence from the Grenfell Inquiry highlighted deficiencies in staff training and professionalism, with reports of residents' concerns being disregarded and unacceptable behavior from some staff members. Additionally, poor leadership within social housing organisations has been identified as a concern. A review of professional training and development in the sector concluded that a major culture change was necessary, with a focus on qualifications and standards for senior housing staff.

As a result, the Social Housing (Regulation) Act was amended to propose a new Competence and Conduct Standard for staff in the social rented sector, including requirements for senior housing managers and executives. The consultation sets out detailed policy proposals for this new standard, including draft directions to the Regulator and a draft policy statement outlining qualification requirements for senior managers and executives. Key elements of the proposed standard include the development of written policies for managing and developing staff skills and conduct, as well as the adoption of appropriate codes of conduct within social housing organisations.

Business Case (including Analysis of Issues)

The Council's stance throughout our responses to the consultation, is that whilst we broadly agree with the proposals, the government should provide more prescriptive guidance on the proposed reforms. This would ensure consistency and clarity in standards across the sector.

The Council has several concerns that will be raised as part of our response to this consultation. This includes:

1. Uncertainty in Case of Non-Compliance:

Ensuring clarity on actions housing providers should take in case of non-compliance with qualification requirements is paramount. Without clear guidance, there is a risk of inconsistency, potentially disrupting service delivery.

2. Proportionality of Training Requirements:

We request the government provides clarity on ensuring that training requirements align with practical needs without imposing undue burden. Setting qualifications too high could limit the pool of capable candidates for these roles.

3. Staff Well-being:

Mandating additional qualifications may add to workload and stress levels, potentially leading to burnout. Our consultation response requests that the

government acknowledge capacity issues for senior staff as part of the development of these proposals.

4. Feasibility of Time Commitment:

Given existing workload pressures, our response requests that the feasibility of time commitments within existing capacity is assessed to enable qualification attainment in tandem with current workloads. Adjustments to workload distribution or additional support may be necessary.

These concerns have been detailed in our proposed responses to the consultation in Enclosure I of this report.

Overall, implementing the Competence and Conduct Standard for social rented sector staff is an important step to improve service quality. However, we request that the government addresses a variety of areas. This includes further clarity on the proportionality of requirements, considering staff well-being, accessing to grant funding and providing clear guidance on how to implement the code of conduct.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£16,400	Shortfall – £16,400	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£16,400	Shortfall - £16,400	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The financial information outlined in this section is the result of a high-level review to understand the costs to the Council if this policy is implemented without further change. It is important to note that the submission of this consultation response itself will have no financial impact to the Council. However, we have detailed the calculated impact should the law be enacted as this will form part of our consultation response related to the government's request for an impact assessment. The results of our high-level review are included below:

The average cost is calculated by observing lower and upper bound cost range to identify the cost per financial year (year 2 and year 3). This is because the proposals do not become law until April 2025 (year 2).

The high-level review, completed using the figures issued in impact assessment of the consultation suggest that the cost per year to the Council for implementing these proposals from April 2025 is estimated to be £16,400.

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including property and priorities?)

The implementation of the Competence and Conduct Standard for Social Rented Sector Staff will indeed have a significant impact on cross-council functions, particularly within the housing sector. The substantial financial investment required for implementing these new requirements would reduce the resources available for building and maintaining our social housing stock in the borough. The potential impacts of these proposed changes have been detailed below:

- **Financial Constraints:** The estimated cost range (£23,840 to £41,760) for qualification requirements represents a significant financial burden for the council. Funding these qualifications from the Housing Revenue Account would divert resources away from critical housing initiatives, potentially impacting the council's ability to address housing needs within the community.

- **Staff well-being and capacity:** Mandating additional qualifications may increase workload and stress levels for housing staff, leading to potential burnout. This can negatively affect staff morale, productivity, and the overall quality of housing services provided to residents.
- **Compliance Challenges:** Uncertainty surrounding non-compliance with qualification requirements poses challenges for housing providers. Clear guidance from the government is essential to ensure consistency and prevent disruptions in service delivery across councils.
- **Proportionality of Training:** It's crucial to ensure that training requirements align with practical needs without imposing undue burden. Setting qualifications too high could limit the pool of capable candidates for housing roles, impacting the council's ability to recruit and retain qualified staff.

Public Sector Equality Duty
 As part of this decision, due regard has been taken to the Public Sector Equality Duty. The equalities implications of the recommendation were discussed, and an Initial Equality Impact Assessment (Stage 1) document has been completed accordingly as per Enclosure 2.

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES	
Director – Resources and Assets	
Monitoring Officer	
Leader of the Council	

For Highways use only	
<i>If your item is not about highways matter you do not need to complete the Town and Parish Council information or the Local Ward Member information</i>	
Town and Parish Councils	
Local Ward Members	

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
 That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for this item of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as appropriate.

List of Background Papers
Enclosure I – Proposed Consultation Responses
Enclosure II – Stage 1 Equalities and Impacts Assessment

Private: Information that contains a small amount of sensitive data which is essential to communicate with an individual but doesn't require to be sent via secure methods.

Appendix 1 - Exempt Part 2

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