

TITLE	Officer Response to Recommendations of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Tuesday, 21 March 2023
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Simon Dale
LEAD MEMBER	Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Housing - Stephen Conway

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report sets out the Officer responses to the 12 Recommendations of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group. The full report of the Task and Finish Group can be found in Annex A to this report.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) Approve the Officers' responses to the Recommendations of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group, set out in subsection 1.6 of this report;
- 2) Note the report of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group, contained as Annex A to this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group was established by the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 25 May 2022. The Group has met on 7 occasions and has engaged with a range of stakeholders including the Executive Member for Housing, tenants of social housing, the Association of Retained Council Housing, and the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel. The Group surveyed tenants of Preferred Registered Providers (PRPs), and received over 165 responses which helped to provide a snapshot of the concerns and issues of our residents.

The report and Recommendations of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group were presented to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 March 2023, and the Committee resolved that the Group's 12 Recommendations to the Executive, as amended, be approved.

This report provides the Officer responses to the Recommendations made by the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group. Overall, the recommendations are supported by Officers subject to commentary on how the Recommendations might be achieved in practice.

BACKGROUND

1.1 The Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group consisted of Councillors Shirley Boyt (Chair), Chris Johnson (Vice-Chair), Laura Blumenthal, Andy Croy and Rebecca Margetts.

1.2 The Group agreed the following Terms of reference:

- To look at the service provided by each of the Council's preferred registered providers (PRPs) and to compare performance with WBC's housing service, WBC housing companies and industry best practice.
- To recommend minimum service levels which tenants will expect of PRPs and WBC housing.
- To consider the Council's current approach to appointing and monitoring Preferred Registered Providers.
- To consider the legal framework underpinning this process.
- To consider the views of local stakeholders.
- To consider the views of Housing Associations and WBC's own social housing stakeholders.
- To consider examples of best practice.
- To consider how tenant satisfaction, housing provider performance and other KPIs are measured by PRPs, WBC and other social housing providers.
- To consider how appointment of Preferred Registered Providers could be improved to create a single excellent level of service, regardless of whether a resident uses a housing association or WBC provision.
- To produce a final report to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and, subsequently, the Executive with recommendations for improvement.

1.3 The Group considered evidence from the following stakeholders:

- Steve Bowers (Chair of the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel)
- Councillor Stephen Conway (Executive Member for Housing)
- Jonathan Cox (Director of Data and Business Intelligence at Housemark)
- Paul Price (CEO of the Association of Retained Council Housing)
- Rhian Hayes (WBC - Assistant Director Economic Development and Growth)
- Frances Haywood (WBC - Head of Strategic Housing)
- Zulfiqar Mulak (WBC - Interim Assistant Director Neighbourhoods and Communities)
- Simon Price (WBC - Assistant Director Neighbourhoods and Communities)
- Tenants of PRPs within the Borough via survey
- Snapshot information from WBC Councillors via email.

1.4 The Task and Finish Group report was submitted to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 March 2023. The report provides the Group's Recommendations to the Executive, set out in Annex A.

1.5 Many of the Group's recommendations are covered within the new partnership agreement which will be in place from April onwards, whilst others are part of the

work of the Strategic Housing Team. As part of the selection of the Council's new Preferred Partners, which was agreed at the February 2023 Executive meeting, officers have already explored some of the recommendations of the Task & Finish Group with our partners and will continue to do so.

1.6 The Recommendations and Officer responses are set out below.

Recommendations	Officer Response
<p>WBC assist PRPs to facilitate the establishment of a tenant support forum within the Borough, made up of tenants from each registered provider, using TLIP as a model, insofar as the forum will be led by tenants rather than PRPs or WBC. The tenants will draw up the terms of reference for the Panel.</p>	<p>The forum would need to discuss collective issues across all RP residents, rather than discussing issues with specific individual landlords. The emphasis needs to be on the PRPs to drive forward a wider tenants' forum where there is an appetite to do so, with the Council supporting this as an action. Facilitating a tenant support forum will be included as an action to be explored in more detail within the PRP Partnership Agreement. In conjunction with this, the Council will liaise with the PRPs to ensure that tenants have a voice to raise local issues to their housing providers.</p>
<p>Any existing PRP operated tenants' forum should broadly align with the terms of reference as agreed via recommendation 1, and PRPs should be encouraged to ensure that they have a tenant representative on the wider tenants' forum.</p>	<p>PRPs are using different ways to engage with their tenants. Further discussions will take place with the PRPs as to the best way to engage with their residents. An action on facilitating a tenant support form will be included in the PRP Partnership Agreement and will cover the point about the PRP to have a tenant representative on the wider forum if this is deemed appropriate. Where there are existing tenants' forum in place the Council will encourage these to broadly align with recommendation 1.</p>
<p>PRPs support tenants to develop a tenants' charter that builds on the Government's social housing charter recommendations during the first three years of the partnership agreement.</p>	<p>Following the Social Housing White Paper, the Government has introduced a new charter for social housing residents which all RPs will need to adhere to. The charter emphasises the need for more tenant engagement. Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) are also being introduced which will enable the wider public to see how RPs are performing in the areas of tenant engagement. The Council is asking for a copy of the each of the PRPs TSMs and will review these on an ongoing basis as part of performance managing</p>

	the PRP agreement. PRPs will be encouraged to deliver best practice in terms of tenant engagement, and this will be captured as part of the review process of each PRP.
PRPs maintain up to date named local, community neighbourhood contacts within the Borough, whose details will be provided to tenants.	The Council is aware of the hesitancy of the RPs to give out contact details due to staff changes and information becoming quickly outdated. The Council will include this recommendation within the PRP Partnership Agreement to include contacts for the local neighbourhood officer and where possible a named contact within the repairs team.
PRPs provide and maintain up to date details (email and phone) for a minimum of one named person who will be the point of contact for officers and Ward Councillors in the event of problems arising.	The Council will include this in the PRP Partnership Agreement to include contacts for senior management regarding repairs and neighbourhood issues, where issues need to be escalated by Members on behalf of their residents.
PRPs provide Borough specific performance data to WBC on a regular basis. The specifics of the data required will be determined by WBC.	This is already included within the PRP Partnership Agreement and forms part of the quarterly review process for each PRP. Specific data (including TSMs and CORE data returns covering nominations) will be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis as appropriate. Following the initial 3 year period of the partnership agreement, performance by the PRP partnership will be reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
PRPs work constructively with WBC to secure affordable provision from developers, over and above Section 106 provision, to meet the needs of WBC's priority groups.	This is already included as an action within the PRP Partnership Agreement, with an expectation that each PRP will contribute to the provision of additional affordable accommodation, above and beyond that secured via s106 agreements, for use by priority groups, such as temporary accommodation, care leaver accommodation and accommodation for vulnerable adults with additional needs.
PRPs provide details including address, type of property and type of tenure of all the properties they hold in the Borough. These details will be updated annually.	This will be included as an action within the PRP Partnership Agreement. The data will be required annually. The Council will ensure that any information shared from this data is in line with GDPR requirements.

<p>PRPs provide full details to housing officers of their forthcoming development programmes on a quarterly basis.</p>	<p>This information is currently being provided by each PRP. However, further information is being requested from each PRP detailing each property on their development programme in the Borough so that the Council's housing needs team are aware of forthcoming properties they are able to allocate to, which enables better use of the able affordable housing stock in the Borough. This additional data is being requested from April 2023 and quarterly moving forward.</p>
<p>PRPs provide details of the tenants' charter, tenants' forum and contact details of local operational contacts within the welcome packs that they provide to new tenants.</p>	<p>The Council will explore what information is given to new residents. If appropriate, a request will ask for the PRPs to include this recommended information to their tenants.</p>
<p>PRPs resolve complaints and disputes in a timely and satisfactory manner. Where the tenant remains unsatisfied, details of the Ombudsman escalation process should be provided, and tenants should be informed that their local Ward Councillor(s) may be able to support and advocate for them in this process.</p>	<p>The Council will include this in the PRP Partnership Agreement and will request information on complaints and disputes as part of the data collection.</p>
<p>PRPs ensure that service charges are proportionate and transparent; they represent good value for money; the service being charged for is being delivered. Estimated charges should be avoided but where they are unavoidable any over-payments will be refunded promptly.</p>	<p>Service charges are governed by individual tenancy agreements and leases, and the common law and legislation in this area. This includes the definition of 'service charge' in the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, which links service charges to actual costs. In practice this means that service charges can only cover actual costs and must be accounted for to ensure that they are proportionate and transparent. Rents are governed by the Housing Regulator through a national rent standard formula.</p> <p>The Council will liaise with any PRP to address concerns around service charges where these are not resolved by the PRP and their residents. Specifically, over payments that are not refunded or where they are not refunded promptly and to encourage changes in practice.</p>

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)	Nil	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	Yes	Revenue

Other Financial Information

This would include officer time, where officers were being asked to help facilitate a Tenants' Forum with PRPs. Many of the Group's recommendations were being picked up as part of the ongoing work with the RP partnership, with expectations of the RPs outlined in the new partnership agreement. There is now a dedicated resource within the team being a Housing Partnerships and Projects Officer to manage the PRPs in particular. Officers may look to utilise developer contributions for affordable housing on joint projects with the RP partners where they are contributing to a priority need, such as specialist or care leaver accommodation. Any decisions around the spend of these monies would seek approval through our existing governance processes.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

The Task and Finish Group engaged with a range of stakeholders, and surveyed tenants of our current Preferred Registered Providers within the Borough. Selection of our Preferred Registered Providers went through a thorough interview and selection process.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard has been given to WBC's duties under the Equality Act.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030

There will be no negative impacts on WBC's Climate Emergency goals and ambitions as a result of this report.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

List of Background Papers

Preferred Partners Selection Executive Report (February 2023)

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