

Housing & Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel

22 January 2025

Air Quality Strategy



Main points for consideration



- Government requires Local Authorities to produce an Air Quality Strategy (AQS) where there are no Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA).
- New Forest District Council revoked it's remaining AQMA in Lyndhurst in September 2023.
- The draft AQS details local sources of pollution and identifies 6 priority areas to improve local air quality.
- Relevant stakeholders involved in developing the draft AQS include development control, public health, climate change, transport and industry.
- A steering group will be formed with relevant stakeholders to agree annual work plans to implement the AQS.
- The Council has a statutory duty to review and assess local air quality against Government set air quality objectives and this work will continue alongside the work to implement the AQS.

Implications/Issues to consider



- The AQS will extend beyond achieving compliance with the air quality objectives by:
 - identifying local issues and concerns
 - understanding of the impacts of air quality in the New Forest on public health
 - working collaboratively with partners across the district and local region on measures which could improve air quality
- Any resulting AQS actions are currently not funded within existing budgets.
- All available funding streams including those from Government, such as Defra air quality grants, will be considered to aid implementation of the AQS.
- Local authorities are waiting for details of Defra air quality grants, but previous successful grants included assessments and actions which supported the implementation of AQS work.

Recommendations Proposed



That Panel:

- Consider the draft Air Quality Strategy and support the process for implementing an AQS for the New Forest District Council.
- Support the recommendation to Cabinet on 5 February 2025, for approval to consult on the draft Air Quality Strategy.



Corporate Plan Performance

Saqib Yasin

Main Points for consideration



- The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) originate from our Corporate Plan 2024-2028 and are presented in dashboard form
- As an organisation, we encourage a culture of transparency. We have committed to publish quarterly dashboards of KPIs. (as per our Performance Management Framework)
- The KPIs and targets themselves have been extensively considered and are not now subject to further review or change
- The dashboard is flagged for those measures under the remit of the Housing and Communities panel

Implications/Issues to consider



- Homelessness Duty cases and households in emergency accommodation are linked. Although performance has dipped last quarter, it started from a strong baseline position. There is no indication of a continued downward trend.
- Number of families with children under 16 in external emergency shared accommodation over 6 weeks. Small numbers meant this was amber in numerical terms in Q1. Performance back on track Q2.
- CCTV – a number of new cameras have been deployed, and this is reflected in our spend.
- There are very high compliance rates for our five safety and compliance management, Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs).
- The number of Appletree Careline services to customers continues to fluctuate against a revised set of challenging stretch targets.

Recommendations Proposed



- None for onward action
- Note: Continued inclusion of commentary / narrative for each measure is encouraged. It provides useful context and focus for discussions. This will also provide mitigation for any areas underperforming and forewarn PH.



Community Grants 2025/26

Main Points for consideration



1. A full review of the annual community grant programme was undertaken in summer 2024 and adopted for this year's process. An additional £40k was added to the existing budget for the Task and Finish (T&F) Group to decide how to distribute.
2. The T&F Group reviewed the Councillor Community Engagement grants, which have not been reviewed for some time, and recommend increasing from £600 to £1,000pa
3. Revenue and Capital Community grants applications were reviewed with recommendations, using the recently approved changes to the schemes to simplify administration
4. To continue supporting two community transport schemes, in partnership with HCC and Community First Wessex, until 31 August 2025, where a full review and procurement exercise will commence
5. Panel are to consider the suitability of a community lottery scheme to run alongside the community grants programme to provide additional financial support to local organisations and groups.

Implications/Issues to consider



1. The T&F Group decided to allocate the additional £40k by increasing Councillor Community Engagement grants, revenue grants budget and set-up costs of a community lottery scheme, should it be deemed suitable to adopt.
2. Increasing Councillor Community Engagement grants will enable Councillors to provide more support to their local areas, increase local engagement, and provide support for smaller grant amounts, often ineligible for other schemes.
3. Revenue Grants – changes mean that 3-year funding agreements will be developed and agreed with those in Band A to support long term projects and promote closer working
4. Community Transport schemes to continue until 31 August 2025 for Group Hire and Call & Go. The Wheels to Work funding and scheme was to end due to HCC originally planning to end their funding. **However**, HCC have since reversed their decision and will extend their funding until 31 August 2025 so the scheme may continue. The NFDC Full community grant budget is allocated. Officers working with HCC and Community First Wessex on assumption our funding is to end and what alternatives are available to support the scheme, if viable.
5. The merits of a community lottery scheme. Could generate up to an additional £67k to support local groups (which we approve if included), and over 120 local authorities operate this scheme, including several Hampshire based authorities, but will require initial set up costs and resources, and support from local groups

Recommendations Proposed



That Panel approve the Task & Finish Group recommendations

1. To increase Councillor Engagement Grants from £600 to £1,000 from 1 April 2025
2. To approve community grants of £152,500 in revenue grants and £77,871 in capital grants.
3. To approve community transport grants of £44,359 for Call & Go and Group Hire.
4. That the Panel further consider the adoption of a Community Lottery scheme, making a recommendation to Cabinet to either:
 - Request Officers produce a detailed report on how a community lottery scheme could be successfully run in the district, and the short to long-term implications for the Council, and for the report to progress through the Council's decision-making process. **OR**
 - Not advance the scheme at the current time.



Housing Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy 2025-2029

Main Points for consideration



- This report introduces a new housing strategy and policy framework (within landlord services) to prevent and tackle ASB in the Council's housing stock.
- Between 2023/2024 Housing Services received 160 reported cases of Anti-Social Behaviour, which represents 31 cases per 1,000 homes.
- This strategy and related policies responds to a changing legislative and regulatory landscape, as well as feedback from our residents on how we have managed previous reports of ASB, and how living through ASB feels to our residents.
- The Council has developed a strategy to deliver effective prevention and support initiatives under the following priorities:
 - a) Preventing and early intervention:** publishing a new ASB Policy, Hate Crime Policy and a Good Neighbourhood Policy
 - b) Managing risk and supporting victims:** actions will be determined via a risk assessment or harm matrix whilst making it clear what types of reports will be considered "anti-social", "unreasonable" or a "nuisance".
 - c) Working in partnership:** building on the work already undertaken in our district through effective community safety partnership arrangements, including the longstanding and effective work of the Safer New Forest Partnership.
 - d) Putting tenants first:** record, track, and monitor outcomes of reports and ensure the tenant engagement service are actively involved in service improvement.
- Interventions identified within our strategy will pay close attention to the social demographic profile in the New Forest and effectively target and support groups who may be disproportionately impacted by ASB.

Implications/Issues to consider

- The Regulator of Social Housing & Housing Ombudsman Service has strengthened their investigative approach, and their response to failings. Landlords have been notified of the increase in expected standards in a series of special reports from the Housing Ombudsman, who have published complaints where evidence of maladministration has been found, with a large focus on ASB complaints.
- The Ombudsman has recommended that landlords provide a clear statement of their approach to ASB and the way it intends to work with residents and relevant, organisations to combat what is largely a social behavioural problem. It is clear that landlords should **support victims** and follow **a risk-based approach** to reports of ASB.
- Landlords have been repeatedly instructed to formalise their position on reports that don't meet the threshold to be reasonably considered ASB. To reflect this change of approach, a new "How to be a good neighbour" leaflet has been developed, the NFDC website has been updated, and new system processes are being introduced.
- New staff response and case management processes have already been actioned to ensure the Council's operational response to ASB reports mirrors the policy and data requirements of the new regulatory regime.
- A new Neighbourhood Team has been created within existing budgets (led by the Housing ASB & Neighbourhoods Manager) this team will focus solely on the individual response to ASB & Neighbourhood reports as well as being a visible presence on estates and communal buildings.



Recommendations Proposed



- Panel Members are asked to consider the proposed policies and make recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness who will be required to approve the policies. The Policies are required in the shorter-term at a service level to improve service delivery and outcomes.
- The ASB strategy will inform a longer-term framework of service delivery, partnering with local agencies and support in aligning our goals and resources with the corporate plan objectives. It is asked that panel members recommends to Council the approval of the draft ASB Strategy and to carry out formal public consultation.
- Once the strategy is fully adopted the Policies will be updated in line with any changes required and will be continuously reviewed.
- In accordance with this aim, Panel Members are asked to consider the proposed ASB Strategy and make recommendations to Cabinet.



Housing Landlord Condensation, Damp and Mould Policy

Main Points for consideration



- This report introduces a new Condensation, Damp, and Mould Policy for Housing (Landlord Services).
- In the 12-month period commencing Autumn 2022, the Housing Service received 546 reports of damp/mould, and in the 12-month period commencing Autumn 2023, a further 400 were received.
- The policy recognises and acknowledges the serious impact damp and mould can have on people, both physically and mentally, and seeks to remedy this at the earliest opportunity by introducing:
 - a) Customer Contact Triage Workflow, Script and Risk Matrix;
 - b) Educational material and tenancy support for tenants;
 - c) Website Form for e-reporting and automated email responses;
 - d) Training for key staff in identification and prevention and regular topic feature in staff briefings;
 - e) Database to record, track, and monitor outcomes of reports and insight on repeat reporters;
 - f) Use of independent professionals when warranted in complex cases.
- Certain individuals may be at increased risk of the health impacts of damp and mould exposure, and through our health needs risk-based approach we will identify and prioritise those individuals most at risk and prioritise our resources to respond accordingly.

Implications/Issues to consider



- The Housing Ombudsman has seen complaints about damp and mould increase significantly in the past few years and called for a 'zero tolerance' approach. The inquest into the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak and widespread media reporting has pushed the issue to the top of the agenda.
- Awaab's Law, via the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, requires landlords to comply with new requirements and, if they fail to do so, tenants will be able to hold their landlords to account by taking legal action through the courts for a breach of contract (tenancy).
- The Council's complaints procedure now aligns with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, meaning we can deal with Pre-Action Protocol letters alleging disrepair through the complaints process.
- An annual budget of circa £60k funded by the HRA is required to support this policy and this will be agreed as part of the Council's annual budget setting process.

Recommendations Proposed



- Panel Members are asked to consider the proposed Condensation, Damp, and Mould Policy and make recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness who will be required to approve the policy.



Social Housing Regulation Act Progress

Main Points for consideration



- This report outlines the Council's progress towards meeting the Social Regulation Act (2023) and the Act's consumer standards which came into effect on the 1st April 2024 and is presented to the Panel for scrutiny, accountability, and transparency as part of the Council's governance arrangements.
- This report gives:
 - assurance of satisfactory progress towards meeting the requirements of the consumer standards and the Council's current strengths and potential weaknesses as it prepares for regulatory inspection from the Social Housing Regulator for the first time,
 - feedback from our residents as reflected in the high scoring Tenant Satisfaction Measures, taking account of the learning opportunities presented by complaints and tenant engagement approaches.
- The Council is undertaking a gap analysis against the consumer standards and forming a detailed action plan to address the gaps in strategy, policy, and performance to deliver compliant and high standard homes and housing service to tenants that are tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable tenants with appropriate support being put in place.
- Building on the partnership work already undertaken in our district through effective stakeholder engagement to build a robust evidence base to prepare for inspection and better service delivery across internal departments, external stakeholders, tenants and with other landlords and councils.

Implications/Issues to consider

- The Social Regulation Act (2023) requires landlords to deliver against all the consumer standards which in turn improves outcomes for our tenants, and mitigates longer term legal, financial and reputational risk to the Council. The self-assessment and activities being undertaken to prepare for the inspection insure against the possibility of the Council being unprepared for regulatory inspection and not achieving a compliant grade.
- The Landlord service is delivering a good service to its residents as evidenced by the Tenant Satisfaction Measures and a non-compliant grade is unlikely, there are IT systems for example under development including a Corporate CRM system which will allow our tenants to self-serve which remain in development as part of the Transformation Programme. The regulator will expect staff to make the systems we have already work effectively for tenants recognising that most landlords are in a constant change cycle.
- There are a significant number of policy and practice improvements that need to be planned and implemented over the next twelve months including tenant data collation and analysis, governance arrangements particularly in relation to tenant engagement, equality and diversity with a focus on vulnerable tenants and tailoring services, learning from complaints and implementing any Ombudsman recommendations across landlord functions, contract management, stakeholder management, and collating an evidence base and context document of around 250 documents, policies and audit reports for submission when the time comes for inspection.
- The reality is it can't all be done at the same time and priority-based Action Plan that is transparent and resourced is the desired outcome from the gap analysis work. The aim is to have an approved plan in place by June 2025.

Recommendations Proposed

- Panel Members are asked to consider the progress made to date in meeting the requirements of the Social Housing Regulation Act (2023) through our approach and work against the consumer standards, action planning and learning from complaints and make recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness on our preparedness for Regulatory Inspection and ambition to achieve a compliant grading from the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH).
- The Panel support a recommendation to put preparedness for regulatory inspection on the Corporate Risk Register to ensure Corporate oversight is maintained even though our landlord functions are of a good standard, and the risk of being found non-compliant by the regulator against the consumer standards is currently low. The risk is the uncertain inspection timetable and the short notice approach of the regulator whilst we are in the process of compiling our evidence base and making the required policy and practice changes in the landlord functions.
- The resultant Consumer Standard Action Plan will inform a longer-term work programme of service improvement including improving systems, producing new policies, and initiating a range of service improvement projects and aligning our service improvement goals and resources with the corporate plan objectives.

Housing Revenue Account Budget and the Housing Public Sector Capital Expenditure Programme for 2025/26



Main Points for consideration



The report sets out a proposed balanced HRA budget for 2025/26, including decisions to be taken on dwelling rents, garage rents, shared ownership and service charge.

The proposed budget includes uplifted maintenance budgets meaning that a total of £18.939 million will be spent on maintaining tenant's properties in 2025/26. This proposal supports the Council's Corporate Plan commitments and responsibilities to its tenants.

Budgets of £1.5m and £1.87m are proposed for Fire Safety & Statutory compliance, and Decarbonisation respectively.

The proposed Capital Programme totals £30.820m, including spend of £15.2m on the continued development and acquisition of new Council dwellings. The Capital programme requires external loan finance of £12.865m, with the cost of this borrowing covered in the medium-long term through the rents payable.

The budget is supported by a 30 year business plan forecast and spending decisions taken within this proposed budget support the financial sustainability of the HRA over this longer term period through the protection of the minimum reserve balance and an appropriate level of interest cover.

Implications/Issues to consider



- Maximum rent uplift recommended to maximise the upgrades of properties.
- The report recommends increasing expenditure on housing maintenance and capital programmes to escalate work to ensure compliance with Housing Regulatory and safety standards, and energy efficiency targets. This proposed increase is in line with 30-year projections and the HRA's capacity for fiscal borrowing and debt increases to accommodate the programme.
- The proposed uplifted rent (in line with government guidelines) and service charges, as well as partial re-financing of the HRA settlement loan enable increased expenditure on housing maintenance and capital programmes. This increased expenditure ensures compliance with Housing Regulatory Standards. The proposed budget is supported with 30 year projections and potential for fiscal borrowing and debt increases to accommodate the programme.

Tenant Involvement Group

Members of the TIG were given the opportunity to review, scrutinise and challenge senior managers on the proposed HRA budget and report for 2025/26.

Members of the TIG understand the recommended rent increase and, notwithstanding the recognised impact on tenants, realise the necessity and welcome continued input on the budget and budget setting. The TIG also understand that the majority of Councils and providers of social housing will be increasing rents by the allowed 2.7%.

Tenants feel the Council continue to take the 'tenant voice' and impact on tenants into account within budget setting and providing housing services.

The TIG group appreciate the Council's proposed focus on tenants' homes, reflected in the budgets outlined for both reactive maintenance and planned work, alongside a continued and appropriate focus on sustainability through the Council's decarbonisation and energy efficiency programmes.

Tenants also recognise the need for new Council homes and support the proposed budget to continue to provide much needed affordable homes in our communities.

Members of the TIG are reassured with the explanation from Officers of the Council, alongside answers to questions from the TIG, that the proposed budget and spend on tenants' homes and services has been thoroughly considered to ensure the right spend for both tenants and the Council.



Recommendations Proposed

1. that from 07 April 2025, an increase in dwelling rents of 2.7% from the 2024/25 weekly rent level, in accordance with Government guidelines, be agreed;
2. that from 07 April 2025, an increase in garage rents of 2.7% from the 2024/25 weekly rent level be agreed;
3. that from 07 April 2025, an increase in shared ownership property rents of 3.2% from the 2024/25 weekly rent level, in accordance with Government guidelines of RPI +0.5%, be agreed, and that the weekly rent of one additional property sold under previous legislation be increased by 2.7%;
4. that from 07 April 2025 Service Charges will continue to reflect actual charges and following a reduction in window cleaning and utility costs, these respective charges will be reduced;
5. that the HRA budget, as set out in Appendix 1 of this report, be agreed; and
6. that a Housing Capital Programme to 2027/28, as set out in Appendix 4, be agreed.





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