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**Scrutiny Working Group – Environment, Housing and Communities**

**Social Housing Green Paper – 15 October 2018**

**In attendance**

Cllr Barry Anderson (Chair)  
Cllr Pauleen Grahame  
Cllr Asghar Khan (until 1:05pm)  
Cllr Mary Harland  
Cllr Peter Gruen

Councillor Debra Coupar – Executive Member for Communities was in attendance, along with the following officers:

Neil Evans - Director of Resources & Housing  
Simon Costigan - Chief Officer, Property & Contracts  
Kieran Ferdinand – Policy Officer  
Kevin Mulvaney – Head of Finance  
Jill Wildman – Chief Officer, Housing Management

Steven Courtney - Principal Scrutiny Officer

**Purpose**

1.1 The purpose of this note is to summarise the main discussion points and outcomes from the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) Working Group meeting held on 15 October 2018.

**Background**

1.2 In mid-August 2018, the Government published *The Social Housing Green Paper* for consultation. The consultation running until the 6 November 2018. The launch of the green paper provides an opportunity to submit views on proposals for the future of social housing under the following 5 core themes set out in the green paper:

- Tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities
- Expanding supply and supporting home ownership
- Effective resolution of complaints
- Empowering residents and strengthening the regulator
- Ensuring homes are safe and decent

1.3 Leeds City Council is committed to providing a consultation response to the green paper and at its meeting on 3 October 2018, the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) resolved to provide additional support to the consultation response via a working group meeting.

1.4 The following information was prepared and presented for consideration at the working group meeting:

- Scrutiny Working Group Briefing – A new deal for social housing: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Green Paper
- A new deal for social housing – consultation form.
- Leeds Right to Buy Consultation Response

## **Summary of discussion**

### **1.5 Ensuring homes are safe and decent**

- Decent home standards – are the standards clear and how would the introduction of additional standards be financed? The working group were advised that there are lots of issues regarding standards, with single glazing, partial central heating, currently meeting the decency standard.
- Does the Council go beyond the legal decency standard? Yes, the Council has looked at combatting fuel poverty and insulation. There was a note of caution regarding the disposal of poorer quality housing such as back-to-back's, as this does not necessarily improve housing conditions as the properties become poor quality private rented housing.
- Powers to get private rented sector up to legal standard? The working group was advised that minimal legal standards are low. Private rented sector has grown to 63000 properties compared to 56000 Council stock. With regard to different standards, there is the minimal legal standard, the Council has a higher rental standard. The Leeds Rental Standard is a self-regulating body for Private Rented Sector. It was acknowledged that the three standards can cause confusion.
- Does the Key Performance Indicator of 98% decency target still exist? Private sector below 50%. Current position for Council housing in the high 90%s. Private sector, the condition surveys are done every few years, so lags behind.
- How long would it take to assess if all the Council stock is meeting the standards? – This would be straight forward based on the information held.
- Planning – Concern regarding new homes being built without snap proof locks. It was suggested that this needs to be a basic standards for all new build properties. As this is a planning related matter officers advised that this concern would be passed to City Development.

The working group were supportive of the Leeds draft response expressing the importance of the Government financing any obligations introduced to meet any new standards

## 1.6 Effective resolution of complaints

- Clarity was sought regarding the logic in reducing the time scale for resolving complaints locally from 8 weeks to 4 weeks before referral to the Housing Ombudsman. – The corporate complaints procedure takes approx. 40 days if residents opted to progress through the stages. The Working Group was advised that efforts are made to resolve it before the eight weeks has expired. Reduce timescales may increase cases to the ombudsman.

The working group considered that opportunities should be given to resolve issues locally, and that there is a complaints process in place which extends beyond 4 weeks. That process would need to be changed if a 4 week timescale was to be imposed.

## 1.7 Empowering residents

- Concerns was expressed around league tables and the alignment to Affordable Homes Programme Funding. It was felt that comparisons would be difficult due to differences across authorities between housing stock numbers and type etc. The working group expressed however that the public have a right to transparent and open information.
- Clarity was also sought regarding the accepted common definition of 'affordable' homes, and the importance of the government defining that.
- Stock transfer – this was viewed as something that would reduce democratic accountability and that there is no public or political appetite for stock transfer, it was also noted that Grenfell was part of a stock transfer.

The working group supported the comments in the draft response on this matter.

## 1.8 Tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities

Comments of the Working Group echoed the draft response, adding that social housing should not be perceived as an option of last resort but a choice and a different housing option. Stigma has been an area of focus by the Government previously in the Housing and Planning Green Paper, but proposals have not been seriously brought forward. Concern was also expressed about the London-centric perception of Government and regarding the public's perception of council tenants in general brought about by a small minority of disruptive tenants.

## 1.9 Expanding supply and supporting home ownership

- Clarity was sought regarding the removal of the HRA borrowing cap – The working group was advised that not much is known at this moment in time. The announcement by the Prime Minister was unexpected, but if taken literally councils will be able to finance building out of rental income. Demand for housing and council house income creates certainly for borrowing. There is a sustainable model. Land availability and capacity could be an issue.

- With regard to right to buy, the working group considered that there should be total local flexibility on the use of receipts ring-fenced to social housing. There was frustration expressed regarding the high need for social housing and right to buy. – The Working Group was advised that there have been issues about discount and flexibility in use of receipts and the different pots of funding. It was stated that there needs to be a reform on the rules and discussion between Homes England and Local Authorities regarding a programme which delivers as many homes as possible. The Council sells over 500 per annum, these cannot be replaced at that rate.
- Clarity was sought regarding the support and understanding of local MPs, who understand the challenges in Leeds.

The working group had no further comments on the initial responses outlined in this area.