

## **Report into the review of the Leeds Housing Board**

**October 2024**

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### **Background**

The Leeds Housing Board (LHB) was established in early 2023 to facilitate scrutiny of Housing Leeds activity and the implementation of the Housing Strategy. Two distinct meetings were established, one to review the delivery of services and one to evaluate delivery against the Strategy. These meetings have a separate attendee list with different agendas and objectives.

At the time this review was commissioned, the LHB had been operating for around 12 months and it was felt this was an opportune time to initiate an assessment of progress. The effectiveness of this Board and how tenants and elected members scrutinize activity will also be evaluated by the Social Housing Regulator when their first inspection is initiated.

The regulator will want to see a robust Board structure with an environment suitable for open and frank debate where all attendees feel comfortable to express an opinion and ask searching questions.

How the Leeds Housing Board interacts with the wider scrutiny landscape will also be reviewed. Opinions will be sought as to how the Board communicates with comparable entities and how its relative performance is perceived.

### **Review**

Prior to meeting with Board members, a series of questions were drafted and shared with interviewees. These were shared in good time to enable adequate preparation.

Meetings were more of a discussion rather than taking a formal structure, with the pre-prepared questions acting as a prompt if required.

Individual meetings were set up with each of the elected members and tenant representatives who attend the Board throughout September and early October 2024. In addition, the considerations of senior Council officers and those participating in other roles with oversight responsibilities will be included.

Those consulted were:

Cllr Lennox	Elected member	Operational and Strategy meetings
Cllr Anderson	Elected member	Operational and Strategy meetings
Cllr Brooks	Elected member	Operational and Strategy meetings
Cllr Venner	Elected member	Operational and Strategy meetings
Cllr Bowden	Elected member	Operational and Strategy meetings
John Gittos	Tenant representative	Operational and Strategy meetings
Zioness Amaka	Tenant representative	Operational and Strategy meetings

Julia Preston	Third sector representative	Strategy meeting only
Helen Lennon	Housing Assoc representative	Strategy meeting only

\*Cllr Bowden only recently joined the Board and was not able to fully reflect on its effectiveness. Mandy Sawyer and David Glaister attended each of the review meetings.

## **General Findings**

### **- Positive**

A common theme was that the quality of papers and information provided by officers was of a high quality and well presented. All attendees stated they were happy with how officers engaged with them and provided them with material.

Attendees felt that meetings were structured to enable challenge, and that there was an environment open to posing difficult questions.

Generally, those consulted thought the number of meetings a year was appropriate.

### **- Could be improved**

There was a general feeling that there was not enough scrutiny, or challenge, of Housing activity at the operational meetings. Much of the meeting time is spent on officers presenting papers and there is little challenge / discussion on agenda items. Low tenant attendance has meant that the tenant voice is not strong on the Board

Attendees expressed a general lack of understanding as to what the rationale behind the Board was. There was no detailed knowledge as to how the Board complemented other scrutiny activity within the Council, attendees were not clear how the Leeds Housing Board fitted into the wider oversight structure. Members did not know how it differed from other Council committees.

## **Operational Meetings - Detailed Feedback and Suggested Improvements for Consideration**

Detailed feedback and suggested improvements, much of which was stated by several interviewees including the following:

### **Board Meetings**

- Generally, Board members felt that it is good to have a balance between online and in person meetings. In person meetings help Board Members establish stronger relationships. It was suggested that at least two meetings per year should be held face to face. Generally, Board Members were comfortable with meetings being held during the day.
- Board Members felt that the quality of information provided to the Board was very good and enabled them to understand the issues and actions being undertaken.

- Members felt that there was too much emphasis on officers presenting reports rather than discussion. Board Members suggested a change of approach so that meetings followed more of a workshop style to stimulate more discussion. The focus of the discussion should be on challenges and issues to seek the Board's input to improvements.
- Members felt that there was not enough challenge from Board Members. Elected Members felt that Tenant Members needed to be more challenging, and Tenant Members felt that Elected Members needed to lead the challenge more. There was a general view that staff are working really hard and doing their best in challenging circumstances and so didn't want to appear critical. It is recommended that this needs to be led by the Chair, creating an environment for constructive challenge and feedback.
- Whilst accepting that the Board's role is about overseeing our work on Social Housing regulation and Housing Ombudsman compliance there are other wider issues that are of importance to tenants and so should be considered by the Board. A couple of Board Members felt that it would help the Board's wider understanding if it received updates on other Council projects, e.g., council housing growth. One Board Member raised that there has been no discussion on the final report of the Grenfell Inquiry (although this is on the agenda for the January meeting). It is recommended that the Board reviews its forward plan at each meeting and consider new items that it may wish to receive.
- It was felt that sometimes a separate meeting should be arranged to discuss some topics, e.g., setting up small working groups to have a deep dive into specific topics, which will then report back to the full Board.
- Board Members have specific responsibilities linked to the management of complaints, including the Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC). It is proposed that consideration is given to setting up a formal subgroup of the Board to consider complaints, made up of all tenants and chaired by the Deputy MRC (Cllr Bowden) to enable more detailed input into complaints, which is then reported into Board.

#### **Board Membership, Induction and Support**

- Some Board Members, particularly new Members and Tenant Members were not confident on the purpose of the Leeds Housing Board. There needs to be a more detailed induction for new Board Members to explain the role of the Board and social housing regulation.
- There have been low levels of attendance of Tenant Board Members and some turnover in Membership. There are currently two tenant representative vacancies to be filled. As of November 2024, there is a recruitment campaign to attract more interest. It is important that we offer training workshops to tenant representatives to develop their scrutiny skills and help in the effective execution of their responsibilities. Tenant representatives should continue to be offered a session prior to Board meetings to prepare and discuss matters arising. These should complement training that should (proposed) be provided when a tenant representative joins the Board.
- One Board Member felt that the Board make up is not diverse enough and does not fully represent the Council's customer base and that consideration should be given to trying to achieve a more balanced Membership through recruitment of Elected Members and

tenants. The equality make up of Tenant Board members is already considered as part of tenant recruitment but is consideration given to this as part of Elected Member appointments? This would have to be investigated further.

### **Communication and Relationships**

- Currently very little information about the outcome of Board meetings is shared with tenants. Consideration needs to be given to how we provide feedback and how Tenant Board Members can support this feedback.
- Again, the Board papers are not shared widely with all Elected Members. It is proposed that consideration is given to how we ensure that all Elected Members have awareness of the work of the Board, papers etc.
- Some Board Members were not clear of the Board's relationship with wider governance arrangements. There is currently not a strong connection between the Board and the Tenant Scrutiny Board (TSB). As part of the recent Tenant Member recruitment a TSB Member has been appointed. It is proposed that we formalize a requirement for one of the Tenant Members to be a member of the TSB, and that there is an opportunity for the routine update on TSB work into the Board.
- Some Board Members were not clear of the relationship between the Board and the EH+C Scrutiny Board. We currently share an update on the Board as part of the annual Housing update to the EH+C Scrutiny Board where there is an opportunity for consideration for further scrutiny. Consideration should be given as to whether there is anything further to strengthen the connection into the Scrutiny Board.

### **Strategy meetings - Detailed Feedback and Suggested Improvements for Consideration**

- Board Members, particularly the Independent Board Members were unclear of the purpose of the Board and the role of Board Members in ensuring that Housing Strategy priorities are delivered.
- Again, meetings are mostly taken up by officers presenting information already disseminated in Board papers. Board Members felt that it was more important to create opportunities to follow-up on specific areas of discussion and to create an opportunity for networking with other attendees. Currently feels like an information sharing exercise rather than providing detailed scrutiny.
- Strategy meetings would be strengthened by extending the membership, including more people from across the Housing sector. This will enable more coordination in service delivery and more effective use of resources.
- It is therefore proposed that a change of approach is considered for these meetings, which includes attendance of more people from across the sector. A workshop style / partnership discussion should be adopted and that there is a focus on issues / challenges to the delivery of the strategy priorities and how the sector can work together to respond (similar to the Leeds Strategic Housing Partnership previously in place).
- The agenda and invite list would be tailored to the area of discussion, inviting guest speakers, national figures on particular topics. Everyone across the sector is really busy so need to make the sessions attractive to invitees – what will they get out of it?

- It is also important to develop more effective communication with customers in relation to progress in delivering strategy themes. There was a view that often there is a big strategic push for something, but then there are no follow up communications which support operational delivery.

- **Next steps**

Present this report to Cllr Lennox as Chair of the Board, and to SMT. The following will then be developed:

- Delivery plan outlining actions with timescales.
- Communications plan outlining how internal and external partners will receive details of proposed changes to the Board.
- Plan for how to review effectiveness of any changes introduced.
- Mandy Sawyer will arrange a training session with Cllr Bowden to assist him in his role as support for the MRC. Reissue guidance around the governance structure of the Board. Highlight what the agreed scope of the Board is and what are its 'powers'. Reissue the terms of reference to remind Board members.
- Take Simon Baker's guidance on how best to record Board details on gov.delivery website.