



To: Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5)

Date: 31 January 2018

Subject: Report of the Task and Finish Group on improving the Quality of Housing and the Health and Wellbeing of Coventry Residents.

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5) of the outcome the Task and Finish Group on improving the Quality of Housing and the Health and Wellbeing of Coventry Residents.
- 1.2 Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5) agreed at their meeting on 19th July 2017 to establish a task and finish group to look at improving the Quality of Housing and the Health and Wellbeing of Coventry Residents, in recognition that housing is a significant factor in impacting health outcomes.
- 1.3 The Task and Finish group wanted to investigate, and draw attention to the link between health and housing, look at the existing work being undertaken by organisations across the City to support people in developing and maintaining healthy homes and to consider how we can improve the quality of private rented sector housing.
- 1.4 Members were joined on the task and finish group by representative from Coventry Citizens Advice, who were able to provide an insight into the housing challenges faced by Coventry residents and thanks goes to them for their help and support.
- 1.5 Members also heard evidence from West Midlands Fire Service, Whitefriars Housing, the Council's Housing Enforcement team and Public Health. A call for evidence was also put out electronically to enable private Landlords to give their views.

2 Recommendations

The Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5) are requested to:

1. Consider the recommendations from the Task and Finish group in the report and support the recommendations below for Cabinet
2. To request an update in 6 months' time on the progress of the recommendations.

The Cabinet is recommended:

1. That the Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group are asked to look at hosting Citizens' Advice outreach in GP surgeries (Cllr Caan)
2. To endorse the work of Citizens' Advice Frontline Network to look at the co-ordination of grant and charity resources to assist tenants to create easier access to funds for tenants in need of support (Cllr Bigham)
3. To support the continued work of the West Midlands Fire Service on the Health Agenda, including working with partners to evaluate the impact of the Back Home Safe and Well initiative and, if appropriate, explore options for future funding (Cllr Caan/Cllr Abbott)

4. To endorse work with city partners to consider opportunities for information sharing, which could lead to the identification of vulnerable people who may benefit from services or support through community resources, such as from Citizen's Advice and the Fire Service Safe and Well check. (Cllr Abbott/Cllr Bigham)
5. That work is undertaken to define and promote Healthy Homes (Cllr Caan)
6. To support the proposal to continue to develop Selective Licensing in the City (Cllr Bigham)

3 Information/Background

3.1 Context (or background)

3.2 Health and Social Care Scrutiny Board (5) set up a task and finish group to look at improving the Quality of Housing and the Health and Wellbeing of Coventry Residents at their meeting 19th July 2017. The group met five times and heard evidence from Citizens Advice Coventry (who participated in all subsequent meetings of the task and finish group), Whitefriars Housing, West Midlands Fire Service, the City Council's Housing Enforcement team and Public Health.

3.3 Outcomes of the Task and Finish Group sessions

3.4 Public Health and setting the scene

Public Health presented background information to the group outlining the impacts housing can have on the health of an individual and that this is an area which is increasing in profile nationally. Information on the type of housing stock in the City, as well as the quality of it, was provided. The most recent figures provided highlighted that 35% of private rented stock in Coventry was not considered to meet the national decent homes standard.

3.5 The group discussed the number of partners involved in helping improve the standards of housing and decided who to invite to future meetings.

3.6 The Preventative Sustainability and Transformation Plan work stream was also discussed as a forum where partners are currently discussing and enabling preventative work to improve the outcomes of Coventry residents.

3.7 Citizens Advice Coventry

3.8 Citizens Advice Coventry presented a snapshot of the health consequences of poor or unsuitable housing for Coventry citizens. In 2015/16 the housing enquiries received by Citizens Advice related to social (25%) and private rented (75%). In 2016/17 the balance changed to social (33%) and private rented (67%) as a result of an increase in housing enquiries about Registered Social Landlords (RSL) but shows that issues about private rented sector housing still dominated. This highlighted the importance of needing to find way to engage with private landlords to encourage them to improve the quality of their properties. The task and finish group also requested an additional meeting to find out more from the City Council's Housing Enforcement team about their service and powers.

3.9 The greatest number of enquiries for both years related to 'repairs and maintenance' with regards to both Registered Social Landlords and private landlords. The second largest issue was about the 'suitability of accommodation'.

3.10 Citizens Advice analysed their client enquires, relating only to the health aspect of housing where there is a potential trigger for physical or mental health problems and found a number of reoccurring themes:

- unfurnished properties lacking the basic essentials like flooring, furniture or beds
- unsafe, broken or absent electrical or gas fittings or unsafe, broken or absent cooking facilities

- broken or inadequate plumbing
- pre-existing infestations
- holes in ceilings, walls or window frames
- mould or other fungal growth.

- 3.11 Citizens Advice voiced that tenants do not choose to live in the conditions described above, however there are a number of factors which result in them being ‘trapped’ in poor quality housing, both economic and social, including a fear of complaining in case they lose the property.
- 3.12 As a result of this meeting, Members of the task and finish group formulated two recommendations.
- 3.13 **Recommendation 1:** That the Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group are asked to look at hosting Citizens’ Advice outreach in GP surgeries.
- 3.14 Citizens Advice used to run outreach sessions in GPs surgeries in Coventry but with changes to the health service, this ended. However, there are many benefits to both the Health Service and residents of such an agreement. Being in the GP surgeries allows Citizens Advice to have contact with vulnerable individuals who may not otherwise access their services. The help provided can help improve circumstances for the individual, as they can provide advice not only on housing but about debt, finance and employment. This can help improve the individual’s wellbeing and reduce the number of visits they make to the GP thereby saving money. The GP can also signpost an individual to Citizens Advice during their appointment which enables them to focus their appointment time on health related matters – a 2015 Citizens Advice report stated that GPs in England report spending almost a fifth (19 per cent) of their time on social issues that are not principally about health. The implied cost to the health service of this time is almost £400 million a year¹.
- 3.15 **Recommendation 2:** To endorse the work of Citizens’ Advice Frontline Network to look at the co-ordination of grant and charity resources to assist tenants to create easier access to funds for tenants in need of support.
- 3.16 The group proposed this recommendation as basic furniture is important in having a healthy home. Even if an individual gets a tenancy with a RSL, they are often not provided with any basic furniture or flooring. Flooring, for example, is important in preventing slips and trips and for keeping a property warm. Not having a cooker makes it difficult to feed yourself well. Tenants are encouraged to apply to grants and charities to furnish their properties and Advice Services across the city will help with this. However, it was felt it would be far easier if resources were co-ordinated. Citizens’ Advice Frontline Network have offered to undertake research into the funding available and then share the results so options for co-ordination can be considered.
- 3.17 **West Midlands Fire Service**
- 3.18 A representative from West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS), highlighted two aspects of the outreach work currently undertaken by WMFS. As fire prevention has improved, the Fire Service have expanded their services to help vulnerable people in the community and can often gain trust, and access to properties, in a way that other uniformed services, and social services, struggle to.
- 3.19 The Fire Service recognise that there are clear links between poor health and the risk of fire, and that by working with health organisations to support vulnerable people, fires can

¹https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Public%20services%20publications/CitizensAdvice_AVeryGeneralPractice_May2015.pdf

be prevented. WMFS have a number of Vulnerable Persons Officers who undertake support work over a number of weeks and months to address living conditions, which can include working with Hoarders.

3.20 The first initiative WMFS described was the 'Safe and Well Checks', which have built on the old Home Safety Checks. WMFS still assess the physical risks of fire in a home, but now also look at health, social and lifestyle factors. As well as checking there are no immediate fire hazards, giving fire safety advice and fitting free smoke alarms if needed, the health, social and lifestyle factors discussed with individuals include:

- weight, exercise and healthy eating
- mobility and falls
- mental health, memory loss and dementia
- loneliness and social isolation
- smoking, alcohol, medication and drugs
- hoarding
- employment
- road safety
- home security

Between 4,000 and 6,000 of these checks are carried out in Coventry annually and referrals come from a number of agencies. Councillors can also refer to the service if they have concerns about constituents.

3.21 The second initiative discussed was the current pilot running in the City (as opposed to the Safe and Well Checks which are now core business for WMFS) entitled the 'Back home safe and well initiative'. This scheme involved WMFS transporting elderly and vulnerable people home from hospital when no other suitable arrangements can be made. The trial is going well, but will be reviewed prior to any continuation.

3.22 When the vulnerable person is taken home, WMFS do a basic safety check on the house. If it were to be found unsuitable, there is an agreement with UHCW that they would readmit the individual, if the individual agrees to go as the Fire Service can only advise.

3.23 The pilot has been funded by UHCW and Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group. Resources available through the Better Care Fund are being used to fund an extension of the pilot until 31 March 2018 so that its impact can be evaluated. This lead to the Group proposing recommendation 3 below.

3.24 **Recommendation 3:** To support the continued work of the West Midlands Fire Service on the Health Agenda, including working with partners to evaluate the impact of the Back Home Safe and Well initiative and, if appropriate, explore options for future funding.

3.25 **Whitefriars Housing**

3.26 Whitefriars Housing were invited to the meeting to give a Register Social Landlord's (RSL) perspective on improving the health and wellbeing of their tenants.

3.27 The organisation's priority at present is a focus on tenancy sustainability, using a 'rent first' approach. The principle of this is that if rent is not paid, then the tenancy fails and the tenant becomes homeless. They offer an in-house money advice and debt advice service to help tenants, and as a rule of thumb, if the tenant is willing to work with Whitefriars and engage with them, Whitefriars will work with the tenant to try to maintain the tenancy.

3.28 If there are issues with a property impacting on health and wellbeing, this might be uncovered during the tenancy enforcement checks. These checks are more frequent in the

first year when tenants are on starter tenancies, which can convert to a fully assured tenancy after a year.

- 3.29 Whitefriars also talked about some of the work they are doing to reduce poverty and encourage apprenticeships through their suppliers.
- 3.30 Whitefriars have recently regenerated the Manor Farm estate. Prior to the changes taking place, baseline data including some on health and wellbeing was collected. A review will take place in 2 years to see whether the changes have had a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the residents. Changes include additional installations to improve heating efficiency as well as to improve mental wellbeing through initiatives like the gardening tool hire club. This scheme encourages people to socialise with their neighbours, be active and improve their gardens and therefore the appearance of the neighbourhood.
- 3.31 Whitefriars were asked how repairs were scheduled, prioritised and recorded. It was confirmed that repairs are scheduled based on the nature of the repair and in some situations, the vulnerability of the tenant is taken into consideration. However, tenants are not routinely asked about their vulnerability by RSLs when repairs are requested and it was suggested that RSLs may want to always consider the vulnerability of their tenants when prioritising repairs. Data is not shared between agencies and RSLs regarding, for example, vulnerable social care clients who may live in a RSL property, and it was suggested that looking at doing so may help RSLs be more responsive to vulnerable clients.
- 3.32 This discussion prompted recommendation 4, which is about data sharing between partners to identify vulnerable people who could benefit from support from a number of agencies to make their home healthier.
- 3.33 **Recommendation 4:** To endorse work with city partners to consider opportunities for information sharing, which could lead to the identification of vulnerable people who may benefit from services or support through community resources, such as from Citizen's Advice and the Fire Service Safe and Well check.
- 3.34 **Housing Enforcement**
- 3.35 The Housing Enforcement team presented to the group and highlighted that their enforcement work is reactive, responding to complaints by tenants, working towards the aim that the team enforce the requirements of the Housing Act and ensure minimum standards met. They deal with forced evictions and are responsible for the mandatory licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).
- 3.36 It was commented however, that minimum standards as required by law are not necessarily satisfactory in bringing homes up to standards. This view was echoed by other witnesses who felt they would like to see more regulation of the private sector.
- 3.37 It was acknowledged *by the Task and Finish Group* that there is a gap between the legal minimum standard for a home and what is a healthy home. Hence recommendation 5 below.
- 3.38 **Recommendation 5:** That work is undertaken to define and promote Healthy Homes
- 3.39 The standards for HMOs are more stringent as they have to be licensed. About 50% of applications go through without issue as they are from experienced Landlords. The remainder are given a schedule of work and visits are repeated until the standards are met.

- 3.40 When properties are inspected, hazards are categorised by risk. This is worked out using a formula prescribed by legislation, which does take into account the age of the tenant when scoring vulnerability, for example very young children or being elderly would increase the score.
- 3.41 About 30% of total complaints are tenant/landlord relation issues. Sometimes the tenant has not told the landlord of the issue and sometimes they are vexatious.
- 3.42 On average 90% of mould issues due to washing and ventilation issues.
- 3.43 Tenants do have rights, providing they follow the prescribed process, making sure they sign a contract, continue to pay rent, use the deposit scheme etc. It is when people don't follow the required process, or withhold rent (for example in protest), then it becomes more difficult for Housing Enforcement to help them.
- 3.44 The team work in partnership with WMFS, often doing joint visits. Doing so can prevent a property being deemed prohibited. One reason for this is WMFS have a van of kit which can be used to make the property safe on a temporary basis (for example, with smoke alarms) which can be rented to the landlord. Without this facility, the team would have to remove the tenants and the Housing Options team would need to find them temporary accommodation.
- 3.45 Some local authorities do use Accredited Landlord Schemes, but like with Landlord Forums, it tends to be the "good" landlords who engage and not those who we really need to improve standards.
- 3.46 The task and finish group also asked questions about Selective Licensing and progress with the scheme. Recommendation 6 below is as a result of discussion by the group.
- 3.47 **Recommendation 6:** To support the proposal to continue to develop Selective Licensing in the City

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