



Altair

Wiltshire Council

Housing Board Governance Review

v0.1

Draft report
June 2017

Wiltshire Council
 Where everybody matters

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1 | Introduction – the brief and our approach

1.1. The Brief

1.1.1. Wiltshire Council (the Council) owns and manages some 5,289 homes¹, mostly in the Salisbury and South Wiltshire areas of the county. The Council is also developing some 200 new homes, funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)². In 2013, the Council set up the Wiltshire Council Housing Board (Housing Board) to support the Executive (Cabinet) in the oversight of its housing services to tenants and leaseholders. The Housing Board first met in December 2013 and holds meetings approximately bi-monthly. The make-up of the Housing Board is three tenants/leaseholders, three independents and three councillors. It is chaired by the housing portfolio holder, who provides a strategic link into Cabinet. The Council also established a Housing Assurance Panel (HAP), with tenants/leaseholder and independent members to provide a housing scrutiny role.

1.1.2. The Council appointed Altair Consultancy and Advisory Services Ltd (Altair) to carry out a review of the governance arrangements for the Housing Board/Housing Assurance Panel with the following terms of reference, to:

- 'Review the Terms of Reference/roles of the Housing Board and the Assurance Panel
- Review the relationship between the Housing Board and the Executive Cabinet
- Examine other options for the Council in governance arrangements for supporting the Council to consider in the management of its housing stock'.

1.2. Our approach

1.2.1. The following activities were the main components of the review:

- A document review; a list of documents seen is at Appendix 1
- Interviews with members of the Executive, Housing Board, HAP and officers during April 2017; a list of interviewees is at Appendix 2
- Observation of the January 2017 Housing Board and the April 2017 KPI Targets Sub-Group
- Research into alternative governance arrangements in place in other councils
- Reporting.

1.2.2. We wish to thank everyone involved in the review for their insight and contributions to the review without which this report would not have been possible.

¹ Housing Strategy 2017

² ibid

2 | Findings

2.1. Wiltshire Council resident engagement (Council housing)

2.1.1. The table below provides summary information about the Housing Board, the HAP, and the ways in which the Council engages with tenants and leaseholders.

Council Details	Resident Engagement Methods
<p>Type of Council: Unitary Provision of Housing Service: In-house Number of Housing Stock: 5,289</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Housing Board ▪ Housing Assurance Panel ▪ Local Housing Panels and Older Persons Panels ▪ Focus groups ▪ Housing on the pulse ▪ Estate inspections ▪ Housing matters
Housing Board	
<p>Name: Wiltshire Council Housing Board Composition: 3 councillors, including one from the non-ruling group; 3 tenants/leaseholders (excluding tenants/leaseholders on the Housing Assurance Panel); 3 independents. Members must be 18 or over. Councillors and tenant board members must fulfil the category requirement. The chair must be the Housing Portfolio holder. Length of tenure: 2 x 4 year terms Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Paid (£8000 – the chair; £3,175 board members) Meetings: 6 per year and an AGM Terms of reference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider, review, scrutinise and offer advice relating to the Council’s housing services including, but not limited to: allocation, development, improvement, maintenance and management of Wiltshire Council tenancies and homes - Contribute to the effective provision and delivery of Housing Services activities, taking a longer-term perspective, interpreted as ten years or more - Advise the Council and Cabinet on the strategic direction of council housing and help set the strategic direction <p>Aims and objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review Housing Services policies and strategies, taking a long-term perspective and advising on best practice - Contribute towards high-level and cost effective operational performance and service delivery, including business plans and budgets - Assist in risk minimisation and effective deployment of resources - Contribute to papers for Cabinet and Scrutiny, reviewing, analysing and adding additional comments as appropriate - Examine, provide advice and feedback on proposed changes to strategic direction of Housing Services, taking a long-term and cost-effective perspective - Encourage participation of tenants and other stakeholders - Plan a forward work-programme, including investigations during the next 18 months, advise on performance measures, within a strict, over-arching focus on housing issues 	

- Report findings within its powers following detailed and methodical analysis, aware of financial implications and making cost effective recommendations.

Scrutiny Panel

Name: Housing Assurance Panel

Composition: 7 tenants or leaseholders and 4 independents – cannot be members of other formal groups within the Council’s resident engagement structure. There should be a minimum of one and maximum of two leaseholders. Members must be 16 years of age or above.

Decision making/advisory: Advisory

Remuneration: Reasonable travel expenses

Meetings: Quarterly

Terms of reference:

- Act as a ‘critical friend’ to assess the performance of landlord services
- Measure, test and monitor the services tenants and leaseholders receive
- Advise the Housing Board and through that route influence the Council’s strategic priorities

Aims:

- Enable residents to objectively scrutinise quality and delivery of housing services
- Hold the Council to account for the cost and quality of service
- Support the Council to deliver effective and cost-efficient services;
- Support continuous improvement in landlord functions and the development of strategic priorities
- Work in partnership with the Housing Board and council staff.

Work plan:

- Carry out on average 4 reviews a year

2.2. Roles of the Housing Board and Housing Assurance Panel

Housing Board

2.2.1. The Housing Board was set up as an advisory body with a remit to contribute to the strategy for landlord services, taking a long-term view. Using the insights gained from discussions with Housing Board and staff members, observation and board papers we record the following:

- The Housing Board has had a valuable role in managing relationships, developing trust and confidence in the Council’s landlord housing services and in holding officers to account, in a supportive way
- It has worked well due to good relationships within the Housing Board and with the links into Cabinet
- There was an aspiration for more communication and feedback from cabinet discussions on housing so that the Housing Board could see the extent of its influence
- It has given a higher profile to the Council’s landlord service than otherwise might be the case in a county council
- It enables independent viewpoints to be heard due to its composition of tenants, independents and councillors from across the political spectrum
- Housing board members are generally well engaged and there is scrutiny and challenge of papers and performance

- There were mixed views regarding the chair's role: having the Housing Portfolio holder as chair, with the close links to the cabinet member with the housing portfolio, was seen by many as important; a counter view was put forward that the chair should be an independent
- Agendas are lengthy and the substantive papers provided involve a significant resource commitment by officers to provide information for discussions
- Sometimes discussions veer to being operational and short-term as opposed to keeping to a strategic, longer-term focus and oversight, and there were mixed views about how strategic the Housing Board could be in practice
- Cabinet has taken control of housing delivery whereas development is in the terms of reference; the Housing Board may therefore feel under-valued and its housing expertise not used
- The cost-benefit of having a Housing Board was questioned
- The future role of the Housing Board was questioned, with a mixture of views put forward from having more influence and a wider remit to questioning whether it had served its purpose and could be dissolved.

Housing Assurance Panel

- 2.2.2. The Housing Assurance Panel replaced earlier scrutiny arrangements and has the classic role of a scrutiny panel, acting as critical friend to review aspects of housing services from a user perspective. Using the insights gained from discussions and HAP reports we record the following:
- The HAP provides good, balanced reports, which are well researched and written
 - HAP is not at its full complement of members
 - HAP members are well engaged and active, particularly the chair
 - It is an effective mechanism for looking at the 'nuts and bolts' of aspects of service delivery.

2.3. Relationship between the Housing Board and Executive (Cabinet)

- 2.3.1. The Housing Board's link to Cabinet is through the chair of the Housing Board, the councillor who holds the Housing portfolio, to the cabinet member for Housing (excluding Strategic Housing), Leisure, Libraries and Flooding.
- 2.3.2. The Housing Board reports formally to Cabinet once a year, when its Annual Report is presented. The Annual Report is not a key decision item for Cabinet; its purpose is to inform Cabinet of the areas considered and discussed by the Housing Board during the previous year. The most recent Housing Board Annual Report, a comprehensive document, went to the March 2017 cabinet meeting. The minutes record that the report was noted, following a question relating to the appointment process for independent board members and an observation relating to the definition of voids.
- 2.3.3. The key link between the Housing Board and Cabinet depends on the effectiveness of the working relationship between the housing portfolio holder and the cabinet

member with housing responsibilities. We were provided with positive comments concerning this, and that the Council valued the Housing Board.

2.3.4. In the interviews we heard that housing board members would welcome more feedback on cabinet discussions about housing. There appears to be two aspects to this. One is a straight-forward communication matter which could be resolved by having a standing item on each agenda for feedback on housing discussions at Cabinet. The other concerns clarifying understanding about the frequency and type of housing discussions at Cabinet. We reviewed cabinet agendas and minutes from April 2016 to March 2017. Housing was not a topic on the agendas during 2016. It was an item in the January, February and March 2017 cabinet papers. The minutes show that the topics were the housing repairs contract, the HRA budget and Housing Board Annual report.

2.4. Sector trends: what others are doing

Tenant engagement overview – TPAS survey

2.4.1. TPAS has recently carried out its first national tenant engagement survey. It received 638 responses (57% from tenants and leaseholders and 23% from staff members) from 230 organisations (27% local authorities and 68% housing associations).

2.4.2. Some of the summary findings are that:

- The value of involvement includes eliminating waste, fewer complaints and improved customer focus.
- 25% of engagement is using digital channels, and this is an increasing trend
- Most engagement focuses on repairs and housing management
- Where people are familiar with corporate strategy development, two thirds of respondents feel that tenant engagement strategies inform business strategies
- Many organisations do not track the impact of engagement
- Community engagement activities are more individual rather than community focused
- A dedicated scrutiny group is by far the most commonly used mechanism for tenant scrutiny, with tenant inspectors, task and finish groups and on-line approaches growing.

2.4.3. The conclusions beginning to emerge from the survey are that:

- “Engagement is alive, well and valued, but is changing in nature
- There is scope for much more measuring and publicising outcomes achieved through engagement to ensure they are effective and efficient and set future priorities
- Digital engagement is increasing and organisations are ready for this
- Engagement is highly valued and often links to business objectives
- Formal engagement is well established in repairs and housing management but there is scope to extend to allocations and lettings, rents and development – all key areas of current government policy. Landlords may see benefits in broadening their involvement activities in these areas

- Community engagement mostly concentrates on individual skills rather than community building activities”.

2.4.4. More detailed analysis will be available for TPAS members later in the year. From the initial findings, it is evident that tenant scrutiny is well established; it is less clear how tenants are engaged in strategy and policy matters. Altair has carried out research to see what other councils are doing.

Residents on boards and scrutiny panels overview – Altair experience

2.4.5. Around 100 councils in England have retained their housing stock, with the remainder having either transferred their stock to a housing association or set up an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO).

2.4.6. In Altair’s experience of working with councils with retained stock, not many have housing boards with councillor, tenant (including leaseholder) and independent board members and apart from Cambridge Council (see case studies below) we are not aware of any which remunerate board members. Councils have several different ways of obtaining input from residents and other stakeholders, including the views of minority parties (see case studies).

2.4.7. Most councils have some form of scrutiny panel or forum, mirroring the TPAS findings.

2.4.8. Wiltshire Council’s Housing Board has some similarities with the governance structure of housing associations, particularly those which were stock transfer associations which initially had boards of a third councillors, tenants and independents. As associations have matured, many reduced councillor and tenant board membership. However, housing association boards have decision-making powers which is not the position with the Council’s Housing Board.

2.4.9. There are also similarities with ALMOs, having governing bodies comprising councillors, tenants and independents. Constitutionally an ALMOs is an independent company which manage services for a fee, with a council as sole shareholder. The services provided by ALMOs are specified by contractual arrangements (a Management Agreement). ALMO boards are decision-making bodies.

2.4.10. While ALMOs have primarily provided Housing Revenue Account housing management and maintenance services, councils have also handed over other services to ALMOs, such as homelessness and housing options (Cornwall Housing), private letting agencies (Berneslai Homes), new build housing development (Stockport Homes) and street cleaning (South Tyneside). Barnet Homes has become part of a newly created ALMO group ‘The Barnet Group’ which has taken on areas of Adult Social Care service delivery from the LB Barnet.

2.4.11. Some councils which set up ALMOs have taken these back in-house once the Decent Homes programme was completed.

Resident engagement, housing boards and scrutiny panels – Altair research

2.4.12. Altair has researched what councils are doing to engage with resident and other stakeholders, focusing on councils with housing boards and scrutiny panels. Attached at Appendix 3 is a spreadsheet with information for ten councils. These were selected using criteria that the organisations referred to housing boards, were in the south/south east and/or were unitary councils with housing stock. We did not include London boroughs in our search.

2.4.13. From the information obtained we have produced four case studies for three unitary councils and one district; these provide good examples of a range of approaches.

- Cornwall – a unitary authority with an ALMO
- Swindon Council – a unitary authority
- Bristol City Council – a unitary authority
- Cambridge City Council – a district authority.


Case Study 1: Cornwall Council/Cornwall Housing

Council Details	Resident Engagement Methods
<p>Type of Council: Unitary Provision of Housing Service: ALMO Number of Housing Stock: 10,500</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Litter picks ▪ Estate monitors ▪ Assistance in forming a Tenants and Residents Association ▪ Public Meetings ▪ Neighbourhood gatherings ▪ Area representative ▪ Estate monitors/communal cleaning ▪ Focus groups ▪ My Opinion Matters (MOM) survey ▪ Mystery Shoppers ▪ Tenant Led Scrutiny Panel ▪ Complaints Appeals Panel ▪ Tenants' Forum
Housing Board	
<p>A Housing Board exists through CORSERV - a company established by Cornwall Council to provide strategic direction for its existing arm's length and commercial trading companies including Cornwall Housing. Name: Cornwall Housing Board Composition: Councillors, Tenants and Independents Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Information not available Meetings: Varies (2 – 9 times per year) Terms of reference: Information not available Recent Agenda Items: - Rough Sleepers Initiative - CHL funding - The role of Cornwall Housing in the creation of new homes supporting the Council's Development strategy</p>	
Scrutiny Panel	
<p>Name: Tenant Led Scrutiny Panel Composition: - 5 members from Cornwall Housing Tenants Forum; 4 non-involved tenants; 2 other Cornwall Housing customers - 1 leaseholder; and 1 other customer Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Travel and childcare expenses paid Meetings: Monthly Terms of reference: - It is a critical friend to Cornwall Housing Ltd (CHL) - Works in partnership with CHL to improve services, but the Scrutiny Panel remains independent - Works with Cornwall Housing Tenants' Forum (CHTF) and CHL Board to identify areas that need scrutinising - Reports its findings to tenants, other customers, CHL Board and CHTF - Identifies areas that are working well - Helps to improve services for Council tenants and other customers across CHL</p>	

Case Study 2: Swindon Borough Council

Council Details	Resident Engagement Methods
<p>Type of Council: Unitary Provision of Housing Service: In-house Number of Housing Stock: 10,265</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Swindon tenants' voice ▪ Housing sounding board ▪ Tenant scrutiny panel ▪ Tenant association for sheltered housing ▪ Tenant academy
Housing Board	
<p>Swindon is changing the nature of its Housing Advisory Forum to bring it into line with the Council's other advisory groups. It will become a Cabinet Member Advisory Group.</p> <p>Name: Cabinet Member Advisory Group</p> <p>Composition: 6/7 councillors, including opposition councillors; 6/7 tenants/leaseholders drawn from various tenant groups, e.g. TASH (sheltered housing group). No standing places for external individuals, but they may be invited along. Tenants who are also on the scrutiny panel are excluded from the Group.</p> <p>Decision making/advisory: Advisory</p> <p>Remuneration: Reasonable expenses paid</p> <p>Meetings: Quarterly (minimum)</p> <p>Terms of reference: Not yet known, however the Terms of Reference of the Housing Advisory Forum were: To consider housing policy and strategy issues that relate to Housing Management Services delivered by the Council to its tenants and leaseholders</p>	
Scrutiny Panel	
<p>Name: Tenant Scrutiny Panel</p> <p>Composition: 8 Swindon tenants - members cannot hold office in any other Tenant Group of Swindon. They can however attend meetings as observers</p> <p>Decision making/advisory: Advisory</p> <p>Remuneration: Reasonable travel expenses</p> <p>Meetings: Quarterly - Members will attend the Housing Performance monthly meetings. A minimum of 1 and maximum of 3 members will attend each of these meetings on a rota.</p> <p>Terms of reference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To ensure that Swindon Council provides a high-quality housing service that retains tenants at the heart of the organisation - To work on behalf of tenants and leaseholders to ensure that Swindon Council provides housing services that are of the highest standard and meet the tenants' needs - To ensure that Housing Services embeds the new regulatory framework - To scrutinise and make recommendations to Cabinet relating to performance and proposal for targets each year - To commission review of policies and processes and to approve the actions and recommendations arising from those reviews and continue to monitor that appropriate action is being taken - To ensure tenants are consulted before major changes to Housing Services are Implemented 	

Case Study 3: Bristol City Council

Council Details	Resident Engagement Methods
<p>Type of Council: Unitary Provision of Housing Service: In-house Number of Housing Stock: 29,197</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Service user groups ▪ Housing scrutiny panel ▪ Neighbourhood and partnership forum meetings ▪ Environmental improvement programme
Housing Board	
<p>Name: Housing Management Board Composition: - 4 Councillors (the Executive Member and a representative of each of the other main parties); 6 tenants/leaseholders; and 1 independent housing professional Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Information not available Meetings: Every 6 – 8 weeks Terms of reference: - Advise on development of the strategy for Landlord Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advise on and review the Landlord Strategy delivery plan and the key projects identified within the Strategy - Review overall, high level performance - Annually review the draft Business Plan and associated Capital and Revenue Budgets - Review risk and risk management arrangements - Review draft reports on key decisions to be taken by the Cabinet or Council - Be consulted on and advise the Director on key changes to strategy, key policies, significant service changes and development proposals - Maintain an overview of the development of tenant participation 	
Scrutiny Panel	
<p>Name: Housing Scrutiny Panel Composition: 12 places - all Bristol City Council tenants and leaseholders are eligible to apply with the exception of Housing Management Board members Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Information not available Meetings: Monthly Terms of reference: - Prioritise and oversee tenant led scrutiny activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collect evidence so housing services can be scrutinised - Look at the evidence and make recommendations for service improvements - Report recommendations to senior management and the Housing Management Board - Monitor and review agreed action plans - Tell other tenants what the panel is doing and encourage them to get involved 	

Case Study 4: Cambridge City Council

Council Details	Resident Engagement Methods
<p>Type of Council: District Provision of Housing Service: In-house Number of Housing Stock: 7,115</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Housing regulation panel ▪ Resident inspectors ▪ Housing scrutiny committee ▪ Tenant and leaseholder garden competition ▪ Residents' meetings and events ▪ Digital champions
Housing Board	
<p>Name: Housing Scrutiny Committee Composition: 5 Council tenants; and 1 leaseholder Decision making/advisory: Decision making Remuneration: £220 - £880 annual salary depending on amount of time given to role Meetings: Information not available Terms of reference: The Committee monitors the work done by the council every three months, to ensure residents' money is being well spent and services are of a good standard. Recent Agenda Items: - £8.8 million project to modernise the council's sheltered accommodation</p>	
Scrutiny Panel	
<p>Name: Housing Regulation Panel Composition: Tenants and leaseholders Decision making/advisory: Advisory Remuneration: Expenses only Meetings: Information not available Terms of reference: After the housing regulation panel scrutinise a service, they produce a report on any areas that must be improved. Their reports include deadlines on improvements that must, where possible, be put in place by the council over the following weeks and months. The housing regulation panel communicate their progress to all residents quarterly in Open Door magazine, seeking the residents' views and feedback</p>	

3 | Options for the future

- 3.1. In this section we consider possible future options, drawing on the findings from the document review, interviews and external research. The options are:
- Retain both the WCHB and the HAP as they currently operate
 - Retain both but consider revisions
 - Retain the HAP but stop having the WCHB
 - Stop both.
- 3.2. In the table overleaf we assess the likely suitability, feasibility and acceptability of the different options.
- 3.3. When assessing the different options we highlight the following:
- There are varying approaches to involving tenants in an advisory capacity in the development of strategies and plans. The value of advisory boards is that they provide external perspectives, either to the housing portfolio holders and/or have links into a council's wider scrutiny arrangements
 - A number of interviewees commented that the current Housing Board arrangements work well because of the individuals involved
 - Where councils have structures which are similar to the Housing Board, tenants and independent persons are generally unpaid
 - Most Councils have some form of tenant scrutiny panel and it would be unusual not to retain this
 - The HAP appears to be working well and therefore the grounds for changing its role and remit would have to be clearly articulated.
- 3.4. The Council may wish to consider discussing and/or visiting other councils to see how their arrangements work in practice before deciding on the best way forward.

	Suitability	Feasibility	Acceptability	Comments
As is structure for WCHB and HAP	Both the WCHB and HAP provide challenge and review to housing service delivery, including performance and risk assessment. The WCHB remit is wider than currently being implemented. The HAP is performing a typical scrutiny role	The As Is arrangement has been operating since 2013 and shows that it is feasible	There was mixed support for retaining the As Is structure. In interviews, there was some questioning of the role of the WCHB; specifically, its ability to influence council decision-making; its ability to be strategic, and the limited breadth of its role.	The Housing Board's terms of reference include council housing management, maintenance and development; in practice, the board's remit excludes development. Most other councils do not remunerate Housing Board Members, and the value for money of continuing this arrangement would have to be assessed
As is structure, revised ToFRs,	This is a variant on the above, so should be broadly suitable.	This is a variant on the above, so should be broadly feasible.	This will depend upon what revisions to the terms of reference are agreed	From the research, councils such as Swindon and Bristol are using their advisory panels to provide the cabinet portfolio holder with a broad perspective from residents, minority party representatives and other stakeholders Most other councils do not remunerate Housing Board members, and the value for money of continuing arrangement would have to be assessed
No WCHB, retain the HAP	This is a common approach among other councils and in principle should be suitable.	Most councils with retained stock have housing scrutiny panels.	The Council would need to consider the benefits/dis-benefits of no longer having the Housing Board	This recognises the work of the HAP. The terms of reference and outputs are clearly understood
No WCHB, no HAP	Alternative such as using social media and other digital channels could replace the WCHB and the HAP	The feasibility of this option would have to be explored further. Digital engagement methods are changing rapidly, are popular with a different demographic, potentially extending feedback channels.	This option could be seen to exclude stakeholders who do not wish to engage using social media.	This option is not seen as acceptable right now but could be explored for the future

Appendix 1 | Documents reviewed

Wiltshire Council Housing Board
Terms of reference
Role description and person specification
Appointment process
Annual report
WCHB agenda, papers and minutes – January 2017 and October 2016
WCHB AGM papers – November 2016
Housing Assurance Panel
Terms of reference
HAP report – Housing Matters, June 2016
Other
Housing Strategy 2017
Housing Strategy Equality Analysis
Cabinet agendas, minutes and papers, April 2016 to April 2017
WCHB and HAP cost spreadsheet

Appendix 2 | Persons interviewed

Angela Britten	Tenant board member, WCHB
Anna Campbell	Chair, HAP
Robert Chapman	Independent board member, WCHB
Councillor Richard Clewer	Chair, WCHB, Portfolio Holder for Housing
Cindy Creasy	Independent board member, WCHB
Jacqui Evans	Independent board member, WCHB
Lorraine Le-Gate	Tenant board member, WCHB
Janet O'Brien	Head of Housing, Strategy and Assets
Councillor Jonathan Seed	Cabinet member for Housing (excluding strategic housing), Leisure, Libraries and Flooding
Nicole Smith	Head of Housing, Operations and People
Councillor Ian Tomes	Councillor member, WCHB
Councillor Fred Westmoreland	Councillor member, WCHB

Appendix 3 | Housing boards and scrutiny panels research

See separate spreadsheet

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