

Committee: Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 1 November 2021

Subject: The Council's Relationship with Housing Associations

Lead officer: Steve Langley, Head of Housing

Lead member: Councillor Martin Whelton, Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and Climate Emergency

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Recommendations:

- A. No decision will be required as the report is for information only.
 - B.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. With over circa 12,000 homes under their management, Merton's 22 housing associations are key partners in our efforts to ensure excellent housing services and secure affordable high quality homes for all Merton residents.
- 1.2. This report seeks to set out the regulatory framework for housing associations as well as how the council is currently developing its relationship with housing associations; and building upon its existing relationship with the Clarion Housing Group who is its biggest stock holding Landlord in a constructive and collaborative way.
- 1.3. The housing association sector has undergone many changes, including deregulation, mergers and changing commercial context, but it is important to acknowledge those housing associations who are seeking to demonstrate an improved track record of housing management delivery as well as a commitment in meeting the housing needs of Merton residents through affordable housing and bedroom mix going forward.
- 1.4. We hope that over the coming months and years the Council and housing associations will enjoy constructive relationships with each other and create a platform for learning, sharing information and improving the health and well-being of Merton residents.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1 There are just over 12,000 rented housing association properties in Merton, managed by 22 housing associations. Merton is unusual in that it holds no stock itself having completed a LSVT to Merton Priory Homes (now Clarion Housing Group) in March 2010. Prior to the LSVT the Council had completed two small scale voluntary transfers. The first was in 1998 to the Moat Housing Group and the second was in 2007 of the Tadworth Estate situated in Reigate and Banstead. Below is the number of properties transferred

	Rented	Leasehold	Total
Merton Priory Homes	6326	2535	8861
Tadworth	163	59	222
Pollards Hill Estate	956	66	1022

2.2. The social rented housing stock is the fifth lowest of any London borough. Many of the housing associations have significant stock in other boroughs and so we would not be the only local authority trying to influence and communicate with these housing associations.

2.3. **Housing Association Regulation and Performance**

The council does not have a direct role in the regulation and performance management of housing associations but the local authority could refer an issue to the regulator to investigate if it had a particular concern. The Regulator of Social Housing regulates registered providers of social housing, including local authorities, to promote a viable, efficient and well governed social housing sector able to deliver homes that meet a range of needs. All local authorities are regulated, including those whose stock is managed by an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) or a Tenant Management Organisation (TMO).

The objectives of the Regulator of Social Housing are set out in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. In summary, their role is to:

- protect social housing assets
- ensure providers are financially viable and properly governed
- maintain confidence of lenders to invest into the sector
- encourage and support supply of social housing
- ensure tenants are protected and have opportunities to be involved in the management of their housing
- ensure value for money in service delivery.

The Regulator of Social Housing has set out a number of standards that housing associations, councils and ALMOs must comply with. For consumer standards their role is reactive in response to referrals or other information received. Their role is limited to intervening where failure to meet the standards has caused or could have caused serious harm to tenants. The regulator does not have a legal duty to consult or inform local authorities, but the regulator will endeavour to keep local authorities informed as appropriate to the particular circumstances of each case.

Housing associations are legally required to be members of an ombudsman scheme. The Ombudsman provides guidance on the establishment of complaints systems. If a housing association tenant wants to complain about their landlord, they need to initially contact their landlord. If this fails to resolve the issue the resident can escalate the complaint through a designated person. This could be an MP, Councillor or a tenant panel. The designated

person can try to help resolve the issue. If they don't succeed they can refer this to the housing Ombudsman.

Where serious concerns are raised, the council can bring them directly to the Regulator of Social Housing. It is not recommended that a separate arbitration panel be established, as this would replicate the existing regulatory mechanisms.

2.4 **Clarion Performance**

Despite not having a regulatory role, since the stock transfer the Council has held regular reviews between senior Clarion executives and senior officers within the Council. These meetings are held to ensure compliance with the Stock Transfer Agreement and also provide a platform to discuss performance and any other matters arising.

Regular discussions are held regarding case work at an operational level, generally on an ad hoc basis as cases are brought to the attention of officers and councillors and MPs.

Additionally, over the last few months we have heard from local tenants regarding the poor service that they have received and this has been acknowledged by Clarion. Their reports and presentation to scrutiny have been to explain their plans to improve services. Weekly updates are received from Clarion with regards to Eastfields estate and monthly reports and estates in general.

This report is not designed to set out detailed performance data on Clarion Housing, as they are submitting their own performance updates to the panel. However, council officers do meet monthly with Clarion Housing to discuss current performance. For reference, the most recent performance data can be found below.

Measure	Target	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21
Properties With a Valid Gas Safety Certificate [Regional]	100%	99.67%	99.72%	99.48%	99.59%	99.60%
Fire Risk Assessments - Open Actions in Time	95%	94.28%	78.48%	90.97%	96.28%	98.45%
Occupancy Rate (General Needs & Supported Housing) [Regional]	99%	98.94%	98.99%	99.01%	99.01%	98.99%
Total Open ASB Cases	N/A	46	42	43	44	47
ASB Cases Open Over 90 Days	N/A	7 (15.22%)	8 (19.05%)	14 (32.56%)	14 (31.82%)	17 (36.17%)
Estate Services - Cleanliness (Estate Inspections)	90%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	88.89%
Estate Services - Cleanliness (Quality Assurance Visits)	85%	100.00%	100.00%	99.77%	99.76%	100.00%
Estate Services - Grounds Maintenance (Estate Inspections)	90%	100.00%	85.71%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Complaints Received (Stage 1 and Peer Review)	N/A	49	55	52	44	33
Member Enquiries Received	N/A	48	57	67	60	56

Member Enquiries - Average Days to Resolve	20 wd	15.1	14.5	14.2	19.5	15.3
Repairs satisfaction	85%	84.30%	85.80%	86.50%	84.40%	87.90%

Clarion Futures: In addition to Housing Services, Clarion provide and assist with a number of community based initiatives. Appendix 1 outlines the role of Clarion Futures and the Merton Community Panel.

2.5 **Nominations to Void Properties**

Of interest will be the role the Council has in seeking to work collaboratively with all Housing Associations, including Clarion, in improving outcomes for Merton residents. An example is the important role that housing association have in meeting the housing needs of Merton Residents through agreed nomination rights. Below is a table that shows the number of nominations received in 2020-21 from all partner housing associations in the borough.

No of Bedrooms	Studio	1	2	3	Total
Noms received	1	112	61	18	192

2.6 **Other initiatives**

- 2.6.1 Tenants Champion: In late 2021 Merton established the job of Tenants' Champion with Cllr Nick Draper appointed by Full Council.
- 2.6.2 Improving information on the councils website by the insertion of information regarding housing association tenants' rights
- 2.6.3 Publication of a performance matrix data set from Clarion on the Councils website

3 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 3.1. None

4 TIMETABLE

- 4.1. None

5 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. None

6 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. None

7 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. None

8 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. None

9 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None

10 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

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11 BACKGROUND PAPERS
APPENDIX 1 (below)

APPENDIX 1 – CLARION FUTURES

LB Merton: Clarion Futures & Regen Team activity summary

Clarion Futures

Futures' spend in Merton is at least £350k pa with 3 staff dedicated to the borough itself (2 employment advisors, 1 community development officer) + 1 further fte across the Money/Digital teams. On top of the £350k there is another £40k in-kind from Brompton bikes for 50 loan bikes. With the Regen Team's social value role and in-kind contributions from contractors the total Clarion added value spend each year in Merton is well over £500k pa.

Futures' headline activity;

Merton Community Panel was established by Futures with Housing colleagues and is comprised of Clarion residents, independents and nominated local Councillors. Since 2019 the Panel have been allocated an annual budget from Futures of £100,000 to support the local community. Grants awarded include:

- £40,000 to the Merton Giving Coronavirus Fund , which supported a variety of organisations to transform services to enable services to continue to delivery of services to residents across Merton;
- £20,000 to Uptown Youth Service
- £8,000 to Dons Local Action Group, an organisation that was directly set up as a response to Covid, providing essential supplies to those in food poverty;
- small grants totalling £24,000 have been awarded to Tooting & Mitcham Community Sports Club; Polka Theatre; Accoutre Centre for Learning; and South London Tamil Welfare Group.

On top of this Futures provided £47,500 in additional grant funding during the pandemic to 22 Merton-based organisations.

Eastfields Estate; Acacia Adventure Playground - with funding from our supply chain partners we are aiming to replace some of the structures at the playground which are coming to the end of their life. The cost for these improvements is approximately £43K. We are in discussions with Travis Perkins about their potential contribution in terms of materials.

Nearby BMX Park – we are looking at improvements to the track for which the Merton Community Panel has agreed a £10k donation. Our BMX partners have recently been successful in a bid to Access Sport for some new bikes. We are also looking to upgrade a basketball court on the Sadler's Estate.

Brompton Bike Hire and Hadley Property Group – we have been working with both partners to open Cycle 42, a pop-up cycle hub, offering 50 Brompton folding bicycles to Merton residents on a free 90-day trial basis. Inspired by Brompton's 'Wheels for Heroes' campaign (free cycle hire for NHS workers) this new initiative has been developed to help improve the mental and physical health of Merton residents. As a spin-off from the partnership we have helped Hadley develop Cycle 42 (a former soft

play centre) as a useful meanwhile space for local partners The Bike Project and Dons Local Action Group, who are both now using the rent-free space to deliver much needed services to local residents.

Merton Partners - Clarion Futures supports many local partners and stakeholders in the delivery of youth and community development services across Merton including:

- National Trust (Gardening at Farm Road);
- Merton Connected Polka Theatre;
- Attic Theatre;
- Roots2Grow;
- Ethnic Minority Centre;
- Mitcham Town Community Trust and the associated secondary and primary schools;
- AFC Wimbledon Foundation;
- Tooting and Mitcham FC;
- Phipps Bridge Youth Centre;
- Personal Independence Support;
- Uptown Youth Service;
- Accoutre Centre for Learning; Dons Local Action Group
- South Mitcham Community Association

Community centres - we manage 3 local community facilities with one in development at Ravensbury.

Jobs & Training service - 457 Merton residents have been enrolled onto the 'Love London Working' programme, with 129 helped into work. In addition;

- 2 of Clarion's Kickstart vacancies are in Merton
- We sit on the Merton Adult Learning Advisory Panel and the Merton Economic Wellbeing Group and work with a number of local partners including the job centre

Money & Digital service - in 2020/21 the Money Guidance Team completed work with 87 Merton residents providing a total of 296 interventions (budgeting, debt advice, grants). We awarded 27 grants to these residents, 9 for white goods and 18 for fuel vouchers with a total value of just under £4,000.

In addition;

- 2 digital grants were awarded to local groups totalling £9k, one helped 25 local families, the other trained 30 local people
- 3 further digital projects including 7 digital champions and 7 residents from Oaks Court receiving loaned lap-tops and training

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