

Housing Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 23 January 2024 5.30pm

A Budget Commentary by the Green Group

Cllr Elliot Tong, Green Housing Spokes

Cllr Naomi Bennett Green Finance Spokes

1 Overview

The Green Group's focus continues to be:

- protecting council tenants from the cost of living
- protecting council tenants from the climate emergency
- advocating for our tenants and ensuring that their concerns are heard.

There is not a neat dividing line between these issues. They are closely connected.

Both of the writers of this report represent Abbey ward where over 1 in 4 households are in council housing. This is one of the highest figures in the city. The voices of our residents, their questions and our case work are the foundation of this report. Abbey's council tenants have the same issues as council tenants elsewhere in Cambridge.

The difference is that because numbers are higher, it's easier to pick out patterns.

The main issues that we want to talk about are:

- Damp, condensation and mould ("DCM") - section 2
- Rent levels and arrears - section 3
- Keeping tenants safe and warm - section 4
- Under-reporting and dissatisfaction - section 5
- Garage and parking issues – section 6
- Using HRA expertise to support other residents, without reducing the support for council tenants – section 7

2 Damp, Condensation and Mould (“DCM”)

It has been a privilege to continue to work closely with the new condensation team. I understand that it isn't council etiquette to name individual officers in public meeting so we will continue to give thanks and feedback to the team in private.

Last year my colleague, Cllr Howard said that it was too early to assess all the costs and requirements of the DCM work. I did not expect to be saying the same thing a year later. Yet, despite regular mentions of Awaab's Law by ministers, we are still waiting for detailed guidance and service standards or any offer of financial help.

However, we have learned that no two cases of DCM are the same. The popular view is that if you wash off the mould, open the windows, and turn the heating up, then it's all sorted. In some cases that's even true but not in all of them. Many cases are very hard to resolve.

Our other discovery is that the damage to the tenants' health is very hard to predict. Although we know that some groups are more vulnerable, even within these groups there are differences.

Every time you take a breath in a room where mould spores are present, there is a risk of the spores getting into your lungs. It's another roll of the die.

A very small number of residents experience serious and long term health impacts very quickly. *We need a better procedure to identify those residents quickly and get them out faster through the direct let route.*

It is impossible to quantify the financial costs involved at this stage. Our limited experience suggests that the number of cases is very small. Unfortunately the impact can be very serious.

Another problem is that in a few “legacy” cases, the tenants’ belongings may need to be removed to prevent them acting as a reservoir for mould spores. Some can be deep cleaned. Others need to be replaced, sometimes more than once.

Tenants in this situation should not be pushed into making an ombudsman or disrepair claim for compensation. Discretionary funds for fast replacement need to be set up.

3 Rental Levels and Arrears

I need to explain why, despite the cost of living crisis, we support the maximum 7.7% increase. The main reasons are that:

- 60% of council tenants receive some financial help with rent;
- The HRA is self funding and reduced income means reduced money for repairs;
- For many council tenants, their heating bill is bigger than their rent. We need to spend more to help them keep their homes warm.

4 Keeping Tenants Safe and Warm

We welcome the additional funds for insulation and retrofit. However, as usual we need to challenge how those funds are being spent and whether they deliver the maximum benefits in

reduced emissions and heating bills. We also ask that such improvements are shared more evenly over the housing stock so that more people get a smaller benefit rather than a smaller number getting a larger benefit.

We know that in the past the council hasn't always been able to decide how the retrofit money is spent because it has come from government grants and those grants have strings.

But where we are using our own funds, we should be ensuring that we are delivering repairs and retrofit for the many, not for the few.

We have a large number of tenants reporting badly fitting doors and windows. We know that typically 30% of heat loss is from doors and windows. Yet tenants are regularly being told that their draughty doors and windows are not bad enough to replace and they must wait for years for a "planned" replacement.

We ask again for a review of this policy. We ask if planned repairs can be halted for a year to provide funds to tackle the worst of the draughty doors and windows.

5 Under Reporting and Tenant Satisfaction

We know that under-reporting is more common where there are multiple deprivation factors. But just because this is expected, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be trying to tackle it. The longer it takes to get problems reported, the worse it gets and the more it costs.

It also means that we can underestimate the funds needed for our repair needs because information is missing.

Often we find out about a repair problem, it's because we are talking to the resident about something completely different. When we (tactfully) ask residents about why they have not reported the repair, often residents tell us that they or a

neighbour have had an experience where they do not feel that their repair needs have been met

The repairs most often mentioned are doors and windows but legacy DCM problems feature too.

We'll continue to do our share to tackle under-reporting but we'd like some help from the council too. The condensation team has helped by mapping case clusters and attempting to contact the gaps. We'd like to see more of this analysis in future.

6 Garage and Resident Parking Permit Issues

We'd like to ask for the charges for both garages and resident parking permits to be increased, particularly those for garages.

We have had instances where garages have been used in ways that create a nuisance or even a hazard for neighbours. The charges for these services needs to be increased to ensure that the costs of dealing with these problems are covered.

We also ask for resident parking charges for outsize and heavy vehicles such as SUVs are increased following the Paris model. Heavy vehicles have higher emissions, cause more potholes and take up more room on road and frequently on pavement when they park. We hope that a small nudge from increasing the charges may help residents make more considerate choices. For the avoidance of doubt, we do not ask that these increased charges be applied to blue badge vehicles or vans.

7 Using HRA Expertise to Help Non Council Tenants

The council has a dual role both as a landlord of its own properties and a regulator of other properties through its environmental health unit. We'd like to see the council share more case studies of topical issues such as its DCM work through social media. While the landlord forum is excellent for

larger landlords, social media would reach more smaller landlords.

HRA has an excellent financial advice and inclusion service for council tenants. The service is very busy and runs at full stretch. Officers are keen to use podcasts and other social messaging to get their message out to other officers, councillors and tenants and do as much good as possible with their time.

Not only would this create a valuable resource for council tenants, but the materials could be used by housing association and private tenants too.

The cost of living crisis is entering a new year and shows no sign of ending. Helping residents in this way would not reduce the quality and quantity of this excellent service.

It also helps prevent other residents from falling into debt and homelessness and needing the services of the HRA.

8 Funding of proposals

We consider that these proposals might be funded within existing budgets and do not require a separate vote

Cllr Elliot Tong

Cllr Naomi Bennett

15 January 2024