

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date:** 20 March 2025

**Title:** Homes First – Performance & Outlook

**Report of:** Ian Fitzpatrick, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning

**Cabinet member:** Councillor Mark Slater, Cabinet member for tenants and those in housing need

**Ward(s):** All

**Purpose of report:** To provide Cabinet with a summary of Homes First’s current performance.

**Decision type:** Non-key

**Officer recommendation(s):** That Cabinet:  
(1) Note the summary of performance, operating challenges, and the key activities that Homes First is taking to address these.

**Reasons for recommendations:** To provide information about the current operating performance and challenges.

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## **1. Executive Summary.**

- 1.1 This is the first of what will be a bi-annual Homes First update, providing a summary of performance across each of the key services managed by the team. The team provides a full tenancy management service to tenants living in Council homes, and works closely with colleagues in Property Services and Revenues & Benefits to maintain homes and collect rents. The Housing Options and Wellbeing service within Homes First, supports local residents in need of housing advice, or who are facing homelessness.
- 1.2 The report draws on information taken from housing performance indicators and the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs). First reported in July 2024, the TSMs provide a means of comparing Homes First’s performance with other registered providers of housing, using the benchmark figures issued by the Regulator each autumn.
- 1.3 Performance across the satisfaction based TSMs is encouraging, with the majority of the year-to-date figures faring well in relation to sector average benchmarks. Operational teams are, successfully delivering a robust inspection regime across

the 'big 6' health and safety items (fire, gas, electrical, water, asbestos and lift safety), effectively balancing support and enforcement measures to reduce anti-social behaviour and lower arrears, and in December, secured homes for well over half of those applicants assessed as having a homelessness (prevention or relief) duty.

- 1.4 Better managing complaints is an area that stands out as requiring attention, and to address this a new approach has recently been launched that will see stage 1 maintenance complaints (which make up the majority) managed by specified officers in the Property Services Team, who will deliver a focussed service handling all aspects of investigation and response. Maintaining a focus on compliance, which will always be high on the Regulator's agenda, keeping tenants better informed of progress with repairs, and continuing to lower the number of families living in temporary accommodation, all remain key areas of focus for the team.
- 1.5 The report is intended to provide members with greater assurance about the performance of Homes First, in line with the scrutiny expectations set out in the Regulator's standards, and the resulting focus on performance driven management adopted by the team.

## **2. Background.**

- 2.1 The operating context in which Homes First delivers services remains complex, and is characterised by a series of financial constraints, economic uncertainties, and regulatory changes that continue to challenge the viability of business plans. High maintenance costs and rent increase caps (set at 2.7% under the Governments CPI+1% formula) continue to constrain the budgets available within the Housing Revenue Account, whilst many tenants face an ongoing struggle with the cost of living, and locally, the support services on which many residents rely face significant financial restrictions. Sustained homelessness pressures and the ongoing programme of work underway to re-align services with the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) Consumer Standards, continue to have a significant impact on Homes First's activities.
- 2.2 The remainder of this report presents a summary of the tenant satisfaction feedback received over the past year (section 2), and a performance summary for each service area (sections 4 to 8), setting out the challenges, achievements, and a view of what lies on the horizon for each.

## **3. Tenant satisfaction with housing services.**

- 3.1 Homes First commissions a series of satisfaction surveys that ask tenants for their views about the services they receive. These comprise of transactional surveys, which ask about the experience of tenants who have recently used the service (for example, those who have requested a repair, moved into a new home, or made a complaint), and an annual survey which asks a random sample of tenants drawn from the wider tenant population, standard questions set by the Regulator. The annual survey feeds into the Regulator's TSMs, which all housing providers must submit, so allows the Council's performance to be benchmarked against its peers. Appendix 1 presents a full summary of the results.

- 3.2 The latest figures, released in January 2025, report that 65% of tenants were satisfied with the housing services they received. This was unchanged from the 2023/24 figure, is short of the median figure reported by all landlords (71%), but is broadly in line with the 2023/24 median reported by all local authority (LA) landlords (68%). The figure remains short of the Council's own performance target of 75%.
- 3.3 The two TSMs relating to the repairs service both reported improvement on the year-end figures. Satisfaction with repairs received over the last 12 months was 73% (+4%) and satisfaction with the time taken to complete the last repair was 68% (+5%). Both are ahead of the median scores reported for all providers and local authorities. Two thirds of tenants (65%) agreed that their home was well maintained, in line with the LA benchmark, whilst 78% of tenants agreed that their home was safe, a 4% increase since 2023/24. This is also ahead of the sector benchmarks. Results in the repairs transactional survey are generally strong, but a quarter (26%) of those surveyed stated that they needed to follow up repair requests, whilst 22% reported that repair work took more than one visit to complete. Targeting improvements in these areas is likely to raise satisfaction scores with both repairs and service overall.
- 3.4 Three of the TSMs relate to communications. Around three-quarters (76%) of tenants were satisfied that they felt kept informed of things that matter, which is a slight improvement on the 2023/24 figure and is ahead of sector benchmarks, whilst a similar figure (75%), agreed that the housing service treats them fairly and with respect. This is in line with the local authority benchmark figure. Tenants give a lower score when asked whether their landlord listens and acts upon their views, with 59% of tenants satisfied that they do, although this is an improvement on 2023/24 and is ahead of the LA median score.
- 3.5 Only a third (35%) of tenants were satisfied with the handling of complaints, although this is ahead of the sector (34.5%) and LA median scores (29.1%). In the transactional survey over 60% of tenants reported that they were dissatisfied with how well they had been kept up to date on progress, and found the process difficult to use. Steps are being taken to trial new ways of working to address these issues.
- 3.6 Three TSM scores relate to neighbourhood management. At 57% satisfaction with communal areas has improved marginally but remains below sector benchmarks, whilst agreement that the landlord makes a positive impact on communities (59%) is broadly in line with figures reported by our peers. Satisfaction on with the landlord's approach to managing anti-social behaviour (57%) is ahead of sector benchmarks.
- 3.7 Performance across the satisfaction indicators is good, and complaint handling aside, the majority of scores compare well against the benchmark figures reported by the Regulator. The satisfaction TSMs should be viewed alongside the housing management indicators set out in the service specific summaries below.

## 4. Repairs & Maintenance.

### 4.1 Operating context – key pressures on the service.

- Inflation ⇒ Increased contract and materials costs pressurise budgets.
- Rent cap ⇒ Reduced income to fund repairs and capital investment in homes.
- Regulation ⇒ Higher capital works, monitoring, and inspections costs.
- Sustainability ⇒ Significant costs to upgrade the energy efficiency of Council homes.

### 4.2 Key TSMs & KPIs

Performance indicators (period)	Value (target)
Percentage of tenants satisfied with repairs (Jan 25)	73% (75%)
Repairs completed within target – non emergency (Dec 24)	88.0% (100%)
Repairs completed within target – emergency (Dec 24)	93.7% (100%)
Homes that do not meet the Decent Homes Standard (Dec 24)	4.19% (3%)
Percentage fire risk assessments completed (Dec 24)	99.3% (100%)
Percentage of gas safety inspections completed (Dec 24)	99.4% (100%)
Percentage of electrical safety inspections completed (Dec 24)	97.8% (100%)
Percentage water safety tests completed (Dec 24)	90.2% (100%)
Percentage of asbestos safety inspections completed (Dec 24)	100% (100%)
Percentage of lift checks completed (Dec 24)	100% (100%)

### 4.3 Performance and challenges

Repairs and void contract price costs have continued to increase, placing available budgets within the HRA under strain, and necessitating the ongoing need to limit repairs to some non-essential items. Alongside the steps taken to introduced additional monitoring on spend, this has limited the exposure of the budget and provided a platform on which the service can look to move on from the 'essential only' repairs approach.

As noted above satisfaction results are generally strong, though feedback indicates that keeping tenants better informed of progress will improve this position further. Completion times benchmark well against the sector average mean scores, with over 88% of non-emergency repairs completed on time, well

ahead of the sector average of 81%, whilst 94% of emergency repairs also meet target times. This is in line with the sector average of 95%.

On the capital works side budgets have also been subject to substantial pressure, with works focussed on health and safety and upgrading electrical safety, taking priority over other stock improvements that surveys indicate will be needed over the coming years. Placing safety at the forefront of the team's work is essential and over the past year they have put in place the arrangements needed to support a robust inspection regime across the 'big 6' safety items. Inspections for asbestos checks and lifts are now 100% , whilst those for fire, gas and electric are all close to target. Robust enforcement action routinely targets homes where access issues prevent checks taking place. Water testing for legionella is currently being conducted against a new bi-annual target in line with industry best practice, which replaces the five year testing schedule in place beforehand. As this new testing regime rolls out, performance will move closer to the 100% target.

In a bid to further address cost pressures and improve the service tenants receive, the Property Services Team has undergone a formal restructure. Central to this is the transfer of all surveyor roles into a 'geographically based' team. This gives surveyors more accountability for the homes they manage, and also enables them to better understand the homes on 'their patch'. It also gives tenants a single point of contact for all property related issues. Alongside the creation of a new customer support team, the new structure has reduced staffing cost by £138K per annum, savings from which have been re-invested in repairs and capital works programmes.

The Government has confirmed that all social housing must hold an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band C or above by 2030. Achieving this requires funding over and above HRA budgets, so Homes First will continue to maximise the take-up of relevant grants. In line with this, a £4M programme of sustainability retrofit improvements are currently on site, supported by a £2M grant from the Social Housing De-carbonisation Fund (SHDF). The scheme will reduce the carbon footprint of 200 homes by 20%.

#### 4.4 **The view ahead.**

The service must continue to adapt, so it is able to meet ongoing cost pressures, and the outcomes set out in the Consumer Standards. A number of positive measures, projects and work items are currently being implemented that will address these, through:

- Maintaining a focus on compliance as the top priority of the team, all of whom have a role to play in safeguarding the safety of Homes First properties. This approach will:
  - Drive a robust inspection programme across the 'big 6' compliance functions.
  - Put in place new performance indicators that illustrate progress on remedying compliance deficiencies, and report these to Cabinet and residents groups.
  - Agree an approach to delivering future stock inspections, that balances compliance with the Regulator's requirements and costs.

- Obtain independent assurance from the Council's Internal Audit team.
- Focussing on efforts to reduce non-compliance with Decent Homes. At 4.19%, figures have improved from the 5.2% reported in the TSMs at the end of March, but remain higher than the LA sector benchmark of 3.1%. In the main non-decency is as a result of homes awaiting new windows in blocks of flats where planning approval and consultation with leaseholders is required. All non-decent homes are on this year's asset programme and the number is expected to reduce before year-end.
- Reviewing and re-procuring maintenance repairs contracts, to ensure that services deliver value, are cost effective, and fully meet the expectations of tenants.
- Refining the messages given to tenants about repairs availability, to make it clear that the vast majority of repairs reported to the Council will be completed. Only a small number (currently less than 3%) of 'non-essential' repair requests, mostly relating to fencing, sheds, and decorations, are put on hold due to budgetary limitations. This message will be disseminated to tenants over the coming months, together with a clearer list of Council and tenant repair responsibilities.
- Scoping a web portal that enables tenants to log repairs and track their progress through to completion, via self-service and / or an accompanying APP.
- Continuing to draw on available funding to boost the rating of homes to EPC band C or above. A £1.75M bid in support of a £3.5M programme of works to 173 homes has been submitted to the round 3 of the SHDF, a decision on which is expected shortly.

## 5. Income Collection.

### 5.1 Operating context – key pressures on the service.

- Cost of living ⇒ Tenants may prioritise spend on rising food / utility costs over rent.
- Rent cap ⇒ A rent increase of 2.7%, though lower than last year, will still have an impact on incomes, particularly for those tenants not in receipt of welfare benefits.
- Support services ⇒ Reductions to ESCC funded support services are likely to impact the availability of debt advice and tenancy sustainment support.

### 5.2 Key TSMs & KPIs

Performance indicators (period)	Value (target)
Rent arrears of current tenants (Dec 2024)	3.11% (3.5%)

### 5.3 Performance and challenges

The service is performing well, with arrears at the end of December standing at 3.11%. This figure is below the 3.5% target and lower than the 3.72% figure reported at the end of 2023/24. These outcomes are encouraging, given the relatively high (7.7%) rent increase applied at the beginning of the financial year.

This performance has been achieved by applying an approach that supports tenants experiencing financial difficulties, but takes firm enforcement action against those that do not pay on time. Increasing use of data and automation, deploying a dedicated team of officers focussed on delivering early interventions, and supporting tenants to manage their budgets, are the key tools used to support this approach.

Over the past year work delivered to refine this approach has included:

- Maintaining a rigorous process to secure direct payments for any Universal Credit recipients with a history of arrears, or those requiring support with budgeting skills.
- Implementing a new *Rent Account Calculator* to automate the creation and tracking of sustainable repayment plans.
- Re-instating the issuing of quarterly rent statements to help keep tenants better informed of their account balances and transactions.
- Encouraging the take up of specific welfare benefits, online benefit checker tools and support agencies, via campaigns and regular articles in the *Open Voice* tenants newsletter and rent statement inserts.
- Working closely with Homes First's Tenancy Resolution & Wellbeing teams to provide additional support to those tenants living with multiple compound needs.

#### 5.4 **The view ahead.**

The overriding focus will be on maintaining the current approach (it is working), whilst keeping track of any emerging risks that could affect the service, which may include the:

- Ongoing migration from Housing Benefit (HB) to Universal Credit, which will see changes to payment schedules place a new set of tenants in 'technical arrears'. Migrations also result in additional HB overpayments, which are resource intensive to manage and detract from the core enforcement work of the team.
- Proposals being discussed to reduce the budget available to fund local floating support services by over 80%, which if approved, will come into force from this April. The likely outcome will be that referrals to the service will only be available for those households with the very highest levels of need.

Taking steps to better target the referrals made to partner advice agencies, and delivering further data driven interventions to target enforcement actions, will help address these risks, as will the delivery of an agreed action plan put in place to align the service with the RSHs updated Consumer Standards. Key items prioritised for delivery in the plan include, securing the formal approval of rent setting and rent arrears policies, and taking forward work to scope a customer facing web portal, through which tenants could make payments, check rent accounts, and track enquiries.

## 6. Tenancy Services.

### 6.1 Operating context – key pressures on the service.

- Cost of living ⇒ Tenants experiencing lower wellbeing and more welfare concerns.
- Cost of living ⇒ Ongoing financial hardship and risk of exploitation.
- Rent cap ⇒ Restricts funding available to maintain communal areas and estates.
- Support services ⇒ Reductions to ESCC funded support services are likely to reduce the availability of debt advice and tenancy floating support services.
- Court services ⇒ Delays restrict ability to promptly address anti-social behaviour.
- Police resources ⇒ Reduced staffing limits ability to support vulnerable tenants.

### 6.2 Key TSMs & KPIs

Performance indicators (period)	Value
Sat. that communal areas clean & well maintained (Jan 25)	57%
Sat. landlord makes positive contribution to neighbourhood (Jan 25)	59%
Sat. with the landlords approach to handling ASB (Jan 25)	57%
Number of new cases opened per 1000 homes (March 24)	33.5 (n=108)
No. of ongoing cases of ASB (Dec 24)	300
No. of new cases of domestic abuse reports (April to Dec 24)	42

### 6.3 Performance and challenges

Cost-of-living pressures continue to have a dis-proportionate impact on social housing tenants, with rising levels of financial hardship resulting higher numbers of marginalised households, who experience lower levels of wellbeing. This has contributed to more cases of serious anti-social behaviour (ASB) and left more vulnerable households at risk of domestic abuse, addiction, and exploitation. At the end of December the team was managing an active caseload of 300 cases of ASB, of which around 40% (125 cases) included serious issues that could pose a risk of harm to tenants or other parties involved. The team has handled 83 new reports of ASB and 42 reports of domestic abuse since the start of April.

The team continues to pursue a balanced approach of enforcement and support, working closely with partners to resolve cases and address issues precipitated by mental health issues or other multiple compound needs. All cases are triaged, with the most serious referred to a dedicated Tenancy Resolution Team, who focus resources and harness expertise. There have been challenges, with increasing court delays restricting the ability of the team to take enforcement



action, and reductions to the numbers of officers in local policing teams reducing the ability to undertake joint visits that support tenants who pose a risk to themselves or others. Despite these, the team has:

- Delivered a tenancy sustainment service, through additional roles who actively support 35 tenants with multiple compound needs, reducing rates of tenancy failure and reducing associated legal and relet cost. Maintaining this support is vital.
- Implemented a new case management module in Civica CX, that will bring more rigour to how ASB and domestic abuse cases are logged, categorised, and tracked.
- Continued to renew the strategic and operational framework through which Homes First addresses domestic abuse, adopting an approach that aligns with best practice set out in the DAHA (Domestic Abuse & Housing Alliance) accreditation scheme, which places the interests of victims at the centre of case management.

There is a concern that budgetary restrictions on the amounts that can be spent on communal and external decorations will lead to a deterioration to the look and feel of the Council's estates. At 57%, satisfaction with the cleanliness and condition of communal areas remains unchanged from the figure reported in the TSMs at the end of March, but is below the sector benchmark. In looking to address this, responsibility for delivering block inspections returned to Homes First in February, and the re-located officers will work together with patch based surveyors and housing officers to adopt a pro-active approach to estate management. This newly established approach will be better placed to conduct regular inspections, identify priority works, and monitor their delivery.

#### 6.4 **The view ahead.**

Over the next year the team will continue to enhance the support offer to tenants, drawing in large part on the action plans in place to align the service offer with the Regulator's Consumer Standards. This work will focus on:

- Utilising the insight that bringing communal block inspections back in-house to Homes First's provides, to consider what improvements can be delivered to estate management services more widely.
- Assessing information gathered through a tenant data collection exercise to better understand household needs and update strategies addressing under occupation.
- Reviewing the approach to handling noise complaints, to ensure that it meets the Regulator's and Independent Housing Ombudsman's expectations,
- Fostering closer relations with Sussex Police & continuing to support multi-agency forums that tackle ASB, hate crime and the exploitation of tenants by criminal gangs.

There are new risks on the horizon, in particular the County Council's proposals to reduce funding to housing floating support services. If approved, this will significantly restrict the number of referrals that can be made into the service and the team will need to work with the provider, BHT, to agree how the remaining allocation can be most effectively targeted.

## 7. Housing Options & Wellbeing.

### 7.1 Operating context.

- Temporary accommodation ⇒ Rising costs remain a key challenge to budgets.
- Private rented sector ⇒ Limited supply impacting ability to place at risk households.
- Cost of living ⇒ Making it harder for tenants to afford increasing rents.
- ESCC funding ⇒ Limits to supported accommodation and floating support services.

### 7.2 Key TSMs & KPIs.

Performance indicators (period)	Value (target)
Number of prevention and relief presentations (April to Dec 24)	301
Number of households in emergency accommodation (Dec 24)	42
Perc. applicants with accepted duty successfully re-housed (Dec 24)	63%
Number of households on housing register (Dec 24)	604

### 7.3 Performance & challenges

Higher rents, a reduced supply of homes as landlords exit the sector because of market conditions, and cost-of-living pressures, continue to drive homelessness demand. As a result 'no fault' evictions remain the leading cause of homelessness across the District, with family no longer willing to accommodate and domestic abuse, other leading causes.

In a typical month the housing options triage team, the first point of contact for resident seeking housing advice, responded to over 1,100 telephone calls and e-mail enquiries each month. The team operates within the wider 'Homelessness Hub', which has continued to evolve and expand the services it offers, opening its doors to the public in April, and realising the goal of providing a space where fifteen partner organisation co-locate to deliver a unified service addressing local homelessness. The hub now receive an average of 130 'in person' presentations each month, and the pioneering approach to co-location has been recognised as best practice by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Work at the Hub is focussed on the pro-active delivery of prevention activity, through:

- Negotiating with landlords to help stave off evictions and create new capacity.
- Deploying new officer roles to visit the homes of all cases related to family breakdown, negotiating to keep the at risk family members in situ.

- Re-focussing the Council's 'sanctuary scheme', which provides additional security measures for victims of domestic abuse who wish to remain in their homes.

Where cases progress to formal homelessness assessment the hub team continues to work closely with case officers, to maximise prevention opportunities. This work is complimented by the specialist support delivered by the Wellbeing Service, which accepts referrals from housing teams and other agencies and delivers interventions to address social isolation, employability, lifestyle behaviours and tenancy sustainment. Since April, the team has delivered over 150 interventions, supporting 59 local people.

The approach deployed through the Hub is working, with the numbers of households living in emergency accommodation in December 2024 (42) falling by a quarter since the end of March (58). This has been achieved despite an increase in the numbers of homelessness assessment being carried out, which totalled 301 between April to December 2024, compared with 212 in the same period a year earlier. This reflects the focussed prevention work of the team who, in December, secured homes for well over half (63%) of applicants assessed as having a homelessness (prevention or relief) duty.

There are currently 604 households waiting on the Council's housing register, a number that has remained relatively steady since a full review of the list took place in 2023.

#### 7.4 **The view ahead.**

The Government announced 2025/26 funding settlements for Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) in November, and should provide enough funding to maintain the levels of support delivered through the Hub and existing staffing structures, as well as support housing advice services delivered through BHT and Homelink, a local charity providing grants and loans to households at risk of eviction. Future changes to the structure of funding are anticipated, and the position will have to be kept under close review.

The support that housing and debt advice services that the Council procures directly through BHT will become even more critical, given the reductions that the County Council propose to their floating support services (also operated by BHT), which will reduce the teams access to referrals. Of even more concern are the accompanying plans to close twenty units of supported accommodation, which provide homes for adults with high levels of support need. If approved these will take effect from September 2025, compounding the existing shortage of supported housing across East Sussex.

In addressing these challenges over the coming months the team will:

- Continue to drive forward work to reduce the use of emergency accommodation, with cost pressures likely to remain in place so long as the current subsidy rules persist.
- Further enhance joint working through the Homelessness Hub by introducing shared assessment forms, opening up access to case management systems

and implementing approaches that structure interventions ‘around the service user’.

- Launch a public consultation on making changes to the Council’s allocation policy, set to introduce a new ‘property match’ model that is designed to make the allocations process simpler to use, reduce waiting time, and to lower demand by setting qualification criteria that prioritise those with a local connection.

## 8. Customer Experience Team

### 8.1 Operating context

Regulation ⇒ Increased scrutiny of engagement, governance, and complaints processes by the RSH & Independent Housing Ombudsman (IHO).

### 8.2 Key TSMs & KPIs.

<b>Performance indicators (March 24 unless stated)</b>	<b>Value (sector ave.)</b>
Satisfaction with complaint handling (Jan 25)	35% (35%)
Complaints responded to within IHO code timescales: stage 1	38.3% (82%)
Complaints responded to within IHO code timescales: stage 2	34.0% (84%)
No. of complaints per 1000 homes (Landlord Services): stage 1	63.9 (43)
No. of complaints per 1000 homes (Landlord Services): stage 2	14.6 (6)

### 8.3 Performance & challenges

The team supports the work of Homes First through delivering tenant engagement activities, co-ordinating the response to managing complaints, submitting regulatory returns, and most, by developing a strategy to manage data integrity.

- Tenant engagement and accountability - The main focus of activities has been on renewing how the tenant representative group operates, to meet the more stringent outcomes set out in the RSH’s Consumer Standards. To address these the team have negotiated new terms of reference for the representative tenant group, Tenants of Lewes District (TOLD) and assigned formal roles for the lead member for housing. The tenant scrutiny process has also been renewed, introducing a shorter review frame, customer journey mapping (a focussed process that triangulates satisfaction scores, complaints, and engagement), and a 12-month review point.
- Complaint handling - The team have re-shaped activities to meet the challenges set by the IHO Code of Practice, introduced in April 2024. The code is extensive and covers everything from definitions to processes, and

requires landlords to undertake compliance self-assessments, which are monitored by the IHO. The team successfully received sign-off of the first, submitted in July. In line with the Code, formal responsibility for overseeing complaint handling has been assigned to the lead member for housing, whilst TOLD receives complaints updates every quarter. There are challenges, and having put in place a new framework attention is now focussed on improving performance. Some progress has been made, with complaint handling satisfaction rising from 20% in March 2024 to 35% in January 2025, whilst interventions designed to improve response times are currently being trialled.

- Data integrity – A newly agreed strategy has been drafted, focussing on data accuracy, training, and governance. New reports have been commissioned to established baseline ‘tenancy’ and ‘stock’ data to provide a base for performance reports, regulatory returns, and the introduction of a new reporting tool, Power Bi. A new officer will support related projects and cleansing programmes. Separately, work is underway to begin a full tenancy census to collect key data about household needs.

#### 8.4 **The view ahead.**

The team will continue to support the operational teams to address:

- Tenant engagement and accountability - With the new formal governance structures in place, the focus is now on broadening the footprint of tenant engagement activity, to encourage involvement from a more diverse group of residents. This will require a different approach to encourage younger tenants, working tenants, and those from different ethnic backgrounds to help shape housing services. Encouraging engagement is everyone’s role and all teams will be asked to work with their tenants to shape a renewed involvement strategy to be launched later this year.
- Complaint handling - New processes are being put in place to respond to complaints concerning repairs and maintenance, which make-up (as is the case for all housing providers) around seventy-five percent of all complaints. Since February, stage 1 complaints have been managed by specified officers in the Property Services Team who deliver a focussed service targeted at handling all aspects of investigation and response, the key goals being to improve the speed of the service and limit escalation. The Customer Experience Team will continue to respond to stage two complaints, retain oversight of the process and the responsibility for reporting. Analysis of complaints and IHO determinations over the past year has highlighted that recording and responding to service requests is a key area for improvement, alongside being more responsive to household vulnerability.
- Data integrity - The data strategy, and associated training, will support more accurate reporting for 2024/25 regulatory returns and TSMs. The team will continue to support operational colleagues in testing and deployment of CX housing modules, and by disseminating outputs from the tenant census, available later in the year. This will enable staff to provide a more responsive service based on households’ needs.

## **9. Corporate Plan & Council Policies.**

9.1 Deploying actions set out in the Homes First business plan, delivering changes to improve compliance with the Consumer Standards, and continuing to address the challenges presented by homelessness, will support the housing goals set out in the 'Reimagining Lewes District' Corporate Plan 2020-2024, which are to deliver:

- Two hundred new additional council houses.
- More sustainable and energy efficient homes across the District.
- Opening up access to quality housing options for low-middle income residents.
- Accessible housing for those with physical and additional support needs.

## **10. Business case.**

10.1 There is no single business case covering the subject matter of this report. Related strategies and business plans set out how individual services are delivered and how targets are set and measured. These include, the Homes First business plan, action plans addressing compliance against the Regulator's Consumer Standards, housing & homelessness strategies, asset management strategies, and corporate plans.

## **11. Financial appraisal.**

11.1 There are no immediate financial implications related to the specific officer recommendations contained within this report. *Deputy Chief Finance Officer consulted on 11.02.2025.*

## **12. Legal implications.**

12.1 This report is for Cabinet to note. No action or financial resolutions are required. The report sets out the current performance and outlook of Homes First under the following headings: tenancy satisfaction with housing services; repairs and maintenance; income collection; tenancy services; housing options and wellbeing; and customer experience. Members seeking clarification on any legal matters are invited to contact the Head of Legal Services. *Lawyer consulted: 11.02.25 (Legal ref: 13786-JOINT-OD).*

## **13. Risk management implications.**

13.1 Specific risks associated with this report are set out in the Homes First Business Risk plan and the Consumer Standards Risk Plan. Both of these documents score risk and set out actions / controls in line with the Corporate Risk Policy. The documents are reviewed and updated regularly. The Internal Audit team is aware of the wide implications that the new Consumer Standards, and accompanying regulatory approach, have for the delivery of housing services and is incorporating these into relevant audits.

## **14. Equality analysis.**

14.1. There are no direct equality implications arising from the recommendations set out in this report. However, a number of the key items being delivered in associated

work programmes, such as the tenant census and work to boost the diversity of tenant engagement, will have a positive equalities impact.

**15. Environmental impact analysis.**

15.1 There are no direct environmental impact implications arising from the recommendations set out in this report. As noted above, Homes First will continue to explore all funding and partnership opportunities to accelerate the de-carbonisation of Council homes.

**16. Appendices.**

16.1 • Appendix 1: Tenant Satisfaction Measures – Survey Score and Benchmarks.

**17. Background papers.**

17.1 • Homes First Business Plan.  
• Consumer Standards Action Plan.  
• Tenant Satisfaction Measures Benchmarking Report.