



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 31 JULY 2023 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Joel (Chair)
Councillor Zaman (Vice Chair)

Councillor Adatia
Councillor O'Neill

Councillor Mahesh
Councillor Singh Patel

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Joel led introductions as Chair.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aqbany, Cutkelvin and Waddington.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair noted that none of the Members present were in attendance of the previous meeting, which was held during the prior election cycle.

The Chair moved that the minutes be confirmed as a correct record, which was seconded by Vice Chair, Councillor Zaman.

AGREED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held 15 March 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

4. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION

AGREED:

That the Membership of the Housing Scrutiny Commission for 2023-24 be noted.

5. DATES OF MEETINGS FOR THE COMMISSION

AGREED:

That the dates of the meetings for the Housing Scrutiny Commission for 2023-24 be noted.

6. CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair welcomed the new members to the Commission and reminded members to treat each other and officers present with respect throughout the scrutiny process.

7. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

8. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

9. HOUSING OVERVIEW

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation to provide an overview of Housing Services.

Chris Burgin, Director of Housing, Justin Haywood, Head of Service (Housing) and Simon Nicholls, Head of Service (Housing) presented the presentation, and the following points were raised:

- It was noted that there were 145,000 properties in the city, with 1 in 7 being a council property, generating £80 million in revenue going directly towards housing needs. There were 19,000 council tenants.
- The Housing department provided other services such as tackling homelessness or dealing with empty properties.
- It was noted that there were two budgets available for use to the Housing Department, these are the Housing Revenue Account and the General Fund, which funds the wider services of the department. There were also multiple options to bid for pots of money externally.
- The Council highlighted the loss of 350-400 properties to the right to buy scheme annually, which may later be available for rent or purchase in the private sector.
- It was noted that Housing demand was at an all-time high. It was further emphasised that the land available to build new housing to meet demand was insufficient. According to the Local Plan and agreements

with local districts, 19,000 properties would be built outside the city boundaries.

- Due to a growing issue of housing affordability, more applications had been received due to council properties being the most affordable option.
- Leicester was acknowledged to be the most overcrowded city in the East Midlands.
- There was increasing concern around evictions or threatened eviction from privately rented properties.
- It was noted that 5000 approaches had been received from people suffering from or facing potential homelessness. According to the Housing Act, the council was legally required to provide support for those under threat of homelessness and offer temporary or permanent accommodation. Leicester prevent nearly 70% of those that approach the service from becoming homeless.
- It was noted the collaboration with close partners were key to the success of the strategy and statistics were refreshed and sent out to partners every six months. Closer links had been formed with the private rented sector and housing worked closely alongside the Neighbourhoods and Environmental Services department to monitor and improve housing standards and provide support for tenants and landlords. Over 900 properties had been brought back into use through this work.
- Only 3% of housing in Leicester is currently affordable to those on low income or benefits.
- Funding had recently been received to support tenants facing drug and alcohol dependency.
- Housing noted a 96% tenancy sustainment rate with record low levels of evictions.
- All tower blocks were being installed with a sprinkler system.
- It was noted that Housing lead on asylum cases, which had a significant impact on housing demand and services. There were 300 properties that were owner and manager by the Home Office and 1000 asylum seekers currently occupying those properties. There were three asylum overflow hotels, one which had recently been acquired in 2022, and 500 asylum seekers were dispersed between these hotels. It was noted that the number of asylum seekers coming to Leicester City was increasing.

Members of the Commission discussed the presentation and the following additional points were raised:

- It was estimated that there would be around 30 rough sleepers at any one time although counts weren't exhaustive. It was later clarified that June 2023 had seen 78 rough sleepers with the number of those who had slept rough averaging around 21. The Council highlighted the strong priorities to keep rough sleepers off the street through specified accommodation, which could sleep 52 at any one time. It was noted that some who are offered the opportunity may decline the offer.
- Members enquired about the number of empty properties acquired. It

was noted that while the figures weren't available to hand, the figures would be provided to the Commission at a future date.

- It was noted that Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's) were not under the jurisdiction of the Housing Department and instead fell under Neighbourhoods and Environmental Services Director, Sean Atterbury.
- It was noted that 2% or 400 of the current housing stock were currently void in comparison to 650 previously in disrepair due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was noted that the national guidelines were about 2% to 3%.
- It was noted that the council worked closely with housing associations, some of which had formed agreements to put their own stock through the council system.
- It was noted that a set of sheltered housing stock and bungalows had been designated for older residents.
- The Director promoted the Annual Rough Sleeper street that was conducted annually in November in which officers and members interested spend the night on the streets counting and offering temporary accommodation to those rough sleeping.
- It was noted that the Dawn Centre was increasing the rooms available by 10, taking the total number to 54 single occupancy rooms. Another 44 single occupancy rooms were noted to be available and a further 15-39 spaces could be made available in the event of emergency overflow, with the former being preferable. There were over 200 other hostel units and services available for other specified groups, such as ex-prisoners and young adults.
- The Chair requested that more recent data from April 2023 be circulated to Members of the Commission at a later date.
- It was noted that work was in progress to engage and connect with forums and communities to encourage more women of ethnic minority to join the Women in Construction scheme.

AGREED:

1. That the report be noted
2. That more recent data from April 2023 be circulated to Members of the Commission at a later date.

10. WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING

The Director of Housing submitted a report that provided an update to Members of the 'headline' Housing Register and Lettings data, relating to Leicester City Council's Housing Register, for 2022/23.

Justin Haywood, Head of Service (Housing) presented the report and the following points were raised:

- Of the biannual reports on this subject, the report provided was noted to be the 12-month year-end report.
- The Housing allocations policy was being reviewed due to concern over the number of households on the housing register.

- Households on band 3 were noted to be generally unsuccessful in obtaining a property and the Housing Department was providing advice on alternative housing options.
- Demand for wheelchair access outstripped supply.
- It was noted that the highest demand was seen in the east of the city in areas facing greater poverty such as Troon and Eyres Monsell.
- It was noted that waiting times for Band 1 had increase by 2-3 months, with waits for Band 2 increasing significantly more.
- It was noted that Band 1 households accounted for 75% of all lets which prioritised those facing homelessness, overcrowding or serious medical needs. 26% of all lets had been made through a direct offer due to the urgency of the household's situation and 81% of the direct offers had been made to homeless households.

Members of the Commission discussed the report and the following additional points were made:

- It was noted that there were a small amount of households that were occupying properties that were the incorrect size for their needs, and that Housing were not able to coerce residents in underoccupied properties to move to more appropriate properties. The Housing department were conducting a project to approach tenants in under-occupied that may be interested in a mutually beneficial exchange to improve this.
- It was clarified for the purposes of the report that when referring to the last 12 months, it referred to the period of time up until the end of March 2023.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

That the report be noted

11. RENT ARREARS - YEAR END REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report to inform the Members of the Scrutiny Commission on the rent arrears progress within the general housing stock, over the full financial year, from April 2022 to March 2023.

Head of Service, Charlotte McGraw, presented the report and the following additional points were raised:

- Excellent collection rates are being maintained with over 99.6% being collected.
- It was noted that councils were facing challenges in collecting rent and rent arrears.
- The challenges surrounding the cost-of-living crisis and expected future rent increase were acknowledged and the Housing Department emphasised the focus on tenant support and maintaining standards

within the team.

Members of the Commission discussed the report and the following points were made:

- The total amount of rent collected was noted to be £80 million.
- It was noted that the £1.725 million referred to in the report was the outstanding at the end of the month and it was clarified that while each month had an outstanding balance, the amount would be collected.
- It was noted that direct debit payments were an important factor to the high percentages of payment.
- The eight rent management advisors dealt with the most complex cases.
- It was noted that property disrepair claims had been rising both locally and nationally. Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, highlighted attempts to pre-empt disrepair cases and change the method in which the cases had been dealt with. It was further noted that residents had been approached by solicitors providing poor advice on claims on a no-win-no-fee basis, which included advising residents not to pay rent. Adjustments in the allocation of technology and legal resources had seen small improvements in the speed of addressing claims which was hoped to continue to improve.
- Members raised concern over overcrowding within the city and queried methods to increase visits to homes. It was noted that engagement with tenants had been conducted through multiple methods including home visits, mobile texts, phone calls and letters, and home visits were usually reserved for tenants that had not responded to engagement in areas of higher-level arrears. A home visit could be arranged by contacting the Housing Department. It was further noted that with the acknowledged housing crisis, demand for housing far outstripped the supply and that it wasn't feasible to visit all applicants on the housing register.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the comments made by Members be taken into consideration by the Housing Department.

12. HOUSE BUILDS AND ACQUISITIONS UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report regarding the current new build council house pipeline for the next 4 years, the Council acquisition programme and other delivery routes intended to be used to meet the strategic priority target of 1500 new affordable homes for Leicester.

The Head of Service, Simon Nicholls presented the report. Members discussed the report and the following points were raised:

- Housing had continued to achieve great progress in delivering new

builds and acquisitions.

- Housing was putting in a tender for the Lanesborough Road project to go out for a contractor following the original contractor entering voluntary liquidation.
- It was noted that the majority of the acquired houses were 2-3 bedroomed homes.
- Members asked about the contractor entering liquidation. It was noted that the tender would be going out to multiple contractors due to the impact of one contractor entering liquidation managing multiple sites. It was noted that the Council had not incurred any costs from the liquidation as only the work to prepare the site had been done, the cost of which the council had paid for.
- Members were happy to see the environmental impact included in the report.
- Members enquired about the Abbey Park contractor and progress. It was noted that phase 2 had been delivered by the Housing Association and that of 117 units, 100 units were available in phase 2, all of which were affordable housing. The units would be let to applicants on the housing register.
- It was noted that the impact of increasing costs of materials had impacted budgets. Developers were required to provide a price at the beginning of the development process and achieving at cost price was a known risk.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

13. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT / HOUSING ADAPTATIONS REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report on the on the two schemes that deliver support for residents to remain within their existing accommodation, the Disabled Facilities Grant and Housing Adaptations.

The Head of Service, Simon Nicholls presented the item. In addition to the report, the following points were raised:

- It was noted that wait times for adaptations were dependant on the adaptation required and available resources needed to install it.
- It was noted that adaptations were recommended by Adult Social Care and were provided either through council tenant's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) adaptations or through the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG).
- It was noted that the Disabled Facilities Grant was audited yearly.

Members discussed the report and the following points were raised:

- Concern was raised about residents in first story flats accessing

adaptations. It was noted that if accommodation was unable to be made suitable via adaptations and a Personal Evacuation Plan showed that a resident was not safe to reside in their current property, then they were recommended to be rehoused to a property that had already been adapted or was suitable to install the adaptations required following contact with an occupational therapist.

- Members raised concern about the ramp adaptation shown in the report. It was noted that ramps had a 1-inch rise to every 12-inch length requirement, which was why steeper properties may require larger adaptations.
- Members questioned the decrease in number of applications. It was noted that the assessment requirements had changed and that the report statistics only showed major changes required and those that were smaller were automatically completed.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and thanked members of the commission for their comments.

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

14. WORK PROGRAMME

Members were requested to forward any additional items for consideration for the scrutiny work programme be forwarded to the Chair, Vice-Chair or Scrutiny Policy Officer.

15. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other urgent business, the meeting closed at 8:19pm.