



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 12 MARCH 2024 at 6:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Joel (Chair)
Councillor Zaman (Vice Chair)

Councillor Adatia
Councillor O'Neill

Councillor Singh Patel
Councillor Waddington

In Attendance

Deputy City Mayor, Councillor Cutkelvin – Housing and Neighbourhoods

* * * * *

59. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Aqbany and Cllr Mahesh.

60. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair asked members of the commission to declare any interests for which there were none.

61. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair highlighted that the minutes for the meeting on 9 January 2024 were included within the papers and asked members for comments.

AGREED:

- It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2024 were a true and accurate record.

62. PETITIONS

It was noted that none had been received.

63. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

It was noted that none had been received.

64. ENVIRONMENTAL BUDGET UPDATE

The Head of Service presented the report, and it was noted that:

- The environment budget enables improvements to be made to council estates throughout the city. The budget has historically been set at £750k but due to pressures on the Housing Revenue Account it was reduced in 2023/24 to £200k and will remain at the reduced level for 2024/25.
- Consultation was carried out with ward councillors to prepare project proposals prior to the reduction to the environmental budget and the report sets out those that were completed and those that were put on hold across the three districts in the city.
- The £200k budget was not fully spent as resources did not allow for all landscape maintenance to be completed.
- Alternative funding was sought from the highways division to complete the St Peters shopping parade car park renovations.
- Projects on hold were anticipated to be taken forward in 2024/25 but the retained reduced budget may require further delays. Consultation is currently ongoing with ward councillors to identify new priorities or determine whether existing proposals should be taken forward. A further report will be provided to the Commission on consultation proposals.
- The environment budget is one funding stream for improvements to council estates but other funding such as the public realm investment is also available.

The Commission raised concerns regarding the reduction in the budget and requested that future reports incorporate all available budgets for consideration.

In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- The allocation of the environmental budget varied previously with reliance on proactive housing officers, community activists and ward councillors making suggestions. A consultation process has now been established to engage all ward councillors for proposals and it was agreed that the suggestion for a formalised process to document all proposals would be considered. The Deputy City Mayor provided assurance that correspondence would be reviewed to ensure all suggested proposals were included.
- It was the first time the budget was reduced and will remain at £200k during 2024/25 and the impact to local amenities is hoped to be minimal but will be reviewed in time.
- Cross-divisional services are responsible for ensuring cleanliness across the city. Neighbourhood services undertake street cleansing on a rota basis, highways cleansing of roads and drainage, and the housing

division provide additional services to housing areas through the Housing Revenue Account for estate wardens etc.

- Emerging priorities through ward councillor engagement, particularly in the east district, is for the environmental budget to be utilised for street cleansing and weed spraying. A report will be provided to the Commission on all proposals following the consultation.
- Various considerations are given to proposals to identify priorities for funding from the environmental budget including previous spend in wards, resource and capacity, health and safety or legislative requirements and the impact to the area.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Correspondence to be reviewed to ensure all ward councillor suggestions have been noted for consideration for the 2024/25 budget.
- Formal process for documenting ward councillor suggestions to be created.
- Future reports to include reference to other budgets available to investment in council estates.
- Item to remain on work programme for update on proposals following consultation with ward councillors.

65. ADAPTATIONS STRATEGY

The Head of Service presented the report, and it was noted that:

- All adaptation requests are assessed by an occupational therapist in adult social care. If an adaptation is required, it is referred to the locality team or adaptation team.
- Adaptations to council properties are processed by the technical service and works carried out by the inhouse repairs team or a contractor. Minor works, those less than £1k, usually require no delays – subject to availability of equipment. Larger adaptations are allocated priority points by an occupational therapist. The waiting list is dynamic and varies depending on the adaptation cases approved, and priority points awarded. Priority points are attributed to cases waiting to ensure adaptation will always be completed.
- The service has been proactive in increasing wheelchair adapted properties. The adapt to let scheme enables vacant properties that could be fully or partially accessible to be advertised on Home Choice and a minimum of 10% wheelchair accessible homes will be delivered through the new build programme, with the first due to be delivered at the Saffron Velodrome site.
- Adaptations for non-council homes are requested to be undertaken by contractors through adult social care. The housing division has a mandatory function to administer the Disabled Facilities Grant and therefore may be involved in non-council tenant major adaptation although some individuals choose to entirely self-fund. The Disabled

Facilities Grant is means tested and has specific requirements for funding such as access to an internal bathroom, cooking and sleeping facilities. The maximum grant is £30k.

- An Adaptation Strategy is currently being developed – data has been gathered and key themes are being identified. The Commission will be invited to comment on the strategy in due course.

In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- Adaptations vary for completion depending on works required and priority. Minor adaptations such as grab rails or to enable a hospital discharge will usually be completed within seven days. External concrete ramps are likely to take longer. Major adaptations are allocated points to ensure urgent needs are met sooner but all adaptations are completed.
- Minor adaptations are generally undertaken by the in-house team and major adaptations such as equipment-based lifts, access showers, ground floor facilities and extensions are outsourced to contractors.
- The budget for 2021/22 was not fully spent during the pandemic as adaptations could not be undertaken within homes although the service continued to undertake external adaptations. The underspend was carried forward to 2022/23 to meet demand of adaptations but was reduced in 2023/24 due to budget pressures although the government Better Care Fund monies was increased following representations.
- Government have not confirmed Better Care Funding for 2024/25. Once funding is allocated to deliver adaptations for the twelve-month period the housing division will submit a bid to the General Fund to bridge the gap of what the service forecasts to be required based on historic trends. This is monitored throughout the year and additional funding bids can be requested if there is higher demand for adaptations.
- All adaptations assessed and referred by an occupational therapist will be undertaken but are completed on a priority needs basis. The service has generally completed all adaptations required within the financial year, but ongoing budget pressures could require some waiting times.
- Cost price inflation for materials and services in the construction sector is increasing the cost of adaptations and impacting the number that can be completed.
- Occupational therapists will try to ensure the recommended adaptations meet the needs of the individual in the existing building and affordability but may sometimes require review. For adaptations over £30k the division try and work with other agencies to enable the full cost to be met. Health funding can be contributed or where care home fees are excessive and the cost to fund an adaptation would be less can sometimes be supported although is rare. Charities may also contribute and families themselves may pay additional costs above the £30k Disabled Facilities Grant. Data is available on the number of adaptations above £30k and can be shared with the Commission.
- Some individuals chose to self-fund part of the cost. Where an occupational therapist has approved a scheme, a homeowner can request additional works and fund the equivalent costs.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Adaptations Strategy to remain on the work programme.
- Data to be shared on the number of adaptations above £30k.

66. HOUSING CRISIS DECLARATION AND ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Deputy City Mayor for Housing and Neighbourhoods introduced the item highlighting the positive work of the Task Group which included Members from across various Scrutiny Commissions in assisting a housing crisis to be declared. It was noted that the Action Plan has been a helpful benchmark to monitor workstreams and progress. Two main benefits were noted including the communication with residents regarding the housing register and ensuring the issue became a corporate priority with cross divisional working.

The Director of Housing presented the report in which it was noted that:

- A housing crisis was declared in Leicester in November 2022. An Action Plan was developed including recommendations by the Task Group and adopted by full Council. The Action Plan includes actions for the Local Authority and demands of central government, both which have had good progress.
- The Local Authority is on track to deliver the 1,500 council and affordable housing targets with £250m investment. Poor quality private sector housing is being addressed through the development of the Private Rented Sector Strategy and Selective Licencing Schemes. Homelessness prevention includes private landlord offers and call before you serve landlord offer. The Action Plan is monitored by the Strategic Director for City Development and Neighbourhood Services to ensure cross divisional working.
- There has been good progress with demands on government including an £11.4bn fund to deliver 180k affordable homes over five years and the Local Authority continue to work on bids to secure additional funding for schemes in the city. The Local Housing Allowance cap will be lifted from April 2024 to enable individuals on low income or benefits to access homes up to the thirtieth percentile in the private rented sector. The division previously conducted work with De Montfort University on Local Housing Allowances and at that time only 3% was affordable to this group and further work may be undertaken on the new arrangements.
- Legislation is being introduced to end Section 21 no fault evictions and require robust justifications which was another demand of government as it currently accounts for over half of homelessness applications. Loopholes to holiday homes are currently being consulted on which the Local Authority will be submitting a response to. A national landlord register is also proposed in the Renters Reform Bill 2023 that would help tackle poor landlords.

The Commission thanked officers for the report and good progress. In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- Homes that have been empty for more than five years will be charged three times the council tax of an occupied home and from 2021, homes empty for more than ten years are charged four times the council tax of an occupied home. Unlike many other cities, Leicester has a dedicated small empty homes team who gather data with the council tax service to tackle private empty homes. There has been a slight increase in private empty homes in the city recent due to affordability to bring them back into use, but the team follow a process and work on early interventions with owners and monitor with compulsory purchase orders as a last resort.
- Homeowners may manipulate the system by leaving furniture in the property and proactively making it look as though it is occupied. The Local Authority is limited in its powers to gather evidence and the empty homes team must make a judgement on whether it is viable if legal action is pursued that a judge would determine it as empty on the evidence.
- If a ward councillor identifies land that they think may be suitable for development, they should contact the housing development team who are responsible for new housing developments and acquisitions. The team will follow a process to assess the viability of the site with finance, EBS, planning etc. It is expected that feedback would be provided to the ward councillor on the outcome.
- The viability and legality of a Housing Company was explored and progressed through to the setting up of a Housing Company. When assessed against the existing work of the division however it was felt that it was not an appropriate tool, and nothing further would be gained and therefore the priority should remain on delivering targets within services and in the HRA. A Housing Company will remain on the Action Plan for consideration if outcomes to be delivered are changed and as part of ongoing monitoring of how other Local Authorities utilise Housing Company's to determine whether it may be appropriate in future.
- Sites for long-term development have been identified and form part of the Local Plan proposals which has been submitted to the Government Inspectorate. A number of sites are included for residential purposes but overall there is insufficient land to meet housing needs in the city which has required an agreement with neighbouring Districts. If sites are removed this will reduce the ability to deliver more housing and developments in neighbouring Authorities will not give access to the housing register.
- The Local Authority are actively in discussions with owners of private sites that have not been developed to discuss the feasibility to bring them forward. If successful, the Commission will be updated.
- For a short period of time Local Authorities have been able to retain 100% of Right to Buy Receipts to use alongside other funding for acquisitions and housing developments. Right to Buy receipts can be used to fund 40% of a property. The recent Budget announcement reduces retained receipts to 50% and therefore the Local Authority will

have less money for its active initiatives to increase council homes in the city. The Local Authority will continue to bid to the £11.4bn Homes England Fund but this can only fund 30% of a property. Homes England Funding and Right to Buy receipts cannot be merged.

- Some properties lend themselves to conversion to multiple occupancy which often results in saturation zones that can have an impact on the community. The Article 4 Directive provides power to prevent further conversions in a particular area but does not prevent an individual purchasing and converting a property elsewhere.
- Data indicates that since the introduction of the Right to Buy scheme, Local Authority housing stock has reduced from c37% to c13% but the number of privately owned properties in the city has not increased. Instead, private rented properties have increased but there are no controls on what an individual does when they own a property.
- If the Local Authority purchase a former council property to rent it is protected for ten years. If the council tenant seeks to exercise the Right to Buy in the first ten years, they will have to pay the full rate that the Local Authority paid, after the ten years they will be entitled to purchase at the discounted rate.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- The Commission to be updated if successful progress in bringing forward private sites for development.
- The Commission recommended the action plan be reviewed to make the status of items clearer.
- Item to remain on the work programme for updates on the Action Plan.

67. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair noted it was the final meeting of the municipal year and thanked Members for their contributions and officers for their work. Members were reminded that suggested items on the work programme would be taken forward for consideration and were encouraged to share ideas with the Director for Housing and Senior Governance Officer.

68. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 20.05.