



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER 2023 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Joel (Chair)
Councillor Zaman (Vice Chair)

Councillor Mahesh
Councillor O'Neill

Councillor Singh Patel
Councillor Waddington

In Attendance

Deputy City Mayor, Councillor Cutkelvin – Housing and Neighbourhoods

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16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received by Cllr Aqbany and Cllr Adatia.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

18. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair highlighted that the formal minutes for the meeting on 31 July 2023 were not finalised for review but will be presented to the commission at the next meeting for approval.

19. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

20. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

21. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY UPDATE

The Executive Lead Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods introduced the new draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and associated Action Plan. It was noted that the service continues to be held in high regard and the strength and importance of partnership working across the city has secured additional funding for the agile service.

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

- There is a legal duty to formulate and develop a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. This is required to be reviewed and a new Strategy formulated every five years.
- More people are presenting as homeless and seeking support as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and housing crisis amongst others whereby the service will continue to be flexible and agile.
- The main aim of the service is to prevent homelessness, but this is not always possible. The new draft Strategy will therefore be underpinned by four overarching priorities including:
 - 1) Prevention – to support households to retain within their existing property or identify an alternative property. This however is becoming more challenging with the lack of affordable homes.
 - 2) Intervention – to provide temporary accommodation for families and an extensive offer to rough sleepers where homelessness cannot be prevented.
 - 3) Recovery – to help households recover and try and ensure they do not find themselves homeless again in future.
 - 4) Partnership Working – a collaborative approach to support the needs of those who find themselves homeless or rough sleeping.

Action Homeless, One Roof Leicester and Inclusion Healthcare – homelessness partners – contributed to the discussion and commended the consultation in drafting the new Strategy. The importance of collaborative working to secure additional funding and support the increasing challenges people are facing and the complexity of needs when presenting to services was also noted.

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

- The service prevented two thirds of cases presenting to them but where prevention was not possible, support was provided through intervention such as temporary accommodation. Increased risk of homelessness arose because of court proceeding recommencing following the pandemic in addition to the cost-of-living crisis and increasing rental charges.

It was agreed that more details would be provided to the commission on current homelessness figures although it was noted that this may not be an accurate account but rather a snapshot of what is known to the service.
- The draft new Strategy is underpinned by an action plan which

incorporates the importance of communication. Increasing caseload of officers has made communication difficult but managing expectations through homelessness prevention plans are important.

It was agreed that the commission will be notified of key areas relating to communication within the Action Plan and this will be monitored by the commission as future updates are provided on the draft new strategy.

- The service is proud in the approach of treating anyone that presents as homeless equally and that no community should be spotlighted within the draft new Strategy.
- The Council continues to lobby the Government to increase the 28day notice period when asylum seekers are granted the right to remain to 58days.
- Recruitment and retention of officers within homelessness services is a national issue, particularly given increasing demand. The service does however have a work plan to sustain the service, but the lack of affordable housing is a challenge to sourcing permanent solutions. The Council continues to do what it can to acquire and build social housing in addition to offering incentive schemes to support tenants secure accommodation within the private rented sector such top-up payments and guarantees.
- The service continues to work with colleagues to ensure there are pathway plans in place to prevent care leavers facing homelessness. It was agreed further details and the impact of the second chance scheme will be shared with the commission.
- Services are now primarily delivered remotely but consideration could be given to attendance within the community although there are limited officers and traditionally uptake of other services within the community haven't resulted in greater engagement.
- The draft new Strategy has been developed in consultation with partners and those with lived experience, primarily the Hope Forum through Dear Albert and the Homeless Charter.
- The draft new Strategy and supporting Action Plan will remain live documents over the coming years to adapt to changes and feedback. The intention is to progress to delivery as soon as possible but clarity will be sought on processes and the requirement of seeking Full Council approval.

AGREED:

- The Commission notes the report.
- Officers are asked to consider Members comments and respond to outstanding requests for information.
- Clarity to be sought on the decision-making process for strategies and the requirement for the Homelessness Strategy to go to Full Council.

22. DAMP AND MOULD UPDATE

The Head of Service for Housing and Team Manager for Private Rented

Housing presented the item to update on the work being undertaken involving damp and mould across housing stock and the private rented sector. It was noted that:

- The tragic death of Awaab Ishak has heightened awareness and the importance of governance of damp and mould. Legislation underpins responsibilities and further regulations will be enforced in 2024 for social housing with expectations for the Council to deal with reports of damp and mould.
- A Damp and Mould Group has been established comprising of teams across different divisions to work collaboratively. An Action Plan has been formulated to deal with damp and mould in social and private housing given the awareness of health impacts. This includes greater resources for responding to additional demand of reports, inspections, and repairs as well as increased communication and advice.
- Damp and mould cases have always been a category within the housing repairs section but there has been an increase in reports with the Group using data to identify trends. Around £150k has been spent on remedial work in social housing with improved remedial and preventative solutions utilised.
- The percentage of reports locally for social housing is comparative to national figures but further work is needed to improve reporting from the private rented sector.
- The private rented sector team have secured funding that will enable initiatives such as an online portal for private tenants to report issues, streamlining inspections with the use of tablets, training officers as EPC assessors, providing advice to tenants and grants for home improvements as well as the Leicester Energy Action service.

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

- There will inevitably always be a backlog between reports and repairs, however increased resources have been allocated and the service is maintaining the backlog, currently at around 100 cases.
- Properties are inspected within 28 days and where remedial work is required, they are categorised. Priority one cases where damp and mould is reported in a bedroom or if there is a child or vulnerable person at the property will be completed within four weeks. Priority two cases are completed within eight weeks.
- The Council have invested in its housing stock to ensure properties are of good condition. Whilst the criteria the Regulator will be monitoring is currently unknown, the governance and processes in place ensures appropriate inspection and remedial action when damp and mould is reported.
- There are fewer reports than expected from the private rented sector, but the team are developing a portal that will enable tenants to report damp and mould with evidence.

It was agreed that more information will be shared with the commission when the portal is further developed to support testing and promoting.

- Landlords are required to provide private tenants with EPC certificates and there is also a national database to search EPC ratings. If landlords are found to be renting properties with an EPC rating of F or G the service would expect immediate improvements to sustain at least an E rating. If landlords do not comply or co-operate enforcement action can be taken.

The Chair asked the tenant and leaseholder forum representative for comments in which he noted good experience from the service when reporting damp and mould issues.

AGREED:

- The Commission notes the report.

23. REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE PERFORMANCE UPDATE REPORT

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

- The key performance measures have remained static over several years, but ongoing outstanding repairs is a challenge. A centralised planning team has been created under a single management team to better plan and monitor outstanding repair workloads.
- The biggest challenge for the service is associated with vacancies for craft trade operatives, current running at around 20 full time posts. Measures are in place to attract officers such as a technical framework, market pay evaluation and an apprenticeship programme.
- There has been good improvement with the emergency repairs including reductions in reports categorised as emergencies and work required outside of normal working hours. This has been enabled by collaborative working with customer services, developing an online repair portal, and adjusting shift patterns for evening work.
- The gas service team continue to perform a strong compliance for annual inspections but there are outstanding day-to-day repairs that are of focus. A successful recruitment exercise for officers has supported the service and the extended use of remote technology assist is enabling a better offer for customers.
- Improvements are being seen with the voids team despite previously reporting declines to the commission as a result of the voids improvement plan. New approaches including working with utility companies to improve the transfer when a tenant leave a property, using technology to undertake survey, reconfiguring the

management team, and trialling a new initiative to enable tenants to move into properties quicker with outstanding non-essential repairs to be completed within six weeks.

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

- Vacancies are primarily being created as a result of an ageing workforce and officers moving roles internally. Higher wages for craft trades within the private sector is a challenge to attracting officers and therefore looking to 'grow your own' through apprenticeships.
- The apprenticeship programme can have around 30 apprentices but duration to qualification will vary dependent on the programme, i.e. a single trade or multi-trade operative.
- The use of technology has enabled efficiencies to be made in the service. Tenants are able to report repairs through the online platform and officers are able to engage with tenants via smart phones for some repairs utilising remote assist. Consideration will be given to where this can be further extended to provide a better service for customers.

AGREED:

- The Commission notes the report.

24. HEAT METERING UPDATE

The Director of Housing provided an update to the installation of metres and the proposed billing to tenants supplied by the district heating network. It was noted that:

- A decision was taken at Full Council in February 2023 to install metres in properties supplied by the district heating network to enable tenants and leaseholders to pay for their actual usage rather than the existing standard rate.
- Charges to tenants and leaseholders would continue to be subsidised and protected on the standard rate until metre installation where it is anticipated that significant savings will be made to tenants and leaseholders. There will be associated fixed charges in addition to usage charges, but the comparative bottom line is believed to be equivalent or cheaper than the domestic market.
- A contractor, Vital Energy, had been appointed and tenants had been consulted. Weekly advice sessions had been run for tenants by Council Officers and a dedicated team at Vital Energy.
- 65% of pre-inspections had been completed with 300 metres already installed and a further 300 expected next month. It is anticipated that all metres will be installed ahead of winter unless multiple visits are attempted but officers continue to engage

tenants and leaseholders.

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

- Tenants can choose to opt out of metre installation, but in doing so they would continue to be charged the standard rate which is likely to be significantly higher. No enforcement action will be taken against tenants or leaseholder to require installation of metres.
- The infrastructure supplying the Aikman Avenue flats is complex and therefore unviable to install metres through this project. Funding has been secured to explore potential alternative options and details will be shared once identified.
- The average usage identified within the report is based on Government predictions of usages but inevitably some households may use less or more.
- Fixed costs charged are associated with running the network, similar to boiler service, maintenance and repairs within the domestic market. Standing charges are inevitably higher than the domestic market as the district network supplies around 2,400 customers compared with utility companies supplying millions of customers to spread the cost but the bottom line is comparative.
- Charges to tenants and leaseholders for the installation of metres will be spread over ten years and assurance was given that they will be charged as per the identified cost. It was agreed figures will be reviewed within the report to reflect this.

The Chair asked the tenant and leaseholder forum representative for comments in which he commended the work undertaken by the service.

AGREED:

- The Commission notes the report.
- Officers are asked to review the figures contained within the report to be charged to tenants and leaseholders.

25. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair noted that the work programme is developing with items suggested for future meetings. Members were requested to email additional items for consideration to the Chair.

26. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 20.08.