



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2023 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Chamund (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqpany
Councillor Fonseca

Councillor Modhwadia
Pantling

* * * * *

5. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gee

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no no declarations of Interest.

The Chair Lled on introductions and took the opportunity to thank the Members of the Commission, Officers supporting the Commission and the Officers from the Director of Housing and his team for their contributions throughout the year.

7. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 9 January 2023 and the Special Meeting of the Housing Scutiny Commission held on 30 January 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

8. PETITIONS

The monnitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

9. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer noted that none had been received.

10. ENVIRONMENTAL BUDGET AND PUBLIC REALM PROJECT UPDATE

The Executive Lead for Housing introduced the item.

The Head of Service delivered an overview of the Environmental Budget. A summary of what works were proposed was provided and Members were informed that, all local ward Councillors would receive a letter advising on the changes to the budget and request what priorities they would like addressed on individual wards.

The Director for Housing noted that the HRA budget went to full council for approval and these amendments to the Capital Programme were a legal requirement in order to balance the budget.

In response to the Chairs query, the Director for Housing noted that there were no additional budgets available beyond what had already been committed or these would have been allocated. It was hoped that the reduction in spends would only be for one year subject to inflationary pressures and other unprecedented obstacles and realign the capital programme the following year to the original levels.

The Executive Lead took the opportunity to note that the District Heating element had spiralled the budgets in different direction and due to this it had previously been identified that this impact would be seen in the public realm work. The HRA budget was there to protect the stock to ensure that the properties are maintained, and repair works are carried out to future proof the stock. The proposed projects were not cancelled although, it may take a while longer to deliver and this was made clear during the conversations around the District Heating, this would be a consequence of the decision that was made at Full Council.

As part of the discussions, it was noted that:

- Members were concerned that if the projects were held up for an extended period of time, tenants would notice that works were not being carried out and this would add to existing pressures they may already be going through
- Members commended the Neighbourhoods Improvements Scheme and it was noted that, this scheme would continue with one cohort of 10 Officers for 12 months
- There were different mechanisms of support that could be communicated to struggling tenants
- The Housing Team were proactively working on delivering what could be achieved with a smaller budget.

In further discussions It was noted that although the HRA budget focussed on housing land other environmental works such as fly tipping can still continue to be reported through the LoveLeicester app, which had been widely celebrated across the city and improvements to the app were also in process.

In response to the Chair's concerns on how the reduced budgets would put great pressure on the work they carried out as elected Members the Executive Lead noted that the programme of cuts was unavoidable and that a report could be produced to the Commission in the future on how the delayed works would be programmed in for the future.

AGREED:

- 1) That the Director of Housing be requested to consider how the programme of cuts could be reversed as much as possible
- 2) That the Director of Housing be requested to provide a report to the Commission on how the delayed works would be progresses
- 3) That the Officers be thanked for the report, and
- 4) That the report be noted.

11. REPAIRS, GAS AND VOIDS PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Head of Service for the Repairs and Maintenance Service introduced the item and provided an overview of the report. It was noted that the Housing Online platform had over 8,000 people registered and accounted for over 12,000 repairs with progress being made with the online service and most of the service area returning to pre Covid levels.

It was further noted that there had been a 70% increase in reports and damp and condensation and that resources were being directed to address this area.

Gas and heating repairs numbers remained consistent with the previous year with 15,000 gas safety inspections carried out with the team on track to complete 100% compliance across all properties.

A summary of the improvement actions for 2022/23 were highlighted to the Commission.

As part of the discussions, it was noted that:

- The figures for void properties quoted in the report were properties that were actively being worked on to accommodate tenants, there were additional properties that were vacant that were undergoing extensive repairs and were classified elsewhere
- In response to the Chair's query on the status of The Leys on the Beaumont Leys Ward, it was noted that the initial procurement of a builder had been unsuccessful, the building had now been cleared and the procurement process had begun with the aim to start work in summer 2023 and bring it back as part of the housing stock as soon as possible
- Members of the Commission commended the Housing Team who continuously supported Members with queries around housing and repairs
- Emergency Repairs could be reported online which were then categorised by the Customer Services Team
- The team were commended for the use of technology utilised to carry

out surveys for repairs

- Members suggested that the process to occupy the ready to let properties could be improved further as there were often delays in the process
- On-going work to get void properties back as soon as possible to avoid delays, some properties took longer to return to the market as the extent of work required during the void period
- Members shared their support with Officers that were delivering on bringing back void properties to the stock, including tackling issues with asbestos, damp and mould as part of the process.

The Lead Executive Member for Housing noted that the Damp and Mould Strategy ensured that all our tenants were protected and that generating a better relationship with the Housing associations would allow for cross tenure of the strategy. Significant efforts had gone in before the tragic story that came out in the media and now more resources were being deployed to tackle the issue with damp and mould across the housing sector.

In further discussions, it was noted that tenants across the city were having difficulties with calling in to report issues and Members were getting reports of tenants preferring the face-to-face service. Members of the Commission suggested to have the Customer Services Centre open for longer, as this would be a benefit to the residents. It was noted that, although the customer service centre had limited opening hours, services were still available at other settings within the community and these were regularly assessed as to what was working and what could be improved.

AGREED:

- 1) That the Director for Housing and the Housing Team be thanked for their ongoing efforts to bring back void properties
- 2) That the report be noted, and
- 3) That the option to re-establish customer services be considered

12. WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING

The Head of Service for the Housing Register introduced the item and provided the Commission with an overview of the report. It was noted that the report covered a 6-month period between 1 April 22 and 1 October 2022.

As part of the discussions, it was noted that:

- The report helped Members of the Commission understand how decisions are made and how applicants were banded
- General decline in the stock as a result of the Right to Buy scheme and unpredictability in the rising rents market had increased the number of applications for social housing
- The landlord incentive scheme, allowed for good partnership work with private landlords to house some tenants continued
- Tenants were reassured with allocation as the department only worked with reputable landlords and had built working relationships over multiple years and tenants retained the position on the register in circumstances,

this helped tenants overcome the perceived negatives

- Legislative improvements had also helped improve people's perception in the private rented sector to counter balance the need for housing demands
- The team were commended for exploring approaches to deliver on adapted properties for those with additional needs
- Members suggested reviewing the housing allocations register as the 6 years wait for Band 3 applicants was unrealistic
- The demand in the east of the city and preference to remain within the city did have an impact on particular areas but they were compelled to remain in certain areas due to their own barriers around language and employment
- The Housing Act 1996, provided a framework in which councils could build allocation policies and identifies certain groups that required reasonable preference and there were technical issues that didn't allow for Band 3 to be removed which would impact on the Band above making it difficult to prioritise people
- Opportunities for applicants who may have had their application suspended due to various reasons such as the 3 offer policy would have the opportunity to make representation which would see a Senior Officer respond with a decision
- Members requested the Head of Service for Housing Register to provide a breakdown of the number of applications for housing in each ward and it was noted that this would be circulated to the Commission.

In further discussions, Members of the Commission requested the team to consider how the application forms could be adapted to capture a more wider picture and Officers suggested that Members were welcome to communicate any changes they would like considered to improve the application process which was followed up by an assessment to drive the banding and allocation processes.

13. CHANNEL SHIFT UPDATE

The Head of Service for Housing introduced the item and provided an overview of the report.

As part of the discussions and responses to Members questions, it was noted that:

- The reasons for lower uptake of the shift in service had various reasons and localised challenges, proposals for pop up sessions within communities supported by Members and Officers was suggested as a consideration
- In response to the Chairs query about the contributions made by the HRA to Customer Services, the Director for Housing noted that, this was common and the HRA made contributions to various departments as it was required to do so to pay for a service
- The Housing Team were not in full control of Customer Services but, regular accountability reviews on the performance of the service were an

opportunity to communicate what was working well and areas of improvement

- The corporate direction was to shift the service online and it was suggested that if the online platform was accessible and easy to use, tenants would make the shift with additional support available to ensure no tenants were excluded.

In further discussions the Executive Lead for Housing suggested that a task group could work with the tenants to explore the functionality of the online service in the future.

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

14. WORK PROGRAMME

That the work programme be noted.

15. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other items of urgent business, the meeting closed at 7.46pm.