



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 15 JUNE 2021 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Chamund (Vice Chair)

Councillor Ali
Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Gee
Councillor Rahman

In Attendance:

Councillor Cutkelvin – Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Byrne.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair declared an interest as members of his family lived in Council accommodation.

The Vice-Chair declared an interest as a member of her family lived in Council accommodation.

Councillor Aqbany declared an interest as members of his family lived in Council accommodation.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, these interests were not considered so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Councillors' judgement of the public interest. The Members were not, therefore, required to withdraw from the meeting.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meetings of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on:

- i) 22 February 2021; and
- ii) 12 April 2021

be confirmed as a correct record.

4. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair welcomed members and key officers to the meeting, being the first to be held at City Hall since the lockdown arrangements arising from Covid-19.

The following announcements were made:

- a) Jerry Connolly – Scrutiny Support

Members joined the Chair in sending best wishes to Jerry Connolly for a speedy recovery from his recent illness.

- b) Training Sessions

Members were advised that Scrutiny Support would be arranging a series of training sessions on aspects of the housing portfolio, mainly for the benefit of new Commission members. Details and confirmation of dates would be circulated separately. The Chair confirmed that the relevant slides from each session would be made available to commission members.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION - 2021/22

AGREED:

1. To note the Membership of the Housing Scrutiny Commission for the 2021/22 Municipal Year as follows:

Cllr Westley (Chair)
Cllr Chamund (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Ali
Cllr Aqbany
Cllr Byrne
Cllr Gee
Cllr Rahman

2. That the Chair contact the Chief Whip regarding a suggested revision of the membership for future meetings.

6. DATES OF MEETINGS OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION FOR THE 2021/22 MUNICIPAL YEAR

AGREED:

To note the dates of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meetings for the 2021/22 Municipal Year as follows:

15 June 2021
16 August 2021 (*Post-meeting note – moved to 6 September*)
4 October 2021
29 November 2021
10 January 2022
28 February 2022

7. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no Petitions had been received, in accordance with Council procedures.

8. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer reported that no Questions, Representations or Statements of Case had been received, in accordance with Council procedures.

9. COVID 19 - UPDATE

The Director of Housing gave a verbal update in order to provide the most up to date information to members on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

He commented on the significant progress with services and engagement with tenants, with the ambition to return to the position pre-pandemic. Caution was advised and the need to ensure continued safety against the national ambition and the Government's announcements were emphasised, with further clarity being necessary particularly in respect of housing services.

In terms of the work to support the homeless it was reported that there had been a large number of people supported into temporary accommodation during the pandemic, and that as a result there were pressures involved in securing those people secure and more permanent accommodation. It was recognised that this involved complex cases and individual circumstances and the priorities for dealing with such cases were acknowledged.

A number of support projects were noted and the impact on the capital and revenue budgetary situation was accepted.

In respect of the position with void properties, as reported to the previous meeting, it was reported that significant progress had been made, although further work was required. It was reported that the momentum in dealing with voids was continuing in a positive direction and that although there were challenges to reach the position pre-pandemic the encouraging results were noted and welcomed.

In terms of the repairs issue, it was noted that there would be a subsequent report at a later agenda item. In summary there had been a backlog due to the need to ensure the safety of tenants and staff.

There had been considerable efforts undertaken by the rent teams to ensure a minimal level of rent arrears, with a reduction in debt and no evictions being enforced. It was commented that although this demonstrated excellent work by the teams, the situation on a small number of cases may eventually lead to Court action in the most severe cases. In summary it was reported and noted that the numbers of tenants in arrears and the sums owed were both lower than previous levels. Officers were congratulated on their efforts to achieve this situation in view of the pandemic.

In response to a question it was also confirmed that restrictions on evictions also affected commercial properties as actions through the Courts were not allowed during the pandemic. It was therefore recognised that to reduce levels of debt during this period was a considerable achievement.

It was acknowledged that there would be some cases where action to evict would be necessary. In regard to the formal Notice period given clarity was provided on timescales for such action and Members were advised to contact the Director if they had been advised of discrepancies.

Councillor Cutkelvin (Assistant City Mayor – Housing and Education) reassured Commission members that all evictions were considered too regrettable and were dealt with on a case by case basis. The full and detailed oversight on each situation and the additional vulnerabilities were always undertaken.

AGREED:

That the update be noted.

10. RESPONSIVE HOUSING REPAIRS 2020/21 - YEAR-END PERFORMANCE REPORT & UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided an end of year update on the performance of the Division's Repairs and Maintenance service. The report included a summary of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the performance of the service during the year. The report also provided a progress update on improvements being made aimed at improving the performance of the service.

It was noted that due to the timing of the report, most performance figures quoted were based on year to date figures at Q3 of 2020-21. A verbal update on Q4 was provided showing a reduction in repairs and the performance of the out-of-hours service. It was considered that this was also due to a reduction in calls and requests for works, as tenants were not attempting to engage with maintenance services in view of the lockdown and the restrictions of allowing contractors into their properties.

In respect of the Key Performance Indicators it was reported that the repairs outstanding in each category had shown positive results and an improved situation, with a significant percentage of tenants being satisfied with the service. It was also reported that the service had benefitted from a recent procurement exercise.

The Chair referred to liaison with external agencies and asked whether this could be extended to other areas of the city.

It was noted in response that alongside a number of external agencies involved, there were also links to internal colleagues, where responsibilities and remits meant that efficiencies could be achieved. There were various multi-agency and internal communication groups to ensure that this was achieved.

AGREED:

1. To note the report and the progress made.
2. That a further report that focuses on the key performance indicators of the Improvement Plan be submitted to provide an update at the appropriate time when more data and information was available.

11. GOSCOTE HOUSE DEMOLITION - INSTALLATION OF SPRINKLERS IN TOWER BLOCKS

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided an update on the demolition of Goscote House and the installation of sprinkler systems in tower blocks. It was noted that these were both significant projects and would deliver significant and positive outcomes.

An update was provided on the procurement process where tender documents had been sent to potential contractors.

The Chair commented on the importance of the projects and referred to the ongoing situation with regard to tower blocks and the recent media attention concerning the Government's position on Grenfell.

AGREED:

To note the report and update.

12. RETRO-FIT AND THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which commented on the declared climate emergency and the role of the Housing Division to reach the target of zero carbon by 2030.

The report confirmed the work being undertaken alongside what had been done in the past to improve the thermal efficiency of homes, buildings and vehicles.

In response to questions concerning energy efficient light bulbs it was clarified that the fitting of bulbs in individual homes was the responsibility of tenants. The communal areas were fitted by the service and it was confirmed that LED bulbs and tubes were used to generate efficiencies in new builds.

In terms of retro-fitting it was accepted that this was a complex issue with many buildings needing an upgrade on the fittings required.

In respect of comments relating to the suitability and levels of lighting in communal areas, it was noted that this would be made a part of individual area patchwalks that had been proposed, arrangements for which were being progressed and confirmed.

Councillor Cutkelvin (Assistant City Mayor – Education and Housing) advised of the position in respect of new builds and retro fitting. She reminded Members that the climate emergency agenda was a constant but necessary challenge and was considered through all portfolios.

AGREED:

That the report and update be noted.

13. ENVIRONMENTAL BUDGET 2021-22

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which outlined how the Environmental Budget could be utilised to fund improvements on estates.

It was reported that schemes had previously been agreed with schemes across the city and that ideas for improvements had been sought from key stakeholders, including tenants, residents and Ward Councillors. Examples and images of those recent enhancement works were submitted and the significant improvements that could be achieved were noted.

It was confirmed that patchwalks with Councillors could be arranged to assess priority. This was welcomed by Councillor Cutkelvin (Assistant City Mayor – Education and Housing) as it had been suggested in the past that the distribution of funds and the involvement of stakeholders had been inconsistent.

Members of the Commission were asked to consider the use of the budget across the city and to engage with external partners and stakeholders to help to decide on those projects where funds would be most appropriately and properly allocated.

In concluding the item the Chair welcomed the proposed suggested timeframe to ensure a more consistent approach.

AGREED:

That the report be noted, and Members be encouraged to contact the division with a view to promoting appropriate projects for the future use of the Environmental Budget.

14. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR (ASB) SERVICE - REVISED PROPOSAL

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which set out a revised proposal on the delivery of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Services.

It was reported that currently services were delivered by Neighbourhood Housing Officers within the Housing Division and the Crime and ASB (CrASBU) Team based in the Neighbourhood and Environmental Division. The revised proposal was to create a central housing Anti-Social Behaviour Team that would work closely with CrASBU. Council tenants would still be able to report ASB to their housing officers however all investigations would be carried out by a central housing ASB team.

It was proposed that the key benefits of the suggested revised service would be to provide a consistent specialist ASB service to all complainants regardless of tenure and would enable Neighbourhood Housing Officers to focus on supporting tenants.

It was confirmed that the proposal to change the service has been consulted on previously with the Commission and with the Tenant's and Leaseholders Forum in 2020 and had been amended, in line with the consultation feedback received.

The Chair commented on the timing of the report, suggesting that it had been requested at previous meetings, and expressed concern at its lateness.

In response to a question from Councillor Cutkelvin (Assistant City Mayor - Education and Housing) it was confirmed that the report submitted was unchanged since being published for the previous meeting that had been cancelled.

The Chair also expressed concern at the impact on the team structure of Neighbourhood Services officers, and the management of the relationship with external partners. Concern was expressed that without those enhanced close working relationships and understanding, together with the reduction of control of the Council's own officers, the support to tenants would be diminished.

It was suggested by the Chair that a Task Group be established to assess the implications of the proposals and reference was made to the impact of local level meetings and more formal local action groups previously convened by the Police.

It was suggested that these meetings could be reconvened on the heightened multi-agency approach. To highlight this view the Director of Housing underlined the importance of the agreement that Council officers be based at the Mansfield House Police Station, which would ensure close working arrangements and information sharing, including use of the 'Sentinel' database.

It was emphasised that a consistent approach across the city in respect of ASB issues was required and would be the principal concern of the Task Group.

AGREED:

That a Task Group be established to examine the newly proposed arrangements concerning the management of anti-social behaviour cases, with all Members of the Commission to be invited to join meetings.

15. WORK PROGRAMME

The Commission's Work Programme for the 2021/22 Municipal Year was submitted for information and was noted.

16. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.50pm.