



Leicester  
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the  
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 6 SEPTEMBER 2021 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Westley (Chair)  
Councillor Chamund (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Gee

In Attendance:

Councillor Cutkelvin – Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education)

\* \* \* \* \*

**17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ali, Byrne, Crewe and Rahman.

**18. 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.

## **19. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 15 June 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

## **20. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair made the following announcements:

### a) Task Group review into the role of the Anti-Social Behaviour Team

It was noted that the scoping document for the review was previously endorsed by the Overview Select Committee.

It was confirmed that the scope for the first meeting of the Task Group had been agreed and tenant representatives were also being invited to participate in the review.

### b) Housing Overview Training Sessions

Members were reminded that a programme of sessions to provide an overview of major housing services had taken place.

Officers were thanked for all of their work in preparing and delivering the sessions and for those members that have been able to engage.

It was noted that the sessions had been useful to set the context for some of the more focussed work undertaken by the Commission.

### c) Housing Acronym Sheets

A list of helpful acronyms had been included at the beginning of the agenda, in response to a request at the previous meeting.

## **21. PETITIONS**

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

## **22. 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.

## 23. 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.

All Housing services were operational and significant progress had been made on the requirement to catch up on areas most affected by the pandemic.

The Homelessness had been particularly busy since the 'all in' initiative had been implemented and their aims to prevent homelessness and offer help was recognised. It was reported that 30 individual persons were currently in bed and breakfast accommodation and 4 families.

It was confirmed that the ambition of the Homelessness teams was to ensure that appropriate and more permanent accommodation could be provided without undue delay. The statutory period of 6 weeks in bed and breakfast accommodation was clarified and it was reported that this period was always met by the service.

In terms of the operational work, it was reported that levels of rent collection were very good and was the subject of a detailed report to be considered later in the agenda. The progress with the repairs and voids programmes were also reported and the significant reduction in outstanding works was welcomed. It was noted that the levels of outstanding repairs and void properties was nearing the expected and typical levels pre-pandemic.

Some longer delays in respect of capital works were accepted, due to the limited capacity of external contractors which had affected the programme. Some works would be rolled-over to the 2021/22 capital programme.

In terms of customer services it was noted that officers had returned to York House and that other District housing offices including St. Matthews were also reopened.

The Chair welcomed the update and Commission members joined him in extending thanks and appreciation to the staff for the significant levels of service and progress following the Covid lockdown.

In response to questions it was clarified that families in bed and breakfast accommodation would be provided adequate space for their needs. The Council's proud record in offering more suitable and permanent accommodation within statutory timeframes was reiterated.

In respect of the Afghan resettlement scheme it was confirmed that the Council had offered rehousing services and the communication with the Home Office was noted. It was clarified that the responsibility with holding hotels was a Home Office function and only some Councils had offered help.

Commission members expressed surprise at the reluctance of some other authorities to assist and again the Council's proud record and history in relation to resettlement schemes was acknowledged. It was also noted that the city had an existing Afghani community who were actively assisting with operational issues.

In terms of the problems and concerns reported with customer services and access to services it was noted that as this was a corporate issue and although being highly influenced by housing enquiries, the issue was being reviewed across the Council as a whole.

In conclusion, the Chair confirmed that ongoing updates on the effects of Covid-19 would continue to be reported to future meetings.

AGREED: That the update and position be noted.

## **24. 'WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING' AND OVERCROWDING REDUCTION STRATEGY**

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided an update on the housing register and lettings data for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

A presentation was also given, which reflected the information in the report submitted and detailed the following key areas:

- Covid 19
- Housing Register – Headline Data
- Focus on Overcrowding
- Lettings – Headline Data
- Direct Lets

Graphs and charts were displayed, which provided greater detail on data relating to the following areas:

- General Needs Accommodation
- Adapted Accommodation
- Fully Wheelchair Adapted Accommodation

The data showing levels of demand for each band (bands1-3) and numbers and percentage of applications were described and noted.

In concluding the presentation, data was also submitted relating to the housing register information, lettings information and waiting times, and customer information.

The Chair referred to the level of challenge over the previous 18 months and appreciated the pressures put on services in relation to the irregular data provided. He reiterated his previous comments thanking staff in the services affected by Covid-19.

In terms of the 'everyone in' initiative it was recognised that some complex cases existed with individuals that had complicated needs making them difficult to place.

In response to a question on Brexit it was reported that the data showing the number of tenants remaining and applying for citizenship and the numbers emigrating back to mainland Europe had not been collated. It was confirmed that some limited work on this intelligence could be undertaken and provided to a future meeting. It was not considered at this stage that there would be a significant 'freeing-up' of housing stock due to Brexit as many tenancies affected were private lets linked to employment opportunities.

The effect on the housing stock concerning mutual exchanges was also discussed and it was reported that this could be reported separately to members in due course.

In response to a question concerning sub-letting of properties it was clarified that the Council would only become involved in its own lets as tenancies were offered on the basis of need. Any sub-letting of private dwellings would be a private matter.

In respect of waiting times it was noted that these seemed lengthy in bands 2 and 3 and the influence of private rentals was discussed. It was noted that schemes to encourage and incentivise private landlords had previously been considered and a revised scheme was being launched.

In conclusion, the Chair commented on the need to ensure that all offers of tenancies were properly assessed in respect of suitable accommodation as anecdotal evidence of families being allocated high rise flats had been noted.

AGREED:

1. That the current position be noted and that further updates be provided in respect of:
  - the support for adaptive accommodation and the 'private landlords incentive' scheme; and
  - the effect of Brexit on the housing stock.
2. That the situation concerning families being allocated to high-rise accommodation be explored further and reported back to a future meeting.

## **25. ANNUAL RENT PERFORMANCE**

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided information on the rent arrears progress over the full financial year from April 2020 to March 2021.

It was reported that at the end of the financial year to 4 April 2021 the cash amount outstanding for current tenant arrears were £1.799m, and this was 11% lower than at the same point in the previous financial year. The proportion of rent collected between April to March 2021 was 101.01% which was above target.

In addition to detailed data and analysis of financial information, including Discretionary Housing Payments and the impact of Universal Credit. The report also commented on the excellent performance of the Rent Management Advisory team and it was confirmed that no evictions were carried out over the period with limited legal activity taking place to pursue non-payment of rent.

The Chair commented on the outstanding performance of the team in light of the challenges faced and Commission members joined him in recording their appreciation of their efforts.

In response to questions it was noted that the Government were intending to make changes to Universal Credit (UC) with a reduction in allowances being recommended by the Department for Work and Pensions. It was expected that this would have a serious detrimental effect on the ability to collect rent and would impact many tenants. Incentives to assist those in hardship were being established to limit the likely impacts. In reply to a question requesting clarity on whether National Insurance and Pension contributions would be included in the future UC assessment criteria, it was noted that this required further investigation and an answer would be submitted separately.

It was reported and recognised that evictions were always avoided, and support was provided to vulnerable tenants in arrears, as any resulting homelessness situation would have a greater impact on resources.

In response to a question concerning alternative payment arrangements data concerning the numbers and categories of applicants could be collated and forwarded to members separately in due course.

In response to a further question concerning the succession of tenancies, it was emphasised and noted that this was a function of Neighbourhood Services and not the Housing Rental teams. Any individual cases or concerns from members could be forwarded to the relevant officers on request.

AGREED:

1. That the exceptional performance in rent arrears progress over the previous financial year be noted.
2. That additional information in response to queries concerning the Rent Support Pilot be considered in the review report to be submitted in due course.

*Councillor Aqbany left the meeting at 7.10pm.*

## **26. RENT ARREARS POLICY**

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided information on the revised policy and allowed members to review the documents and provide comments for consideration as part of the development of the rent arrears policy.

It was noted that the report and documents presented a revised rent arrears policy, which was used to collect rent and service charges from Council tenants.

The Chair commented on trends noted as a result of Debt Respite scheme that had recently been introduced and the impacts on the policy were recognised.

AGREED:

That the policy be endorsed.

## **27. COUNCIL HOUSE BUILDING AND ACQUISITIONS PROGRAMME**

The Director of Housing presented details of the Council House Building and Acquisitions Programme.

The presentation slides covered the following key issues on the relevant phases of works:

- Phase 1 completed and occupied
- Phase 2 contracts awarded –start on site dates being confirmed
- Phase 2b contracts awarded – start on site dates being agreed
- Phase 3, business case completed, mobilising the delivery team
- Phase 4 identifying sites

The Chair invited the Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education), Councillor Cutkelvin, to comment on the presentation.

Councillor Cutkelvin referred to the ambition to increase the numbers of new social housing, against the loss of homes purchased under right-to-buy procedures.

The Chair commented that in respect of the Phase 2 developments and the inclusion of some housing for families, concern remained that there was a greater need for larger families. It was also recognised that an update on the Hospital Close acquisition would be submitted to the Commission in due course.

AGREED:

That the presentation and update be note.

**28. WORK PROGRAMME**

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

**29. CLOSE OF MEETING**

The meeting closed at 7.45pm.