



Leicester  
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the  
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 4 OCTOBER 2021 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Westley (Chair)  
Councillor Chamund (Vice Chair)

Councillor Ali

Councillor Rahman

Councillor Aqbany

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**30. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

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

**31. 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.

**32. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

AGREED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 6 September 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

### **33. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

#### ASB Task Group Review

The Chair updated the Commission on the Task Group review into the role of the proposed Anti-Social Behaviour Team. It was announced that the first meeting had been arranged for Thursday 7 October 2021 and members of the Commission who wished to be involved were encouraged to attend. It was also confirmed that tenant representatives had been invited.

In conclusion, it was noted that the first meeting was to find out more about the current set-up for council tenants, the future proposal, and more about models of practice from other local authorities.

### **34. PETITIONS**

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

### **35. 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.

### **36. COVID 19 UPDATE**

The Director of Housing provided a verbal update in terms of the effect of Covid-19 on the department. It was noted that future updates would only continue where there were specific impacts on the work within the department.

The numbers of persons in Bed and Breakfast accommodation were confirmed and the intention to reduce homelessness through viable prevention measures were noted. It was recognised that the situation was now returning to the levels expected pre-pandemic.

In terms of repairs and maintenance, it was noted that the demand was also returning to the levels pre-pandemic and that significant progress had been achieved to reduce the build-up of outstanding repairs requests.

In response to a question from the Vice-Chair, it was noted that repairs could be delayed where stock items were unavailable. Individual cases could be referred to the Director separately for further consideration.

The increased numbers of applications for Council Homelessness services was noted, with a rise in private rental evictions being realised due to the pandemic, increasing demand for social housing. It was noted that the homelessness teams were working hard to reduce the impacts and all cases and applications for accommodation were being dealt with appropriately.

The update and position was noted.

### **37. AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME**

The Director of Housing provided a verbal overview of how Housing Services were supporting the resettlement programme for Afghan Refugees.

The Chair commented initially on the impacts and implications of the resettlement programme being co-ordinated by Government under the Home Office. Commission members were reminded that the support to the process was therefore not an internal decision.

The Director of Housing referred to the links to the existing Afghani community in the city, referenced the fact that the STAR AMAL team was now working with those in the bridging hotel in the City ahead of them receiving accommodation offers potentially across the Country. Health & Wellbeing, Education and Financial matters are all being managed and addressed. The commitment of the City Council to house and help settle 10 families (60 people) to the City was noted and welcomed. Comparisons to the previous support offered in the Syrian resettlement scheme some years previously was described and noted.

The Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education) was invited to comment. Encouragement to the support programme was encouraged and Members advised of programmes established in their Wards, including food banks and access to ESOL, which had provided positive impacts. Details of a conference concerning the national response to resettlement were also reported and welcomed.

The Chair advised that a written report be brought to the next meeting, and that the item would be added as a standing item on the Agendas for successive meetings until further notice.

AGREED:

That the update be noted and that the item be added as a standing item on Agendas for future meetings.

### **38. HOUSING ESTATES SHOPS**

The Director of Estates and Building Services gave a presentation on the position relating to estate shops and the slides were submitted as part of the Agenda pack.

It was noted that the presentation had been prepared in response to matters raised previously, including the make-up of the units and their spread of use; the management and maintenance of the units; and their performance in the context of the Corporate Estate.

The following key points were presented:

- Corporate Estate Overview
- The Council's Retail Holdings
  - Size and Scope
  - Benchmark Comparison
- Neighbourhood Retail Offer
  - Location / Values
  - Tenancies / Management
  - Sector Performance
- Capital Investment & Maintenance

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and commented on the need to ensure that cleansing and maintenance services in relation to the stock of neighbourhood shops were rigorous and effective. Examples of areas where shop canopies and frontages, together with where external 'street furniture' and planters had not been kept in good condition were discussed.

It was also noted that the Council had limited powers in terms of private businesses to enforce cleaning and maintenance of shopfronts and their surrounding area.

The Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education) was invited to comment, and in agreeing the positive support for the work of the service, the vital role of the estate shops and their importance in serving communities was emphasised.

In terms of the need to ensure adequate cleaning and maintenance, it was confirmed that schemes for match funding existed, where private shopkeepers could apply for financial assistance. Individual cases and support, including associated financial support to community projects would be discussed separately with officers with a view to inspections being undertaken. In particular, officers agreed to contact Councillor Ali and Aqbany in relation to respective queries relating to the foodbank in Netherhall and the shopping units along Melbourne Road.

AGREED:

That the presentation and update be noted.

### **39. HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY UPDATE**

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which provided a further update on progress in implementing the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018-2023, since the last update to Scrutiny in November 2020.

It was noted that 6-monthly updates were ordinarily provided to the Commission, but the schedule had been interrupted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was therefore recognised and accepted that the report submitted would have customarily been presented during May 2021.

The Commission welcomed the content of the report, particularly in terms of the progress made since the last update (Quarter 3 & 4, 2020/21) across the following key strategic aims:

- Anyone at risk of homelessness is aware of and has access to the services they may need to prevent it.
- Provide suitable accommodation and support options for people who are, or who may become homeless.
- Reduce rates of repeat homelessness amongst single people.
- Provide the right support and services so that no person needs to sleep rough in Leicester.

In summary, it was confirmed that significant positive results and progress had been made on all points, although some objectives had been placed on hold or changed in order to respond to more immediate needs of the pandemic, and subsequent service recovery.

Commission members requested a further update in 6 months' time and joined the Chair in extending thanks and appreciation to the staff involved in the success of the strategy.

It was suggested that the report be referred to the Overview Select Committee for information and comment.

AGREED:

1. To thank staff for the level of performance in dealing with the cases of homelessness, particularly given the challenges faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. That the report be forwarded to the Overview Select Committee for information and comment.

#### **40. PROPOSED REVIEW OF TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which commented on the Government's published Housing White Paper "The charter for social housing residents." outlining the Government's vision for social housing over the coming years.

Further legislation and guidance was required; however the publication of the White Paper provided an opportunity to begin to review the City Council's approach to tenant and leaseholder involvement.

In terms of future stakeholder engagement, it was confirmed that a meeting of the Tenants and Leaseholders Forum had taken on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2021, where the content of the Housing White Paper had been discussed. It was suggested that members of the Tenant's and Leaseholders Forum be contacted and the Vice-Chair and Councillor Gee be invited to be involved in the development of the new Strategy.

**AGREED:**

1. To review the current tenant and leaseholder involvement activities and the development of an Involvement Strategy.
2. That Councillor Chamund and Councillor Gee be included as the Scrutiny Committee's nominated participants in assisting with the development of the strategy.
3. That the Commission be invited to comment on the draft Involvement Strategy once it is developed.

#### **41. DISABLED ADAPTATIONS, HRA AND DISABLED FACILITY GRANTS**

The Director of Housing gave a presentation concerning the Disabled Adaptations, HRA & Disabled Facility Grants and the slides were submitted as part of the Agenda pack.

The presentation outlined the following key points:

- HRA Disabled Adaptations (for council tenants) with data being compared from previous years, the types of adaptations and the annual spend.
- A description of the 'adapt to let' scheme
- The reasons for the reduced spend, recognising Covid-19 impacts and the reduced stock
- Details of Disabled Facility Grants and their implementation (for homeowners and private tenants), including funding and performance data.
- Clarification of case management

In response to questions, details of the processes under the Home Swapper scheme were confirmed, whereby tenants could source more suitable accommodation.

The Assistant City Mayor (Housing and Education) commented on the response provided recently to a question at Full Council in terms of the numbers of people currently on the Register, the issues of overcrowding, homelessness and adaptations.

The Director of Housing advised that specific data on the numbers and timelines could be provided on request separately and asked the Commission to note that the demand was tenant led and the service had little or no influence.

In response to further questions from the Chair, it was confirmed that the £400k anticipated underspend was discussed in regular budget monitoring meetings and reassurance was provided that appropriate checks and balances were in place. In terms of the applications that had been refused, options to support individuals was a priority and in some cases, work was undertaken to allow applications to be resubmitted.

AGREED:

That the presentation and update be noted.

#### **42. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Commission's Work Programme was submitted for information and comment.

The Chair and Director advised that the paper on Hospital Close would be combined with the Investment in Council Housing item.

The update on the District Heating item would be promoted in the programme, particularly in view of recent media reports concerning likely increased costs through winter.

AGREED:

That the Work Programme be noted.

#### **43. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS**

Ayleena Thomas (Democratic Support Officer).

The Chair advised that Ayleena Thomas was leaving the employment of the Council to pursue other opportunities. It was noted that Ayleena had served the Council for over 7 years as a DSO, including work to support this Commission.

Commission members asked that their thanks and best wishes be recorded.

#### **44. CLOSE OF MEETING**

The meeting closed at 7.30 pm.