



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER 2015 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Cank

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13. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aldred, Byrne & Joshi.

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they had in the business to be discussed on the agenda.

As per his register of interests, Councillor Aqbany declared that a family member was a council tenant.

Councillor Newcombe declared that he had family who were council tenants.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, the interests were not considered so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Councillors' judgement of the public interest. Councillors were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration and discussion on the agenda items.

15. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 27 July 2015, be confirmed as a correct record.

16. PETITIONS

In accordance with Council procedures, it was reported that no petitions had been received by the Monitoring Officer.

17. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

In accordance with Council procedures, it was reported that no questions, representations or statements of case had been received by the Monitoring Officer.

18. AREA MANAGERS' BRIEFING - SAFFRON, EYRES MONSELL, AYLESTONE & KNIGHTON AREA

In a change from the published agenda, it was noted that the presentation being given to the Commission would be for the Saffron, Eyres Monsell, Aylestone & Knighton wards.

Ian Stapleton, Area Manager for the above wards gave the presentation. It was a detailed presentation which covered the following matters:

- Details about the area, such as size and population.
- The tenure and housing stock in the area.
- Key achievements for 2014/15, in particular the completed Saffron Fairway depot scheme.
- Details of the area capital programme and local environmental works were provided.
- Age profiles and household types.
- Voids / empty homes / excess bedrooms.
- Socio economic profiles.
- Priorities for the future.

Members asked a range of questions in relation to the presentation as follows:

Queries were raised about the achievements in relation to the reduction in outstanding responsive repairs. Ian replied that there were a number reasons for this improvement including, dealing with the longest outstanding cases, avoiding duplicates, closer working with craft operatives and avoiding issues which slowed them down such as stock availability, clarity over what tasks would be undertaken and generally better planning of cases. It was also noted that as things improved this had enthused staff to make further reductions in outstanding cases.

In relation to a further question, it was noted that an officer from the Leicester Anti-Social Behaviour Unit would be based at the housing office for 3 days a week.

In relation to a query about timings for length of jobs per category, it was noted that the oldest job request was from 13th July and there were 10 requests from prior to 10th August. The reasons for the delay in those 10 would be explored, but there were often specific reasons for delays, such as a job in a listed

building that required specialist materials.

With regard to a question about fire inspections it was explained that they were carried out monthly (or weekly in certain circumstances) due to the rules prescribed by various authorities (ie the Fire Service). Due to the regular inspections, it was noted that tenants were now more likely to comply with the rules, therefore they were taking less time.

It was confirmed that there wasn't a Tenants and Residents Association for the area, but residents did sit on the city wide Tenants and Resident's Forum.

Ian agreed that it may have been useful to include details of ward meeting funding for the area in the presentation. It was requested that this be included in future presentations.

Further points were raised regarding fire inspections, as it was noted that some residents felt that there were some unnecessary rules. Ian commented that the Council took a zero tolerance approach, because there was a potential for even a doormat to be a trip hazard or impedance should a fire take place. He felt this approach had worked and issues with regard to mobility scooters and cycle parking were being addressed in other ways.

The issue of parking was raised, noting that good successes were achieved in the area, but significant problems were faced elsewhere. Ian agreed that there had been problems, but these were being dealt with on a city wide basis and had led to overall improvements which made the city a better place to live.

A further query was raised about whether the Swift nesting boxes had been successful in attracting returning birds. Ian undertook to find out.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation was welcomed as it was useful to see improvements in one area and these could possibly be extended to other areas.

19. HOUSING VOIDS PROGRESS REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report which informed the Commission of the progress made in the Voids Improvement Project as previously requested. The Director noted that improvements had been made with 14% more properties let in the past year and rental income was up 18%.

Members of the Commission asked questions / made comments on the on the following matters:

It was noted that long term voids had increased from 62 to 78, not reduced as indicated in the report.

In relation to queries about a visit to Nottingham City Homes, Voids Project Manager, Melanie Harris informed the Commission that the visit was mainly

about information and best practice sharing. It was noted that they were an arm's length management organisation which was different from Leicester, so some of their challenges were different, but some matters, such as key control were to be explored in Leicester to see if void times could be improved. Further queries were raised about the numbers of staff that Nottingham employed, and how this compared to Leicester. Melanie explained that it was difficult to compare as the property profile for the two cities was different. The main difference being Leicester's homes were generally older.

In response to a question on the St. Peter's tower block financial implications, it was noted that this was a different project and a further report on that could be provided if requested.

Queries were raised about categories of void cases and numbers not meeting the category specification for repairs. Melanie informed the meeting that voids were treated differently to responsive repairs. She explained that it wasn't possible to know what kind of repairs were needed on a void house until it became empty and was inspected. For example there could be damp issues / pest control issue, or just decoration. A profile of historic trends was being explored in order to determine targets. More details would be provided in future as information became available in terms of how individual houses were targeted.

In response to a query about numbers of voids per ward, Melanie agreed to circulate the figures and provide more details in future reports.

A query was raised about the income from charges to tenants for any damage caused. Melanie informed the meeting that it was a standard charging scheme and in the past year 357 tenants were re-charged a total of £345k. Photographic evidence was always recorded to ensure a successful charge. The recharging was handled by corporate finance / legal. Melanie undertook to find out how successful this was. Figures per ward were requested.

It was queried whether asbestos was creating time delays for voids. Melanie noted that the Asbestos team in Technical Services were meeting their targets.

A number of comments were made in relation to the kitchen and bathroom replacement scheme. Melanie explained that the target given for these replacements was generated on a score that the clerk of works determined following an inspection, but the general target was 10 days, but most jobs were completed much quicker. Further comments were made regarding the 10 day target, that this seemed too long. Melanie explained that a new ring main and water entry point were put in as standard. Also some jobs were more complex than others and could include floor screeding and wall plastering, and time for drying needed to be included if this was done.

It was noted that 3.3.2 of the report indicated that re-let time had increased, an explanation for this was requested. Melanie noted that there were peaks and troughs, but the figures were affected if there was a single case that was particularly problematic, ie it required major structural work or adaptations for

disability. Issues were being looked at for long term voids to better control the difficult cases.

With regard to adaptations, it was queried whether any best practice ideas had been gleaned from other authorities. Melanie noted that this hadn't been done up until now, but would be looked at over the next few months and benchmarking information would be provided in future reports.

In reference to 2.2 of the report where it notes further work was required to return to 2012 levels, it was queried what work needed to be undertaken to achieve this target. Melanie commented that there were plans to be more ambitious than meeting the 2012 level. There were a large number of different projects going on looking at every part of the voids / re-let process. In particular, better engagement with tenants was planned to use the 28 day termination period to seek the applicants views on works to be done which could avoid delays later. Work was also underway to look at making the Voids service better able to work mobile.

With reference to 3.3.11 of the report which refers to a growth in unauthorised work, it was queried what work was being done to make tenants aware of their responsibilities in relation to this. Melanie noted that area managers would tell tenants who were due to leave a property what was required and it would be followed up with an inspection. Charges would be levied where tenants didn't meet their responsibilities.

In reference to a question on the milestones mentioned at 3.4.3 of the report, Melanie noted that these were specific improvements delivered by the project. For example the key control achievement meant that more than one team of craft operatives working on a property at one time and this helped reduce void times. Targets were being developed for future work, this would involve seeking comparative data from other authorities, but it was often difficult to ensure that data was directly comparative because things were often recorded differently at each authority.

The Chair commented, in relation to the work planned for the next six – 12 months that the Commission would want more reassurance that things were moving in the right direction.

It was noted that the figures at Appendix A of the report were wrong. It was requested that the Democratic Support Officer ensure that reports were printed correctly in future. The correct appendix A was to be circulated to Members.

The Chair asked the Executive Member for Housing to comment. He noted that it could have been easy to throw money at this issue, but it wouldn't necessarily have meant smarter working. He felt that things were moving in the right direction and the project was exploring all aspects of the voids issue. He noted that this was a work in progress, but he hoped that progress would move quicker in future.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted;
- 2) That the Voids Project Manager be thanked for he explanations to Member's queries; and
- 3) That the Commission convene a task group to look at voids in more detail.

20. IMPACT OF THE 1% REDUCTION IN RENTS REQUIRED BY THE GOVERNMENT ON THE HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

This item was considered at the same time as Housing Transformation Programme.

The Director of Housing gave the meeting a presentation on the Housing Transformation Programme which covered the following matters:

- The size /scope and work areas covered by the programme – the Project would include a wide programme of service reviews and make savings, increase efficiency and increase investment.
- The 1% rent reduction would have a significant detrimental impact on the level of investment and would mean additional savings would be required.
- Detailed reviews would take place for each service area, which would include engagement with staff, Members and service users.
- Changes agreed so far were outlined, including, changes to communal cleaning and tenants undertaking small repairs.
- Efficiency achievements were also noted including the reduction in outstanding repairs jobs and increase in lettings.
- Details of the planned organisational staffing review, were provided which would cover approximately 50% of the division's staff.
- The next steps were outlined which noted the reduced rental income which meant that service reduction or rescheduling of investment would be inevitable.

Members raised queries on the following matters.

A query was raised about the timescale for the staffing review. The Director replied that reviews were often subject to change depending on the individual circumstances of the review. Broadly, the first consultation draft of the business case proposal would be prepared for late Autumn, with the consultation period ending in January. It was anticipated that the review would be complete in June.

A table which showed the reduction in rental income across the housing stock was requested. The Director agreed to provide this. She did however note that it would be a small amount for each individual tenant, ie. 86 pence on a weekly rent of £86.

The Chair invited the Executive Member for Housing to give the Commission

his view / comment. He noted that he originally envisioned that rents would stay low during his tenure, but even keeping the rent increase to 1% as was previously the plan would have been difficult, but the reduction of 1% created major challenges. He noted that the government justification, of increases in social sector rents, these were minimal in comparison to private sector increases in recent years. He felt that the reduction was purely to reduce the level of housing benefit payments. He expressed disappointment that the reduction would mean decreased level of investment in the city stock. He also noted that housing associations faced particular challenges with having to deal with right to buy for the first time, which meant they too were unlikely to build new homes in the city. He referred to the graph in the presentation which showed over a 10 year period there would be a £12m gap between the previously expected rental income and what was now likely. This would have funded the provision of 106 new homes. He noted that there were three main areas of expenditure for housing, day to day running costs, income management and major investment, but it wouldn't be possible to do all 3 of these at the current level in future, but any changes would be delivered following consultation. He also commented that the Government had made pronouncements about devolving powers, but this change was imposed without discussion. Overall he thought that most tenants would prefer investment in their homes and environment rather than a minimal reduction in rent.

A query was raised about how the programme and subsequent expected reductions in investment would be communicated to tenants, particularly as there were already concerns regarding the progress of the kitchen and bathroom programme? The Director commented that initially there would be discussions with the Tenants Forum and a workshop held to look at the issues. Once a budget had been designed, there would be a communications programme with tenants on a wider basis. She noted that it would be a difficult time for staff, but time would be allowed for meetings and discussions to go through the issues and concerns. Overall, she noted that the £12m in reduction was disappointing, but there would still be £60-70 million spent on council housing in the city.

The Chair, in summary felt that reductions of this sort were to be expected from the government, but he felt that the city had proven itself well capable of managing difficult situations based on good communications with its tenants.

RESOLVED:

That the Commission to receive reports on later stages of the programme and associated reviews at the relevant time.

21. UPDATE FROM CLEANSING SERVICE ON COMMUNAL CLEANING PROGRESS

An update on the Communal Cleaning Review was included with the papers for the meeting.

It was noted that there was no one at the meeting from the Cleansing Services team to discuss the item.

Concern was raised that cleaning services to tenants were deteriorating and that staffing issues could be resolved by employing more tenants.

The Chair expressed concern that there was no one available to discuss the item.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Commission expresses its concern that there wasn't an officer present to discuss the item; and
- 2) That a meeting be convened before the commission next meets to consider issues of concern.

22. HOUSING TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

This item was taken together with the 'Impact of the 1% Reduction in Rents Required by the Government on the Housing Revenue Account'.

23. MONITORING HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY (12 MONTHS)

The Director of Housing submitted a report which sought the comments of the Commission on the first 12 months of the Homelessness Strategy being fully implemented.

Martin Clewlow, the Homelessness Head of Service gave the meeting a detailed introduction noting the aims of the five year strategy, which overall was the better manage homelessness in the city, in particular through a single point of access to the services. In summary, he felt that improvements were being made, whilst achieving savings and there was no noticeable increase in rough sleeping.

Members raised a number of queries on the following matters:

Queries were raised about the new role of customer services staff taking initial calls in relation to homelessness issues. Martin commented that more calls could now be taken due to the longer opening hours. The relationship with Customer Services was developing, but if a client needed specialist support and appropriate officer would be available.

Questions were asked about the impact on the strategy / homelessness figures from universal credit and other benefits changes. Martin commented that it currently wasn't clear as details of exemptions weren't currently known, but it tended to be larger families that were affected this impact will likely increase to smaller families.

The Supporting Tenants and Residents (STAR) team was welcomed however the role they undertook was queried, particularly whether they could help with form filling, it was noted that they had referred a client to a Councillor suggesting that the Councillor could assist in filling in the form. Martin

commented that the role of the team was to support people in tenancies (both public and private sectors) to ensure that they didn't break down with differing levels of support depending on needs. Martin undertook to explore the issue about the referral to a Councillor with the STAR team. A further comment was made in relation to STAR suggesting that there was duplication with the work of the Welfare Rights Service. Also it was felt that the level of referrals to STAR from elected members should be examined.

Further queries were made regarding changes to the housing register and the definition of those people regarded as 'adequately housed.' The Head of Service commented that no one should have been taken off the register even with recent changes. People on the register are written to every year to ask if they wish to remain on. Councillor Aqbany indicated that he would provide the Director with a letter on this issue which had caused some confusion with one of his constituents.

A further query was raised about whether other local authorities could provide any learning experiences to improve Leicester's services in relation to repeat homelessness. The Head of Service noted that a consultant undertook work for the Council exploring approaches in other areas. A study undertaken by York university had looked at 9 approaches across the country, which showed that there was no one size fits all approach for success. It did however indicate that the 'housing first' model, where clients go straight to a tenancy rather than into hostel accommodation first which was currently being used for some clients was proving to be successful. There had also been a review of the processes that duty officers undertake in hostels to see if this could have an impact on repeat homelessness. Also the 'Revolving Door' service was also working intensively with people who were on their 3rd /4th tenancy to ensure that future tenancies were successfully maintained. Another barrier that was considered was outstanding arrears, the Council changed its policy to ensure that arrears did not prevent people from obtaining a new tenancy, they wouldn't however be written off.

Further questions were raised in relation to the future provision of hostel places and the financial health of the homelessness service. The Head of Service and the Executive Member for Housing both indicated that there was currently no scope for further reductions to the number of hostel beds, particularly given the forthcoming welfare changes.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the progress made by the Homelessness Strategy was welcomed, particularly that there had not been an increase in rough sleeping;
- 2) That a further report be submitted to the Commission on the impact of the welfare reform changes prior to their implementation; and
- 3) That the Homelessness team be thanked for all their hard work in delivering the strategy.

24. HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME

Members of the Commission considered the work programme.

Councillor Aqbany referred to a specific issue relating to leaseholder service charges for repairs and maintenance about which he had emailed the Scrutiny Policy Officer. The Scrutiny Policy Officer informed the meeting that he had sought a response and noted that, due to a review, leaseholders were not currently being charged specifically for repairs and maintenance. A decision on the future of these charges would be taken before the end of September.

It was requested that the Commission consider items on the take up of the Community Support Grant and other discretionary support. It was noted that these weren't within the terms of reference of this commission, but could be considered at the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

25. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 8.44pm.