



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 2 NOVEMBER 2015 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aldred
Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Byrne
Councillor Cank

Councillor Joshi

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26. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence from Members.

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Aldred declared that family members were council tenants.

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

As per her register of interests, Councillor Byrne declared that she and family members were council tenants.

Councillor Cank declared that family members were council tenants.

Councillor Joshi declared that a member of the family was a council tenant.

Councillor Newcombe declared that family members 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 of the agenda

items.

28. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 8th September 2015, be approved as a correct record.

Actions Arising from the Minutes

Minute Item 19: Housing Voids Progress Report

- The Scrutiny Policy Officer to set up a task group to look at a set of example voids. i.e. to look at how long a home has been vacant, an analysis of where the voids are across the city to see if there are any patterns which relate to the areas where they become vacant and if there are significant differences between flats and other housing.
- To ask for volunteers for the task group. Responses would determine the timing of meetings. Some Members expressed a preference for evening meetings.

29. PETITIONS

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

30. 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.

31. AREA MANAGERS' BRIEFING - NEW PARKS AREA

Marie Murray, Area Manager for the New Parks area gave the presentation. The following points were covered during the presentation:

- New Parks ward became Western ward following the last election, and the New Parks office also covered Fosse and Westcotes wards;
- The Area Manager for New Parks also had responsibility for the three gypsy and traveller sites in the city;
- The old New Parks ward had the most deprived lower super output area in the city, and was among the 100 most deprived areas in the country (out of 32,500), and included the Aikman Avenue flats and Mossgate;
- Details of unemployment, life expectancy, ethnicity and fuel poverty;
- Age profiles and household types;
- Number of evictions of council tenants, the majority of which were for rent arrears, though three were for anti-social behaviour;
- New Parks district had nearly a third of reported anti-social behaviour cases for the city (26.4%), and added to Beaumont Leys (24.9%) the

two districts in the west of the city handled over 50% of total reported cases;

- Tenure and housing stock profile – almost a third of households in the New Parks district lived in privately rented accommodation, only a small portion of which were empty for 18+ months;
- Monthly void report figures highlighted an improvement on the average re-let time of 42.8 days (previously 73 days in 2014);
- HomeChoice made 251 adverts for properties over 12 months up to August 2015. 2-bedroom properties had the highest number of bids.
- Of the LCC homes with spare bedrooms, 17.7% are in the New Parks district, and a number of initiatives are underway to try and get people to downsize.
- It has been four years since New Parks had any new homes built, but there is potential for development on disused garage sites.
- Estate improvement works have had a significant positive impact on the lives of tenants and residents, with the cost of the project work totalling £412,000.
- Key Achievements 2014/5, in particular Leicester to Work, providing contracts for people out of work through referral from the Job Centre. Projects include cleaning of cladding, environmental and communal area improvements, and car parking resolution.
- Capital works saw nearly £3million spend on improvements to properties in New Parks.
- Officers work with other agencies to provide support for tenants.
- New Parks achieved 0 outstanding out of the category for Responsive Repairs, and best practice has been shared across other districts.
- Priorities planned for 2015-16 totalling £361,000.
- Just over £2million Capital works programme total for 2015-16.
- Future project include parking bays, and recycling facilities.
- Challenges for the future included honing change management skills to ensure managers and staff had the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Social media was recognised as something that could be used as a useful tool, but also noted as a contributing factor in serious management cases.

Members asked questions following the presentation as follows:

The Chair requested information on the voids figures in the presentation for the New Parks district. It was explained that the end figures taken from the monthly void report showed average re-let times for routine voids only, with an average of 42.8 days, an improvement on 73 days for 2014. Non-routine voids were not included in the presentation, as they would skew the figures due to the length of time required to fix some properties.

The Chair noted the good news around responsive repairs, which was an issue in other parts of the city. Marie explained that the New Parks district was top in most of the key performance indicators (KPIs), though jobs completed at first visit required improvement. Work with the planning section, conversations with the workers undertaking repairs and trialling new methods in the district, for example, meeting with Councillors, tenants and residents groups, had seen

positive results. Figures were checked each week to look at individual repairs, and tenants / stores were contacted to iron out holdups. There were certain jobs that would never be completed straight away as some large jobs required a survey.

The landscaping work in parts of the district was noted, and it was explained grounds maintenance work had been reduced. Members suggested that the practice should be introduced in other parts of the city, and Leicester into Work could be contacted to assist with the work. It was noted there was a particular issue around St Peter's area, and a future presentation to the Scrutiny Commission would cover that area.

Members requested further information on the stock profile for New Parks district to be shared with Housing Scrutiny Commission Members. Marie explained there were over 1,100 flats in the area, which brought with it its own issues in terms of the variety and design of flats across the district. Different blocks and what work, repairs and fire inspection regimes were required took time.

Members raised concern over the 866 empty private sector homes in the district, and the little control the Council had over them. They asked what measures were in place to bring those properties back into use and reduce the pressure on the housing waiting list. Simon Nicholls, Head of Service (Capital Investment) informed the meeting there was a team based at Ian Marlow Centre who worked on reducing the number of empty homes in the city. It was explained around 20 private sector properties across the city became empty each month through various reasons, for example, bereavement. The Council could, on occasion compulsory purchase a property, which did not necessarily go back into the Council's housing stock, but could be sold. A report on the Empty Homes Strategy would be brought to a future Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting.

The Chair asked the Executive Member for Housing to comment. He thanked the Area Manager and officers for the work undertaken in New Parks district.

The Chair requested that KPIs for responsive repairs for the city be brought to a future Housing Commission meeting.

RESOLVED:

1. That the presentation was welcomed, and the successes in the area noted.
2. That the Area Manager provide a profile breakdown of housing stock for the district to Scrutiny Commission Members.
3. It was noted a report on the Empty Homes Strategy would be brought to a future meeting.
4. That information on KPIs for responsive repairs for the city be brought to a future meeting.

32. MANDATORY DIRECT DEBIT RENT PAYMENTS OR CREDIT UNION ACCOUNTS FOR ALL NEW COUNCIL TENANTS

The Director of Housing submitted a report which sought the views of the Commission on the proposed introduction of mandatory direct debits or credit union rent accounts for all new council tenants from early 2016, and asked to note the policy would start once the new housing IT system was in place. The report was presented by Mike Watson, Income Collection Manager.

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

It was queried what difficulties Kirklees had encountered and what was positive about their scheme. Also did they have an option available in the area like Clockwise to help their tenants? It was noted that date alignment was crucial for tenants not to be hit by failed Direct Debit payments. It was also noted that Kirklees gave existing tenants 12 months to move onto Direct Debits, and it was asked if that option would be explored in the future for existing Leicester tenants. Mike explained that Kirklees had tried to introduce mandatory Direct Debits to all tenants, but had run into difficulties. At the time Kirklees did not have a service like Clockwise but might have one now. He added the way Leicester was proposing to introduce mandatory Direct Debits for new tenants would give the tenant time to ensure everything was set up before signing for a tenancy. The council could look to extend and advertise the scheme to existing tenants, but the council would not be able to enforce the scheme as a condition of tenancy.

Members were informed there were currently 5-6 tenants signed up with Clockwise but that this number was expected to increase. Prospective tenants would be informed the Council would pay a small fee for an account to be set up with the credit union on the tenant's behalf. Also, Clockwise would not charge for unpaid direct debits if there were insufficient funds in an account. Members were asked to note there would be alternative payment arrangements for people in difficulty, for example, those with mental health issues – whereby the Department for Work and Pensions would be asked to make payments direct to a rent account for those people. For those people who were not diagnosable, for example, with learning difficulties, a Clockwise account would be better for them. It was also explained that Clockwise had an additional service for account holders in the form of a payment card for a fee of £2 a month. Rewards could be earned at retail outlets through using the card.

It was noted that currently 19.3% of rent payments were by non-cash methods. It was suggested a promotional drive could be made to try and increase that figure.

The Executive Member for Housing commented that the need for Direct Debit payments had been forced on the Council by Government and the introduction of Universal Credit. He said there was a need to ensure the Council gained maximum rent from tenants, and that initially the introduction of mandatory Direct Debit payment from new tenants was the right step. He added that the

scheme would not be introduced to all tenants, as it would be wrong to impose on those tenants who paid their rent and were not receiving benefits, unless it became an issue in the future.

The Chair noted the issues that Kirklees had faced when introducing mandatory Direct Debit payments for all tenants, but asked the Executive for the sake of tenant's financial management and to reduce the impact of Universal Credit, to consider the following recommendations:

1. The widening of the mandatory direct debit approach;
2. That the Executive work with other social housing providers to create a common strategy for the issue;
3. That consideration be given to looking at broadening the policy on either:
 - a. An area basis (estate, estates or housing office); or
 - b. Length of tenancy (e.g. up to three years)
4. That work be undertaken in consultation with Clockwise Credit Union and other service providers (which might be credit unions and/or other banking service providers);
5. That Clockwise be asked to come to a future meeting of the Commission to establish its capacity to provide a service for tenants (both LA and HA);
6. If there was a partial extension of mandatory direct debits the impact should be assessed against a control of tenants who do not use direct debits to pay rent and other charges.

The Chair asked for a consensus from Commission Members on the above recommendations as read out, which were agreed.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report content, and commencement of the policy once the new housing IT system is in place be noted;
2. That the Executive be asked to consider the recommendations of the Housing Scrutiny Commission as listed in the minute text.

33. HEATING AND TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER CHARGES

The Director of Housing submitted a report which sought the views of Housing Scrutiny Commission members of proposals to decrease charges for heat and hot water to tenants and leaseholders by 10%, and change the annual service charge to leaseholders who were on district hearing to cover the actual cost of delivering the service. The report was presented by Simon Nicholls, Head of Service (Capital Investment).

Members made the following comments on the report:

Members welcomed the report and noted the district heating system had reduced a lot of heating problems for tenants. They asked if there were any proposals to provide heating in other wards. Members were informed that Leicester District Energy Company (LDEC) schemes were historically linked to housing estates, but a proposal from LDEC and/or the Council could expand

the scheme. Through expansion, those on the system may see a reduction in bills. Members were informed there were currently energy centres at the university, St Marks and St Peters with combined heat and power. LDEC sold the electricity produced and hot water was a by-product. The City Council was trying to get other large organisations to engage with the system.

Members mentioned that new meters had been fitted in properties on St Matthews, but asked how they would provide savings for residents. Members were informed that savings would not be made through have a new meter, but by using less heating and hot water, which would require a change in behaviour in households. It was planned that heat meters of properties on the heating network would be installed, and would hopefully have a positive impact on people's bills, and reduce the carbon footprint.

The Scrutiny Commission welcomed the reduction in the charges, and viewed the installation of heat meters as a way forward. They asked for a future report on gathered information as a result.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a future report be brought to the Commission on information gained following the installation of heat meters to properties on the district heating system.

34. LA HOUSING EVICTIONS 2014-15

The Director of Housing submitted a report which invited comments from the Housing Scrutiny Commission to the Executive on the Council's eviction management processes. The report was presented by Mike Watson, Income Collection Manager.

Members noted the presentation of the report and asked questions / made observations on the following:

Members asked what assistance had been offered to families from the agencies listed in the report, and had any action been taken to avoid eviction. They also noted in the ward by ward breakdown of evictions, that there were high levels of evictions from local authority homes in Beaumont Leys, Eyres Monsell and Western Wards, and asked work could be undertaken in those areas, signposting those at risk of eviction to agency assistance, and so reduce overall figures of evictions. Mike said the areas noted were the three wards among those that had the highest density of council accommodation, and that the figures included the three evictions for the city due to anti-social behaviour. He added the authority could look at targeting resources into those areas to see if services could be made available to those people. Members were asked to note no information was available on the families evicted on the first two quarters of the year, but reported that none of the families had come back through temporary accommodation. Further detail could be provided to Members at a future meeting.

Members noted that some of the people evicted did not use the services of STAR. They added that people with mental health issues would find it difficult to understand what was happening. Mike said that generally evictions were the result of non-engagement on the part of the tenant, and that if people were willing to talk to housing officers it usually didn't result in an eviction. Members requested that STAR be invited to provide information about their service at a future Commission meeting. Members suggested adding the Voluntary Sector to the list of agencies at 3.26 in the report.

The Chair summarised the recommendations made above, and invited the Executive Member for Housing to comment. He stated that he agreed in principle with the recommendations, but before the department committed resources, a discussion would need to be held regarding costs, bearing in mind that eviction figures had reduced.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the department puts further resources into Beaumont Leys, Eyres Monsell and Western Wards to seek to reduce eviction rates in these areas.
3. That a future report be brought to the Commission saying what was done and what the effect was on eviction rates.
4. The relevant Voluntary Sector and STAR representatives come to a future meeting to explain their work to Members.

35. TENANTS FORUM ACTION LOGS

The latest Tenants Forum Action Logs were submitted for information.

RESOLVED:

That the Tenants Forum Action Logs be noted.

36. HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME 2015-16

Members of the Commission considered the work programme. No amendments to the work programme were made.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

37. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.58pm.

Councillor Byrne gave her apologies in advance for the meeting on 17th December 2015.