



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: THURSDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2016 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aldred
Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Cank
Councillor Joshi

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly – Assistant Mayor for Housing

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53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Byrne.

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they might have in the business to be discussed.

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.

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.

55. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair announced that Ann Branson, Director of Housing, would be retiring at Easter. He wanted to place on record his thanks, and the thanks of present and former Commission Members, to Ann for the work she had done for the Council in housing, and the way she had worked with the Commission and Lead Executive Member, to make sure they were as well-briefed about housing issues as possible. Ann had worked for the council for many years, and had worked upwards through the levels of the organisation, and knew the department inside out. Ann was wished all the best for the future.

Cllr Connelly, Assistant Mayor for Housing, wanted to formally thank Ann for her work in housing, and said she had left an impressive legacy. He added he hoped she enjoyed her retirement and her time with her family.

Other Scrutiny Commission Members echoed what had been said, and thanked Ann for her enormous help over the years in assisting them in their role as councillor. They wished her all the best for the future, and a long and happy retirement.

Ann said she was really looking forward to retirement and to spending more time with her new grandchild. She said she had been going to council committees for nearly 40 years, and had had a lot to do with working with Members over that time. She thanked Scrutiny Commission Members for their messages.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing announced that Chris Burgin had been temporarily appointed as Acting Director of Housing from Friday 5th February 2016.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Mayor for the update, and looked forward to working with Chris in his new role.

56. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

that the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 17th December 2015, be approved as a correct record.

57. PETITIONS

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

58. 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.

59. AREA MANAGERS BRIEFING - BEAUMONT LEYS AND ABBEY WARDS

Ela Krychowska, Area Manager, gave the presentation. The following points were covered during the presentation:

- There were a few non-deprived areas in the wards, usually on the outskirts.
- Stock profile – there were very few bungalows and maisonettes in the area.
- The majority of lets were flats, which reflected the housing stock. Members were informed cottage flats were those that had their own door from the outside and were not in a block.
- A key achievement to the overall look of the area had been the improvements made to shopping parades.
- Entrances to flats looked more inviting.
- A play area and gym had been installed on Langley Avenue.
- Stains on the walls of properties following refurbishment would be jet-washed off.
- Community courtyards had received rubberised flooring, sheds had been painted and uPVC doors had been installed. The project was aimed at completing the whole improvement, rather than several small jobs.
- Budget still needed to be found to improve the appearance of render on parts of Beaumont Leys estate. Officers were looking for a surface that would last a long time, and wouldn't require a lot of money.
- Residents have requested more bin stores and bikes stands.

Members welcomed the presentation, and hoped improvements made could be continued across wards. Members asked questions, and received the following responses:

Councillor Connelly confirmed jet-washing equipment had been purchased, and was currently being used in New Parks. A programme of cleaning would be introduced for Beaumont Leys and Abbey Wards. The Chair said Lombardy Rise in North Evington suffered from similar issues with staining from boilers and pipes, as did other areas in the city that were in need of some cleaning treatment.

Ian Craig (Head of Service, Craft Workforce) said uPVC on a lot of houses had deteriorated in colour. The Neighbourhood Improvement Team and One Stop had managed to train a team to clean uPVC, and a lot of the work was based in New Parks. Trying to match the render on properties in Beaumont Leys was proving difficult, and officers were looking at providing additional cladding in some areas.

A small percentage of residents in the two wards could not speak English well or at all. Ela said staff came from a mixture of different groups, and spoke a variety of languages. She added there were no barriers for residents who

wanted to report housing issues.

Members were concerned that there was already fuel poverty in the area, and that the bedroom tax was an additional burden. Members were informed that households under-occupying properties would receive advice from the Income Management Team, and that numbers of household under occupying had reduced since the writing of the report.

It was reported that almost half of Beaumont Leys/Abbey Ward area ranked as being in the 10% most deprived in England, and Members asked what measures were being taken to alleviate the issue. Ela informed Members that residents faced different issues, for example, the high proportion of single parents. She said there were various measures in place across the wards, for example, training to get people back into work.

Members noted the significant improvement to the blocks on Thurstaston Road, Abbey Lane and Langley Avenue. They asked for a rolling programme of inspections to prevent deterioration of housing stock.

Cllr Connelly thanked Ela for the presentation and noted that many improvements to Beaumont Leys and Abbey wards were due to Ela's ambitions. He added that the improvement programme was ongoing, and two years ago £250k per year was allocated for the painting, and now there was money in the revenue budget for the programme. Also, there was funding for a play area in Blue Gates Road and the Assistant Mayor anticipated it would be built within the next financial year.

The Chair thanked the Area Manager for the presentation.

60. RENT ARREARS QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a quarterly progress report to update Scrutiny Commission Members on rent arrears for the period beginning October to December end 2015.

It was noted that:

- a) On 1st January 2016 the amount owing was £171k lower than same the same quarter in 2015, despite difficult economic conditions.
- b) The number of tenants in arrears was significantly less by 30.7%, but the number of tenants in more serious debt had risen by 13.7% compared to the same quarter the previous year. It was reported there was a lot of variability in the figures, but arrears appeared to be falling again.
- c) £1.218m extra rent would be collectible as a result of Bedroom Tax, though the numbers of tenants affected continued to fall.
- d) The arrears among those affected by the Bedroom Tax fell by £44k since 6th April 2015.
- e) An additional £112k of extra collectible rent would need to be collected as a result of Benefit Income Cap (BIC), which would likely increase when the cap was lowered from April 2016.

- f) £217,554 was paid by Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), of which £164,349 was to support people affected by Bedroom Tax.
- g) Evictions had decreased significantly during the year, with 40 evictions in the first three quarters, compared with 78 the previous year. Of those 40, 10 were family cases.
- h) Appendix 2 placed Leicester as only second to Wolverhampton (of those authorities who had supplied information), with regards to cumulative arrears as a percentage of rent role and underlined Leicester's position as a top quartile performer.

In response to Members' questions it was noted:

- a) Tenants rent arrears reduced slightly with the impact of the two weeks non-payment period over Christmas.
- b) The number of serious cases where seven weeks or more rent was owed stayed at around 34% for the first three years reported in the table, but the proportion of those in serious debt rose to 42% in 2014-15, and nearly 70% in the quarter to December 2015-16. The number of cases in arrears had decreased by 30.69% and were approaching a more normal figure since the impact of the introduction of Bedroom Tax in 2013.
- c) There was no evidence of growing hardship through the BIC at present, but was expected to grow on its introduction in April, and could mean a £6,000 drop in income per annum for some people .
- d) The report at 3.12 was amended to read 'on the 1st January 2016, 1,747 or 8.25% tenants were affected by bedroom tax.'
- e) The report at 3.13 was amended to read 'from the 1,866 cases that were identified at the start of this financial year on 1st April 2015, by the 1st January 2016 the number of active cases had reduced to 1,747.'
- f) The national roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) had been done in tranches. In Leicester this was on 25th January 2016 for new single person claimants, and the impact of that had been negligible. Staff received rigorous training and were aware of the difficulties some customers had when making applications for UC online. The onus was on the individual to make a claim as soon as possible as claims could not be backdated.
- g) The Council was not underestimating the significant challenges of UC, which would be challenging for a lot of authorities, especially with areas of deprivation. Awareness would be raised with tenants through a publicity campaign.
- h) Money collected through Bedroom Tax was not a separate pot of money, but reduced the impact of arrears increasing due to the loss of Housing Benefit (HB) for those people affected.
- i) With reference to Table 1, rent arrears was 13.1% lower than the same quarter the previous year, and Housing had done well to mitigate the risk.
- j) A risk to the Council was HB being paid direct to the tenant. Educating tenants on the important of budgeting was important. As previously reported, mandatory direct debits would be introduced for new tenants, and pre-tenancy interviews to mitigate the risk or arrears had been successful, with every appointment attended by potential tenants.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

61. EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

The Director of Housing submitted a report to inform the Commission of the Housing Division's bid to the Service Transformation Fund to increase the number of Empty Homes Officers to reduce the backlog of long-term empty homes. The Commission was asked to note the officers' actions.

It was noted that a bid to the Service Transformation fund which would include the cost of the additional Empty Homes Officers and an amount for the increase in legal work had been successful. Officers were expecting the amount of empty homes to be reduced by a significant amount.

In response to Members' questions it was noted:

- a) Two properties on Humberstone Road were empty, due to proposed future alterations to the junction. The future of the houses was not secure, and had the potential to be demolished.
- b) The Empty Homes Strategy was triggered when a property had been empty for 18 months, and the current total was 1,164. Some properties in the city had been empty for 5-10 years.
- c) 18 months was considered to be a reasonable length of time for a property to remain empty legitimately, for example, due to death, probate and the sale of house.
- d) A 20 stage process was followed, but officers faced challenges. One reason a property could remain empty for a long time was a change of ownership, when the process would have to be started again with the new owner.
- e) The 20-stage process gave people time to respond, and if a case went to public enquiry, the Council had to demonstrate it had done all that it could to exhaust all avenues to bring the house back into use.
- f) The application for compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) could take many months, but progress was being made to speed up the process.
- g) A report would be brought back to the Scrutiny Commission on empty homes generally, and information on the recruitment of additional Empty Homes Officers, and the work around targeting empty properties. A map on the location of long-term empty properties in the city would be included.

The Chair welcomed the objective of reducing the backlog within three years, but asked that the department in that period review:

- a) The 18 month time condition for having a home empty before taking action;

b) Review the 20 stage process referred to in the report at 3.4;

The Chair suggested that officers liaise closely with Highways in terms of junction improvements, as other properties would be affected by highway schemes. He asked that a report on homes blighted by highway schemes be brought to the SC.

AGREED:

That:

1. The report be noted.
2. A report be brought to a future Commission meeting on empty homes generally, information on the recruitment of additional Empty Homes Officer, and the work around targeting empty properties, to include a map on the location of long-term empty properties;
3. The 18 month time condition for having a home empty before taking action be reviewed;
4. The 20 stage process referred to at 3.4 of the report be reviewed;
5. A report on homes blighted by highway schemes be brought to a future meeting of the Commission.

62. RESPONSIVE HOUSING REPAIRS: UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report to update Commission Members on the Division's performance on the completion of responsive repairs to council properties, and the implementation of service changes reported to the Commission and agreed by the Executive in November 2014. The Commission was asked to note the report.

It was noted that:

- a) Requested information was attached at Appendix 2, 'Number of repairs which are outstanding and out of Category by Area'. It was reported that 221 outstanding repairs were associated to a central team under general building works. Roofing related repairs sat under a team who could work at heights.
- b) Completing jobs on a first visit remained the main challenge. There had been some progress with a performance improvement to 82.6% of jobs completed on first visit, although the target was 90%.
- c) The old system had a standardised amount of time of 45 minutes, which was not long enough for some first visits, and another appointment had to be made.
- d) The Division was looking to amend the functional roles of Craft Operatives, and hold a review of materials in vans as part of the wider structure changes in 2016. It was hoped an increased number of jobs would be

passed back to the same individual, who would own the job from beginning to end.

- e) The implementation of the new Housing IT solution, Northgate, would see improved communications, with the introduction of online reporting, tenants able to select appointments for jobs. Better satisfaction monitoring would be enabled, with Operatives using tablets for the tenant to complete a satisfaction monitoring report. Information would be fed immediately back to the manager, and would allow issues to be addressed the same day with the Craft Operative in situ.
- f) The system would also allow for enhanced materials delivery if Craft Operatives had access to their diaries, and could arrange appointments with the tenant.

In response to Members' questions it was noted:

- a) The tenant responsibility handbook would be revised following the staffing review, to reflect changes. The document was 100 pages, as it contained a lot of pictures to highlight to people what they could do. The text and font size would be looked at to make it user-friendly. The standardised age for tenants' responsibility for small jobs repairs was 60. People with mobility issues could contact the repairs service for advice.
- b) Customer satisfaction statistics would be included in a report when available.
- c) Vehicles in Housing all now had trackers installed. These are primarily used to provide driver feedback to aid how LCC drivers drive, including improving driver styles, reducing fuel spend, wear and tear, accidents and damage to vehicles linked to this. The information can also be used to substantiate where vehicles are linked to insurance claims or associated to managing staff
- d) The figure of 118, Humberstone and Rowlatts Hill in September (Appendix 2) was queried by Members. Officers would look into the increase and provide details of the increase to Members of the Commission.

A Member reported that the department had responded to a repair job for a tenant with mental health issues within one hour, and that the person at the end of the phone was extremely helpful. They asked that their thanks and appreciation be noted for the quick response.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked officers for the report, and noted the Commission would monitor progress in Responsive Repairs performance, and development of the service following the implementation of Northgate.

AGREED:

That:

1. The report be noted;
2. Details on the increased figure of 118, Humberstone and Rowlatts Hill in September (Appendix 2) be emailed to Scrutiny Commission.

63. MONITORING THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY (18 MONTHS)

The Director of Housing and Executive submitted a report for comment on the first 18 months of the Homeless Strategy. The Commission was asked to note the recommendations in the report, and make any comments to the Director of Housing and Executive.

The report considered operational data for the first 18 months up to September 2015 since the implementation of the Single Access and Referral Service in April 2014. Members were informed the service was based in Housing Options.

It was noted that:

- a) People facing homelessness went through a single point of contact, and all data was now directly comparable to the previous year.
- b) The rise in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families peaked in quarter 1, with 44 families needing to be accommodated. Initiative in quarter 2 reduced the number to 19, and in quarter 3 would be even lower.
- c) The number of repeat homeless cases was 58 as at end of September 2015. The target figure was 53.
- d) As at September 2015 end, there were 15 beggars in the street who did not have somewhere to live or had refused all offers of assistance.
- e) The service looked to place people straight into a tenancy, rather than through temporary accommodation, for example, if they had lost a private tenancy through no fault of their own.
- f) The pilot of having a Housing Options Officer based at the Bradgate Mental Health Unit had been successful. The Officer worked with health services to speed up the discharge of patients who were well enough to leave hospital, but might not have suitable accommodation to return to. The scheme reduced bed blocking and a similar role was being piloted at the Leicester Royal Infirmary.
- g) 1/3 of the lets go towards addressing homelessness.
- h) There had been an increase in demand, with more evictions occurring in the private sector. Landlords could achieve higher rental income than what was covered by Housing Benefit (HB), and there was a concern that more evictions would occur when HB was capped.
- i) The emphasis is the prevention of homelessness, but sometimes there are crisis cases, for example, domestic violence, asylum seekers, people being asked to leave by family and friends.
- j) The general conclusion was that progress reported in September 2015 was being sustained, though a watchful eye would be kept on the effects of Universal Credit on the service.

The report recommended that no change to the current strategy be made at

this time due to the continued increase of those requesting assistance when facing homelessness, and that the Commission receive a further two-year progress report in July 2016.

In response to Members' questions it was noted:

- a) The number of bed spaces could only be reduced if other initiatives reduced need. Currently there was 96% occupancy, and the recommendation was to keep it at that number.
- b) Usually a family would only be placed in a bed and breakfast if they were in crisis, and the service had not had the opportunity to plan alternative accommodation, usually an average of 3 days for families, which was well under the government target of 6 weeks.
- c) Hostels that were closed two years previously (Lowers Hastings Street / Upper Tichborne Street / Loughborough Road) had been, or were subject to plans to, refurbish the properties.
- d) Landlords were duty-bound to bring a valid notice (Section 21 Notice) to the attention of tenants. Housing was well versed in seeing poor quality notices, and landlords were challenged to serve a legal notice. Housing Options would try and save the tenancy and solve issues for the tenant / landlord.
- e) Tenants were worried they would have to pay court costs. With the reduction in the number of lets, it was essential that time be increased to enable the tenant to remain in the property and not be made homeless. Housing Options would pay court costs, so tenants could have stability and remain in their home.

The Chair said it would be useful to have expanded information on placing families/people in bed and breakfasts, and the costs to the service. Members asked that the next monitoring report includes a paragraph on how much had been paid out in court costs for tenants that had been evicted by private landlords.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and observations made, and looked forward to a future report in the summer.

AGREED:

That:

1. The report be noted;
2. The Head of Service in the next monitoring report provides expanded information on placing families/people in bed and breakfasts and the cost to the service, and how much had been paid out in court costs for tenants that had been evicted by private landlords.

64. WORK PROGRAMME OF THE SCRUTINY COMMISSION

The Scrutiny Policy Officer submitted a document that outlined the Housing Scrutiny Commission's Work Programme for 2015/16.

The Chair asked that a report on the procurement, introduction and operation of the Northgate IT system be added to the work programme for the Scrutiny Commission.

AGREED:

That the programme be received and updated with the addition of a report on the procurement, introduction and operation of the Northgate IT system be added to the work programme for the Scrutiny Commission.

65. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 8.44pm.