



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 22 AUGUST 2016 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany
Councillor Byrne

Councillor Cank
Councillor Dawood

Councillor Joshi

In Attendance:

Councillor Connelly – Assistant City Mayor, Housing

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19. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies from Chris Burgin, Director of Housing.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Byrne declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members were council tenants, and that she also was a council tenant.

Councillor Cank declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members were council tenants.

Councillor Newcombe declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that he was listed on the Council's Housing Register, and family members were council tenants.

Councillor Aqbany declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members were council tenants.

Councillor Joshi declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in 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.

21. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Minute Item 12, Empty Homes 2016, Page 6 Para. 4 – An amendment to read '...each of which had only *one* occupant.'

AGREED:

that the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held 4 July 2016, subject to the amendment noted above, be confirmed as a correct record.

The Chair asked the meeting to note four areas in the minutes, where information which had been asked to be brought back to the meeting was still awaited:

Minute Item 12, Empty Homes, Page 6, Para. 1 – The Chair questioned how other Local Authorities dealt with empty homes and whether there was any benchmarking information to compare Leicester with other areas. The Head of Service to provide the information to the Commission.

Minute Item 12, Page 6 Para. 4 – The Chair had asked previously for officers to send to Members of the Commission figures for under-occupied properties for each area of the city, though not necessarily in a report.

Minute Item 13, Homelessness, Street Begging and Rough Sleeping, Page 7, Para. 3 – The Chair questioned the number of times that all emergency beds had been in use. The Head of Service to supply information for the past six months.

Minute Item 13, Page 8, Action Note – Details were still awaited on the costs of repatriation of the homeless.

22. PETITIONS

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

23. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

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

24. MONITORING THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Director of Housing submitted a report to the Housing Scrutiny Commission for comment on the first 24 months since the Homelessness Strategy was fully implemented. Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service, summarised the report on a service which dealt with complex problems and was seeing an increase in demand.

Members heard there was an emphasis of moving from crisis management. Successful prevention work and support had increased in line with demand. The Commission noted that one reason for homelessness was the loss of assured shorthold tenancies and more evictions in the private sector, coupled with less private accommodation and a reduced number of council properties available for let due to Right to Buy sales. It was also noted that the numbers of people on the housing register continued to increase, with most applicants having little or no prospect of receiving accommodation as the housing list was based on housing need and was not a waiting list.

It was noted that Housing First continued to focus on helping people into permanent housing accommodation who would otherwise have been moved into crisis temporary accommodation. The objectives of the homeless strategy included the 'No Second Night Out' initiative for rough sleepers.

Members heard that Government legislation and welfare reform would present a range of challenges. There continued to be a need for hostel bed spaces, and the focus would be on meeting the needs of those who required accommodation support, and to move those that did not need this type of support into housing accommodation.

The service would continue to monitor and review the strategy, including eligibility criteria for those wanting to access temporary accommodation. It was also recommended to review the Housing Register by considering a modification to bandings, and eligibility of those on the register. Stakeholders would be consulted on the proposed restructuring of the housing register.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing said homelessness was an emotive and sensitive issue but that the Homelessness Strategy was successful and it was the right time to review it, the results of which would shape and influence final decisions by the authority.

A Member made reference to a constituent, and questioned why, if a single person in a three-bedroom house was unsuccessful at bidding, they would be suspended and prevented from bidding for any more properties for 12 months, thus preventing another family from moving into the property. The Head of Service said each case was looked at on an individual basis. Each candidate was given three choices (offers), and if they were not taken, these were considered to be refusals. The Chair requested the Head of Service look at ways in which more offers could be made without disqualification from making new applications for another year.

Members referred to the local housing allowance rates that had been frozen since 2014, and identified the increase in private sector rents as an area of

concern. They also referred to private sector landlords refusing to house those in receipt of housing benefit, which reduced the stock of available housing. The Head of Service said the allowances were set nationally. She added that the service was awaiting clarification on whether supported accommodation would be subject to the Local Housing Allowance Cap which would be applied in April 2017. If supported housing rents were affected, the service would have to look at whether continuation of temporary accommodation schemes was viable. The Chair suggested the Housing Scrutiny Commission write jointly with the Assistant Mayor for Housing to the government to press for speedy request for clarification.

In response to a question, the Head of Service confirmed there would be a review of the Housing Register, as the housing environment had changed over the past 10 years, and managing customer expectations was a priority. It was an administrative burden managing 11,000 applications with very limited resources. It was also known that people on the lower bands were unlikely to receive any offers of housing, and would need to seek alternative housing. In May 2014 the service stopped accepting applications from individuals who were adequately housed, but existing applicants were not removed from the list. The Chair requested that any recommendations following the review of the Housing Register be brought before the Commission at a future meeting.

Members said they had assisted applicants with the bidding process, but it had been unclear which level of priority (banding) had applied to them. The Head of Service said the new system (Northgate) should be showing banding information, and she would investigate why it wasn't. The Head of Service would also provide information on the different levels of priority.

It was noted that between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016, 7,298 of calls relating to homelessness and urgent advice enquiries had been transferred to the Emergency On-Call Team in Housing Options. The Head of Service informed the Commission that it was not intended to channel shift the service, and the emergency duty team would remain accessible and in place, as some callers required urgent, specialist advice on the day. The service would, however, channel shift some routine services, for example, changes to applications, and there was a vulnerable inclusion strategy for people who couldn't self-serve.

The Head of Service informed the meeting that STAR provided essential support to vulnerable tenants, for example, providing emotional support for those going to court. On a quarterly basis, information provided by STAR on all outcomes of prevention work was reported to government.

In response to a question, the meeting was informed the service was looking to reduce the cycle of homelessness, for example, repeat stays in hostels, and were looking at providing a support plan to break the cycle, by looking at other solutions, including independent living and supported living schemes. There were also robust procedures in place to manage homeless young people of 16-17yrs, with joint assessments between Housing and Children's Services to deal with safeguarding concerns. A plan would be developed for care leavers prior

to them reaching 18 years. Some care leavers would move on to supported living, and some on to independent living. The YMCA was also used as a specialist young person accommodation provider, with wrap around services to support young people.

Members referred to the proposed reduction of 60 units of internal provision of supported housing for single people, and cost of independent accommodation and floating support services. The Head of Service stated it was a proposal which would mitigate some of the risks of the potential capping of rents. Information was currently being worked upon as part of the proposal, and would be provided to the Commission when available.

Attention was drawn to Appendix 9 of the report. As part of the Housing Spending Review Phase 3, (proposals for a review of the eligibility criteria and a reduction in accommodation based support), two options to achieve savings had been outlined in the report. The Assistant Mayor for Housing informed the Commission the Executive had taken the advice of officers and were not considering Option 1, and Option 2 would go out to consultation. He added the work proposed would be brought back to the Housing Scrutiny Commission prior to any decision on the final proposal being considered by the Executive.

A Member questioned how the service could reduce the total spend on Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation. The Head of Service responded that for the financial year 2016/17 only £4,000 had been spent as B&B accommodation was used as a last resort, and its use could only be prevented if people contacted the service early.

The Chair asked for ongoing updates on the strategy.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted;
2. The Housing Scrutiny Commission write jointly with the Assistant Mayor for Housing to the government to press for speedy request for clarification;
3. The Head of Service to bring any recommendations following the review of the Housing Register before the Commission at a future meeting.
4. The Head of Service to investigate the new system Northgate and the provision of banding information to ensure it was visible to applicants;
5. The Head of Service to provide information on the different levels of priority (banding).
6. The Head of Service to look at ways in which more offers could be made without disqualification from making new applications for another year.
7. The Head of Service to provide information to the Commission when available on the costs of independent accommodation and floating support services to individuals as part of the reduction of 60 units of supported housing.

8. The Head of Service to provide an update to the Scrutiny Commission at a future meeting, following consultation on proposals for a review of the eligibility criteria and a reduction in accommodation based support.

25. TOWER BLOCK REFURBISHMENT UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report which updated Members on the St Peters tower block refurbishments. Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, informed Members the scheme was envisaged to be completed in 2017/18. Operational lessons had been learned when working around tenants in Framland House. Further block refurbishments would see the removal of all tenants before work started.

The Commission was asked to note that work on Gordon House had been approached differently and an external lift had been provided for contractors. This had enabled external work to commence prior to moving out the tenants. Work had also started on Maxfield House, with the replacement of the lift and fire doors. Refurbishment would be completed when Gordon House was finished. Due dates for completion were January 2017 for Gordon House, with Maxfield House expected December 2017.

Members were informed that refurbishment of the tower blocks would be completed within budget, and the Council would not incur penalties for slippage of the programme of works, although the cost of council tax for vacant properties was incurred, only the first calendar month is free. Void figures would be reported separately for St Peters blocks, and information would be brought to the next meeting of the Commission. Members noted that Goscote House, which had 132 flats of differing size, had not been included in the scheme of redevelopment as it was constructed differently to the other blocks. A consultant's report had raised issues that required further investigation, and some testing work was underway. The consultants had been given a brief, which included valuation of Goscote House, and whether it could be reconfigured to reduce the number of bedsits and increase two-bedroom accommodation. A separate report would be prepared for the Assistant Mayor for Housing. In response to a request from the Chair, the report would also be brought to the Housing Scrutiny Commission for consideration. Members would also visit Gordon House once refurbishment was complete.

Concern was expressed regarding the lift at Framland House which had recently been out of use for a few days. The Head of Service reported a maintenance contract of the lifts in the towers had been agreed with the lift company LES, a local engineering firm who had agreed a 20 minutes response time.

A Member questioned why the scheme had taken so long. Members heard it had been underestimated how long it would take to move people out of the Framland House, as the tenants had varying needs, for example, disability requirements and had been moved into more suitable accommodation. It was also noted that through natural wastage there would be vacancies of

approximately 65 high-demand properties on St Peters.

AGREED:

that

1. The report be noted;
2. Information on voids for St Peters blocks be brought the next meeting of the Commission;
3. Following consultant investigations of Goscote House, the separate report prepared for the Assistant Mayor be brought to the Housing Scrutiny Commission for information.
4. Once refurbishment was complete, the Head of Service to arrange a site visit to Gordon House for Commission Members.

26. VOIDS TASK GROUP

The Scrutiny Policy Officer delivered to the Commission a verbal update on the work of the Voids Task Group.

Members were informed two meetings had been held as follows:

- 7th July 2016 – the task group were briefed on the minimum standard, now rebranded as the letting standard, and related to what tenants could expect in accommodation. It in turn required an understanding of the standards by the various people involved for example, contractors, tenants, estate management officers. Each group of people had different ideas on what work had to be done.

The new lettings standard proposals (150 items) for example, decoration, plumbing, tiling, groundwork, had been brought together under a new code and would go out to consultation with the Tenants Forum and staff, prior to launching.

Members were informed the Housing Transformation Review and Voids Improvement Project (VID) would run at the same time. Work as part of the VID would be a slower feed in as the new staff structure was embedded. The Northgate IT system and increased use of mobile technology would provide accessible information on the letting standard.

- 14th July 2016 – the task group looked in detail at work undertaken on four specific void properties. The department analysed what was done, when and how long work had taken to complete. The voids were between 28 and 35 days. Some reporting issues were found that highlighted other general issues, for example, the ordering of components, lack of preparation in a couple of cases, significant delay in the offer and subsequent refusal of a tenancy. It was noted that lettings stated from Monday, therefore, a property would be empty for a week if work was completed on a Tuesday. The case studies didn't fully give a full understanding of the issues raised, and the Head of Service would study the cases in more detail.

The Head of Service informed the Commission the four cases had been picked at random, and the process had been analysed at each stage, for example, asbestos sampling, how properties were advertised, and so on. It was noted there were various stages of the process that could delay the rental of a property. He added that more complicated and challenging properties that require capital investment had been chosen to see how long it would take to turn a property round.

Chair stated notification of another task group meeting would be sent out, and recommendations would be drawn from that meeting and brought to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Commission.

AGREED:

that:

1. The update be noted;
2. Recommendations from the task group be brought to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Commission.

27. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair drew attention to the Housing Scrutiny Commission Work Programme for noting, but informed Members that it might change as issues arose.

AGREED:

that the Housing Scrutiny Commission Work Programme be noted.

28. ANY URGENT BUSINESS

No other items had been brought to the attention of the Chair.

29. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.53pm