



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 20 MARCH 2017 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Cank

Councillor Joshi

In Attendance

Councillor Connolly – Assistant Mayor for Housing

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75. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Byrne and Dawood.

76. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

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

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

Councillor Joshi 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 family members were council tenants.

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. They were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration of the relevant items.

77. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

that the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 30 January 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

78. PETITIONS

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

79. 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.

80. AREA MANAGERS' PRESENTATION - SOUTH AREA HOUSING MANAGEMENT

Ellen Watts, District Manager, delivered the presentation on the South Neighbourhood Area.

In response to questions from the Chair and Members, the following information was given:

- £60,000 had been identified for parking improvements;
- Improvements to Stoneygate properties included slabbing communal areas, cleaning flats;
- More conversions of houses from 3 to 2 bedrooms were planned, and fencing schemes would continue;
- Updated figures in the presentation to read 5 families and 13 single people had been evicted;
- Tenants could apply to a loft insulation scheme for a loan. Wall insulation had been installed in Saffron and Braunstone which had decreased heating costs for tenants. It was not known if any more investment was being planned;
- A breakdown of Capital spend for boiler replacement, and the number of properties involved would be provided to Members;
- No problems had arisen during garden boundary clarification. Some flats had previously been houses, with some gardens split in non-standard combinations, and boundaries had been revised through negotiation;
- There were 246 cases of anti-social behaviour (ASB) in 2015 leading to just the one eviction. 65% of issues were generally conflict with neighbours but not serious enough to go to the extent of eviction.
- The South area had 31% of the city's arrears which was proportionate to the size of the stock, and were monitored by Income Management;

- Houses in the South area were not difficult to let. Conversions took time but were undertaken because of the design of the properties, with very small bathrooms. A number of void properties were converted over the past 5 years as well as 43 tenanted ones.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the presentation.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted;
2. The Director of Housing to circulate a breakdown of Capital spend on boiler replacements and the number of properties involved.

81. RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a quarterly rent arrears progress report to the Commission for the period 3 October 2016 to 1 January 2017 for noting.

Vijay Desor (Head of Service) and Zenab Valli, Income Collection Manager, presented the report, and made the following points:

- The rent arrears at the end of Quarter 3 were £62,000 higher than for the same quarter in 2015/16, but £108,000 lower than in the same time in 2014/15;
- The service was confident the target of £1.5million by the end of the year would be met;
- There would be an additional £157,000 cash to be collected as a result of the Benefit Income Cap (BIC), due to the lowering of the cap ceiling;
- The Service was continuing to maximise rent collection activities despite economic pressures faced by many households. Most tenants were engaging with the council and continued to pay their rent in a timely manner;
- Actions included the introduction of Direct Debit (DD) arrangements to give tenants the opportunity to pay rent on time. Older people would be assisted to complete forms to move to DD;
- A web-based rent self-serve facility would be introduced to allow tenants access to their rent statements and arrears balances instantly.

In response to Members' questions, the following information was given:

- Comparable rent figures were gained from the Housing Quality Network, and occasionally comparable authorities were contacted for information;
- With regards to a freeze in benefits, any reduction in disposable income for tenants would impact on rent collection. Rent had reduced by 1%, so there had not been as much of an impact on arrears as expected. The number of low paid tenants relying on welfare payments was increasing, and other welfare reform changes might drive arrears up;
- The Income Management Team undertook early intervention to prevent

high rent arrears and tried to assist a tenant in the best possible way to ensure they got the right support and prioritised rent payments. They also offered assistance with income maximisation with benefits, universal credit, etc. Members requested the age profile of tenants with rent in arrears be provided, though it was noted that older tenants tended to be better at paying their rent;

- There were challenges with Universal Credit, with an eight-week wait for tenants to receive benefit and guidance would be sought from other councils who were further ahead with the process;
- Rigorous methods were applied to recover debt. The Exchequer Team assisted with recovery to make contact with former tenants evicted. Evictions were a last resort as recovery of debt was easier when dealing with a current tenant. If a former tenant with a debt entered the system again, Housing Options would liaise to assist in the recovery of the debt;
- People losing Employment Support Allowance from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had the right to appeal and could apply to have Housing Benefit reinstated. Tenants would be referred to Welfare Rights to assist with the appeal process, to food banks, the Supporting Tenants and Residents Service (STAR) and charity links to help pay for service charges;
- Tenants could go to Citizens Advice for assistance with form filling. The Income Management Team would also assist over the phone or ask the tenant to attend duty appointments with the Income Management Team to complete forms;
- There were robust systems to support those who went through the hostel route into a tenancy. More often than not first time tenants facing eviction had not come through the hostel system but had been given a flat from the list, and the individual might be overwhelmed with bills and by looking after a property. Other evictions might be the result of sanctions from the DWP. It was officers' role to engage with tenants to offer support and prevent evictions.

The Chair thanked the Officers for the report.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted;
2. The Director of Housing to provide the age profile of tenants with rent in arrears.

82. OVERCROWDING AND UNDER-OCCUPATION PROJECT

Justin Haywood and Michal Nowaczyk delivered a presentation on a project underway to identify levels of overcrowding and under-occupation of Council tenancies.

The following points were made:

- Overcrowding outweighed under-occupation figures, with the exceptions of Braunstone and Saffron;
- A complementary need was a potential swap, and it was found that people

- normally liked to stay in the same Housing Allocations area;
- There were 340 potential housing resolutions, so consideration needed to be given as to why those housing swaps had not been undertaken;
 - Only a small number of those properties registered on the HomeSwapper site were under-occupied;
 - Pilot aimed at encouraging more customers to register on HomeSwapper. Mail shot to be sent, followed by telephone calls to those with more 'desirable properties';
 - Pilot will also include using functionality in HomeSwapper to suggest swaps, which will appear to users when they log in, making it easier for them to use the website.
 - HomeSwapper was keen to work with the Council, and it was free of charge to make certain improvements to the app, where it was mutually beneficial

In response to questions from the Chair and Members the following information was given:

- The target audience was those who had expressed an interest in moving;
- Officers had chosen to send letters with information about the HomeSwapper scheme, as it was mainly elderly tenants who were under-occupied, and who may not have access to IT. Members would be informed when letters were sent in case there were queries from constituents. Follow-up telephone calls would be made and a phone tutorial offered to help with the website form completion;
- Expressing an interest in the HomeSwapper site would not affect a tenants place on the Housing Register – the two were entirely separate;
- Advice would be given to those registered to update either their profiles to advertise their properties better, for example, highlight good features of the house, to help prevent home swaps from falling through;
- There were 21,000 tenancies and limited staff in Tenancy Management Services who could ensure properties were maintained to a decent standard. The service was working smarter and pooling information on tenancies from different sections, for example, rent arrears team, repairs service. Some people did not report any repairs which could indicate issues in the house that tenants did not want anyone to see;
- In the past assistance had been given to help someone to move, for example, alerting service providers;
- The HomeSwapper scheme allowed people to move to other areas, not just the city.

The Chair welcomed the report and asked that when the pilot was completed a future report come back to the Commission.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted;
2. The Director of Housing to provide the age profile of tenants with rent in arrears.
3. When the pilot was completed a future report to be brought

back to the Commission.

83. COUNCIL HOUSING VOIDS - A TASK GROUP REPORT TO THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

The Scrutiny Policy Officer presented a report to the Commission on the work of the Council Housing Voids Task Group.

The Chair asked those present to note that during the course of the review, the task group had received a lot of co-operation from the department. The Director of Housing welcomed the report and thanked officers and Members involved in the preparation of the report.

The Chair also asked that the report be taken to Overview Select Committee for final approval in April 2017, and that the service bring a response to the recommendations back to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be presented to the Overview Select Committee in April 2017;
2. A response to the recommendations contained in the report be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

84. WORK PROGRAMME

VOTE OF AGREED:

that the Work Programme of the Commission be updated and noted.

85. VOTE OF THANKS

The Chair briefly summarised the work of the Commission over the year and thanked officers and Members for their work and contributions.

Cllr Joshi on behalf of Members on the Commission thanked the Chair and Vice-Chair for their work, the Director of Housing and Assistant Mayor, and officers who had assisted the Commission over the year.

86. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.50pm.