



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2017 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Cank (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Byrne

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor, Housing

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28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dawood, Halford and Hunter.

29. 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 she 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.

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.

30. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting

held on 14 August 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

31. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Chair informed the meeting she had not been notified of any questions received five clear days in order for them to be included on the agenda. However, a number of questions had been received from a member of the public on the day of the meeting which would be forwarded to the Director of Housing to instruct officers to provide a written response to the person who had sent the questions.

32. PETITIONS

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

33. QUARTER 1 RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT - APRIL 2017 TO JUNE 2017

The Director of Housing submitted a report on rent arrears progress for the quarter from 3 April to 30 June 2017. Zenab Valli, Interim Income Collection Manager presented the report, which was considered a positive Quarter 1 progress report, despite the ongoing financial climate. It was reported that many tenants were engaging with the service in a timely manner. Points made included the following:

- Universal Credit (UC) Full Service was due to commence in Leicester in March 2018 would affect many more working age households over the following 12 months. The Income Management Team (IMT) were in the process of meeting with other authorities who have had UC Full Service implemented and were at the information gathering stage. .
- The IMT offered advice to all tenants and ensured information on agencies, who could help and offer advice to tenants, was available, for example, Citizens Advice offered money management and debt advice, the STAR team offered basic budgeting support and other types of emotional support. The IMT try targeted approaches when monitoring accounts with arrears and tried to target those bandings with most of the arrears ensuring those tenants were aware of support and advice available if they had other debts or required further support.
- Tenants were encouraged to make direct debit payments. The Council could also apply for third-party deductions if a tenant was in receipt of welfare benefits. Many tenants preferred a payment direct from benefits knowing their rent would be paid.
- The number of tenants paying by Direct Debit, Bank Standing Order or Wage deduction was low at 19.49% from the 14,161 number of tenants that were identified with rent to pay. The IMT engaged with tenants to promote direct debit payments, however, many tenants preferred to be in control of their own finances and particularly when benefits were received on a weekly basis those tenants did not prefer direct debit payments. Once the paperless direct debit facility was fully implemented whereby IMT could set

the direct debit's up by phone, take up might increase. IMT previously promoted direct debits and provided incentives to promote take up but despite this tenants continued to choose to be in control of their finances and would much rather pay cash or ultimately consider bank standing order's opposed to direct debits.

- The take-up of Clockwise Credit Union accounts was low, as most tenants were satisfied with the bank they were with. The service would continue to be promoted as it guaranteed rent payment would be covered before benefit payments reached the tenant them. It was particularly useful to promote Clockwise Rent Payment Accounts now that UC rollout was imminent and tenants would be receiving the housing cost element of their benefits directly into their bank accounts. The IMT could apply for Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA's) for UC claimants. This was when the DWP would consider paying the Housing Costs Element of UC directly to the landlord in cases when the tenants had vulnerabilities or were in arrears over 8 weeks plus or when they were in 4 weeks arrears plus with a history of arrears. The APA's could be reviewed and the maximum time they could be paid for was 24 months. Being on an APA could allow the tenant time to learn how to budget on a monthly basis.
- UC Full Service would affect anyone of working age with two children or less, and could take 6-8 weeks before receiving their first payment is received. Feedback on UC rollout in other areas showed a disastrous impact on rent collection, with average UC debt levels at £800 – 8 times worse than current average figures, and was regarded as a failure by the Department of Work and Pensions being able to respond to the changes as a result of UC rollout.
- People in debt often struggled to manage money, especially if they were in a position with loan sharks or door stop lenders. They also struggled to understand that rent was a priority debt. Office appointments were offered to tenants to discuss their financial situations in more detail when those types of cases were identified. The IMT go through income and expenditures and if they identified tenants with other debts they were provided with basic budgeting advice and for more intense support referred to more specialist advice agencies when required.

Councillor Connelly, the Assistant City Mayor, Housing, offered his thanks to the Income Management Team for their work, and was pleased to see the levels of debt reduced, but recognised the future threat of Universal Credit.

AGREED:

that the report be noted.

34. HOUSING SYSTEM REPLACEMENT AND HOUSING CHANNEL SHIFT

The Director of Housing submitted a report which provided an overview and update on the Housing system Replacement Programme and Housing Channel Shift. Charlotte McGraw (Head of Service) and Kevin Wheeler (Programme Manager) presented the report.

Members considered the report and during the ensuing discussion, comments

and queries were raised and responded to by officers:

- E-communication would cut down the number of calls to the repairs service, particularly beneficial to those tenants on pay-as-you-go mobile phones.
- It was noted that some people would be unable to access channel shift services, though it was also recognised that some would be able to use it with some support which would be the target audience to try and increase the uptake of channel shift. There would also be customer service centre floor walkers to provide support.
- Concern was raised that support was not available in all areas, for example, libraries which may be short staffed, or customer services where appointment times were limited. Members asked officers to consider if IT support could be given to residents by housing officers, though it was noted that previous surgeries had seen little or no attendance by residents.

AGREED:

that the report be noted.

35. HOMELESSNESS REVIEW & STRATEGY UPDATE

The Commission received a presentation (a copy of which was attached to the agenda), on the review of the current homelessness strategy, which set out the proposed timetable for the publishing of a new homelessness strategy for Leicester. Julie Turner, (Business Change Manager, Housing Transformation Team) informed the meeting that it was a legal requirement for the strategy to be updated every five years. The following information was given:

- The cost of renting or buying a home rose fastest in the East Midlands in the past year compared with nationally. House prices in the region went up by 7.5% in the year to the end of July compared to 5.1% across the UK.
- People could become homeless through no fault of their own, for example, those in shorthold tenancies could be evicted at short notice.
- There were 222 responses to the consultation questionnaire reviewing the last homeless strategy (2013-18) and included feedback from the service user group at Dawn Centre, Homelessness Reference Group, government agencies, health service and the Job Centre.
- It was acknowledged that a prevention approach was effective in reducing the number of homeless people, through the provision of advice, guidance and people knowing where they could seek support before a crisis arose. The service wanted to develop an app for people to get support, for example, those struggling with budgeting.

During the ensuing discussion a number of queries were raised and responses given, which included the following:

- The Housing Options Team were working with landlords to encourage them to let to people on benefits (One out of 47 properties were available at Local Housing Allowance rates of a sample reviewed by the private sector housing team). The private sector housing team found it challenging to find suitable private lettings (that were affordable and in a decent condition).

- New government legislation brought in resulted in changes to tax levels. Some small landlords are selling their properties which would reduce the number of lettings.
- Members were concerned that some private landlords were evicting tenants, then re-letting properties at a higher rate. When people were at risk the council looked at individual circumstances and would try to intervene with the landlord, to try and find a permanent solution so tenants did not go into hostels or temporary accommodation. The prevention rate for those potentially facing homelessness was good at 90%, and a prevention fund was available to help support tenancies.

Councillor Connelly said the need to renew the Homelessness Strategy was clear and including the Housing Scrutiny Commission was part of that process. He noted the number of homeless in the city centre had increased, as had been seen across the country. He made a point that not all rough sleepers wanted help and some were subject to the 'Revolving Door' process and could not hold tenancies, and the service needed to direct resources to try and tackle the problem.

Councillor Connelly added UC would increase the numbers of homelessness, as there was limited affordable housing being built in the city, and the council was losing properties under 'Right to Buy' and was increasing pressure on the Housing Service. It was noted problems could only be resolved by providing more affordable housing.

AGREED:

that the report be noted.

36. TRANSFORMING NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES - EAST AND CENTRAL AREA - FINAL PROPOSALS

The Director of Housing submitted a report to provide an overview of progress to date of the Transforming Neighbourhood Services (TNS) programme, and set out proposals in relation to the East and Central areas of the city. Lee Warner, Head of Neighbourhood Services, presented the report on the programme in its final stage, and informed Members the approach used was to try and develop services fit for the future, as well as reducing running costs.

Members considered the report and during the discussion, comments and queries were raised and responded to by the officer. Points raised included the following:

- There were 11 neighbourhood buildings in the six wards covered in the east and central areas.
- Following an engagement process from 9 January to 19 February 2017, 2,346 completed questionnaires were returned. In addition there were 620 freehand submissions, some of which were letters from students. Drop-in sessions arranged were well-attended.
- Following feedback received a set of proposals was sent out for a six-week consultation period, with 5,000 questionnaires circulated. 527 completed

- questionnaires were returned.
- Members were informed that parking was being taken into consideration when housing offices moved into other centres, as were direct bus routes. It was also acknowledged that some work on parking spaces was required, with particular reference to St Barnabas library. This would form part of the consultation for disabled parking spaces and parking at other centres, including enforcement issues.
 - The indicative capital costs to carry out the work required were a one-off investment of £500k. The project was designed to deliver financial savings for the council in a difficult time, but in a considered way. Efficiencies would continue to be made following completion of the TNS project, with an improved offer and service.
 - St Barnabas may have been considered for closure, but by having housing services in the building it enabled the library service to continue there.

Councillor Connelly noted the expenditure in buildings, but savings would be made long-term when other properties were disposed of. He added that decisions had not been taken lightly, but had been forced to be taken due to challenging government cuts.

AGREED:

that the report be noted.

37. UPDATE ON TOWER BLOCK FIRE INCIDENT

Chris Burgin, Director of Housing provided a verbal update on developments in the investigation into the recent fire incident at Goscote House tower block.

Members were informed the investigation had found the fire had started on the 18th floor, and not the bin area as previously thought. It was believed a cigarette had been thrown into and set alight rubbish blocked in the rubbish chute, which had then fallen down into the bin. Smoke had filled the 18th floor, as the bin hopper door was not fully closed. All chutes in the building were serviced and repaired to ensure there were no gaps, and the fire doors to bin chute rooms had been inspected. Discussions with Biffa to see if an increased number of waste collections from Goscote House from two to three times a week, were being considered.

Members were asked to note there were no further actions required by the council as landlord for Framland House, following a small fire set by local youths.

It was reported that there was currently no information on cost or timescales for the installation of sprinkler systems. Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service had advised the authority to have a wet rise system where water was already in the pipes, rather than the fire brigade having to pump water up.

It was noted the installation of sprinkler systems would be at significant cost to the authority, but it was important the right system was chosen and installed at minimum disruption to tenants. A report would be brought to Housing Scrutiny

Commission as soon as the commencement of works was known.

The Chair thanked the Director for the update.

38. WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the work programme, and noted there was some movement in the reports listed.

The Chair requested a detailed Customer Services performance report be brought to the meetings in January and March, to include information on call centre calls and issues experienced by customers. The Chair queried whether the service was offering value for money.

It was noted the Homelessness Review and Strategy Update would be brought back to the meeting in November.

The Chair noted that Councillor Byrne would bring to the attention of the Director of Housing issues a constituent was facing. The Chair requested a full report of the issues arising be brought to a future meeting.

39. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.17pm.