



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 15 JANUARY 2018 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Cank (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany
Councillor Byrne

Councillor Halford
Councillor Hunter

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor, Housing

* * * * *

60. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Dawood.

61. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

There were no declarations of interest.

62. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Agreed:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 20 November 2017 and 18 December 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

63. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

64. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer reported that no questions, representations or statements of case had been received.

65. RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT - JULY 2017 TO SEPTEMBER 2017

The Director of Housing submitted a report on the Rent Arrears Progress over the second quarter from July 2017 to September 2017.

Zenab Valli, Income Collection Manager, Housing introduced the report and explained details regarding:

- Rent arrears and the number of tenants affected by bedroom tax.
- Arrears among those affected by the Benefit Income Cap had increased following lowering of the benefit cap.
- 10 evictions in total which were carried out for non-payment of rent from the second quarter. (The figure of 40 which was noted in the report as the figure for the previous year at the same point was clarified as an error). However, there had been a significant decrease in the second quarter compared to the first quarter mainly as tenants were reported to be paying their rent in a timely manner. Reference was made to the process of evictions and it was underlined that evictions were always a last resort.

Following questions and comments from the Committee, the following points were made:

In response to queries from rent arrears, it was noted that;

- The Income Management Team (IMT) had a focus upon high level arrears case queries however they had quality interventions as soon as tenants got in arrears.
- Various initiatives were being tried to decrease arrears, including personal development support, encouraging Direct Debit (DD) sign up and payments and other alternative payment arrangements.
- It was noted that there was six months to implement the new initiatives and review practices.

Queries were raised as to why more tenants were not taking up support services available to them;

- The various support services such as Supporting Tenants and Residents (STAR) service which provided housing support for Council tenants in Leicester were discussed. It was noted that only some people chose to engage.

Discretionary Housing Benefit payments and encouraging more tenants to make payments by direct debit;

- The Income Collection Manager, Housing noted that further promotions around providing initiatives for tenants to set up DD payments for instance over the phone may be possible.
- The Director of Housing noted that it was mandatory for all new tenants to set up payments via DD.

- In response to the queries, Commission Members were invited to attend the Housing Department's Income Management Team (IMT) to see their work first hand.

Concerns regarding tenants being charged a fee for paying rent via Pay Point (PP);

- The Income Collection Manager, Housing detailed the various payment methods available which tenants may use to make rent payments as an alternative to Pay Point. It was made clear that retailers were not allowed to charge tenants and Leicester City Council (LCC) was working with the company Pay Point to target those shops that did try to charge. The attached poster is a notice to customers affected to report the matter directly to the Pay Point team.

Specific information was requested on the numbers of repeat offenders getting into arrears to be brought to a future meeting. The Director of Housing noted that this, in relation to capturing the number of court cases was an ongoing piece of work.

RESOLVED:

1. Members to attend and spend time at/ with the Housing Department's Income Management Team (IMT).
2. The Scrutiny Policy Officer to forward the email sent from a Member to IMT regarding locations which were charging for rent Pay Point payments.
3. That the contents of the report be noted.

66. HOUSING CUSTOMER SERVICE - CHANNEL SHIFT, CONTACT AND PERFORMANCE 2017/18

The Director of Finance submitted a report to provide the Housing Scrutiny Commission with a brief summary of the progress achieved through the Housing Service Channel Shift programme and how this had enhanced, and changed the customer experience.

Alison Musgrove, Service Manager Revenue and Customer Support, Finance introduced the report and Edward Quick, Customer Support Manager, Finance contributed details in the report.

Changes in the ways customers made contact was explained for instance more phone calls and online services now took place rather than face to face contact. Staff reductions and its implications were also highlighted. Works to develop further Channel Shift and implementation of 'my account' were in progress.

Members of the Commission raised points/ questions and received responses on the following matters:

- Equalities implications were highlighted and how much thought had gone into service provision for non-English speakers was queried. The

Service Manager responded that the translations were available and did take place, firstly if anyone in the team was able to translate but otherwise this service had to be requested via the in-house language line, which was the process. The Chair requested for this information to be included in the report.

- Services such as chat online service and displaying frequently asked questions were suggested. It was noted that the department was just in implementation of the review and the first six months would be about ensuring adequate staffing was in place. The procurement of an Automatic Call Distributors (ACD) system was reported to be in the pipeline. Discussions with the Communications and Digital Media team would take place to find out what additional information the website could accommodate.
- Information on the closure of the tier one phone line and the effectiveness of the tier two phone line (dedicated to homelessness and general enquiries) was provided following a query about calls to Housing Options and call backs. Due to the tier one phone line closure, while some traffic had moved online, the tier two phone line had seen an increase of calls partly due to a significant level requiring transfers to emergency lines which applied more pressure. Due to the increase of calls it was seen as more difficult for calls to be returned. Changes to the number of calls were envisaged when the new homelessness legislation came into place.
- The Customer Support Manager, Finance, informed the Commission that it was planned for some Customer Service Officers to attend different hubs/ centres to assist customers in accessing digital services. In addition, the Service Manager Revenue and Customer Support, Finance noted works which were taking place in collaboration with Adult Education to provide support with language and digital skills.

RESOLVED:

1. That the correct equalities information and language translation processes be included in the report.
2. That the contents of this report be noted.

At 6:50pm the Chair adjourned the meeting for 10 minutes.

At 7:00pm the meeting reconvened with Councillors Cank, Alfonso, Halford and Hunter present.

67. UNIVERSAL CREDIT - IMPACT OF FULL SERVICE ON COUNCIL TENANTS

The Director of Housing submitted a report to inform Members of the Scrutiny Commission of the potential impact of Universal Credit (Full Services) on Council Housing Tenants and HRA.

The Universal Credit (UC) Full Service was due to commence in Leicester from

June 2018, whilst in preparation, all new transition UC claims ceased during January 2018 to June 2018. Once introduced all claimants would be expected to manage their UC claim and job search activities online.

Zenab Valli, Income Collection Manager, Housing introduced the report explaining the potential increase in rent arrears and the potential risks to HRA income; however plans and preparations were in place to mitigate these risks.

Following questions and comments from the Committee the following further information was given:

- The Chair underlined that effectiveness of the UC roll out could depend to an extent on the relationship with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). From June 2018 – the Income Management Team (IMT) anticipated providing advice at DWP/ job centre locations in Leicester. IMT management also attended strategic meetings led by Revenues and Benefits which were also attended by DWP management. UC seminars had recently been delivered and positive/ close works with DWP were taking place to alleviate any pressures.
- Prior to June 2018 IMT staff would be briefed and laptops being considered for them to assist claimants in their homes. It was planned that additional support officers would be in place to assist those with complex/ mental health needs transferring to UC.
- Support services for claimants were discussed and from February 2018 it was noted that waiting periods would be abolished by Central Government and claimants would be entitled to UC from the first claim day.
- There were several concerns regarding advanced payments offered to claimants from DWP as it was felt that it could cause more arrears/ debts.
- The Chair asked about other pilot authorities in relation to UC challenges. It was responded that a lot had suffered significant increases in rent arrears and bad debt and faced challenges to collect rent because of the UC roll out even with additional DWP support. Leicester and the IMT had considered these authorities actions and issues and had learned and taken good practice from them including the need to have more intense management in place.

RESOLVED:

1. That the contents of the report be noted.

68. HOMELESSNESS REVIEW & STRATEGY CONSULTATION

The Director of Housing submitted a report to provide feedback on the consultation exercise relating to the homelessness review, strategy and proposals.

Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service, Housing, presented the report which included details of the full consultation exercise and the responses which had been completed over a four week period.

The Chair complimented the Assistant City Mayor for Housing Councillor Connelly for his radio interview on homelessness and rough sleepers.

The following concerns were highlighted by Members of the Commission and the Head of Service provided responses:

- Issues surrounding the Dawn Centre were emphasised by Members as a matter for concern. It was queried as to why there were a number of perceived barriers by clients in accessing the services provided at the centre and that potential clients suggesting they had not been informed of daytime services. In addition, Members felt there was reluctance for some to use the overnight accommodation and instead preferred to sleep on the streets.
- The number of bedded units and emergency beds in the Dawn Centre was explained by the Head of Service, Housing. The centre currently had 62 residents and that there were a lot of residents living there who had complex issues relating to substance abuse, alcohol misuse and mental health issues. It was noted that an inclusion health care team and mental health inclusion service team were available on site. Some reasons for people not wanting to use the centre included the centres zero tolerance policy to drugs as well as the cost of meal provisions (approximately £30 a week) which was not covered by Housing Benefit. In regards to the draft strategy it was aimed to reconfigure and offer different models of accommodation to suite various complex needs.
- The Chair expressed concern that whilst valuable information had been gained through the rough sleeper surveys it mainly concentrated on the inner city area whilst the outer estates still required help. Any assistance which the Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) could contribute was also requested.
- Further discussions took place on; young people requiring care with regard to the number of hostels which were available and the local connection in relation to women's refuge who were victims of or feared sex and domestic abuse.
- The Chair noted there was no reference to equalities, gender, age etc. in the homeless client responses and it was felt that this would be useful.

Julie Turner, Business Change Manager, Housing commented that the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 response was integrated into the new strategy on which a report was currently being prepared for the Assistant City Mayor for Housing.

The Assistant City Mayor for Housing, Councillor Connelly thanked the

Business Change Manager, Housing and the Head of Service, Housing for their hard work. It was encouraged that the more that could be done to reduce the number of rough sleepers would be the better but meeting the target for 2020 would be a challenge.

RESOLVED:

1. That Councillor Cank would attend a conference in London on Thursday about the new homeless strategy and provide feedback to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.
2. To note the contents of the report and thank the Officers.
3. That Councillor Cank set out the views of the Commission on the report in a letter to Assistant City Mayor Councillor Connelly.

69. TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS' FORUM MEETING NOTES

It was noted that the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum meeting notes from 7th December 2017 had been submitted.

Tim Draper, Development Officer, Housing clarified the following details; When full, the Tenants' & Leaseholders' Forum of fifteen consisted of thirteen Tenants and two Leaseholders who are representative of their own areas but noted that the work of the Forum was not area based but a scrutiny of the whole housing division.

The Tenants' & Leaseholders' next meeting would take place at the Town Hall and attendance by housing division representatives was by invitation only.

70. WORK PROGRAMME

The current work programme was discussed and noted.

71. CLOSE OF MEETING

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 7:56pm.



Important customer notice

Making cash payments in PayPoint stores is a free service.

If a retailer tries to charge you for this service, please report it to our Contact Centre at enquiries@paypoint.com, stating the store name/location.

Thank you.

To find your local store
visit paypoint.com/storelocator

