



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2017 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Cank (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Byrne

Councillor Halford

Councillor Dawood

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40. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hunter and Councillor Aqbany.

41. 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 Halford declared an “other” disclosable interest in the general business of then meeting in that she was a council tenant.

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.

42. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 18th September 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

43. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

44. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

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

45. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO HOUSING SAFETY COSTS - SPRINKLER PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Director of Housing provided details of the government response on fire safety funding assistance received from the Communities Secretary.

The Chair commented that the letter made clear that despite promises made in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster concerning help to make buildings safe the government now had no intention of providing assistance.

The Chair commented that the council had indicated it would fit and where required retro-fit sprinklers and asked what progress was being made on this.

The Head of Service, Housing replied that consultants had been appointed who would firstly look at a solution for Maxfield House, which was to undergo a programme of refurbishment for up to 12 months starting January 2018, once there was an agreed installation at Maxfield House the consultants would then look to roll out appropriate installations at all other blocks from what had been learned from the initial installation.

In terms of retro-fit sprinklers being installed “as required”, it was not yet known what sprinklers were needed in each block so the consultants would be reviewing each block and providing a report that advised a solution for each which would then be implemented dependent upon different configurations and risks in each block. It was noted that Maxfield House was currently vacant but there would be full consultation with all tenants as the programme moved from block to block.

The Chair asked that the Commission be kept informed of progress on the Sprinkler programme.

46. VOIDS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report on the performance of the Voids and Property Lettings Team for the first quarter of 2017/18, advising the changes in the way void properties were dealt with as a result of the Housing Transformation Review implemented in November 2016 and the impact of those changes on those allocated a council house.

The Head of Service, Housing introduced the report and explained that the City had been divided into 2 areas with the end to end process now managed by

two managers to ensure areas worked together and to improve communication between teams.

The Commission noted the achievements to date and the explanation of the terms and definitions for voids as set out in the report and that in terms of the number of voids held the authority aim was to only be holding 2% stock as voids at any one time in order to keep annual rent loss to a minimum.

There was a general discussion on refusal rates during which concerns were expressed about the bidding process e.g. that people were bidding for properties who did not actually want the area or people were panic bidding because they thought they would be taken off the list.

The Head of Service, Housing agreed to consider suggestions that: i) when councillors dealt with people on housing matters they could ask people not to pick areas they did not want as that delayed others from being successful in their bid and being housed; ii) the council should correspond with people first about why they were not bidding for properties rather than take them off the list to avoid people panic bidding in areas they did not want.

The Head of Service, Housing clarified that when the bidding process ended the offer was sent and the bidder given a certain time to respond, if they did not respond that was treated as a refusal. The service was trying to be proactive as it did not want refusals and there were instances where multiple viewings had been arranged so that people could see properties before an offer was made. In relation to whether any penalty was applied to those who refused a property due to the area or had not replied to an offer, at the moment they would not be suspended from the housing register.

Responding to concerns that properties were being let and remaining empty whilst works were completed it was advised that the new letting standard enabled people to view properties so they knew what to expect from the property before taking on the tenancy. The service could also re-start people's tenancies if there were issues like this to avoid incurring rent charges until they moved in.

The Commission noted that the figures given for council tax loss as at August 2017 would equate to almost £1 million over the year and commented it would be good to see that reduced.

Commission members referred to the matter of Sheltered Housing schemes being less popular and it was suggested that there was an issue with housing people with mixed needs together. The Head of Service, Housing responded that as part of the work being done sheltered housing officers had met with other housing officers and a questionnaire was to be sent to all existing tenants as well as a questionnaire to people bidding for sheltered accommodation to ascertain their views and establish the actual demand for such schemes.

The Chair asked that Sheltered Housing form the subject of a report to a future scrutiny meeting tackling the reasons for being hard to let and putting forward

remedies.

AGREED:

1. That the contents of the report be noted,
2. That an item on Sheltered Housing be added to the current work programme,
3. That a report on Sheltered Housing be brought to a future meeting.

47. EMPTY HOMES ANNUAL REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report which provided information on the work being carried out by the Empty Homes Team, their targets and proposed changes in the way the long-term empty homes in Leicester were reported.

The Head of Service, Housing presented the report and key points included:

- In future to avoid confusion it would be reported how many were physically empty rather than how many had been brought back into use.
- Recruitment of additional empty homes officers had been approved to enable the empty homes team to work on using Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to bring long term empty properties back into use.
- During the period 1/4/16 – 31/3/17 10 CPO's had been approved, 18 cases were pending final outcome, 1 notice had been served and there were 3 properties where negotiation purchase was being considered, however, this was something that could only be done with known owners.
- Compared to neighbouring authorities Leicester was performing well and taking a proactive approach to bringing long term empty properties back into use and it was notable that the number of properties empty for over 18 months had reduced for several reasons as set out in the report.

Commission members discussed the report and noted the announcement made on 15 December 2016 by the Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government relating to the New Homes Bonus (NHB) and how that would be applied in 2017-18.

It was queried whether it would be appropriate to target properties empty for more than 6 months. The Head of Service, Housing responded that rather than 18 months to get properties back into use it was likely that a decision would be taken to bring down the time limit to 12-18 months rather than reduce to 6 months as that would not be practical at this time.

The Chair thanked officers for the work done on this project.

AGREED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

48. TECHNICAL SERVICES PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The Director of Housing submitted a report providing an update on the second

phase of the Technical Services programme.

The Programme Manager, Housing outlined the report noting there had been significant progress and consolidation work within the programme to enhance efficiencies.

The following points were noted:

Transforming Depot Services

- 35 depot sites had been focused on and could be rationalised, these covered a range of service areas: Parks & Open Spaces, Housing, City Cleansing, Transport Fleet, Cemeteries and Crematoria,
- 8 sites were identified during the first phase for early disposal or alternative use as they were surplus to requirements and would have little impact on service delivery,
- Various issues had led to delays in the commencement of the second phase; external surveyors were assessing essential requirements and would report on identified works needed including costs.

Corporate Landlord Transformation Project

- The Corporate Landlord model for managing corporate buildings went live in April 2017,
- A second phase budget consolidation exercise would commence soon and would affect HRA element of costs. On completion of the budget consolidation exercise, embedded staff in service areas would move to Estates and Building services as part of a single delivery team,
- Work was ongoing to consolidate over 2000 property related contracts that provided similar services down to about 20 single contracts to realise significant savings and to ensure proper performance management.

Stores Transformation Project

- Highways and Housing Stores were moving towards a managed service by an external supplier and the project was now at a critical stage in terms of procurement process and it was anticipated that the new service provider would be identified by April 2018.

Disposal of Surplus Assets

- This area was now subject to review which was underway.

Programme Benefits

- The programme overall was aiming to deliver savings from 2016/17 and to improve internal benefits to staff.

Commission members briefly discussed the report, noting the disposal programme (pg43) and the budget reductions set out in the table (pg46). The Programme Manager commented that in terms of actual receipts for the disposals this had delivered approximately £2.3 million and the rationalisation of space programme was about ensuring premises were used better.

Commission members supported the consolidation of contracts and welcomed the opportunity to use and maximise use of council expertise workmen rather than lots of different contractors.

The Programme Manager advised that in terms of how reductions in depots

would impact on staff the aim was to try and have minimal impact upon staff and there would be close contact with Unions to properly deal with any staff reductions or relocations to ensure this.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

**49. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT SPENDING REVIEW - PHASE 4
(HOUSING TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME)**

The Director of Housing submitted a report with details of savings delivered to date for the Housing Transformation Programme and to consider at an early stage the proposals set out in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for the three years from 2018/19 to 2020/21 which would be presented in detail to Scrutiny on 18 December 2017.

During the course of discussion it was commented that:

- The service still faced a number of external pressures as referred to in table 1 within the report,
- From 2020-21 the government were suggesting that rents could increase but for the purpose of this report calculations were based on current rental rates.

18.39pm Councillor Halford withdrew from the meeting.

Commission members considered the detail of proposals for savings within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and noted that in terms of savings to be achieved from Housing Transformation and Fleet & Transport the majority of those would equate to efficiency savings with no impact on services. In relation to rents, based on stock levels and rent rates formula there was potential to achieve almost £1million additional income.

Commission members noted the proposals for capital savings and the next steps specified in the report.

18.41pm Councillor Halford rejoined the meeting.

The Chair thanked officers and commented that the commission looked forward to receiving further details to the 18th December 2017 meeting.

AGREED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

**50. AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMME: REVIEW OF 2013-2017 AND
PROPOSALS FOR 2017/18 ONWARDS**

The Director of Housing submitted a report setting out details of affordable housing needs across the city and the steps being taken to address that.

The Head of Service, Housing outlined the report and expanded upon the planning requirements for new developments and section 106 agreements to deliver a certain percentage of affordable housing suitable to meet needs of people on the housing register.

The Head of Service, Housing also gave an overview of the existing pipeline projects for 764 new completions over the four year period 2017-21.

Commission members discussed the report which included the following questions:

- Had it been found that developers were trying to reduce the amount of social housing that was provided through s106 agreements? The Head of Service, Housing replied that generally there were good relationships with developers but it was about timeliness of property becoming available and there were some challenges however we were usually successful at delivering. There was more of an issue with developers forming a relationship with housing associations in a timely fashion that fitted with their financial models and funding.
- The report referenced affordable housing throughout and there was much less mention of social housing which was council housing, there was also a rent differential between affordable housing and social housing. Was housing being targeted for the neediest? The Head of Service, Housing confirmed that the council had an affordable rent guarantee; some housing associations would deliver rents at social rates. Affordable housing included other products too such as shared ownership and was not the only solution that the city needed.

In relation to the Council seeking to set up its own Local Housing Company, Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor, commented that the council was making progress although this had taken a little longer than originally projected and a report was due to be submitted to the executive by the end of December 2017 and more detail on the position would be brought to a future meeting.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the contents of the report be noted,
2. That further detail of the Local Housing Company be brought as a briefing to a future meeting.

51. TENANTS' AND LEASEHOLDERS' FORUM - MEETING NOTES

The Chair introduced the meeting notes for information.

During discussion the following points were made:

- There was concern over the infrequency of grass cutting and general grounds maintenance across all areas of the City and it was agreed that this should be raised at the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission,
- In relation to premises on Cantrill Road, Braunstone the Director of Housing agreed to look into whether the facility was under council ownership and still being used.
- The old Mowmacre Sports and Recreation Ground on Thurcaston Road was previously under Parks and Open Spaces and it was not clear what was planned for this. The Director of Housing agreed to look into and report back.

52. WORK PROGRAMME

The current work programme was discussed and noted.

53. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

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Concerns were expressed about pay point arrangements for people paying their rent, in particular issues about whether there was a charge if paying by debit card or paying cash with such charges amounting to approx. £26 per year. It was stated that there was supposed to be no charge for those paying cash but certain retailers had been applying charges.

The Director of Housing commented that there had been an issue with a particular shop making inappropriate charges and the co-ordinator for the region was involved with that shop. The Director of Housing took note of concerns relating to several other shops applying charges and confirmed charges should not be made for cash payments and agreed to investigate further.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 19.09pm.