



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2018 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Alfonso (Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Joshi

Councillor Newcombe

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly – Assistant Mayor for Housing

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38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Byrne, Corrall, Westley and Willmott.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Joshi declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that he had family members who were council tenants.

Councillor Alfonso declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that she had a family member who was a 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. The Councillors were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration and discussion of the agenda items.

40. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 8th October 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

41. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

42. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

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

43. RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT - JULY 2018 TO SEPTEMBER 2018

The Director of Housing submitted a report which informed Members of the Scrutiny Commission of progress over the first quarter from 2nd July to 30th September 2018. Members were asked to note the report.

Zenab Valli, Income Collection Manager, presented the report, and the following points were made:

- Rent collection was at 98.89%.
- Evictions were a last resort after attempts to save a tenancy were not successful. During the quarter there were 10 evictions for non-payment of rent: eight single people and two families.
- There were 735 new claims for Universal Credit (UC), of which 465 tenants were already in rent arrears before claiming UC. Average arrears were £269 for UC claimants.
- Partnership working with DWP was working well and the Council had been granted 'Trusted Partner' status, which gave access to the DWP's Landlord Portal IT system and helped prevent delays in UC claims being assessed. Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs) direct to landlords could also be applied for, but this was not an arrangement agreed for all tenants.
- The pilot which had seen Income Management Team officers co-located in three Job Centre Plus sites was successful and would be extended for a further three months.
- Four new Rent Management Advisers had been recruited and offered specialist support. Thirty five council tenants were in receipt of long term support.

The Income Collection Manager responded to questions raised by Members:

- There was an initial spike in rent arrears during start-up of UC claims. With APAs in place, arrears were stabilising. Other Housing Associations and Councils were reporting a similar turnaround as tenants got used to being on the new benefit.
- If all information was provided in a timely manner, the first payment would

usually take five weeks. There were various reasons for a delay of the first payment to reach an account: there were claimants who did not attend their claimant interview, or information was missing. When an application was made for a managed payment, the initial request was made through the portal and could take up to a couple of months to arrive. Concerns had been raised with the DWP who were working to change the process and have it more as a bank transfer.

- The Income Management Team continued to heavily promote Direct Debits. There were associated charges with DD if account-holders became overdrawn, and a lot of tenants preferred to pay by cash or standing order. It was hoped that a further two dates in the month on top of the current two dates would be introduced to collect payments from accounts.
- There was a renewed focus around Clockwise accounts, and rent advisers were now trained to set up accounts. Start-up had been slow, but advisers would continue to push for the accounts to be established.
- There were no cash payments in any of the offices, but Paypoint facilities were available. Cash payments could be made at Customer Services.
- 7,053 tenants in rent arrears were not in receipt of UC. Tenants could be in receipt of other types of benefit and not entitled to claim UC as it was restricted to two children or less and not fully rolled out. Also, some people paid full rent. When speaking to tenants, income details were established to find out if families were entitled to additional benefits. Tenants would also be directed to agencies and welfare rights and advised of appeals processes.
- Tenants could have been in arrears for a period of time where debt had built up, a court order was in place, and repayments were low and would take a long time for the arrears to be paid. For UC, APAs could be paid directly to a landlord, payments could be split between tenants, or payment could be made more frequently until a tenant learnt how to budget. The Council tried to support tenants with different payment arrangements.
- On the Council's website there was information and advice on welfare rights (help with appeals, etc.) STAR, community advice and law service, and other agencies in the city. There were also benefits around immigration, and people were referred to other agencies for more specialist support.
- People applying for UC were given assistance in the Customer Service Centre. Rent Management Advisers could educate tenants to manage their online claim, and there were online digital courses around the city, for example, in libraries. The STAR team also offered support.
- Where people were already in arrears and there were delays in UC payments this made the situation worse -this reflected a national picture. There were some ways to mitigate the situation, including APAs to pay back arrears, and support by other means.
- Officers based at job centres had been offering advice as a pilot for the past three to four months. They would try to see council tenants for the claimant interview to offer further advice and support. The number of people seen depended on the number of referrals. The Income Management Team when on site also tried to attend DWP team meetings to try and upskill the job centre plus staff on the types of people they wanted to see, and the types of queries. It was a test and learn environment, with positive resolutions for complicated cases.

The Assistant City Mayor for Housing, Councillor Connelly thanked the Income Management Team for the hard work they had put in to deliver and improve the situation with rent arrears. He added that UC in reality was going to be extremely difficult for many families. He said the decision to have the four Rent Management Advisers was paying off, and the relationship between DWP was working.

It was AGREED that:

1. the contents of the report be noted.

44. SHELTERED HOUSING

The Director of Housing submitted a report on sheltered accommodation which included recommendation and proposed new measures, based on consultation with residents to improve the living conditions for existing residents, and make sheltered accommodation more appealing to prospective tenants. The Scrutiny Commission Members were recommended to note the proposed improvements and feedback any observations and comments to the Director of Housing or Executive.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service presented the report, and drew Members' attention to the following:

- 397 tenants would be given feedback on the consultation exercise.
- As part of the consultation, officers had visited other sheltered housing schemes not owned by the Council. It was proposed that Council blocks would be managed in a similar way to other non council sheltered schemes in the city.

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

- Statistics on vacancy information not included in the report would be provided to Members of the Commission. It was noted there were no current plans to empty any of the blocks.
- The vacancy rate was quite high at the start of the process, but there was now managed demand, which was currently sustainable.
- People could go on the list for sheltered housing accommodation through the usual online process for housing accommodation.
- It was queried what communal activities were popular and who delivered, them. The report aimed to address this to ensure that the offer provided was consistent. It was noted that some communal areas and activities were well used, and officers wanted to make sure all were well used and refurbished to make them attractive to residents.
- It was noted internet use was low. It was not particularly expensive and was being installed in all sheltered accommodation.
- Members noted the joint responsibility for fire safety between Housing and Adult Social Care Departments and asked if there had been any serious incidents involving a fire. It was reported that joint meetings between

departments worked well and it was stated within the report that fire safety was a priority issue and was managed successfully. Buildings were fitted with alarms and monitored, fire policies were communicated effectively, and assisted technology helped to ensure people were safe. No serious incidents had occurred.

- It was further noted that changes in legislation and funding had not impacted on sheltered accommodation. Housing wanted closer joint working with Adult Social Care and Tenancy Management to ensure the offer provided was the same across the Board.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing, Councillor Connelly noted it was a opportune time to review what the Council offered in comparison with other providers, and he looked forward to the fuller plans when they were available.

The Chair recommended that:

- any strategic proposals for investment in the sheltered housing stock be brought to a future meeting of the Commission; and
- the outcome of discussion on the management of fire safety in the sheltered housing estate be brought to a future meeting of the Commission.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report.

It was AGREED that:

1. the report be noted
2. any strategic proposals for investment in the sheltered housing stock be brought to a future meeting of the Commission; and
3. the outcome of discussions on the management of fire safety in the sheltered housing estate be brought to a future meeting of the Commission.

45. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report which informed Members of the Scrutiny Commission of the progress to date in implementing Leicester's Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023. The Commission was asked to note the report.

Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service, presented the report, and made the following points:

- Further progress had been made and work undertaken on nine agreed key actions as noted in the report.
- It had been a busy year, and the Council had seen the number of people approaching for assistance and the number of people rough sleeping increase.
- However in Leicester a lot of work was undertaken for the prevention of homelessness, with a 76% success rate (1,740 households). It was noted that maintaining those levels was a challenge, but the service remained

- committed to breaking the cycle of homelessness.
- Partnership working with the voluntary sector was good and provided an opportunity to harness good practice and ensure services were not duplicated. The Homelessness Charter was launched in October 2018 in Leicester Cathedral.
 - The Diocese led on the Charter 'giving through charities' where people could pledge support to the Charter in different ways. The Diocese were working on a logo, and anyone working in partnership with the diocese and those signing up could use the logo. People would also be able to donate through the website.
 - There had been changes to frontline services to embrace the Homelessness Reduction Act for example, improved access to housing services and self-serve, and 1:1 coaching support for individuals struggling to take action to prevent their homelessness.
 - Alternatives for accommodation needed to remain fit for purpose; work would continue with mental health services and health care.
 - The Council helped with more than just the statutory homeless and had its own eligibility criteria for access to homelessness services.
 - Work continued to ensure that families did not need to go into hostels when homeless and where there was a need for temporary accommodation it was self-contained and only for a minimum period.
 - There was specialist accommodation for young people and offenders; if coming out of prison and homeless, there was higher risk of them reoffending.
 - As a corporate parent there was joint commissioning with children's services. Officers were looking at the commissioning to ensure children got the best service.
 - More single people with complex issues were being seen, and therefore different models of accommodation to meet changing needs were required.

Members requested an indication of the numbers of people in the city seeking homeless assistance be included in a future report.

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

- Funding had been received for Homelessness Prevention Officers, but caseloads remained high even though new staff were being trained as quickly as possible.
- There were a lot of complexities around rough sleepers, different cohorts, rough sleepers with tenancies – officers were working with those individuals to try and get them back into their tenancies. The Outreach Team, Transitions Team tried to get rough sleepers off the street. It was a difficult task to gain the confidence of some rough sleepers. An emergency protocol for severe weather was in place to ensure that no one needs to sleep rough during inclement weather. Some individuals with tenancies chose to remain on the street for different reasons; possibly through social isolation, or mental health issues. It was not just a local problem and the Street Lifestyles group looked at all issues around rough sleeping and street

- begging.
- Some rough sleepers were from out of town, though there had been some significant success with reconnections with their own communities. Nonetheless there were some that did not want to be reconnected.
 - In relation to the private rented sector, the team worked hard to access accommodation in the sector and also supported those tenants. It was noted it was difficult to approach new landlords, and market rents were higher than the local housing allowance. Some people were benefit-dependent who would be difficult to house in the private rented sector.
 - There was just under 6,000 households in housing need at some point and the need for accommodation was becoming more of a challenge because of the lack of affordable housing. The Housing register would be brought to the next Scrutiny Commission meeting.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing thanked the officer and her team who worked hard to reduce the number of rough sleepers in the city. He said it was clear that work was in progress and could be extremely frustrating, but working with partners and the voluntary sector would continue to reduce the number of rough sleepers. He added that until there was a programme of building affordable housing, social housing and council houses in particular with reasonable rent, the issues would continue.

The Chair commended the officers who she knew were out very often after midnight. She thanked the officer for the report.

It was AGREED that:

1. The report be noted;
2. The number of people in the city seeking homeless assistance be included in a future report to the Commission;
3. The Housing Register be brought to the next meeting of the Commission.

46. EMPTY HOMES UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report to update Members of the Commission on the work that the Empty Homes Team were doing to bring long-term private sector homes back into use. The Commission Members were asked to note the report.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, presented the report, and made the following points:

- Officers reported on properties that had been empty for 18 months, five years and 10 years.
- There was a 20-stage process to bring properties back into use.
- There had been a slight improvement on quarter one with the number of empty properties reduced.
- The vacant post had been filled and the Team was now at full capacity.
- Not all properties went through the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)

- process.
- During the process the Empty Homes Team do enter into dialogue with owners, and can negotiate with the owner to purchase the property, this was better than a CPO and less in legal costs.
 - There were ex council tenants that did approach the Council from time to time, and the Council did agree to repurchase leasehold properties.

Members asked questions and the following responses were given:

- Some homes believed to be empty were in fact occupied, and the Council Tax Team had not been notified.
- The number of homes that had been empty for a long time hadn't come down much further recently, though figures compared well with other areas. A lot of intensive work had been undertaken over the past 18 months to get those figures down. Long-term empty properties could be complex and with legal implications, for example, someone with a mental health issue, terminal illness, inherited by siblings that could not decide what they wanted to do with the property.
- If a property was empty and the owner engaged with the owner, sometimes it would be sold, and the Council relied on the new owner to bring it back into use. When the council sell on a property they have CPO'd a condition of that sale is that the new owner must bring that property back into use within a set period of time.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing, Councillor Connelly thanked the officer and team for reducing empty homes in the city and bringing them back into use for families to move into. He also noted that empty homes could become a blight on a neighbourhood. Can give a family a home.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report.

It was AGREED that:

1. The report be noted.

47. TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDER'S FORUM ACTION AND DECISION LOG

No comments were received from Members in relation to the Tenants' and Leaseholders Forum Action and Decision Log.

Tenants Forum meeting feedback was circulated at the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting, and is attached for information.

48. WORK PROGRAMME

The Work Programme was noted.

- An update report on the Conditions of Tenancy would be taken to the Scrutiny Commission meeting on 11th March 2019.
- The Anti-Social Behaviour Policy to be included on 'To Be Allocated'. Guidelines and information with challenges and issues faced, and the

complexity of the balancing action with anonymised examples.

49. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other items of urgent business the meeting closed at 7.15pm.

Tenants Forum meeting feedback – Housing Scrutiny Commission

Our last meeting of the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum was held on the 27th September 2018.

Officers from the Parks and Grounds Maintenance service came to the meeting to talk about green spaces on estates. We raised some issues, particularly around grass cutting. As a follow up to this I have been out with the officers to show them some areas where we have concerns. The officers have taken on board our feedback and I am pleased to say they are taking steps to improve the service in the areas we have identified.

We also had a presentation from the Adults Skills and Learning Service who told us about IT courses available in the city to help people apply for Universal Credit. We are hearing that more tenants are applying for Universal Credit, so it was useful to hear what was available so we can signpost people for support.

We had a discussion about the role of the Tenants Forum and identified some areas we thought it needed to change to ensure it continues to be meaningful. As a result of this a workshop was held with Forum Members on the 21st November to talk about this in more detail and to come up with proposals for change. Myself and Wendy were unable to attend the workshop but we have arranged to meet with officers on the 4th December to get feedback and agree the way forward.

Our next meeting will be on the 6th December when Councillor Connelly

and Chris Burgin will be attending to outline the HRA budget proposals and we will give our views on these.