



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 7 JANUARY 2019 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany
Councillor Corral

Councillor Joshi
Councillor Newcombe

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly – Assistant Mayor for Housing

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56. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Byrne and Willmott.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Members stated their declarations were included on each Councillor's Register of Interests and there were no further declarations to be made.

58. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 26 November 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

That the minutes of the Special Meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 17 December 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

59. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

60. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

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

61. ANNUAL BUDGET

The Director of Finance submitted a report which set out the City Mayor's proposed budget for 2019/20 to 2021/22. The Housing Scrutiny Commission was recommended to pass any comments to the Overview Select Committee as part of its consideration of the report before it would be presented to the Council meeting on 20 February 2019.

The Head of Finance presented the report, and the following information was provided:

- The report included matters that Full Council needed to consider when budget and council tax levels were set.
- The report gave details of existing programmes involving spending cuts, and highlighted former decisions that affected Council services. It was noted that all savings programmes were required, and additional funding for services had been progressed over the past four years through the spending review process. The budget report did not introduce new spending cut proposals.
- A council tax increase of 3% was noted.
- The body of the report also included information on pressures on statutory responsibilities, required spending review savings, targets for departments and key spending pressures.
- The report provided a one-year budget with projections in spending and income in definite terms, as changes had been signalled in government finance for 2021 on how business rates would be collected and distributed. It could only be assumed that the budget would not vary significantly, but definitive figures could not be given due to changes which might be made at a national level.

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

- The £3.1million included non-HRA budget, covering homelessness costs.
- The spending review programme had been running across the Council for a number of years to allow a balanced budget to be achieved to reflect the significant budget reduction. It had led to a series of decisions (Executive and budget monitoring reports, for example, December 2016, and Executive decision around the Homelessness Strategy Spending Review).
- The Business Rates Retention Scheme allowed for councils to retain half of collected rates. Leicester City Council also received some of the pool of

funding distributed to local authorities. The Government had been consulting on increasing the localisation up to 75%, which was intended to incentivise local authorities to drive economic regeneration but which increased the risk for councils that did not increase business rates. If business units became empty, part of the cost for loss of business rates income was to be borne by the Council.

- Members said that with so many shops closing down it was hoped the Council could do something to regenerate business. It was noted there would still be some redistribution should business rates retention be increased to 75%, but that the government over recent years had reduced revenue support while increasing business rates, and over time business rates would provide an increasing amount of the Council's income, with increasingly less from the distribution pool.
- Concern was raised about the demographic pressures in Adult Social Care and growth in numbers of looked-after children, and about the potential funding gap increase in 2021/22 from £16.2 to £50m should the Government not provide sufficient funding. It was acknowledged that it would be difficult for the Council to manage should figures of that magnitude materialised and the level of funding available across councils was a widespread concern for local government generally.
- The Assistant Mayor for Entrepreneurial Councils was working with Council officers to drive funding.
- It was noted that figures in the report had been rounded to the nearest £100k but that the totals were correct.

The Chair noted that a balanced budget had to be presented to Council but with significant budget cuts, officers had worked well to present the budget as written.

It was confirmed that the report would be submitted to Council on 20 February 2019, and the Housing Scrutiny Commission Members supported the draft budget as proposed.

It was AGREED that:

1. The draft budget report be noted as proposed.

62. RESPONSIVE HOUSING REPAIRS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report on the Division's performance on the completion of responsive repairs to council properties. The report also provided an update about the implementation of service changes and measures taken to prevent customers having no heating and hot water during extremely cold weather.

Ian Craig, Head of Service, who presented the report, made the following points:

- Work had been ongoing to install boiler buoys to properties, with those affected by the severe weather in 2018 prioritised. Water tanks in roof spaces are also being decommissioned where possible.

- Online repairs reporting would be supported with a picture based system to make reporting easier.
- There was continued improvement of the Responsive and Planned Repairs Improvement Project to deliver on the commitments to tenants and the Scrutiny Commission, as outlined in the report.
- Next steps included the online booking of repairs appointments under Channel Shift, and the roll out of a replacement mobile working solutions using mobile phones and tablets which would hopefully be introduced at the end of February 2019.
- A pilot was being undertaken to speed up the delivery of glass from the supplier for repairs.
- Vehicles would be fitted with more modern internal racking, so that more materials were available to complete as many jobs as possible on first visit, but there was a delay to the procurement of the contract.
- There was an introduction of descaling programme of maintenance to pipework – some major floods had occurred because of blockages in soil stacks.
- A review meeting each year before bad weather occurred ensured plans and measures were in place to effectively respond and manage such situations.

In response to Members' questions and observations, the following information was provided:

- Between 10-12% of jobs had issues with tenants not being in. When an operative attended a property every attempt was made to get in touch with the tenant. The job would be cancelled and the letter of cancellation would be sent to the tenant asking them to report the repair again. Channel Shift would allow more flexibility for tenants to request a certain time for an appointment which the service tried to accommodate where possible.
- Areas considered to improve the repairs performance included taking out water tanks to prevent water leaks. Other areas included advice given to tenants on how to empty boiler condensation pipes into a bucket inside the property during freezing weather through a device designed by Housing Repairs Service.
- The mains water going into buildings was constantly being reviewed, for which Severn Trent had responsibility.
- There was a programme of LED light replacement across the city in communal areas, which would include courtyard lights.
- Other repairs issues were being raised by the tenant whilst the operative was present. Some repairs could be phoned in by the operative and booked.
- The Handyman Repair Service was still in place.
- Complaint levels are very low however complaints were made for varying reasons, for example, a repair was undertaken when the tenant was expecting a renewal, or the customer service they received was not as expected.
- The new tenants handbook was available on the web and the Tenant conditions of tenancy was being consulted upon on the Council's website.

- Officers continued to look at business needs going forward and included looking at apprenticeship schemes in different areas.
- The Service monitored how many jobs were not undertaken on first visit.

Members thanked all the repairs staff for all their work over the years.

The Assistant City Mayor for Housing, Cllr Connelly endorsed the comments made by Members, and was pleased with the significant improvement in repairs completed on first visit. He added he was pleased that permanent jobs had been found for apprentices, and there had been an increase in women in construction. He thanked the Head of Service and his team for doing a difficult job whatever the weather, 365 days a year.

The Chair echoed what was said by Members and gave thanks to Housing Officers and their colleagues. He noted there were few repairs problems reported to him over the Christmas period.

It was AGREED that:

1. The contents of the report be noted.

63. WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING?

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation to the Housing Scrutiny Commission for noting, which provided headline data for the Housing Register.

Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service, delivered the presentation, and drew Members' attention to the following points:

- Information on the Housing Register was brought to the Commission twice a year.
- Tenants wanted as much information as possible on lettings and waiting times, and a snapshot would be sent up front to show how long people would have to wait. Different areas of the city had different waiting times.
- Customer information on bands and average waiting times were also given to Home Choice.
- Under the break down of Bands, 1-bedroom stock highest number of lets went to those in temporary accommodation.
- Persons on Band 3 had little chance of receiving an offer of a house.
- There were different levels of overcrowding on the Bands.
- Housing Register information included in the presentation would be useful for Councillors when talking to constituents.
- Targeted work for those in close proximity to each other would continue to promote swaps. Targeted support also helped the council with its mobility of stock.

The Chair said the Council needed to be more proactive where children were concerned as a priority. He added that successive governments had failed to build and now there was a housing crisis, and all local authorities could do was

manage their statutory obligations. He welcomed the proactiveness of the Housing Department.

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

- People leaving the armed forces and veterans were placed on Band 2, or Band 1 if there was a medical need – the composite need was considered on each individual application. Members thanked officers for embedding the Armed Forces Covenant in the department.
- A lot of under occupying tenants fell into the older persons category, who had been in the property for many years. The Department did offer assistance and incentive to move and tried to help tenants as much as possible with a move.
- If accommodation in the private sector was not habitable, the property would be inspected. It could mean the council serving notice on the landlord to carry out statutory repairs, and the tenant might need to move out. If the property was unfit or condemned that would mean the tenant would be classed as homeless. For Registered Social Landlords, they would be contacted in the first instance, but inspections would also be carried out where necessary. Tenants living in RSL property should not be denied an inspection if requested.
- Leicester was a national dispersal area for asylum seekers who were housed in the city by the home office while they waited for a positive decision to stay in the country. Cases were dealt with by housing options for move on after 28 days from where they are staying and were given the same priority as any other homeless family.

The Chair said there had been issues with housing associations across the city over the years, and that he received a large amount of complaints and had to fight as a councillor to even get a response from the housing association when contacted. He suggested social housing should be provided by one provider and put forward a recommendation to look into the issue as an authority.

The Chair thanked the officer for the presentation and information.

It was AGREED that:

1. The presentation and following information be noted;
2. The Commission put forward the recommendation to look at issues faced by tenants in Housing Association properties in the city.

64. VOIDS PERFORMANCE REPORT - APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 18/19

The Director of Housing submitted a report which updated the Housing Scrutiny Commission on void performance for the first half of 2018/19. The Commission Members were asked to note the report.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, presented the report, and provided the following information:

- It was reported that the voids figure had deteriorated over the year.
- Rent loss figures for December 2018 were expected to be the same as 2017.
- Council Tax figures had improved.
- Ready to let occupation figures were at an all time low (5.2 days).
- Vacancies in the Repairs Team were similar to the Voids Team – vacancies had been held for apprentices which had impacted on the work that could be completed, but the team was now running at full employment.
- Asbestos removal had increased by 300%. It was hoped that asbestos removal would be undertaken in a planned way rather than reactive.
- Severe weather in 2018 had taken the Voids Team and Housing Department some time to recover. Heating and hot water in properties had been a priority.
- Priority void list were those fleeing domestic violence or harassment, or people with medical needs. The Team tried to turn around those properties quickly, but the number of cases had been consistent at 19 for a time and had been unsustainable. The number of cases had now reduced to normal levels.
- The Department had no influence on the delays in new fire doors which had to be installed before a tenant could move into a property. Delays had been influenced by manufacturers and more rigorous testing of doors.
- There had been a slight increase in the poor condition of some of the properties returned – tenants were recharged for damage.
- City-wide based working had been used to bring down the number of voids. Areas were now working to their own priorities but would be kept under review should the number of voids increase substantially again.
- Properties were now advertised when they were ready to let.
- Asbestos removal had a significant impact on voids. The asbestos policy would be reviewed.
- All asbestos would be removed from Liangs Easiform bungalows when they became void, which would benefit the repairs service in future.
- New tenants would also be asked if works could be carried out in occupation to enable a tenant to move in sooner rather than wait till all works were complete.
- A Works Planner had been recruited dedicated to voids.
- Repair works could now be issued to contractors to help with peaks in voids work.
- Re-let times had improved since the report was written, and year-end report would be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

In response to Members' questions, the following points were made:

- Work was not halted on an empty property until a tenant was recharged but continued nonetheless. The previous tenant would still be chased for payment. Members asked if the previous tenant could be charged for lost rental income, which the Head of Service would take back as a suggestion.
- Members took on board the issues around fire regulation and the delay in manufacturers providing fire doors on properties, and also issues around the removal of asbestos, but asked that more focus be given to the issue.

They asked for further information on the percentage of money recharged to tenants that was received and how much was written off.

- Two-thirds of the way lighting programme had been undertaken around the city.
- When a property went through the letting process, there were minimum letting standards that were required such as the inspection of gas and electric facilities and an assessment of the property based on the home, health and safety rating system, even the position of cookers needed to be taken into consideration to ensure standards were met.

The Chair requested a report on voids by Ward across the city.

The Director of Housing said he shared Members' passion for getting voids back into the system as quick as possible. He added that asbestos removal had been exceptionally difficult over the year, and the 'Beast from the East' had made it necessary to move staff from the Voids Team to deal with boiler issues, and then again to work on leaks. He also noted there were normally 15 apprentices, but over 2018/19 45 apprentices had completed at one time. 40 jobs had been held for the apprentices which was an exception to normal circumstances.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and looked forward to a further report.

It was AGEEED that:

1. The report be noted;
2. A year-end report would be brought to a future meeting of the Commission
3. Further information on the percentage of money recharged to tenants that was received and how much was written off to be provided to Members;
4. A report on voids by Ward across the city be brought to the next meeting of the Commission.

65. 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.

It was AGREED that:

1. The Tenants' and Leaseholders Forum Action and Decision Log be noted.

66. WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing Scrutiny Commission work programme was noted.

The Chair requested a report on information on the number of anti-social behaviour across Wards, and a breakdown for each Ward.

67. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other items of urgent business, the meeting closed at 7.14pm.