



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

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

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Nangreave (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Willmott

In Attendance

Councillor Cutkelvin – Assistant City Mayor, Housing and Education

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17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr Cutkelvin was introduced to the meeting and welcomed as Assistant Mayor with responsibility for Housing.

The Chair informed the meeting that the order of the agenda had changed, and that he would take Agenda Item 9, Housing System Replacement and Housing Channel Shift after Agenda Item 5, Questions, Representations or Statements of Case.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gee and Pickering, Cllr O'Donnell.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Westley declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting that he had family members who 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. The Councillors were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration and discussion of the agenda

items.

19. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Minute 10. Manifesto Housing Commitments

Councillor Willmott asked why the Housing Manifesto Commitments report was not included on the agenda. The DSO reported the agenda item had been missed in error and the briefing note and table of proposed commitments would be circulated to all Members and be on the agenda for the next meeting.

AGREED:

that the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 5th August 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

20. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

21. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Director of Housing was present to respond to three questions submitted and supplementary questions that arose.

The Chair said the questions submitted cut across multiple areas of the council and multiple scrutiny committees, and answers to the questions had been collated to be presented at the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

Mrs Zina Zelter was invited to the table to ask her questions.

- 1) “In light of the climate emergency and fuel poverty, does the council intend to require all its new developments to be to Passivhaus/Zero Carbon standard with renewable generation? If not, why? And if yes, what is the time line?”

Reply

The Director of Housing said from a planning perspective, current policy sought to address this through the adopted Core Strategy.

Core Strategy policy stated all development must mitigate and adapt to climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The policy required development to meet the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 and where feasible, encouraged development to incorporate best practice energy efficiency and sustainable construction methods, and encouraged development to include connection to an existing Combined Heat and Power or Community Heating System, wherever feasible.

The city council was currently in the process of producing a new local plan, which would seek to enhance the strength of policies addressing climate change. Whilst there had been a climate emergency declared on the local

level, national government had limited the scope of planning policy available to allow local planning authorities to set energy performance standards higher than the Building Regulations.

National planning policy guidance currently did not allow local planning authorities to set energy performance standards for new housing above the equivalent of Level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

The energy efficiency standards of new development was being considered as part of the new local plan process. There would be future consultation on a draft local plan, but the scope would largely be defined by how far national policy allowed local authorities to go in policy development and adoption.

From a Leicester City Council housing building perspective, not only was the council committed to building high quality, good value affordable homes for those people on the housing register, it also wanted them to be environmentally friendly and cheap to run.

The first phase of new homes (29 units) were being built to the current Building Control standards and were due to be completed in the Summer of 2020.

The council aimed to build subsequent phases to higher standards and the way it would be achieved would be decided on a site by site basis. It could not be confirmed at the meeting if it would specifically include the use of specific renewable technologies or that all developments would be built to Passive House Standards.

The council had not ruled out any form of construction or methods for achieving good quality homes that were kind to the environment and cheap to run

Supplementary Question

Should not housing be required to be built to level 4 standards?

Response

The Director of Housing said the first step for LCC was to get back in to building Council housing and produce a good quality product, balancing the needs of the City and delivering on the new homes that it needs with producing a good balanced environmental produce which was excellent value for money. Now the first phase was up and running and the council is back into house building there was the possibility of doing particular schemes in order to be an example for others.

He added the Heathcote Road site, sold for £1 in conjunction with a Housing Association was already built to passivehaus standards. Each site going forward would be assessed on a case by case basis. It needed to be noted that a number of the sites that LCC would be delivering on would be small sites with low profitability or expensive to deliver in the private world. This would cost the authority more and the council needed to make sure it delivered the right

number of homes that the City needs.

- 2) “Would Leicester City Council consider actively checking and enforcing all private rental accommodation to ensure it is reaching minimum carbon efficiency standards, and licencing them to cover the cost of checks and enforcement?”

Reply

The Director of Housing responded that as a local authority, it was responsible for maintaining standards in houses in multiple occupation (HMO) and temporary accommodation, as well as rented single and family properties. The council ensured HMOs applied for mandatory license, inspected private rented properties for disrepair and hazards, and offered services and support to ensure properties were safe to live in, were in good repair, and had adequate fire safety measures and facilities. Furthermore, the council could act to help tenants who felt their landlord was failing to maintain a rented property to a satisfactory standard.

In relation to energy efficiency, in April 2018 the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES) regulations was introduced and meant that private landlords could not let domestic properties to new or existing tenants if the Energy Efficiency Certificate (EPC) rating was F or G (unless an exemption applied). From 1 April 2020 the prohibition on letting F and G properties would extend to all relevant properties, even where there had been no change in tenancy.

As part of the process in awarding mandatory licenses, an Energy Performance Certificate was required for properties when they were let. The Energy Performance Certificate provided details on the energy performance of the property and what could be done to improve it.

If a local authority believed a landlord had failed to fulfil their obligations under the MEES Regulations, they could serve the landlord with a compliance notice. If a breach was confirmed, the landlord might receive a financial penalty.

The council was now undertaking work to introduce a Selective Licensing Scheme (SLS). The scheme aimed to improve the standards of property management in the private rental sector in specific areas of the city. Selective Licensing schemes were established in many places around the country, with local authorities reporting benefits for their communities such as better housing, increased housing demand and protection of vulnerable people who currently lived in poor condition properties; it was the council’s intention that as part of the work energy standards were also considered.

However, in Nottingham following consultation with landlords it was decided it would be unfair to place a burden of heavy charges on landlords who were good, and instead target those landlords who were not so compliant.

Supplementary Question

Am I understanding you don't routinely consult?

Response

The Director of Housing said that a number of different organisations and stakeholders would be consulted, and what was in place in other parts of the country would be looked at.

The Chair said that private landlords and licensing fell under the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Commission and further questions on the issue should be forwarded to that Commission.

- 3) "Given that there is to be a consultation in the next few months on a carbon action plan for the city, please would this commission press for an additional person to be added to the City Executive (beyond the deputy city mayor for environment) whose sole role would be to push for all council policy and actions to be in line with tackling the climate emergency to be part of that carbon action plan."

The Chair said it was important that climate change impacted on every service in the city. It had been seen on the news how it had come to the forefront, and it was important the council took it seriously, and that climate change impact be included in reports.

Members requested a report be brought to the Commission to explain in more detail outlining what level of house building standards could be achieved, and the trade-off between long-term benefits to short-term higher costs on build. It was further added the council should be building to the highest possible standards, and if law prevented the Council from doing so, the law should be challenged.

The Director of Housing said the council was trying to obtain a balance in delivering a significant number of homes for the city, and meeting climate and energy efficient standards and making sure good value was provided for the city.

AGREED:

1. That a detailed report be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission on house building standards.
2. That climate change impact on proposals be routinely included in reports

The Chair reported that items would be considered out of the order given in the agenda.

22. HOUSING SYSTEM REPLACEMENT AND HOUSING CHANNEL SHIFT

The Director of Housing submitted a report to the Commission for noting which

provided an overview and update of the Housing System Replacement programme and Housing Channel Shift.

Charlotte McGraw, Head of Service, presented the report and drew Members' attention to the following:

- Channel shift was about broadening channels for those that could access online services; it was acknowledged that this was not a one size fits all approach and that vulnerable tenants needed to still be able to access services by traditional means too;
- Progress had been made in delivering Rents Channel shift and the first stage of repairs;
- The team was actively promoting uptake of Housing Online;
- The mobile working solution had been updated and alongside Repairs Channel Shift it had made it easier for people to book, cancel and access services.

The Chair asked what performance indicators were being used to assess whether the strategy was successful, i.e. in terms of the percentage of enquiries made online, the cost of introducing rent and repairs channel shift and the projections for the future. Members were informed that statistics on call volumes were considered on a monthly basis alongside data on face-to-face transactions. Currently the council was developing datasets, for example, on rents and how many tenants were signing up to access the services, and the same would be done for the repairs service over the next year. The Chair asked that a detailed report be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

The Chair noted the lack of connectivity between the Granby Street system and Northgate. He asked what criteria would be used to ensure connectivity between the new housing system and the CRM system used at Granby Street Customer Services. Members were informed a response to the question would be looked into and be provided to them in writing following a discussion with IT.

Members stated that it was a problem for some tenants accessing services online and asked for the approximate number of tenants who did not use electronic means to connect. Members were informed the figure was not known for housing, but at a recent Anti-Poverty summit it was estimated that 10% of people were not able to use digital means, and as many council tenants were in poverty it could be assumed that a number of tenants were in that 10%.

An example given of successful engagement online was the Choice Based Lettings system. There had been initial concerns that people would not engage, but it had become clear that people had with 99% of all bids made online, although it was not known how many were receiving support, for example, in libraries. For those that could not engage online, they were not excluded and Members were given reassurance that there were no plans to remove the telephone system and people still had direct contact. It was noted the situation would be closely monitored and it was believed the gentle encouragement approach the council was taking was correct.

Councillor Cutkelvin, Assistant Mayor for Housing and Education, stated the new system reduced the number of times repairs operatives had to visit. Tenants could now upload pictures of required repairs, reducing the number of visits needed.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. A detailed report on performance indicators used to assess the success of the Channel Shift strategy for accessing housing services be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.
3. Information on the criteria being used to ensure connectivity between the new housing system and the CRM system used in Granby Street Customer Services be forwarded to Members of the Commission.

23. HOUSING LEICESTER

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation to the Commission for noting which updated on progress on the delivery of new housing.

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

- Branding for Housing Leicester had been updated.
- Housing was mainly being built on sites of previous use, usually garage sites.
- Each house cost approximately £130k to build.
- There was a demand for 6,000 houses (highest for two bedrooms), and also an identified need for wheelchair accommodation.
- Planning permission had been granted for all six first phase sites, and a second phase of sites and work ongoing to deliver over 100 units. The council was currently looking to identify other sites to deliver the manifesto commitment.
- The contractor Robert Woodhead would deliver the new homes, and for added social value would be providing work experience for the Council's apprenticeships and operatives, and also work with Leicester colleges.
- The acquisition programme of buying back former council housing had a total value to date of £16million.

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

- The council was in the unique position to increase the percentages of homes with wheelchair access and would be built to Level 4 standard. Housing were working with the Environment Team, looking at long-term development moving away from fossil fuels and gas towards air source heating.

- Bungalows were land hungry, though there were benefits, as being wheelchair accessible relied on less technology for the tenant. The existing phase of development is delivering bungalows and future phases would look at increasing the number of wheelchair accessible bungalows.

Members asked that future presentations be put in overall context in what the Council wanted to achieve for the future. They added that it was disappointing that not all houses would be built to the same standard and asked officers and the Assistant Mayor if standards could be increased, as once built a property could be retrofitted, but was counter-productive. The Director of Housing said a paper would be brought setting out additional costs associated with different levels of standard of build.

The Assistant Mayor agreed that the Council should be looking at environmental standards, but it was noted that when Passivehaus was done in the past, tenants did not always comply with the principles.

Members asked if the Phases of build were down to identifying sites. It was noted that sites and capacity to build were down to the design process and resources available.

The Chair commented that housing associations were not accountable to local authorities, with many housing associations in the city having offices in other cities, providing tenants with poor standards of housing and service. He added he would like to see government bring housing association back under local authority control.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the presentation and information be noted.
2. The Director of Housing said a paper would be brought setting out additional costs associated with different levels of standard of build.

24. VOID PERFORMANCE REPORT: APRIL - JUNE 2019

The Director of Housing submitted a report for noting which provided an update on void performance for the first quarter of 2019/20.

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

- The number of voids held was now less than 200.
- The average time taken to re-let a property was reducing and improving and once ready took an average of 5.4 days to let. The longer a property was empty, the more rent was lost.
- The council operated a 50-week year to give a two-week break over the Christmas period to tenants, defined as rent-free.
- The council reported void figures based on the actual void period. Some

other authorities based the void period on when contractors were working on a property, so it was hard to compare like for like with other authorities.

- When void properties were checked they were clean, had an energy performance certificate, were asbestos safe, and meters changed.
- A full range of repairs was undertaken in house on voids but work for example on full re-wiring and boilers was currently outsourced.

Members had previously stated that there needed to be a closer look at how tenants maintained their homes. It was noted that craft operatives saw the condition of a property on visits and fed back to neighbourhood housing officers to investigate further. Members were further informed there was a programme of welfare to visit vulnerable people, and visits are done on potential risk flags, for example, rent arrears, previous evictions, to prioritise checks on property conditions and support with a tenancy, and identify other issues. It was added it was not currently possible to visit all 21,000 homes every year to make sure people were maintaining properties due to resources.

Members were asked to note that the condition of housing stock coming back was a concern and appeared to be getting worse thus impacting on voids, and there needed to be a more stringent regime to protect properties. Also, the council was still liable for council tax on voids so it was essential that void times were reduced.

The Chair noted that in the past, if the standard of home improvements by the tenant was of a good standard and met health and safety requirements, the council would not require the tenant to put the property back to its original state. The Head of Service reported that if work was of a good standard and safe that remained the case.

Members were informed that there were many things that contributed to void times, including the age of a property, or a property had not had capital programme work at the request of former tenants by, for example, tenant refusal for upgrade and these need to be done when the property becomes void.

The Chair noted there were a lot of elderly people as council tenants who struggled to maintain gardens, and that the probation scheme used to be in place and could Housing look at supporting them through a finance scheme. Members were informed there was a scheme where people could pay for a gardening service, where the charge was on an hourly basis and at a reduced cost.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. Information on the gardening service scheme be provided to the Commission.

25. RESPONSIVE HOUSING REPAIRS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report to the Housing Scrutiny Commission for noting, which provided an update on the Division's performance on the completion of responsive repairs to council properties, and an update about the implementation of service charges.

Ian Craig, Head of Service, drew Members' attention to the following:

- During 2018/19, over 90,000 repairs were undertaken.
- 89.4% of repairs were completed on first visit, and 88.4% within target time.
- There were 190 complaints (0.21% of actual work carried out).
- Tenants' primary access to the service was by phone, but the service was working towards Channel Shift and its benefits of longer service access.
- Tenants could also use an online service called 'My Account' to report issues. In addition to that, front line staff could take information on repairs.
- Morning and afternoon appointments were available and a 24/7 out of hours service was operated for emergency repairs. In 2018/19 there were 123,371 calls to the call centre.
- The number of repairs outstanding and out of category did not include gas and central heating.
- The number of repairs completed on first visit was 85.5% due to the hard work of operatives and exceeded the 85% target.
- The next phase for repairs was to go online, with advantages previously outlined. Tenants would be able to report repairs and upload pictures through mobile phones.
- Customer Satisfaction monitoring would be embedded into normal business. Tenants would be asked to leave comments on the service provided, and any complaints would be responded to quickly.
- 19 craft apprentices were currently being recruited.

Members asked to see in the report the number of missed repair appointments because the tenant was not home. The Head of Service reported Channel Shift would give tenants the opportunity to make their own appointments and would reduce events when tenants were not in. It was noted there was also a cost to missed appointments, especially if it was a big job with materials and tools delivered.

Members also reported the Out of Hours service had been very good.

Members asked if the new service being pushed forward had ownership amongst the workforce, and had lone working, risk assessments and health and safety aspects been considered. They also asked about rates of sickness in the workforce. Members were informed all safeguarding aspects were considered. With regards to isolation, workforce surveys were undertaken, and the workforce themselves were close-knit teams with regular team meetings and events outside of work.

The Chair referred to Appendix 2 Window and Doors repairs being out of

category and queried if it had any connect to problems with getting proper fire doors. The Head of Service said the problem with fire doors did have an impact but it could not be said if it was the ultimate reason for the figure given.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted.
2. The number of missed repair appointments due to a tenant not being at home be included in future reports.

26. TENANTS' AND LEASEHOLDERS' FORUM ACTION AND DECISION LOG

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

The next meeting of the Forum would take place on 8th October, City Hall.

Members were informed the Forum had arranged to have a telephone installed in Braunstone Frith Centre for older residents to use to call through to the Council.

It was AGREED that:

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

27. WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing Scrutiny Commission work programme was noted.

It was AGREED:

1. That the DSO would circulate to Members the report on Housing Manifesto Commitments, and to contact the Director of Housing for further information if required.

28. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other items of urgent business, the meeting closed at 7.28pm.