



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2019 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Nangreave (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany
Councillor Gee

Councillor O'Donnell
Councillor Pickering

In Attendance

Councillor Cutkelvin – Assistant Mayor, Housing and Education

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29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence. The meeting was informed Councillor Gee would be arriving late to the meeting.

30. 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 interests. The Councillors were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration and discussion of the agenda items.

31. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

that the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting

held on 7th October 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

32. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

33. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Director of Housing was present to respond to three questions submitted.

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

- 1) What is it that tenants do that make passivhaus homes not work well? Chris Burgin referred to this more than once at the last meeting, the implication being that it was a reason not to build passivhaus, and it would be helpful to know details.

Reply

The Director of Housing responded that it wasn't a case of not building Passivhaus homes, but there were some issues the authority was aware of. Feedback received by officers had been anecdotal and related to the volume of fresh air generated by the internal system and the need to open windows, which in a fully sealed house was contradictory, even though it was accepted that people did this to maintain the internal comfort conditions. It was noted that a meeting had been arranged with East Midlands Housing (EMH) to talk to them about their experiences of managing and maintaining this type of construction, to hear of the feedback they had received from the tenants and to learn from this for future phases of council house building.

It had further been identified that the authority needed to generate 876 homes and Passivehaus building reduced the numbers of homes that could be built due to the design.

The Chair informed Ms Zelter that further clarification if required could be requested from officers.

- 2) If council tenants want better insulation/energy efficiency measures on their homes can they request and would they get them? Specifically external wall insulation. Would that be something they could request and would they get it?

Reply

The Director of Housing replied that if tenants were concerned about the insulation levels in their homes they could contact Housing to request a visit. It was noted there was an annual budget which was spent increasing certain types of insulation, for example, loft insulation, double glazed windows could be added to the programme for replacement. If tenants were experiencing mould growth due to a potential cold bridge, it would be investigated and insulated.

It was noted that external wall insulation was not fitted on request, but on a programmed basis and only prioritised the most poorly performing homes, primarily the ones with solid 9inch walls. Two such programmes had been carried out in the past and externally insulated in excess of 1300 homes. All homes with a cavity had been filled with insulation.

The Chair informed Ms Zelter that further clarification if required could be requested from officers.

3) When doing voids work are homes given extra insulation/energy efficiency measures? If not, could they be? Again, specifically external insulation.

Reply

The Director of Housing responded that when a void property was inspected, all areas were looked at and if required loft insulation would be increased, windows checked, etc. but external wall insulation was not fitted on an ad-hoc basis as it was not efficient doing a single property but more efficient on a programme basis. Previous external wall insulation schemes had been part funded by central government initiatives, such as CESP and ECO. There was no match funding currently available, but it was hoped government would look at this as part of their response to the climate emergency and would be responded to by Housing accordingly.

It was further reported that when capital improvements were undertaken, Housing looked to increase insulation wherever possible. Most recently insulation levels had increased as part of the cladding programme. Properties in Beaumont Leys and being worked on in New Parks were all benefitting from increased insulation as part of the renewal of the external cladding, and Housing would continue to do this.

The Chair noted that further clarification required on the questions above would be provided in writing.

34. GOSCOTE HOUSE AND SPRINKLER INSTALLATION UPDATE

The Director of Housing submitted a report for information to update Members of the Commission on the current situation regarding the demolition of Goscote House and the installation of sprinklers in the four remaining tower blocks.

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

- The original plan had been to refurbish Goscote House but a full structural survey confirmed the main elements of the block were at the end of their economic life, and the decision was taken on 8th January 2018 to demolish the block and redevelop the site for new affordable housing.
- Consultants recommended the block be deconstructed due to the

constrained site. It was anticipated demolition would start in Summer 2020 and take approximately 22 months.

- Sprinklers have been installed in Maxfield House prior to tenants moving back in.
- A specialist fire consultant was appointed to help with specification and officers had worked closely with Leicestershire Fire and Rescue to ensure they were happy with proposals.
- Large tanks had been fitted in the plant room to ensure pipes were full of water should a sprinkler head be activated.
- Sprinkler heads were activated at a certain temperature, and there had been no false activations to date. Tenants have received a guide to the sprinklers.
- The next challenge would be installing sprinkler systems in the remaining tower block flats with tenants in situ.

In response to Members questions the following points were noted:

- The decision had been made after detailed investigations and a report by specialists could not guarantee the building beyond a five-year review period.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Gee arrived at the meeting.

- Reference was made in the report to possible contingencies relating to the demolition of Goscote House. As part of the process surveys would be required on asbestos removal, scaffolding and crane with licence to overwing other buildings in the area, among other matters to be taken into consideration. The process being followed for Goscote House demolition was very robust and would impact on the final contingencies figure.
- Members asked that Ward Councillors be kept informed and that the local community was consulted on options being considered for the redevelopment.
- Members queried the £3million stated for demolition as being under budget and a more realistic figure needed to be provided. Officers reported that the figure could change and was based on previous similar demolitions and soft market testing. It was noted that on any site, issues would be different, but would ensure that final figures would be robust. The Assistant Mayor noted that it was fair to be cautious about the figure of £3million and would be challenging it.
- The building was not considered a dangerous structure, but its extended lifetime could not be guaranteed. Risk assessments were being undertaken so no decisions had yet been made to relocate anyone in the vicinity of the tower during demolition. Deconstruction would be top-down, and if a considered too great a risk, local consultations would be conducted.
- Pollution and dust were raised as an issue, but the Commission was told specialists would undertake the demolition professionally and competently.

The Chair welcomed the report and spoke on behalf of the Commission who supported the sprinkler project and the recent report from the Grenfell Inquiry.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted.
2. Once the building was decommissioned a report on the future site development be brought to the Commission.

35. SAFETY COMPLIANCE

The Director of Housing submitted a report which provided information on how the Housing Division managed the risks associated to water hygiene, fire safety and asbestos in Council properties.

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

- The Housing Division had a range of policy documents to ensure risks were identified and managed effectively and that everybody knew their roles and responsibilities and that they had been written to take into account the legal requirements of each area.
- Legislation and council policy ensured water systems were controlled to prevent a risk of legionella bacteria in communal water tanks.
- The primary purpose of the fire safety policy was to ensure all steps were taken to prevent a fire and to keep tenants and leaseholders safe. There was different legislation depending on the type of building and officers worked closely with Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service.
- A stay put policy was designed to stop residents in flats unaffected by fire from unnecessarily evacuating the building and blocking the stairways, and enabled fire fighters to quickly get to and extinguish a fire.
- Compartmentation was the use of construction techniques to divide the building into a series of fire tight boxes called compartments.
- There was a budget of £1million for 2019/20 to carry out fire improvement work in addition to the £1.3million budget for sprinklers.
- The asbestos policy complied with and reflected the legal framework and good practice. Asbestos was managed but not automatically removed if in good condition.

In response to Members' questions, the following responses were given:

- Sprinklers were in areas of the greatest risk, such as flats, and not generally in communal areas with no combustible materials.
- Additional resources had been arranged to undertake surveys for asbestos.
- With regards to water hygiene, work could be carried out by in-house staff, with contractors managing the more specialist climate air conditioning units. Officers would enquire as to whether contractors were local.
- Members enquired how many properties had been converted into flats. It was noted that Leicester City Council had around 200 properties with potentially 400 tenants. Information would be circulated to Members on the number of properties involved.

- Members were assured compartmentalisation was taken seriously. Officers were confident that tenants and leaseholders were living in well maintained blocks of flats with good fire safety measures in place.
- Members asked that the Tenants' fire sprinkler guide be written in clearer English and be more accessible. Officers said they would review the document and circulate it to members of the Commission.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted.
2. Officers to enquire and inform Members of the Commission if contractors managing water hygiene were local.
3. The Tenants' guide to fire sprinkler systems be reviewed and circulated to members of the Commission.

36. COUNCIL HOUSING GAS & HEATING SERVICES - RESPONSIBILITIES AND WINTER PREPARATIONS

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation for noting which updated the Commission on the responsibilities and winter preparations for the Council's housing gas and heating services.

Rob Webster (Gas and Heating Services Manager) and Ed Quick (Customer Services Manager), delivered the presentation and the following additional points were made:

- The 'Beast from the East' (BFTE) had impacted across many services. The Housing Division had an extreme weather policy for Council owned properties and had been implemented during the extreme weather conditions.
- Every customer must have a gas safety inspection every 12 months.
- Some work is done by contractors, for example, heavy pipework.
- A big recruitment drive of Gas Service & Heating Engineers had taken place this last year and the service has increased overall numbers. Emergency out-of-hours cover had also increased from one engineer to two engineers during winter.
- It had been reported at a previous Scrutiny Commission meeting about the installation of Boiler Buoys to all properties, and the programme of installation continued, usually during the annual gas safety visit. Residents would be shown during installation what to do when boiler issues arose during severe weather.
- Customer Support was at the sharp end of the service, and during the BFTE had received a huge increase in the number of calls, including gritting and bin collections. Telephone systems had broken down and customers could not get in touch.
- Staff had been reluctant to give advice to customer on how they could repair the boiler themselves, as it involved hot water. As a result, engineers had received an influx of calls. The Team received training to give advice on boiler buoys. There was also an online video offering advice to people during severe weather conditions and this is available on the Council's main

web page.

- With emergency arrangements in place, extra staff members can be brought on board from repairs to increase craft staffing linked to weather related repair jobs.
- Previously from a telephony perspective lots of teams had reacted to their own services but could not be brought together to give unity of messages.
- A pre-greet message on the line with additional information and advice, and information to view the online video would be given.

In response to Members' comments and questions, further information was provided:

- People were prioritised into different categories following a series of questions. Sometimes people would be flagged in the system as vulnerable, having a disability / package of care. Prioritisation might also be made due to age or learning difficulty (picked up by staff training).
- Other calls received included enquiries regarding social welfare and benefits.
- A Communications Officer is now a standard response from Housing to improve communications to tenants, councillors and other stakeholders of issues, and to provide advice. Officers were working on additional general advice to go online.
- A number of changes had been made to the system. In the past, too many calls had broken the system which covered all areas, for example, leisure services. The throttle system meant that extra calls received than the system could handle would be kept on another system and played a message and would keep the call system afloat.

The Chair asked that information be made available in local Housing offices and libraries. He added that the Division needed to work in conjunction with Age Concern to pass on information to people. The meeting was informed it was a vital role of the Communication Officer to pass on information. The role was not a nominated person, but one person set by the Director as single point of contact to coordinate the Divisions communications in severe weather

The Chair thanked the officers for the information.

AGREED:

1. That the presentation and additional information received be noted.

37. HRA CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation for noting to the Commission which provided information on the HRA Capital Programme.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service delivered the presentation and the following information was noted:

- Condition surveys used scoring and criteria.

- The table of information showed Decent Homes Standard minimum age but works upon inspection might only require an upgrade.
- Generally more specialist work was outsourced, for example, sprinkler systems.
- KPIs were in place to ensure contractors delivered work to a high standard.
- £1.2million had been spent on disabled adaptations in Council Housing (£2m in other Housing in the City through DFGs)
- £1million had been spend on fire safety, with a significant number of good quality fire door upgrades. Bins were a fire risk, and there had been replacement of a number of these to robust bin stores.
- Insulation was installed at the same time when external cladding a building.
- All properties met the Decent Homes Standard.
- There were some properties in which new bathrooms were to be delivered.
- There were some parts of the capital programme that predominantly used contractors, for information, boiler installation, rewiring. For kitchen refurbishments it was reported to be a 50/50 split. Information on the locality of contractors would be emailed to Members.
- It was reported that work did have an impact on the carbon footprint, but that set carbon reduction targets had been met, for example through, 'A' rated energy boilers were installed. It was further noted that when a property was let it would have a valid Energy Performance Certificate.

The Chair stated he would like to see more spent on adaptations. He asked that future reports include statistics on people waiting for improvements.

Members reported they had received calls from residents about draughty bungalows, with vulnerable people complaining about being cold. It was reported that the bungalows were insulated but surveys would be undertaken to look into the situation.

Councillor Cutkelvin, Assistant Mayor for Housing and Education, informed the meeting the reductions in the carbon footprint and climate change were very much a priority for her and the City Mayor's team.

The Chair requested that the Deputy City Mayor with responsibilities for Environment and Transportation be invited to the next main meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission, to discuss the future of housing development in the city in the context of the climate emergency resolution adopted by the Council.

AGREED:

that:

1. The report be noted.
2. Information on the locality of contractors to be circulated to Members.
3. Future reports to the Commission contain statistics on the number of people waiting for adaptations.
4. The Deputy City Mayor with responsibilities for Environment and Transportation be invited to the next main meeting of the Housing

Scrutiny Commission to discuss the future of housing development in the context of the climate emergency resolution adopted by the Council.

38. MANIFESTO DELIVERY - HOUSING

The Director of Housing submitted a report which updated the Commission on progress on delivery of the Labour manifesto commitments made in 2019. On presentation of the report, the following points were made;

- Under acquisitions, the council had now acquired 140 properties.
- Six sites now had planning permission for our first 29 new build homes.
- Preplanning discussions were taking place for another four sites for a further 100 units.
- A significant amount of work was being undertaken to reduce the number of families in temporary accommodation.
- Delivery of the diverted giving scheme had gone live with BID and 10 sites had been launched. It was anticipated there would be a total of 16 units located in the city to divert money away from people begging on the street and would go directly to support the homeless and initially the charity One Roof to provide the Night Shelter
- The commitment to resettle 45 families by 2021 was almost met, with 42 families welcomed, and the final three families expected to arrive towards the end of the year.
- The home extension fund had been allocated £500k. The housing register and those most severely overcrowded would be reviewed as a desktop exercise to see if extension or loft conversions were viable to address overcrowding.
- The Division would continue to invest in council housing with £26m invested for 2019/20 alone.

The Chair thanked the Director for the report.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing and Education noted the work across the whole Division. She said that being mindful of rough sleepers and temporary accommodation work, she had been impressed with the work done with the voluntary and community sectors, delivering a committed multi-agency response. She reported that the diverted giving had raised approximately £1,000 in the first few weeks.

Members of the Commission expressed concern that anything not seen to be doing well was apportioned to the local authority, and that anything good was apportioned to the voluntary sector. The Director of Housing informed the meeting that a multi-agency team, which included the police, legal officer, housing officers and CRASBU, were using the arm of enforcement to get people to agree to accept services available and get people the alcohol and drug treatment they needed, and to get them off the street. It was noted that people refused assistance, and the enforcement side was welcome. There were different enforcement options for which the legal officer would build a case, for example, dispersals, injunctions, criminal enforcement.

It was reported that some people could not cope with existing accommodation offers especially issues over rules or move into a place with rules. Further discussions were taking place for a unit with less rules, but which provided wrap-around support. The Director of Housing informed the meeting of plans to visit St Mungo's in London, which operated something similar.

Members congratulated the department on developing the diverted giving scheme. The Chair thanked the Director for the report.

AGREED:

1. That the report be noted.

39. WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING

The Director of Housing submitted a presentation to update on the Housing Register, lettings, tenant overcrowding and under-occupation information.

Justin Haywood, Service Manager, Partnerships & Housing Solutions, delivered the presentation, and drew attention to the following information:

- Headline data for those facing homelessness largely remained the same at 21%.
- There had been an 11% increase in lets compared to the same period for 2018 (675). If the trend continued, the service would be on track to have an additional 100 lets, though there were ebbs and flows in the data.
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- Band 1 had changed significantly over past six months, with numbers increasing by 23%, due to changes in policy to ensure those in most need were in the highest-priority band.
- There are now three distinct categories of overcrowding, within Bands 1, 2 and 3 to reflect the different degrees experienced. Band 2 had seen a 1% decrease as a result of policy changes, but there had been no significant change in Band 3.
- Under lettings information, there had been an increase in offers to Band 1 applicants due to policy change. It was reported that Beaumont Leys had the most vacancies during the period outlined.
- There were no family lettings in Band 3.
- Customer information was given to all new applicants and added to Leicester HomeChoice.
- A project working on tenant overcrowding and under-occupation had ended. Phase 2 had not been as successful and it had been concluded tenants were reluctant to move. The Tenants Incentive Scheme would be introduced to take the objectives forward with a different approach, alongside a budget to consider extensions for eligible properties.

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

- When people applied for housing, they could bring to the attention of

officers an issue with overcrowding. There was also good management information on the number of tenants considered to be statutorily overcrowded. Band 1 had seen an 82% rise as a result of better identification and policy change.

- Phase 2 of the project to get tenants to swap had not replicated the success of Phase 1. It had highlighted that tenants would require incentives to move in significant numbers. As such, the next step was to recommend a tenants' incentive scheme.
- Around 45% of homeless applications were from households renting within the private rented sector, with 90% of these being made homeless through no fault of their own.
- When purchasing housing it took quite a while to bring back into Housing stock, as voids were prioritised with the use of resources, to the detriment of bringing those properties back on board.

The Assistant Mayor for Housing and Education noted that councillors were in a good position to provide advice to residents and visuals in the presentation were helpful. She reported that 'Right to Buy' had put huge pressure on council housing stock, and what could now be provided for residents had changed over the past ten years, but residents still applied for and expected to be provided with a council house.

The Assistant Mayor added that issues around the private rented centre would go to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Commission as a regulatory function, but the whole conversation around civil penalties, or selective licensing schemes could be brought to the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

The Chair agreed that housing was in crisis and needed a mass social housing building programme. He added that overcrowding had an impact on children and health of those people affected. He welcomed the commitment to new build housing.

The Chair further noted rough sleeping was happening around the country and was not acceptable, and with the housing crisis there would be more people being made homeless and more families split up. He added that people were at the mercy of landlords who served eviction notices for no reason, and tenants were too frightened to report repairs for fear of eviction.

The Chair thanked officers for their hard work.

AGREED:

1. That the presentation be noted.

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

AGREED:

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

41. WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing Scrutiny Commission work programme was noted.

Members of the Commission were asked to note that the next meeting of the Commission had been moved to Monday 13th January 2020.

42. CLOSE OF MEETING

There being no other items of urgent business, the meeting closed at 8.30pm.