



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 27 AUGUST 2024 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor O'Neill (Chair)
Councillor Zaman (Vice Chair)

Councillor Bajaj
Councillor Gopal

Councillor Modhwadia
Councillor Waddington

Councillor Gregg
Councillor Halford

In Attendance

Deputy City Mayor, Councillor Cutkelvin – Housing and Neighbourhoods

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85. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that there were no apologies for absence.

86. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Chair asked members of the commission to declare any interests for which there were none.

87. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair highlighted that most additional information requested at the previous meeting had been circulated and further information would follow and the formal recommendation was being considered by officers.

It was further noted that the minutes for the meeting on 11 July 2024 were included within the papers and the Chair asked Members for comments.

AGREED:

- It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2024 were a true and accurate record.

88. CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair highlighted that following discussions at the previous meeting about the Council's acquisition and new build programme, a site visit had been arranged for the Commission to attend the Zip building and members were reminded to confirm if they were able to attend.

It was further highlighted by the Chair that information regarding the proposed inquiry day had been circulated to Members across the Housing and Public Health & Health Integration Scrutiny Commissions and volunteers were being sought to form a task group to look in more detail at health services for homeless individuals, particularly with complex needs.

89. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS AND STATEMENTS OF CASE

It was noted that none had been received.

90. PETITIONS

It was noted that none had been received.

91. REPAIRS & MAINTENANCE SERVICE PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Head of Service presented the item in which it was noted that:

- Work has been focussed over recent years to improve voids performance to ensure properties are available for let with significant improvements realised and a reduction in the number of voids held at any one time.
- Resources are being prioritised to respond to ongoing issues around damp and mould given the heightened awareness following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. A damp and mould policy has been developed with cross divisional working and a commitment as a landlord to deal swiftly with mould. Greater allocation of resource to ensure inspections are undertaken quicker to assess and identify any works has resulted in some increased work in other areas. Measures to tackle damp and mould include humidity tracking, dehumidifiers and mould resistant paint.
- Repairs were completed within target time for 85% of cases, although key performance indicators of day-to-day responsive repairs are not meeting set targets. There has been an increase in repairs and issues with resource to undertake works has been a challenge. Recruitment in craft and trade industries can be seen nationally and across public and private sectors. The service have also struggled with the backlog that was created during the pandemic where only emergency repairs were permitted, and a further spike was caused by the cyber attack that prevented access to systems to undertake day-to-day repairs.
- Improvements have continued with emergency repairs. Tenants are more educated on what constitutes a genuine emergency repair to ensure a better service is provided and responding quicker where necessary.
- The gas servicing team continue to work to ensure almost 100% compliance with meeting legal requirements for gas safety checks. The team have supported the district heating meter programme, assisting with ensuring systems are operating as efficiently as possible for tenants to pay for what is

needed. Three new gas engineers have been appointed through the internal apprenticeship programme and have also been successful in external recruitment.

- Recruitment continues to be a challenge with twenty vacancies. Issues also persist that when individuals are recruited, other officers may be promoted or moving within the division creating vacant posts again. The service is working with Human Resources to identify how to broaden and attract talent. The apprenticeship programme has been expanded from 30 to 40, with an intention of training, recruiting and retaining individuals.
- Materials are required to fulfil repairs and the service have advertised a tender for an inventory management system to modernise stores. Also tendering for materials framework for core items to be delivered and provide better assurance that stock will be available in a shorter timeframe to allow appointments to be booked to complete repairs and provide a more efficient service.
- A project group is working across the repairs service to identify improvements, including better van stock to enable repair completion on first time visit and grouping works together to prevent multiple visits etc.

In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- Housing stock affected by damp and mould is a small proportion at around 3-5%. The team have reviewed information and advice available on our website and work with public health and neighbourhoods to ensure tenants and those in the private rented sector are educated. The service is also working proactively to ensure officers are able to identify and report early signs of damp and mould when undertaking work to better understand our housing stock and intervene earlier. It was agreed that information can be shared with the commission on update communication and options for when assessing a property.
- The pandemic had an impact on the performance of the repairs service, but the main challenge continues to be recruitment issues. All roles are job evaluated and governed by the local authority pay structure, but additional council employee benefits are promoted to incentivise and attract candidates. The Council have simplified the recruitment process as it was recognised that trades may not follow the traditional recruitment route of completing forms. The service work with colleges and attend job fairs to attract talent but skill shortages can be seen nationally across construction and trade sectors, with contractors also highlighting they are unable to complete additional requested due to limited resource.
- The service work with adult social care and tenancy management as well as liaising directly with tenants to identify and prioritise those who are vulnerable. If tenants are known to be vulnerable, they will be allocated priority one for works to be completed within fourteen days whereas priority two requires works to be completed within eight weeks. Timeframes are defined by the policy but cases can be escalated and often completed quicker where concerns are raised and vulnerabilities known.
- A service improvement plan was created to address performance for voids which includes various factors for efficiencies. This includes undertaking better surveys initially to identify works needed, working with tenancy management to ensure tenants are aware of their responsibilities before handing the keys back, strengthening cross service working and capital investment. The repairs pledge also allow tenants the opportunity to move into a void quicker by completing works to ensure safe and other works within six weeks at a

convenient time for the tenants.

- Repairs are categorised when raised for timeframe to be completed, such as within 24 hours, 14 working days and a year etc. Key performance indicators are measured for whether repairs are completed in their allocated category timeframe.
- Various determinants can impact whether a repair is deemed an emergency or not. Call agents are able to provide advice to tenants and discuss solutions for cases.
- A supply of core radiator stock that is regularly used is stored by the service but there are so many different types and sizes of radiators that it would not be possible to store all types fitted across the housing stock. It would not be feasible to replace all radiators with a standard solution as they would have been determined for appropriateness of room size, type of building etc.
- The service has around 300 craft staff and management support. There are currently 20 vacancies and therefore a significant shortage of skills to be able to undertake work per day, week, year etc.
- The centralised planning team work more efficiently to be able to respond to damp and mould or complex repair cases. Previously, teams would work in silo to complete repairs but now work together to ensure teams are aligned and multiple tasks booked together to provide a streamlined process and better service.

It was highlighted that the repairs and maintenance service is for council owned housing stock although the private rented sector strategy includes standards that can be enforced, and an item is listed on the work programme for further discussion at a future meeting.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Additional information to be circulated.

92. HOMELESSNESS SERVICES UPDATE

The Chair noted that the report covers aspects that will be the focus for further discussion as part of the task group inquiry day and therefore enables an introductory discussion on the matter.

The report was presented by the Heads of Service in which it was noted that:

- It is an extremely challenging time with rising levels of homelessness seen locally and nationally. The Council declared a housing crisis in November 2022 due to the lack of affordable homes in the city which impacts homelessness as well as other factors such as the cost-of-living crisis.
- The report sets out data and financial pressures on the service. An additional £1m funding was allocated in 2023/24 and further £10m for 2024/25 to help with the additional demand but consequently puts greater pressure on balancing the budget.
- The number of households approaching services due to risk of becoming homeless is at unprecedented levels with an 11% increase from 2022/23 to 2023/24, equating to around an extra 500 contacts. This is often a result of being asked to leave private rented sector accommodation or family homes. The fast-track national asylum support service is also impacting homelessness services where individuals are granted the right to remain and required to leave

Home Office accommodation.

- Pressures on homelessness services has resulted in increased numbers of individuals and families in temporary accommodation. This includes 520 families, of which 262 were in bed and breakfast or hotel accommodation, and many exceeding six weeks as well as 552 individuals. Hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation is seen as a last resort option as it is acknowledged not to be ideal but increasing demand sometimes requires this provision. Full Council approved £45m funding to purchase 224 properties to alleviate pressures in temporary accommodation.
- Partnership working is ongoing with a range of agencies working internally and externally to provide a multi-agency approach to services to support individuals and families at risk of homelessness and/or when homeless.
- A homelessness and rough sleeping action plan was produced in conjunction with partners and published in December 2023. It is an agile action plan to respond to emerging issues with four main areas, including prevention, intervention, recovery and partnership working. The aim is to work collectively to enhance service provision to prevent rough sleeping and homelessness.

Members noted the difficulties and pressures services are enduring and thanked officers for their ongoing work and report. In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- Leicester's Homelessness Charter is working to bring organisations and individuals together to address homelessness in the city. Successful events have been hosted to inform officers and share resources on how service users can navigate available services. Coffee mornings are also hosted at John Lewis to share information and resources.
- Communication is a priority within the action plan for the first year to support the delivery of the homelessness and rough sleeper strategy. It is intended to improve communication to ensure service users know how to access services and share information with partners by working with the Homelessness Charter.
- Following the implementation of the streamlined asylum process, around 670 households received a discontinuation notice and sought services from the Council until April 2024. A further 109 households, equating to around 8 cases per week, have sought services since May 2024. The Deputy City Mayor for Housing and Neighbourhoods along with the Deputy City Mayor for Social Care, Health and Community Safety continue to engage with the Home Office and seek settlement funding, particularly due to the disparity in schemes.
- Full Council approved £45m funding to acquire additional properties to improve pathways for more suitable accommodation for households facing homelessness and prevent use of bed and breakfast accommodation. The aspiration is to return to a situation where no families are in temporary accommodation, but economic pressures and housing crisis are likely to require additional investment into temporary accommodation.
- The service is always keen to learn and liaise with homeless advisors on good practice in other areas. Data for Leeds indicated 53 rough sleeper and 2,000 families currently in temporary accommodation and officers requested Cllr Waddington share details of recent meetings to speak about their approach to avoid use of bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Individuals may rough sleep in the city if they are homeless but there are also individuals who are entrenched in street lifestyles and choose to rough sleep. A range of services are available, and teams go out 7 days a week and early mornings to offer support. Services will ensure the appropriate support is

provided to individuals to stabilise recovery and engage relevant organisations. Accommodation is available for individuals who choose to come and go if they are not ready to move to settled accommodation and officers will continue to work and support tenants and if alterations are required ensure the most appropriate support is in place to meet needs. It was agreed that further information would be provided regarding the impact of services.

- Occupation of properties to ensure best use of stock has been reviewed but tenants cannot be forced to downsize. Consideration has also been given previously to use of spare room in properties but this would require further thought, particularly surrounding safeguarding.
- The service has a bed and breakfast elimination plan that is monitored weekly and officers work with children services and public health to ensure families with children are receiving the right support. It is a government target for families to not reside in temporary accommodation for longer than six weeks but many local authorities across the country are unable to find suitable alternative accommodation with many families waiting months. It was agreed that further information would be provided on current figures.
- The Department for Work and Pensions pay eligible individuals in the private rented sector a set amount determined by the local housing allowance which is set by government. The private rented sector team work to sustain tenancies and schemes are available for landlords to continue with tenancies. It was agreed that details of the schemes would be circulated.

The Director of Housing provided assurance that the City Mayor had written to Ministers on two occasions regarding the additional pressures of asylum seekers needing support for accommodation when the outcome of their case is positive and agreed that a further letter could be written to new Ministers. It was also noted that the Chief Operating Officer is the East Midlands representative and meets directly with Ministers to raise issues.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Additional information to be circulated to Members.
- The Commission request that a letter be sent to Ministers regarding asylum cases.
- The Commission request that officers explore and consider the Leeds temporary accommodation model in relation to bed and breakfast.

93. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT & ADAPTATIONS UPDATE

The Head of Service presented the report, and it was noted that:

- The process to determine the need for adaptations is carried out by occupational therapist in the social care and education division. They will conduct an assessment of the individuals needs to identify the level of support and required adaptations.
- Adaptions required for council tenants and under £1k will be completed by the housing division on equal priority. Adaptations over £1k, such as stair lifts and shower rooms etc. will be completed in priority order. The occupational therapist will allocate points depending on circumstances, but end of life and life limiting cases are often highest priority.
- The order to complete adaptations is continuously changing dependent on priority and therefore not determined by a waiting list. The service aims to work

as quickly as possible to ensure all adaptations are met and those with least priority also have work completed to meet their needs.

- The Council is committed to delivering adaptations to meet the needs of tenants and has allocated £1.2m-£1.3m each year from the Housing Revenue Account over recent years. This includes funding provision for the adapt-to-let scheme where properties are identified to be able to be reconfigured to be adapted or where they are currently partially adapted and can be made fully adapted.
- The housing build programme commits to deliver 10% of new builds that meet full wheelchair standards and planning gain also requires adapted properties to be delivered through private sector developments.
- The disabled facilities grant is available to deliver adaptations for non-council tenants although this is a means tested fund and government limit contributions with a cap of £30k. For individuals who live in private rented accommodation, housing association properties or owner-occupied homes, the social care and education division will commission minor adaptations to be completed directly and major works can be self-funded or applications can be made to the disabled facilities grant.
- The government have allocated £1.861m million in recent years and the Council have contributed to increase the budget to enable more people to receive financial support to adaptations.
- Customer feedback is usually positive when adaptations are completed but the benefits and impacts have not always been identified. A feedback questionnaire has therefore recently been implemented to gather data and further information can be shared with the Commission on the impact in future.
- An Adaptation Strategy is being developed and key themes have been identified. It is intended to share for consultation in the coming months and further information will be shared with the Commission.

In response to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:

- Prior to adaptations taking place, tenants are required to sign to acknowledge the works to be completed to meet their needs. Work will be assessed by housing officers from a technical perspective to ensure it meets the required specification and the occupational therapist is required to assess and agree to sign off the adaptation to ensure it meets the tenants' requirements. If a tenant is not satisfied with the completed work, the occupational therapist will deal with the complaint and can be escalated to the Ombudsman.
- Adaptions for council tenants will be undertaken by in-house craft teams or a council procured contractor. For adaptions utilising the disabled facilities grant, the council can act as an agency service to appoint a contractor, or an individual can identify and appoint an independent contractor that meet conditions.
- An extension to a property is usually determined as necessary where an individual requires ground floor living and where the occupational therapist has determined the current footprint of the property cannot be reconfigured to meet the individuals needs.
- The Housing Revenue Account budget is monitored and reviewed periodically. On current analysis it is likely that actual spend for 2024/25 will be similar to recent years.
- A breakdown of total wheelchair accessible new build properties as part of the councils housing acquisition and new build programme is available and was agreed to be shared.
- A dashboard is used to highlight properties that have been adapted and

therefore ineligible for the right to buy scheme. It was agreed that further information would be provided to the number of properties and consideration on how to ensure tenants are informed when adaptations are being considered.

Members were reminded to share casework with officers directly to investigate.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Additional information be circulated.
- Further update to be provided on feedback of the impact adaptations have and the development of the adaptations strategy.

94. WHO GETS SOCIAL HOUSING?

The Head of Service presented the report, and it was noted that:

- The report covers the period 2023-24, and the snapshot provided was accurate on 1 April 2024. The number of households on the register at that time was 6682 which was an 11% increase compared to the previous year.
- Overcrowding remained the biggest cause for joining the register. Overcrowded households account for 58% of the applications on the register, which was consistent with the previous year. The number of statutory and critically overcrowded households has increased by 24% from 197 to 245 in the last 12 months.
- The Easymove scheme was introduced in May 2023 to help address overcrowding. This has worked well, successfully managing 9 mutual exchanges and saved £63,000 in associated costs. The target this year is 10 mutual exchanges and by the end of July 2024, 4 mutual exchanges had occurred so it is hoped that the target will be surpassed.
- The need for all type of housing is high and demand outstrips supply. The highest need is for 2-bedroom accommodation – 33% of those on the register require this housing. Demand for houses is higher than that for flats or maisonettes so there was a lower wait for this type of accommodation.
- Housing need in all areas of the city is high, but needs are highest in Abbey Ward, Wycliffe Ward and Castle Ward where the highest proportion of people on the housing register are awarded the highest priority (Band 1). The lowest need is in Knighton Ward and Aylestone Wards, with the lowest proportion of people on the housing register awarded Band 1.
- Housing demand differs to housing need. This is where people want to live and the bidding patterns show that Western, Braunstone Park & Rowley Fields and Eyres Monsell have highest demand, but the housing needs in the area are lower. It was highlighted that further information on breakdown within wards could be provided.
- The service would like to increase stock of adapted accommodation and is working on this. The need for wheelchair adapted accommodation vastly outstripped the supply. Waiting times have reduced for this type of accommodation however there is a disparity between the number of Fully Wheelchair Accessible need applicants on the register achieving lets compared to those requiring other types of accommodation.
- Of all lettings achieved in the 2023/24 period – 74% went to Band 1, 20% to Band 2 and 6% to Band 3. 53% of all lettings were to households who were homeless or at risk of being homeless. The figures are proportionate to previous years and reflects the support given to homeless households to

secure settled accommodation.

- Compared to 2022/23, there was a 4 month increase in waiting times for a 1 bedroom flat, a 5 month increase for a 2 bedroom flat and an 8 month increase for a 3 bedroom house.
- Lettings to Housing Association and HomeCome accounts for 23% of all lettings in this period. This was proportionate to corresponding lettings in the previous year. PA Housing was the largest provider with 39% of lets.
- The Housing Allocation Policy allows housing allocation priority based on circumstances that merit rehousing such as risk or emergency or best use of the housing stock. The number of direct lettings was 32%, an increase of 6% since last year, predominantly as a result of homelessness issues. Direct lets to homeless households accounted for 76% of the total direct lettings.
- There is significant need for social housing in the city and the service is actively working to identify suitable accommodation. This has required a flexible approach due to changing demand and a proactive acquisition and new build programme to help meet rising demand.

The Commission expressed their concerns of the ongoing difficulties and increasing waiting times for residents on the housing register and in response to questions and comments it was noted that:

- A cross service approach is taken and performance is monitored to ensure voids are turned around quickly to be re-let. There may be occasions where it is more difficult to let quickly as additional works may be needed or constraints on services.
- The Council permit Housing Associations to utilise the IT system to advertise and allocate available properties to let at no charge, so whilst it is not a formal requirement it is assumed likely that much of their stock is let through HomeCome. The Local Authority have around 19k properties and let around 900 per year, whilst Housing Association have around 11k properties in the city and around 250 are let through HomeCome.
- Succession of tenancies is governed by the Housing Act. Services liaise with tenants and review regularly to identify alternative options and will work proactively and give priority to those who may seek to find a more suitable size accommodation if their current property is larger than needed to allow others on the housing register to utilise the space, however this cannot be compelled and whilst smaller social housing may have financial benefits to relocate, a larger property may continue to be more financially viable than the private sector.

The Director of Housing highlighted that further information regarding details of the formal scheme to enable tenants to move to more suitable accommodation could be shared with the Commission.

AGREED:

- The Commission noted the report.
- Additional information on the to be circulated.

95. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair reminded Members to raise items to be considered for the work programme and noted that the next meeting would take place on 12 November, although a site visit and inquiry day would take place in between.

96. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 19.30.