

Leicester  
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the  
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: WEDNESDAY, 10 DECEMBER 2014 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)  
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany  
Councillor Joshi

Councillor Mayat  
Councillor Potter

Councillor Westley

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly: Assistant City Mayor, Housing

\* \* \* \* \*

**31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor V Patel and the Director of Housing.

**32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were asked to declare any interests they had in the business to be discussed on the agenda.

Councillor Westley declared that members of his family were council tenants.

Councillor Aqbany declared that a family member was a council lessee.

Councillor Joshi declared that a family member was a council tenant.

Councillor Newcombe declared that he was a council lessee.

Councillor Potter declared that she and a member of her family were council tenants.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, the interests were not considered so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Councillors'

judgement of the public interest. Councillors were not therefore required to withdraw from the meeting during consideration and discussion on the agenda items.

### **33. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held 4 November 2014 be confirmed as a correct record.

### **34. PETITIONS**

In accordance with Council procedures, it was reported that no petitions had been received by the Monitoring Officer.

### **35. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE**

In accordance with the Council's procedures, it was reported that a question had been received from Councillor Willmott. Councillor Willmott's question was as follows:

"Please will the Housing Scrutiny Commission consider expanding the scope of the Empty Homes' Strategy in the light of the points I will make in asking this question?"

Councillor Willmott added that he questioned how it might be possible to increase the number of empty homes that were being brought back into use. He stated that statistics had previously indicated that there were approximately 10,000 people on the housing waiting list with approximately 5,000 empty homes in the city, though he acknowledged that these statistics might now be slightly out of date. Councillor Willmott commended some good work that was being carried out by the Empty Homes' Officers and questioned whether more officers could be recruited as that there was evidence that investment in this area brought positive outcomes. Councillor Willmott requested that the Housing Scrutiny Commission look further into this.

Members of the commission supported Councillor Willmott's request and it was agreed that a scoping document to consider this further be brought back to the commission. Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor, Housing also indicated his support for the scrutiny commission to look further into this.

RESOLVED:

that it be agreed for a scoping document to consider ways to increase the number of empty homes being brought back into use, be brought back to the Housing Scrutiny Commission

### **36. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET (INCLUDING CAPITAL PROGRAMME) 2015/16**

Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor, Housing presented the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2015/16. He explained that a rent increase of 2.2% was proposed, which was the lowest proposed rent increase in the previous 6 years. He added that he had hoped to avoid an increase in rent and was aware of the financial difficulties that people were experiencing. He also recognised that most the council tenants did not qualify for housing benefit, but that there was a need to maintain investment in housing stock. Assistant City Mayor Connelly welcomed the comments from the Tenants and Leaseholders Forum and agreed to their request to freeze the communal cleaning service charge until after the Housing Scrutiny Communal Cleaning Task Group had concluded its work and their recommendations had been put forward.

Members generally commented that the rent increase was regrettable but necessary in order for the council to continue to invest in their properties. Councillor Potter commented however, that she would not support the rent increase and asked for consideration to be given to people who did not receive housing benefit. She added that some people were on very low wages, received no financial help and would not be in a position to pay increased rent.

Some members expressed views that private landlords generally charged higher rents and did not have the same high standards that the city council did, though a comment was made that this was not the case in the Netherhall area of the city.

A reference was made to the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum and a concern was expressed that the forum did not represent every estate in the city. There followed some discussion as to how best to ensure that people were aware that the forum existed and as to whether there was a better system for representing tenants. It was agreed that this would be subject to a task group review and a scoping document would be brought to a future meeting of the commission. It was further agreed to ask Councillor Potter to seek residents who would like to engage with the review.

The Chair questioned as to how the proposed 2.2% rent increase compared to other local authorities. The Head of Finance, Adult Social Care and Housing, responded that the figure had not been checked against other local authorities' proposals, but this could be investigated.

Concerns were expressed relating to the possible impact of the Transforming Neighbourhood Services strategy and whether older people would need to travel further to their housing office if there were more shared council buildings. There were also concerns as to whether there would be confidentiality issues if services shared the same buildings. Assistant City Mayor Connelly responded that he would not pre-judge the outcome of the consultation, but he felt that with care, it would be possible to run all services from the same building and maintain confidentiality. The Transforming Neighbourhood Services Strategy

would be brought to the relevant scrutiny commissions for consideration. The Scrutiny Policy Officer reported that the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission were looking into the Transforming Neighbourhood Services and he offered to copy the Housing Scrutiny Commission into the appropriate information.

In response to concerns raised in relation to private landlords, Assistant City Mayor Connelly responded that the scrutiny commission had looked into this before. There were examples where private landlords and also some Housing Association landlords were not investing in their properties; and this had shown up in councillors' case work. He added that 2.2% was the lowest rent increase that the council could afford to implement without there being a detrimental effect on investment in council housing stock.

A suggestion was made that the Housing Scrutiny Commission carry out a piece of work on Housing Associations and it was agreed that this should be added to the work programme.

Concern was raised relating to a particular case of a family, with a child with severe disabilities, who were told that their property could not be adapted to meet the child's needs. This was resolved after the councillor intervened. Assistant City Mayor Connelly responded that he was disappointed at what had happened, but there were 22000 houses in the council stock and this was not indicative across the city. He believed that the council provided an excellent service.

RESOLVED:

- 1) that the commission note the proposed 2.2% rent increase;
- 2) that the commission welcome the freezing of the communal cleaning service charge until after the Housing Scrutiny Communal Cleaning Task Group has put forward their recommendations;
- 3) that it be agreed for a review to be carried out relating to how best the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum could represent tenants and for Councillor Potter to be asked to seek residents who might wish to engage in the review; and
- 4) for some work in relation to Housing Associations be added to the work programme.

### **37. VOIDS IMPROVEMENT PROJECT UPDATE**

The commission received a presentation from the Project Manager, Voids Improvement Project. A copy of the presentation is attached at the end of these minutes.

In respect of properties that were refused after being made ready to let, the commission heard that in order to arrange a prompt re-let, there was currently

a pilot project whereby the top five people from the list could view the property at the same time. To avoid raising any expectations, it was important that any communications that were sent out to interested viewers were clear.

A concern was raised that multiple viewing created ill-feeling which was passed onto the ward councillors and officers responded that the system was still only a pilot project and would be fully evaluated.

The Project Manager explained that at the end of the previous year, it was taking 54 days to turn around an empty property; this figure had now been reduced to 36 days. The new target would be 25 days. The commission heard that while work was being carried out to minimise the void re-let time, it was also necessary to keep some properties empty because of the Tower Block programme and the need to decant people into alternative accommodation whilst the improvements were carried out.

Congratulations were given on the work that had been carried out to reduce the void times and a member enquired as to whether comparisons had been made with other local authorities. The commission heard that a comparison had been made with Nottingham City Homes. The Leicester City Council void times compared favourably with Nottingham, however the information was collected differently so it was difficult to compare times accurately.

Concerns were raised that in the past, tenants had moved into a newly refurbished property to find that there were problems with faulty workmanship which necessitated the need for further work to be carried out. Officers expressed disappointment to hear of this and asked in future they be made aware of any similar problems. A member expressed alternative views that work on empty properties was improving and that few complaints had been received from tenants.

It was noted that some properties were left in such a poor state that a considerable amount of work had to be carried out before new tenants could move in. It was queried whether the cost of the refurbishment was reclaimed from the tenants responsible for the damage, and Assistant City Mayor Connelly responded that this was very difficult to do where a council tenant had been evicted. However officers confirmed that whilst it was a long process, the council did their best to track people down in order to claim back their costs. A question was raised as to why the council allowed the situation to occur in the first place and it was explained that there were capacity issues for staff because of the size of the housing stock. However officers explained that they were looking at a pilot scheme whereby an officer would go and visit the property once a tenant had given notice.

Concerns were raised that after a tenant died, the families were given insufficient time to clear out the property and also were charged rental on behalf of the deceased. Officer explained that invoices were made out to the estate of the deceased and there was no obligation for the relatives to pay the rental in those circumstances.

RESOLVED:

- 1) that the commission note the report and congratulate the department for work carried out and progress made on the Void Improvement Project.
- 2) that the commission request a further progress report at a future meeting.

### **38. RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT - JULY 2014 TO SEPTEMBER 2014**

The Income Collection Manager presented a report relating to rent arrears for the period July to September 2014 and explained that the number of tenants with rent arrears was lower than at the same point in the previous year.

Members considered the report and a member expressed concern that people were being evicted because of non-payment of rent. Members heard that evictions were not carried out lightly, but were a last resort. Every effort was made to encourage tenants to engage with the council. Where people applied for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) for help arising from the Bedroom Tax, provided that they then went on to the Housing Register to down size, they would not be evicted. DHP could also be paid in other circumstances. As part of the interview process, officers also liaised with Children and Young People's Services and Adult Social Care and tenants were informed of the consequences but sometimes people chose not to engage with the process. In response to a query as to what happened to people if they were evicted, officers explained that they could seek help from Housing Options as their role was to provide temporary accommodation whilst investigations were ongoing. Single people might choose to go back to their families.

Members expressed concern that people experiencing financial difficulty and the general rise in rent arrears was a result of the government's welfare reforms. A query was raised as to how many people were making financial arrangements with Clockwise Credit Union and officers explained that the results were still very low which was disappointing. This would be reported back in the progress report for the third quarter.

RESOLVED:

- that the progress report be noted.

### **39. SCRUTINY REVIEW - PERFORMANCE OF THE COMMUNAL CLEANING SERVICE - TASK GROUP UPDATE**

The Scrutiny Policy Officer updated the commission on the meeting of the Communal Cleaning Service Task Group which had taken place on 9 December 2014. At the meeting there had been a presentation from the Cleaning Services Team, an extensive question and answer session and also helpful engagement from tenants

The Task Group were almost in a position to make their recommendations, but views of tenants and leaseholders were also being sought and they had stated

that they would not be able to meet in time to make the initial deadline of 5 January 2015. The Scrutiny Policy Officer asked Members to extend the deadline to give the tenants and leaseholders enough time to hold their meeting. Members agreed that the deadline could be moved back to March to facilitate this and thanked tenants for the contribution they were making to the review.

RESOLVED:

- 1) that the Commission note the Task Group update on the Performance of the Communal Cleaning Service; and
- 2) that it be agreed that the deadline for the Task Group report be put back to March 2015.

**40. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) SPENDING REVIEW AND HOUSING TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME (HTP)**

The Chair proposed that, due to time constraints, this item, along with the presentation on the Tenancy Management Improvement Programme and the Scrutiny Commission Work Programme be deferred to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission in January 2015.

RESOLVED:

that the items as detailed above be deferred to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission in January 2015

**41. TENANCY MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME**

This item was deferred to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission in January 2015.

**42. HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME**

This item was deferred to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission in January 2015.

**43. CLOSE OF MEETING**

The meeting closed at 8.08 pm.





# Minute Item 37



## VOID REPAIRS & PROPERTY LETTINGS

PERFORMANCE UPDATE & SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLANS

## BACKGROUND

PERFORMANCE 2013/14

At the end of 2013/14

- The average re-let time for routine voids was 54.5 days
- The number of voids held was 457
- The annual spend on materials was £842k
- 1239 properties had been let
- A challenge report had identified a number of areas for improvement including performance management, process, standards & specifications and use of resources

## VOIDS IMPROVEMENT

THE WORKSTREAMS

The VIP Project was set up consisting of 4 workstreams

- 1. Performance Management**
  - To improve management data
  - To review work area targets for all sections
- 2. Process**
  - To improve average re-let times
- 3. Standards & Specification**
  - To look at the way that capital works are conducted during the void period
  - To refresh minimum lettable standard and manage tenant expectations
- 4. Resources**
  - To improve the way in which the service uses its resources

## VOIDS IMPROVEMENT

THE WORK SO FAR

So far the project has

- Implemented voids capital kitchens project
- Improved management reporting information
- Reduced material spend by £255k
- Reduced void time by 16 days, saving £50k in rent loss & £30k Council Tax in first 6 months
- Conducted a benchmarking exercise of the minimum lettable standard
- Commissioned consultants Red Quadrant to map the allocations & voids processes and identify areas for improvement
- Contributed to corporate fleet review analysis

## PROCESS MAPS


ALLOCATIONS

<b>Tenant gives notice</b> Outgoing tenant gives 28 days notice of termination	<b>Create advert</b> Tenancy management officers produce approximately 60 adverts a week	<b>Advertise properties</b> Properties advertised on website and vacancy sheets produced	<b>Choice based Lettings cycle</b> The Choice based Lettings cycle runs from Weds to Mon. Applicant can bid for up to 3 properties per week	<b>Shortlisting</b> Tenancy management officers compile a shortlist of applicants for each property prioritised by banding
<b>Offer</b> Following eligibility check an offer letter is sent to the shortlisted applicant. Applicant can refuse offer	<b>Ready to Let</b> Notification received from Voids repairs that property is ready to let	<b>Escorted viewing</b> Estate management officers conduct escorted viewings. Prospective tenant can refuse at this point	<b>Sign up</b> Tenancy management officers carry out approx. 60 sign-ups per week	<b>Occupation</b> New tenant moves in. Average re-let time is calculated to this date

## PROCESS MAPS

PROPERTY REFURBISHMENT

<b>Tenant hands keys in</b> Tenant returns keys to Area office. Average re-let time calculated from the date the tenancy is terminated	<b>Property inspection</b> Voids technician inspects the property and specifies works required	<b>Clearance, Pest Control &amp; Asbestos</b> Property is cleaned, sent to pest control and surveyed for asbestos if required
<b>Works by other sections</b> Additional works required such as damp proofing, timber treatment, woodworm treatment	<b>Capital Programme Works</b> Capital programme works such as new kitchens, bathrooms, boilers and rewires are carried out	<b>Voids Works</b> Voids repairs works are carried out as per the specification
<b>Ready to Let</b> Notification is sent to Property Lettings team that property is ready to let		



# VOIDS CASE STUDY

## 3 BED HOUSE IN NEW PARKS



**The Property**

- Property became vacant following the eviction of the previous tenant
- The property required clearance of items left by the outgoing tenant before the voids work could commence.



**Living Room**

In the living room, the team

- Cleaned switches & sockets
- Removed tenants own poorly laid laminate flooring
- Removed fire surround and made good the wall
- Patched plaster on wall & ceiling
- Renewed internal doors



**Hallway**

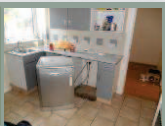
In the hallway, the team

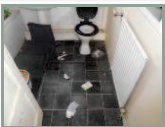
- Cleaned switches & sockets
- Tested smoke alarms
- Repaired stair nosing
- Patched plaster on wall & ceiling
- Boxed in stair balustrades

**Kitchen**

In the kitchen, the team

- Replaced internal doors
- Replaced damaged wall tiles
- Capped off gas pipe and washing machine pipe
- Repaired base unit and wall units and replaced worktop
- Cleaned and applied mould treatment to units and sink

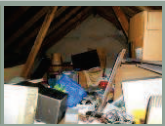




**Bathroom**

In the bathroom, the team

- Removed shower, capped off pipework and tested fan
- Checked flue strapping on boiler
- Replaced damaged wall tiles
- Patched plaster on wall & ceiling, renewed internal door
- Replaced vinyl floor tiles as per asbestos method statement



**Loft**

In the loft, the team

- Cleared all items left by outgoing tenants



**Master Bedroom**

In bedroom 1, the team

- Replaced broken window and fitted plasterboard above doorway
- Replaced skirting board
- Plaster-boarded & skimmed blocked doorway
- Renewed internal door



**Bedroom 2**

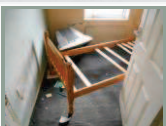
In the bedroom 2, the team

Plaster-boarded & skimmed blocked doorway

Removed cupboard door, architrave, fire surround and made good wall

Patched plaster on wall & ceiling

Renewed internal doors & fixed skirting board



**Bedroom 3**

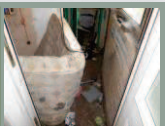
In bedroom 3, the team


- Cleaned switches & sockets
- Removed nails and screws from walls
- Patched plaster on wall & ceiling
- Supplied and fit window restrictor
- Renewed internal door

**Outbuilding**

In the outbuilding, the team

- Renewed the shed door
- Renewed door locks
- Removed timber store from shed roof






**Garden**

In the garden, the team

- Capped & locked gas meter
- Secure front door and replaced trim
- Renewed front fence
- Removed unauthorised door and window



**Garden continued**

- Remove structure around pond
- Remove brick wall
- Dig up and raise patio area
- Clear and trim garden
- Fill and level pond



