



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2015 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aldred

Councillor Aqbany

Also in attendance:

Councillor Connelly – Assistant City Mayor Housing

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38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Byrne, Cank and Joshi.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they might have in the business to be discussed. No such declarations were received.

40. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held on 2nd November 2015 be confirmed as a correct record.

41. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no announcements from the Chair.

42. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received in accordance with Council procedures.

43. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer reported the no questions, representations or statements of case had been received in accordance with Council procedures.

44. AREA MANAGERS' BRIEFING

John Thomson, Centre Area Manager gave a presentation on the work of the Centre Housing Management Area. The Centre Area covered the Castle, Belgrave, Rushey Mead, Stoneygate, Spinney Hills, and Wycliffe wards.

The presentation covered the following topics:-

- Details of the area, including population, number of households, density and number of council properties.
- The tenure and housing stock in the area.
- The council housing stock profile.
- Ethnicity/English proficiency
- Residents/Tenants age profile
- Household profile
- Private sector empty homes
- Council Properties excess beds/under occupation profile
- New developments
- Indices of multiple deprivation, including fuel poverty, life expectancy and employment.
- Planned Capital Works 2015/16
- Key Achievements for 2014-15
- Environmental Improvements 2014/15
- Challenges in the future

In response to Members' questions it was noted:-

- a) The Tower Block refurbishments were on schedule. Repairs to lifts in blocks being refurbished could be a challenge.
- b) Issues of anti-social behaviour in Goscote House from non-residents were being addressed and the situation was improving. Vacant flats in other blocks were offered to tenants in Goscote House where possible.
- c) A bid had been made to the Service Transformation Board to recruit 4 staff for 3 years to help reduce the number of empty properties in the private sector and to bring them back into use. The Department

received 20 referrals a month and bringing these empty back into use was actively being pursued under the Empty Homes Strategy. Many owners of empty properties co-operated voluntarily with the Council in making them available for occupation, but where owners did not co-operate, the Council would use its powers of Compulsory Purchase as a measure of the last resort. This power had been used four times in recent weeks.

The Chair thanked the Area Manager for the presentation.

AGREED:

That the Housing staff and the ASB Team continue their efforts to reduce incidents of ASB in Goscote House.

45. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENT SETTING AND BUDGET 2016-17 CONSULTATION

The Director of Housing submitted a report seeking the views of Members on proposals for setting the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2016/17, increasing service charges (excluding heating and cleaning) and garage rents by 0.9% and reductions in the 2016/17 spending from options set out in table 6 of the report.

It was noted that the budget would be set in the context of the government requirement that rents are reduced by 1% for each of the next four years (2016-2020). The Executive were proposing that the first of the four Rent Reduction Budgets is set as a balance budget with no use of reserves. The Executive were also proposing to consider the outcome of the work on an HRA Spending Review Phase 3 in the summer of 2016 to identify a total reduction in spending of c£11.7m pa by 2019/20, compared to the current business plan. Consideration of Spending Review Phase 3 will enable the Executive to agree a 3 year framework for future annual budgets up to and including 2019/20. Any proposed changes would be subject to consultation in the future.

Members made the following comments:-

- a) STAR was a valued service and with the implementation of Universal Credits, the service could be under further pressure.
- b) Some landscaped areas had suffered from overgrown trees and bushes and concerns were expressed at reducing landscaping provisions.
- c) The Task Group would be looking at the length of voids to ensure that homes were returned to use as soon as possible to minimise loss of rent income and reduce extra costs in paying Council Tax on void properties.

In response to Members' comments it was stated that:-

- a) That the 3 current staff vacancies for STAR would continue until the

report on the challenges facing the service was received. The report would assess the impact on the service of the ongoing vacancies and a decision on them would be taken at that time.

- b) A number of landscaping improvements on many estates had already reduced the need for landscaping maintenance works. The budget for landscaping works had been increased in recent years and had made significant progress, which gave confidence in being able to suggest a reduction in budget now.
- c) Tenants who felt their kitchens or bathrooms were in poor condition were able to submit requests for improvements and these would be considered alongside the planned kitchen replacement programme.
- d) There was no proposal to reduce the budget provision for works on concrete paths.
- e) The replacement of inefficient boilers was carried out under a different line in the capital programme and the proposed 10% reduction was felt to be achievable without any detrimental effect upon tenants. This would be monitored.

AGREED:

- 1) That the report be received and the Commission support the proposals for the HRA budget for 2016/17, the proposals for increases in service charges and that the proposals for budget reductions be noted subject to the comments made by Members.
- 2) The Commission be updated on future progress of the budget as it progresses.

46. RENT ARREARS QUARTERLY REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a quarterly progress report on Rent Arrears - July 2015 to September 2015.

It was noted that :-

- a) The cash amount owing as at 2nd October was £1,708m which was 8.8% lower than in the same quarter last year.
- b) The number of tenants in arrears was 4,883, which was 0.75% less than the same quarter last year.
- c) The number of tenants in more serious debt, (owing more than 7 weeks rent) was 1,492, some 27.7% lower than this quarter last year.
- d) For the current financial year from April '14 to March '15, c. £1.235m extra (based on latest estimates) rent will be collectable as a result of

the “bedroom tax.”

- e) £163,541 was paid by Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP’s) for all Council tenants, of which £128,136 was for those affected by the Bedroom Tax, from April to September 2015.
- f) The arrears among those affected by the Bedroom Tax had decreased by about £20k since 6th April 2014.
- g) There were 28 evictions carried out for non-payment of rent from 6th October to 2 October 2015, compared to 51 in the same period last year.

Members were pleased to see the number of evictions was down on the previous report.

Following Members questions it was reported that:-

- a) If families were evicted they were entitled under legislation to request the local authority to determine if there was duty to provide accommodation. In cases involving children there was a requirement to provide temporary accommodation until the application was investigated and determined. However, evidence suggested that many families that were evicted did not approach the Council to be housed after being evicted.
- b) Staff were being proactive in profiling tenants and were contacting single tenants to advise that they may be affected by changes in their circumstances under Universal Credit.
- c) The introduction of mandatory direct debits or credit union arrangements for new tenants from February 2016 may mitigate some of the risks for rent arrears under the new universal credit system.
- d) Officers had visited other local authorities with a profile similar to Leicester to learn examples of good practice. This identified the relationship between council’s and the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) as a potential weakness. Consequently officers had contacted the DWP to devise protocols for sharing information where tenants’ arrears were increasing. There is a 7 week delay period for new claimants. The Council were participating in a pilot Trusted Partner Scheme whereby the tenant can get paid earlier so the Council can get the rent payments before the tenant goes into arrears.
- e) Universal Credit claimants received their first claim payment within 6-8 weeks of making their claim. Future payments were then paid on the monthly anniversary of their first payment. Universal Credit was paid monthly in arrears based upon an assessment in the last week of the monthly period. This meant that if a tenancy was cancelled in the first three weeks of the assessment period, when the assessment was

carried out in the fourth week, the DWP would not pay for the three weeks the claimant was a council tenant. Conversely, if the tenancy started in the last week of the assessment period the DWP would pay 4 weeks of payments.

AGREED:

That the Commission welcomes the reduction in rent arrears and expressed gratitude to the staff for their efforts in achieving this. The Commission also recognised the challenges to be faced in the year ahead arising from the changes arising from the introduction of the Universal Credit payments.

47. MANAGEMENT OF GYPSY AND TRAVELLERS SITES (UPDATE)

The Director of Housing submitted a report providing an update on the operation of 2 new Gypsy and Travellers' Sites at Redhill Nook and Greengate Nook and the refurbished Meynells Gorse site. The sites opened on 13 April 2015, 20 April 2015 and 15 June 2015 respectively.

It was noted that:-

- a) The Gypsy and Traveller Team consisted of 3 officers based at Meynells Gorse, but they visited the other sites on a daily basis to carry out inspections , give advice to tenants, escort contractors on sites etc.
- b) There had only been 2 terminations of tenancy since the sites had opened.
- c) The issues arising at the sites were now reducing following the initial settling in period.
- d) The multi-agency approach was producing positive changes and these were outlined in the report.
- e) Improvements in CCTV technology meant the CCTV systems in use at the sites could be redesigned which could reduce the number of cameras but maintain the same level of coverage. Should this occur, a discussion to advise residents of the actions to be taken will be undertaken in the early part of 2016.
- f) Residents had access to a central hub of advice and help from staff covering multi-agency services. Education officers were providing assistance to residents in addressing the issues in making applications for Elective Home Education.
- g) Each plot had access to an individual area in the amenity block which provided a kitchen or kitchenette, a day space and a bathroom shower facility. The amenity blocks were not designed to accommodate sleeping arrangements.

AGREED:

1. That the report be received and that the improvements made be welcomed, particularly in relation to reducing incidents of Anti-Social Behaviour.
2. That the Commission thank the staff involved for their work to achieve the improvements at the sites.
3. That arrangements be made for the Chair and Vice Chair to revisit the sites to observe the improvements that have been made to the sites.

48. REVIEW OF THE LOCAL TENANCY MANAGEMENT SERVICE

The Director of Housing submitted a report on the outcome of the Local Tenancy Management Service Review.

It was noted that:-

- a) There were no proposals to change the level of service to tenants, but there would be a better definition of the services to be provided from a local base and ways in which they could be delivered more efficiently had been identified.
- b) The location of local housing offices was still being considered as part of Transforming Neighbourhood Services Programme which had a consultation programme as it moved around the City. Details of these were outlined in the report.
- c) There would be a (organisational) staff review which was not within the scope of this Commission. Subject to staff consultation, the 6 Area Managers were to be replaced with 3 Neighbourhood Housing Managers and the tenancy management service would be managed in three areas from the summer of 2016. This internal change would not affect the decisions on area offices.
- d) While there were no proposals to reduce the level of tenancy management services, this issue would need to be considered as part of the budget setting for the next four financial years in response to the 1% rent reduction. This issue would be considered in budget reports and the Commission would be invited to comment upon proposals as part of the budget process.
- e) The proposals identified 35 tenancy management and tasks that were expected from the Local Tenancy Management Service, but here was no reduction in the range of services that would be delivered from a local base.

Following Members comments, it was noted:-

- a) That the staff consultation process would be completed by March 2016 and the new structures introduced in July/August 2016.
- b) Although the three proposed Tenancy Management Areas contained differing numbers of properties the workload and demands within each area was approximately the same. For example, the number properties requiring fire inspections were not evenly distributed between the three areas and this placed a greater burden on staff in the areas where these properties were located
- c) Staff would receive appropriate training where this was required arising from the proposals.

AGREED:

That the proposal ne noted and the Commission receive and update on the implementation of the review at the August 2016 meeting of the Commission.

49. UPDATE ON COMMUNAL CLEANING

The Director of Housing submitted an update report on improving the Communal Cleaning standard and the issues raised by the Housing Communal Cleaning Task Group which reported its findings to the Commission in March 2015. Representatives of the City Cleansing Team were present at the meeting to comment upon specific actions in response to the Task Group recommendations relating to the contractor.

It was noted that:

- a) A company had been engaged to carry out finishing works to dwellings and blocks of flats which improved the appearance and maintenance of communal areas.
- b) A programme of work for improving communal flooring areas for 2015/16 included Apollo Close, Apollo Court, Berners Street and Mercury Close. A further programme of works for communal flooring areas planned for 2016/17, subject to budget approval was detailed in the report.
- c) A programme of deep cleaning had also been carried out and details of the full list of block of flats that had received this were detailed in Appendix 3 of the report.
- d) New backpack pulse mops and micro fibre cloths had been trialled and found to reduce the volume of water used in the cleaning process which was having beneficial effects particularly in those parts of the city clean and fresh water was not readily available for cleaning purposes.

- e) The Building Cleaning Team was being remodelled to have a dedicated resource with a view to obtaining membership of the British Institute of Cleaning Services (BICSc) and all cleaners trained to the BICSc's national standards.
- f) It was expected that the operational structural changes would be complete by February 2016. It was envisaged that the tariffs and charges for cleaning would be reviewed when the current cleaning programme had been completed. Any changes would be subject to consultation.

In response to Members' questions it was stated that:-

- a) It was not intended to reduce the frequency of the cleaning programme and this would be supported by reinforcing conditions of tenancy.
- b) The current planned programme of works could take up to 5 years to complete.
- c) The dedicated cleaning resources were being increased from 2 to 3 teams and supervisors would undertake monitoring of cleaning standards with tenants.
- d) Local people were encouraged to apply for vacancies in housing teams, but the majority of cleaning vacancies were part-time.

AGREED:

- 1) That the update on the progress made on the improvements to the cleaning of the communal areas be welcomed and that officers consider the issues raised by Members above.
- 2) That a further update report on the progress with improvements and how the new equipment is operating be submitted in 6-9 months' time including feedback from residents on the works carried out to determine if the criteria has been met.
- 3) That St Austell Flats be considered for inclusion in the programme of improved works to communal floor areas and a deep clean and Rona Gardens flats also be considered for a deep clean.

50. SCOPING DOCUMENT FOR SHORT REVIEW OF VOIDS PERFORMANCE

Members received the draft scoping report for a proposed short review of progress and performance relating to void times in city council housing stock.

AGREED:

that the terms of references in the scoping report be endorsed and that they be submitted to the Overview Select Committee for

approval.

51. WORK PROGRAMME OF THE SCRUTINY COMMISSION

The Scrutiny Support Officer submitted a document that outlined the Housing Scrutiny Commission's Work Programme for 2015/16.

AGREED:

That the programme be received and noted.

52. CLOSE OF MEETING

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 8.50pm