



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 4 JULY 2016 at 6:15 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Newcombe (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Joshi

Councillor Cank

In Attendance

Councillor Connelly – Assistant City Mayor Housing

* * * * *

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aqbany and Byrne.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they might have in the business to be discussed.

Councillor Joshi declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members were council tenants.

Councillor Cank declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members were council tenants.

Councillor Newcombe declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting in that family members 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 of the agenda items.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

that the minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission held 18 April 2016 be confirmed as a correct record.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

AGREED:

that the terms of reference for the Housing Scrutiny Commission be noted.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION 2016/17

AGREED:

that the membership of the Housing Scrutiny Commission for 2016/17 be noted.

6. DATES OF COMMISSION MEETINGS 2016/17

AGREED:

that the dates for meetings for the Housing Scrutiny Commission for 2016/17 be noted.

7. PETITIONS

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

8. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

In accordance with the Council procedures, it was reported that no questions, representations or statements of case had been received by the Monitoring Officer.

9. COMMITTEE PROCESSES - PRESENTATION

The Democratic Support Officer delivered a presentation which outlined some of the procedural aspects of how the Commission worked. A copy of the presentation is attached at the back of these minutes.

10. HOUSING DIVISION STRUCTURE

The Director of Housing presented a report which provided details of the senior management structure within the Housing Division. He advised that this was the same structure chart that had been brought to the previous meeting of the Commission, but he had been asked to provide a brief overview at the first meeting of the Commission in the new municipal year, for the benefit of new Members.

Members heard that there had been changes to the management structure which had enabled some responsibilities to be re-allocated. The Director explained that a number of issues presented the division with significant challenges; for example:

- The one percent rent reduction would result in a loss of income to the Council of £27m over the next four years.
- Universal Credit placed pressures on tenants and their ability to pay their rent.
- The benefit cap meant that people who received housing benefit may no longer be eligible.
- 'Right to Buy' – the Council were selling approximately 250 – 300 properties per year, a figure that was likely to increase significantly and affect the Council's income.
- High Value Vacant Homes Levy – this was likely to affect three bed semi-detached house and above.
- The setting of rental levels according to tenant's income – this would result in increased administration costs because of the checks that staff would need to carry out.

The Chair referred to the staffing structure and asked the Director to send him details of the number of staff in each of the different service areas.

In response to a question, the Director confirmed that officers in the Housing Division networked with housing associations and other local authorities to share ideas and practice. This was something that Vijay Desor, one of the Heads of Service, was involved in.

A Member questioned whether any closures in housing offices were anticipated. The Director advised that the Transforming Neighbourhood Services project looked at combining buildings to deliver services, as had happened for example at the Pork Pie Library. It was a question as to whether it was preferable to have buildings or service provision and savings could be made by combining buildings.

A Member questioned whether, with the reduction of housing income, the Council would be able to maintain the high level of services it currently provided. The Director responded that there needed to be a planned approach but it had been shown that with the changes that had been made over the past two years, changing structures and a staffing review, savings could be achieved. Councillor Connelly, Assistant City Mayor for Housing added that in view of the savings that needed to be made, there was a significant challenge to face and it would be remiss not to look at housing offices in attempts to make savings.

A Member questioned in relation to the anticipated increase in 'Right to Buy',

whether it would it be possible to restrict tenants' qualifying period so that they had to wait longer before they could apply to purchase the property. The Director explained that the two year qualifying period had been set by the government and could not be changed. The Assistant City Mayor added that any attempt by a local authority to set up an 'Arms Length Management Organisation' (ALMO) with a view to avoid the 'Right to Buy' legislation, would be blocked by the government.

AGREED:

that the information on the structure of the Housing Division be noted.

Action to be taken	By
In relation to the Housing Division Structure, for information on the members of staff in each of the different services area to be sent to the Commission.	Director of Housing.

11. RENT ARREARS PROGRESS REPORT - APRIL 2015 TO MARCH 2016

The Commission considered a report which provided an update on progress made in relation to rent arrears for 2015/16.

Vijay Desor, Head of Service, summarised the report and stated that evictions were down nearly 50 % compared to the previous year. Officers were working to reduce these; they were a last resort and there was a robust scheme to ensure that every step was taken to prevent evictions taking place. Members were pleased to hear that most tenants worked closely with Housing to avoid such measures being taken. In response to a question, the Head of Service stated that couples and families were more likely to engage with the Service than single people who tended to be more transient.

Members heard that there were continuing challenges because of Universal Credit which continued to be rolled out in Leicester. The Service worked closely with the Revenue and Benefits team to engage with people who were likely to be included in the next stage of the roll out, to help prepare them for the changes.

One change related to the system for paying rent. Tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit, had their rent paid by the council, but with Universal Credit, the tenant had the responsibility for paying their own rent. They needed to include housing costs when they claimed for Universal Credit, but some people were omitting to do this. The benefit agency did not backdate housing costs where the claimant made an error, and the claimant would need to submit a new claim. Members were urged, where possible, to tell people that if they were currently claiming Housing Benefit, they needed to claim for housing costs when they submitted their Universal Credit claim. A Member suggested

that there should be a publicity campaign to raise awareness. The Head of Service explained that they tried to use a combination of methodologies and found it most effective to reach out to the target group that was being affected. Officers tried hard to educate people so that they understood what was happening. In response to a suggestion, Members heard that the council could not add any information to the Universal Credit webpage because that was owned by the government, but officers would check with Revenue and Benefits to see whether there was a clear message on their webpage.

The Chair queried whether there were comparative figures for how Leicester compared with other Local Authorities and was advised that recent information showed that for rent arrears, Leicester performed very well, coming second to Wolverhampton and in the top quartile of performing authorities.

The Chair asked for details of the total rent arrears that were written off and asked for this information to be sent to Commission Members.

AGREED:

- 1) that the report be noted; and
- 2) that In respect of the Rent Arrears Progress Report for 2015/16, the figure relating to written off rent arrears be circulated to Members of the Commission.

Action	By
In respect of the Rent Arrears Progress Report, 2015/16, the figure relating to written off arrears to be circulated to Members of the Commission.	Vijay Desor, Head of Service

12. EMPTY HOMES 2016

The Director of Housing submitted a report which provided information on empty homes in Leicester. Simon Nicholls, Head of Service presented the report and stated that there was a 20 stage, clearly defined process for bringing an empty home back into use. The issuing of a compulsory purchase order was always a last resort.

The Housing Division had an Empty Homes Strategy that targeted homes that had been empty in excess of 18 months. However, with the recruitment of additional Empty Homes Officers, there was an aim to reduce this to approximately 13 or 14 months.

The Chair referred to two properties on Humberstone Road that had been empty for approximately 15 years, which he said were an eyesore. The Head of Service confirmed that they were subject to highway improvement; officers

were aware and were looking into this.

The Chair questioned how other Local Authorities dealt with empty homes and whether there was any benchmarking information to compare Leicester with other areas. The Head of Service agreed to look into this and bring information back to the Commission.

It was noted that some areas of the city appeared to have a high concentration of empty homes and Members questioned whether there was an area based strategy. Officers responded that they did not have a high concentration strategy at the moment; there was a very small team of officers to deal with Empty Homes.

Members noted that some properties had been empty for 10 years or more, and questioned why it was taking so long to bring them back into use. The Head of Service responded that there were approximately 95 properties that had been vacant for up to 10 years; this was an improvement on previous statistics, but there were a number of properties that were very difficult to bring back into use. In response to a question, the Commission heard that the owners of empty homes were liable for council tax and the council took steps to recover any amounts that were outstanding. A common reason outlined for such properties was the selling on of the empty home. If the Council commenced action against the owner, and the owner then sold the property, the Council's action would need to start again.

A Member asked that figures for under-occupied properties for each area in the city, be brought to the next meeting of the Commission. She added that she was aware of one particular road, where there were several three and four bedroom houses, each of which had only occupant. The Director advised that the Housing Division did not necessarily know how many people were living in a property and they would need to pull figures from Council Tax and Revenues and Benefits to try to find this information. The Chair asked officers, to send Members what information they had, instead of a report, so that Members could consider further.

A concern was raised relating to under occupancy and the Director advised that it was a matter of choice for people as to whether they chose to remain in their homes or look for something smaller.

AGREED

- 1) that the report be noted; and
- 2) that officers send Members, available information relating to under occupancy.

Action	By
For officers to send to Members, any information available relating to under occupancy in the city.	Simon Nicholls, Head of Service

13. HOMELESSNESS, STREET BEGGING AND ROUGH SLEEPING

The Director of Housing submitted a report that set out the policy on homelessness, rough sleeping and street begging, and the support services available in the city. Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service presented the report and stated that Leicester's approach to Rough Sleeping was that no one needed to sleep rough in the city. It explained that beggars were a distinct group, often with homes or accommodation to live in and usually different from those that rough sleep. Case examples highlighted in the report showed details of the differing groups. Figures of rough sleepers in the report related to the city centre and the neighbourhoods; individuals who moved away from the city centre into the outer areas, were still on the council's radar. There were concerns that numbers would rise following the introduction of Universal Credit, particularly with people under 35 years of age.

Members considered the report and raised comments and queries which included the following:

The Chair questioned the number of times that all the emergency beds had been in use. The Head of service replied that they had the statistics for the past six months, and these would be sent to Members.

In response to a query, the Assistant City Mayor explained that if anyone had concerns about an individual being homeless, they should contact Housing Options with this information. The team available both in day and out of hours would then work to help, support and address this position.

A member questioned who paid the costs where an individual was settled into another city. Members heard that the council paid the costs of repatriation; apart from the financial savings, there were humanitarian issues to take into account. The Vice Chair requested details of costs incurred in the repatriation of homeless people.

Concerns were expressed relating to a growing number of street beggars on Gallowtree Gate and Humberstone Gate. Members heard that this area was a 'hotspot' but an action plan and a multi-agency approach was in place to tackle the issue. This was now a national problem, with organised rings of beggar moving from city to city.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and asked for a further update at a future meeting.

AGREED:

- 1) that the report be noted; and
- 2) that an update be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

Action	By
For details to be sent to the Commission on how many times during the past six months, all the emergency beds had been in use.	Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service
For details to be sent to the Commission on the costs of repatriating the homeless.	Caroline Carpendale, Head of Service

14. VOIDS TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Chair reminded the Commission that the first meeting of the Voids Task Group would be held on Thursday 7 July at 12.30pm. Further meetings of the Task Group would follow on 14 July and 21 July. So far, Councillors Aqbany and Alfonso had indicated that they would join the Chair on the Task Group and other Members were welcome.

15. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair drew Members attention to the Housing Scrutiny Commission Work Programme and stated that this might be subject to change.

AGREED:

that the Housing Scrutiny Commission Work Programme be noted.

16. TENANT FORUM - MEETING NOTES

AGREED:

that the notes from the Tenant Forum Meeting held 31 March 2016 be noted.

17. MAYOR'S DELIVERY PLAN (HOUSING ISSUES)

AGREED:

that the relevant sections from the Mayor's Delivery Plan relating to the Housing Scrutiny Commission be noted.

18. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 8.30pm.

Committee Processes

Scrutiny



Leicester
City Council

Minute Item 9

In the Constitution

- article 8, Scrutiny Committees – Part 2
- Terms of reference at Part 3
- Access to Information Procedure Rules - 4B
- City Mayor & Executive Procedure Rules - 4D
- Scrutiny Procedure Rules 4E
- Political Conventions Part 5
- Code of Conduct Part 5

Constitution is on the website at

<https://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council/how-we-work/our-constitution/>



Leicester
City Council

Openness 1

- Agenda published 5 clear days in advance
- Specific procedure for reports to be taken as urgent and reasons must be recorded.
- Task groups and their conclusions do not have a formal status without acceptance by the Commission.
- Public are allowed to attend meetings and film without prior permission
- Standard items

Openness 2

- Declaration of Interest – if on register don't need to declare.
- Code of Conduct
- Making sure what is proposed and agreed is clearly understood
- Exempt items

Further information and advice