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SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 22ND FEBRUARY, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors P Stables, B Anderson,
J Akhtar, J Tudor, A Hannan, A McCluskey,
A Rontree, S Seary, A Khan and
N Harrington

81 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusals of inspection of documents.

82 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

83 Late Items

There were no late items.

84 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

However, Cllr N Harrington requested that it be noted she is a trustee of Wetherby in Support of the Elderly (WiSE) and Cllr S Golton asked that it be noted he is appointed as a Council representative to Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL).

85 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Cllrs P Grahame and A Maloney.

86 Minutes - 25 January 2024

RESOLVED: The minutes of the 25 January 2024 were approved.

87 Matters Arising

Regarding minutes 76 and 77, it was noted that the response of all five scrutiny boards to the budget proposals was submitted to the Executive Board on 7 February 2024. The report was also included in the document pack submitted to Council on 21 February 2024.

The Chair also confirmed that he had attended the Executive Board meeting on 7 February 2024 to make representations relating to the Scrutiny Board's recommendations regarding the accessibility and safety of parks and greenspaces.

88 Housing Activity Update

The Chair introduced the item noting that the accompanying report updates the Scrutiny Board on key areas of Housing Leeds activity during 2023/24 – including housing rent collection, council housing voids, housing repairs and maintenance, complaints and damp, mould and condensation.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Dennis Moody (Chair, Tenant Scrutiny Board)
- Cllr Jess Lennox (Executive Member for Housing)
- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing & Environment)
- Mandy Sawyer (Head of Housing and Neighbourhood Services)
- Adam Crampton (Head of Property Management)
- Kerrie Murray (Head of Homelessness)
- Craig Simpson (Head of Leeds Building Services)

Mandy Sawyer provided introductory comments, noting that the report reflects improvements in relation to several key performance indicators for Housing Leeds.

She highlighted the ongoing prioritisation of tenant concerns about damp, mould and condensation. She advised the Scrutiny Board that further improvements to advice and support services are being introduced following the recommendations of Leeds Tenant Scrutiny Board - this includes providing access to a practical awareness video.

Dennis Moody welcomed the fact that the Council accepted the recommendations of the Tenant Scrutiny Board about damp and mould.

Members sought clarity about the process that is followed in instances where damp, mould or condensation are reported. Adam Crampton set out the assessment process, along with timescales for dealing with the hazard in the first instance while the root cause is being established.

Concern was expressed about increased pressure on homelessness services. Board members were informed that there is a particular increase in the number of households who are unable to remain with family members, which may be attributable the cost-of-living crisis.

As a consequence of increased pressure, it was noted that there are more households living in temporary accommodation than the last time figures were reported to the Scrutiny Board. Kerrie Murray informed the Board that there is an increase of around 15 families a quarter moving into temporary accommodation.

Kerrie provided an overview of work to increase provision for both families and single households. 1500 people contact the service each week and around 150 of those are seeking temporary accommodation. The service continues to adopt a preventative approach to homelessness and therefore intervenes in cases very early. This approach was supported by Scrutiny Board members.

Members were reminded that consultation on changes to the local lettings policy is underway in response to pressure on the housing register. It was noted that Scrutiny Board members attended a working group in January 2024 on this process.

Mandy assured members that the Council would provide a robust response to the new requirements of the 2023 Social Housing (Regulation) Act, which is being overseen by the Regulator of Social Housing.

Clarity was sought about the procedures that are followed in instances where a tenant cannot pay their rent. Mandy provided an overview of the support that is provided to tenants and underlined the importance of engaging with the tenant before initiating a formal process.

She informed members that over 3,600 households have been supported to make some payment against rent arrears in 2023/24. This supportive approach has also resulted in more income being collected by the Council.

At the request of members, Mandy also set out the formal process for informing tenants that they are at risk of losing their home and outlined the steps that could lead to court proceedings. Mandy reiterated that there had been very few evictions in recent years.

Members queried whether refurbished garages could be let at higher rents to generate additional income. It was confirmed by Adam Crampton that a broad strategy for dealing with garages is in development. Opportunities to invest in sites that could deliver increased income may be explored as part of such a strategy. It was confirmed that in such cases ward members would be consulted about sites in their communities.

Members requested further detail about the number of garages in each ward, categorised by those that are let, those that are void and those that are unable to be let due to being in a state of disrepair.

It was confirmed that at the end of December 2023 700 properties were void, representing 1.35% of housing stock. This has reduced further since that time. It was confirmed that the target for voids remains 1%.

Cllr Lennox reiterated that it is desirable to have some void properties to enable people to 'move through the system.' However, she welcomed the overall trend of reduction in the level of voids.

Members requested a breakdown by ward of void properties and the reasons why those properties are void. There was particular interest in properties that have been void for over six months.

Consideration was given to the challenge of car ownership amongst tenants of high-rise buildings where there are limited parking spaces.

At the request of members, Adam Crampton provided an overview of how large or complex repairs are co-ordinated, highlighting an approach that draws on project management skills with the service.

Members were informed that high value repairs have increased over the last 6-9 months but changes to the process of managing these cases has improved efficiency.

It was noted that a need to improve communication associated with repairs is a recurring theme in tenant satisfaction surveys. Improvements have been made to the way in which teams engage with tenants.

Craig Simpson set out how Leeds Building Services (LBS) has strengthened communication with tenants. He noted the importance of developing strong relationships with housing managers, councillors and tenants. He provided an overview of the complaints process within LBS and the approach taken to larger works involving multiple visits to a property and several trades. Members welcomed the imminent introduction of 'on the way' texts. However, they also recommended introducing the means through which tenants could also respond to such messages.

Adam Crampton confirmed that 85% of appointments to carry out repairs are kept. He acknowledged the need to improve further but welcomed the positive trajectory.

Members sought clarity about whether there is the potential for the Council to dispose of a freehold where the associated properties have been purchased under the 'right to buy' mechanism. Adam Crampton confirmed that this issue is being explored.

Other matters raised by members of the Scrutiny Board included:

- It was confirmed that the 2023/24 HRA Capital Programme is on track to deliver £29.2m of major decarbonisation and energy efficiency projects.
- Opportunities to invest in environmental enhancements around Council owned assets will be considered within the context of financial constraints..
- The process of annual investment in the repair and replacement of lifts in high rise blocks.

- Concerns about the condition of signage to indicate where residents with disabilities can park.
- Progress with the Renters Reform Bill. Cllr Lennox noted she would be writing to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up to advocate for the abolition of Section 21 evictions.
- The process for rehousing people with complex needs.
- Mandy confirmed that the service is on track to ensure compliance with the Building Safety Act once the requirements go live.
- Progress to rehouse the residents of 11 high rise blocks identified for demolition.

RESOLVED: The Scrutiny Board noted and commented upon the update in relation to housing activity during 2023/24.

89 Ensuring the Resilience of the Third Sector in Leeds

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Mary Harland (Executive Member)
- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing & Environment)
- Paul Money (Chief Officer, Safer, Stronger Communities)
- Samantha Powell (3rd Sector & Migration Partner Manager)
- Hannah Bailey (Chief Officer, Voluntary Action Leeds)
- Pip Goff (Director, Volition part of Forum Central)

The Chair introduced the item, reiterating the value of the 3rd sector in Leeds and its integral role in supporting sustainable communities.

Cllr Harland reflected upon the diverse benefits the third sector delivers for the city and its citizens. She acknowledged the challenge of the third sector being asked to meet increased demand at a time of increased financial constraints.

Pip Goff thanked Samantha Powell for the collaborative approach to developing the accompanying report. She reiterated the huge challenges for the sector with multiple costs pressures facing organisations of all sizes. She noted that the third sector is now working in spaces that may have been occupied by local authority or health partners in previous years and she stressed the importance of identifying ways in which to work collaboratively in future.

Hannah Bailey echoed Pip Goff's comments, noting that the challenges facing the third sector are reflective of national trends. She highlighted that cost pressures facing organisations are compounded by increased demand from citizens who are themselves facing a 'cost of living crisis.'

The Scrutiny Board was provided with examples of successful collaboration between the third sector and public partners – for example Voluntary Action Leeds and Forum Central working with the Council to deliver the most recent Welcome Spaces Programme in the city. However, members were also asked to note that there has been a 25% reduction in the number of volunteers in the city and a reduction in the number of small and medium sized organisations.

Hannah went on to welcome the development of Leeds Third Sector Strategy 2023 – 2028 and the launch of Leeds Volunteer Strategy - as key documents produced for the sector with wide support from strategic partners.

It was agreed that there is a challenge for city partners in retaining the vibrancy of the third sector in Leeds at a time when the role of public organisations is reducing. It was acknowledged that this poses a significant challenge but also provides opportunities for bold, creative solutions.

The Scrutiny Board welcomed the report and noted the valuable role the third sector plays in supporting some of the city's most vulnerable citizens, as well as supporting minority communities.

The Board noted that the State of The Third Sector reports reflects the resilience of the sector. However, members recognised the need for greater long term planning to promote stability and sustainability. Pip highlighted the challenge for many third sector organisations of having to engage in short term contracts.

The Board questioned whether there would be value in the Council supporting the third sector to produce further information about the sector's performance, potentially through a visible, regular 'health check' on the sector. The potential value of introducing Key Performance Indicators was explored, along with ways in which to reflect practical challenges such as declining number of volunteers and "red tape" associated with commissioning processes.

The Scrutiny Board queried whether there is a future role for the Board in examining some of these issues in more detail with stakeholders.

Hannah Bailey expressed reservations about whether a single suite of KPIs could adequately capture the complex nature of the third sector in Leeds, which has over 3,000 organisations of varying sizes. However, she agreed that the public sector has an important role to play in creating the conditions to enable the sector and communities to thrive beyond commissioning services. Council investment in third sector infrastructure was seen as important in helping to create the right conditions for third sector groups to come together and deliver services effectively.

Pip Goff and Paul Money reiterated that the accompanying report demonstrates the importance of collaboration and co-production, and that there is support in the sector for this approach.

Members examined some of the barriers reported by third sector organisations including access to community assets and ways in which third sector organisations can share their knowledge to strengthen decision making at a neighbourhood level.

Reference was made to current research by the University of Leeds into urban co-production for disused land in Leeds.

Members recommended that consideration be given as to how the third sector might be engaged in the Council's ongoing community committee review.

Consideration was given to increased knowledge sharing amongst third sector organisations and a "generous approach to leadership" in the sector, particularly since the pandemic.

In response to member queries further information was provided in relation to the Leeds Community Anchors network.

Members recommended further consideration be given to how funding at a West Yorkshire level complements that being provided at a Leeds level.

The Chair thanked Pip and Hannah for their attendance, and their work within the sector. He reiterated that the Board would be happy to engage with the third sector in any areas where there is scope to add value.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report and recommended that further engagement in the next municipal year.

*12.16pm Cllr Anderson left the meeting.
12.21pm Cllr Hannan left the meeting.*

90 Work Schedule

Members considered the draft work programme for 2023/24.

The Executive Board minutes from the meeting on 7 February 2024 were also appended to this item for consideration so far as they relate to the remit of the Scrutiny Board.

Members were asked to note the arrangements for a remote working group which will consider the Regulation of Social Landlords.

RESOLVED: The Scrutiny Board noted the draft 2023/24 work programme.

91 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing & Communities) will take place on **21 March 2024** at **10.30am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at **10.00am**.

Draft minutes to be approved at the meeting
to be held on Thursday, 21st March, 2024

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