

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 10TH NOVEMBER, 2022

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, K Brooks, E Carlisle,
L Cunningham, P Grahame, A Khan,
A Maloney, T Smith, J Tudor, P Wadsworth
and D Jenkins

34 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

35 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

36 Late Items

There were no formal late items.

37 Declaration of Interests

Members did not raise any interests.

38 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Councillors Walshaw and Lay. Councillor Jenkins attended as a substitute for Councillor Walshaw.

39 Minutes - 17 October 2022

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held Thursday, 17th October 2022 be approved as an accurate record.

Matters Arising

Minute No. 30 – Reducing Poverty and Improving Financial Inclusion. The Chair of the Infrastructure, Investment, and Inclusive Growth (IIIG) Scrutiny Board has been made aware of the Board's concerns regarding equal employment and skills opportunities for young people in the city, and persistent inequality of opportunity across the wards. This will be part of the IIIG Scrutiny Board's discussion in February 2023 when they will focus on inclusive growth.

40 Housing Activity Update

The report of the Chief Officer (Housing) provided the Scrutiny Board with an update on key areas of Housing Leeds activity during 2022/23. Updates in the submitted report included:

- Council housing tenancy management and rent collection
- Council housing repairs and maintenance
- Council housing voids and lettings
- Developments in response to the Building Safety Act
- The HRA Investment programme
- An update on the plans for high-rise residential blocks requiring significant investment
- Pressures on the Leeds Housing Register and homelessness
- Changes to the wider regulatory framework
- Housing Strategy

Appended to the report included the Housing Activity Report Quarter 1 2022/23.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Rafique – Executive Member for Environment and Housing
- James Rogers – Director of Communities, Housing and Environment
- Gerard Tinsdale – Chief Officer, Housing
- Mandy Sawyer – Head of Housing and Homelessness
- Adam Crampton – Head of Property Management

The Chief Officer Housing introduced the report, and highlighted the following points:

- Rent collection – the collection performance rate stands at 94%, similar to other core cities. The cost of living has seen an impact on tenants struggling to pay rent, and the service is open to engaging and supporting tenants. Enforcement action will be taken where efforts to cooperate are not successful.
- Voids performance – the target for the service is no more than 1% of stock being void by the end of the financial year. There has been a reduction in the number of voids across the city. However, challenges in terms of a delay in buying materials and operatives being available remain an issue.
- Repairs – demand remains high, with emergency repairs taking longer to complete and there still being a backlog. The service is focusing on engagement with tenants.
- Investment strategy – the capital investment programme sets to deliver renewable heating and energy efficiency projects over the five-year period 2020-2025
- High-rise blocks – options to remove 5 high-rise residential blocks for new modern housing to be developed. Residents will be rehoused from November 2022.
- Homelessness – there is a supply and demand issue with social housing across Leeds, and less properties are becoming empty.

Approximately 600 properties are lost per year through Right to Buy, and the waiting list remains high regarding the housing register. The average wait time to re-house people stands at 2 years.

The Board were provided with an overview on two key legislative changes – 2022 Building Safety Act and Social Housing (Regulation) Bill will place new responsibilities on Housing Leeds as landlord to meet new building safety and regulation requirements.

In response to Board Member's questions, the following information was provided:

- All tenants are contacted once every 3 years, with 44% of those receiving a face-to-face visit. Tenants who receive a face-to-face visit are prioritised based on vulnerability. There has been feedback from residents that home visits can be intrusive, and they are also resource intensive.
- Officers acknowledge that there is a revenue cost associated with empty properties, and the service have a target to get voids under 1%. It was confirmed that there are approximately 934 void properties in Leeds and timescales are to turn around empty properties within 30 days. Due to the backlog in the system, timescales have been longer than this and it is hoped that the service can get back to the 30-day target by next year. Board members commented that properties not receiving on-going maintenance, will increase the time a property is void for and concerns were raised regarding tenants moving in and repairs having been completed.
- Concern was raised about a small minority of properties being reported by members of the public as having been empty for 'years.' Officers noted that it would be unlikely that such properties would be Council stock and that it can be difficult for people to identify ownership in mixed estates.
- The service will explore ways in which to strengthen the current approach to anti-social behaviour by some tenants in partnership with the Leeds Anti-Social Behaviour Team (LASBT).
- Members were asked to provide any details of 'ghost' tenants. It was confirmed that there is a small tenancy fraud team, that can take legal action to recover properties if tenants are not living there or sub-letting properties. A member suggested that those residents are incentivised to move out of properties, however, this was considered unlikely.
- Members concerns were acknowledged regarding a lack of coordination between services and contractors regarding repairs, causing delays, which impact on the tenant. It was confirmed that the service has short term contracts with operators to deal with repair backlogs, and it was confirmed that existing arrangements can meet the demand. The good work of Leeds Building Services (LBS) and MEARS were highlighted, as well as the importance of 'a right first time' approach to repairs. An overview of the MEARS contract in the

western part of the city was also explained, and it was noted that when the MEARS contract for the western part of the city is concluded, it is believed that LBS will then be able to meet demand in the future.

- Feedback will be fed back to the relevant team regarding the importance of keeping tenants up to date with new and existing capital programmes.
- Concerns regarding fuel poverty, and properties coming into disrepair due to damp issues over the coming winter. It was noted that there is a small housing officer support team for tenants, and preventative work is important to mitigate health implications associated with such issues. Officers also highlighted a damp focused report released by the housing ombudsmen that sets out some objectives for the sector to improve on damp and mould; the service are looking to implement the objectives as contained in the report. It was also noted that visits to tenants can reiterate the most effective way of using heating.
- Issues associated with choice-based lettings were discussed. It was confirmed that local lettings policies will be reviewed to identify which aspect of the policy are fit for purpose, and how they can be adapted to better reflect current situations.
- Selective Licensing is going well in the two areas it is implemented, and whilst other areas are being looked at in the future, nothing has been agreed yet.

Members requested statistics on the following:

- The number of cases referred to debt collection agencies and the number of people having enforcement action against them.
- A breakdown on the number of rough sleepers in Leeds.
- The number of Right to Buy properties sold, and the number that have been bought back by the authority.
- Anti-social behaviour related sanctions and repossession cases.
- Clarity on the longest period a property has been void for.
- Average waiting times for people on the housing register across wards in Leeds.
- Comparative performance data for MEARS and LBS.

The Executive Member summarised by explaining all tenants will be contacted, with 44% of those receiving an annual visit. The service work with partners and do their utmost to tackle anti-social behaviour related issues and urge all to report any issues so that it can be dealt with. Members were also asked to let the service know of anybody sub-letting properties, so that the service can act against it. Finally, it was acknowledged that there are not enough properties to meet the demand of those on the housing register, and the challenges around repairs.

The Chair thanked those in attendance, acknowledged the issues as highlighted above and for the good work carried out by the service and as evidenced by tenant satisfaction rates.

RESOLVED – To:

- a) Note the contents of the report on housing activity during 2022/23.
- b) Request additional information as outlined above.

Councillor Khan joined the meeting at 10:55 a.m.

Councillors Maloney and Brooks vacated the meeting at 12:00 p.m.

41 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Democratic Services presented the Scrutiny Board's work schedule for municipal year and therefore the latest iteration of the Board's work schedule for the remainder of the municipal year appended to the submitted report, as well as the Executive Board minutes from the meeting held on Wednesday, 19th October 22.

Members were informed of upcoming meetings and workshops scheduled to take place in December 22.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report and work schedule.

42 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The date and time of the next meeting is scheduled to take place Thursday, 1st December 22 at 10.30 a.m. and will be a remote consultative meeting. The next formal meeting is scheduled to take place Thursday, 5th January 2022 at 10.30 a.m.

The meeting concluded at 12:15 p.m.