

## TENANT SCRUTINY BOARD

FRIDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> March 2019

**PRESENT:** John Gittos (Tenant Chair)

Tenants: Stanley Burton, Mary Farish, Maddy Hunter, Stephen Ilee, Peter Middleton, Jackie Worthington.

Officers: Keith Mack (Scrutiny Officer), Paul Harris (Income Manager for Housing Leeds), Mandy Sawyer (Head of Neighbourhood Services), Ian Parr (Housing Assistant),

### 71 Exempt information

None.

### 72 Late Items

JG raised a late item for consideration. The service charges for all tenants in high rise and Retirement Life properties are to increase. JG asked for a breakdown of the charge, and asked if tenants will all pay the same rate regardless of the different services provided at each block.

### 73 Apologies for Absence

Michael Healey, Rita Ighade, Roderic Morgan, Sallie Bannatyne

### 74 Minutes – 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018

JG opened the meeting and welcomed the attendees. A round of introductions were made for the benefit of the guests.

**RESOLVED** – The minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 February 2019 were passed as a true record

### 75 Minutes of the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing, and Communities)

Information only item

### 76 Update on Recruitment to TSB

KM provided an update to the board members, informing them that MF and SBU are now full members of the board. KM further explained that he had spoken with the third prospective member who was interested in joining the board, and that he has since moved out of the Leeds area. KM said he would continue to use the annual home visit data that was used to identify and contact interested tenants as there are still vacancies on the panel.

SI suggested that younger people could be more effectively targeted to join the board by the creation of a presentation detailing the work of the TSB, as well as the possible introduction of training or qualifications gained as a part of being a member of the TSB. SG recalled a pamphlet that had previously been circulated regarding tenant engagement activities, and that there were previous discussions held around having a tenant engagement 'jobs fair' which could be attended by tenants to speak to members of the individual groups. KM agreed that SI's ideas were valid, though they might be better discussed with Mandy Sawyer who would be speaking later on in the meeting.

JG informed the board that he will be attending the next Repairs and Investment Group meeting to speak to members about why the group is so attractive to them and consider how tenants can be recruited to the TSB.

## **77 Universal Credit Update**

JG introduced Paul Harris, Income Manager for Housing Leeds, to update the board about the current situation regarding Universal Credit.

PH explained that the Universal Credit system was launched in Leeds on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2018, and is applicable to anyone of working age making a new claim which would cover any of the previous six legacy benefits; Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income Related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, and Housing Benefit.

Any tenant in receipt of one of the legacy benefits before the 10<sup>th</sup> of October will continue to receive the same benefit until they make a new claim or are eventually transferred to the Universal Credit system.

PH explained that Leeds City Council have signed up to be a trusted partner with the Department of Work and Pensions, allowing council staff to access the landlord portal and see who has made an application for Universal Credit and to verify their rent and tenancy details. If an application is made by someone who is heavily in arrears or is vulnerable, LCC can apply for an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) to be put in place, allowing the housing element of their payment to be paid directly to the council rather than the tenant just as the housing benefit system does. Managed payments can also be set up for those who might be unable to pay their rent regardless of whether they have arrears, that will pay their housing element and up to 20% from their monthly allowance. This has the potential to be much higher than the current rate of payment so care must be taken to ensure this is the correct route, and whilst the APA cannot be appealed, the percentage taken from their payments can be reduced.

PH told the board that there are 15 Enhanced Income Officers to support applications within each housing office. When a new claim is received, an officer will contact the applicant within 5 days of the claim and ensure that they have enough money to live on until the payment date just over a month after the initial claim. Support and guidance will be offered to help applicants that need it. The month following the date of the claim is known as the assessment period, following which the first payment is made 7 days later. It is possible to claim for an advance on payment from the first day of a claim, however the amount borrowed must be paid

back, deducted from future payments spread over the subsequent 12 months. Two of the Enhanced Income Officers have been seconded to work with the DWP, allowing for a mutual exchange and understanding of working processes. The officers will work with the seven job centres across Leeds, with further support available from contact centres, libraries, and the four hubs which have a specialist support officer. From the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, the same support service paid for by the DWP will be paid instead to Citizens Advice, however the same level of support offered by Housing Leeds will remain available.

A database of UC claims has been developed to record number of claims and any rent owed or arrears. Based on these details, contact will be made from the Enhanced Income Officers to engage with the tenants and be offered one of three levels of support:

- Advice and guidance – for those that can manage their journal and do not require much help
- Standard – For those who may need a moderate level of support
- Enhanced – For those who are vulnerable or that would not be able to manage their claim independently

Those who fall outside of even the highest level of help can be referred to the DWP service centre to handle their claim. Each applicant has their own individual journal and all documents are uploaded online. It is up to the claimant to ensure all necessary documents are uploaded and correct and to inform of any changes in their circumstances as this can affect their payments. A breakdown of the Universal Credit payment can be viewed once it is received, looking similar to a wage slip, with the total figure shown on top and deductions shown below. Claimants are assigned a work coach where applicable to help them find work. If council tax support is required it must be made as a separate claim made at the same time as the original application.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> of October up to the present meeting there have been 4,113 claims verified, with new claims being made continuously. It is estimated that by the end of the year there could be around 10,000 individual claims, which includes those that have been migrated from their existing benefits claim. Between 2019 and 2023 those who were receiving benefits but have not made a new claim will be migrated over to Universal Credit, though by 2023 there should be relatively few such cases. The figures reflect how many claims have been made, however it is impossible to know when somebody stops claiming unless the council is directly informed by the tenant.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> of October to the 31<sup>st</sup> of January there were 2,815 verified cases of which 815 claims were offered advice and guidance, 1,775 were standard cases, 187 were offered enhanced support, and 38 applicants were unable to be contacted or refused any engagement at all.

Up to the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2019 the average amount of arrears held by a new claimant is £358, with the average increase in arrears caused as a direct result of Universal Credit is £68 per account. The total arrears increase because of Universal

Credit across all applications is £192,720. 727 APAs have been put in place, with 28 referrals to a food bank and 28 receiving fuel support.

PH handed out some information leaflets which are given or are available to those making a new Universal Credit claim, and opened the floor to questions. JG questioned how Universal credit might impact those who are moving in and out of work, such as those on temporary contracts. PH answered that a new claim would have to be made when the person is not in employment and then the DWP would stop the payments when they were back in work, however the council would only be made aware of this if they are told directly by the claimant or if the rent falls into arrears. A new claims would be required each time a person is out of work for any reason as long as they were earning over the minimum threshold from that period of employment, otherwise claims can be continued up to six months following. PH further clarified in response to a question from SI that the payments will always be made in arrears, almost like working a month in hand.

JG asked what the criteria is for an APA to be applied to a tenant. PH answered that if the tenant is identified to be vulnerable by support staff - including those with drug and alcohol dependency or those suffering from mental illness - or if they have rent arrears of 8 weeks or more an APA can be applied for. Those who are on Universal Credit should not be taken to court for non-payment of rent given the month long wait for payment. Similarly from the date of the claim to the date of payment tenants will not be taken to court or have further action taken to retrieve any more rent, as the priority is to keep tenants in their properties rather than forcing them to move out.

JG asked if the DWP were paying for LCC staff for their support. PH confirmed that currently the council claim money from the DWP for the support provided, however after the 1<sup>st</sup> of April the contract will be given to citizens advice, although council staff will still be there to support claims as they were already doing. JG asked if there is a chance that the support contract could be offered to another company after the initial year, PH replied that it is, but it is not possible to know any details at this stage, and reiterated that the council are doing the best they can to provide uninterrupted support.

JG asked if information is still kept private between the DWP, LCC, and Citizen's Advice now that GDPR regulates how data is processed. PH clarified that personal data is kept completely private on the tenant's portal and only those with a login can see that information, unless permission is specifically granted to share that data. Data also cannot be shared over the phone unless specifically permitted by the claimant. Housing Leeds will soon be utilising tablets to allow officers to meet with applicants in their homes to submit queries to the DWP.

JG thanked PH for his attendance, and suggested he may be invited back for another update as Universal Credit continues to be implemented.

## **78 TSB Future Report**

JG introduced Mandy Sawyer, Head of Neighbourhood Services who joined the meeting at this point. JG explained, for the benefit of the newly-appointed members, that there has not been a new investigation this year, which has given

the board the opportunity to look over the previous reports and review the work of the TSB and consider the future plans for the board.

MS thanked JG for inviting her to speak, and explained that she is keen to discuss the ongoing activities of the board. MS reassured everyone that the housing service are committed to maintaining the board and hearing its views, and that the enquiries made by the board have been helpful when reviewing housing services with relatively few recommendations having been challenged.

MS noted that the TSB in its current form has been established for around five years, and there are still many ways the structure and function of the board can be developed, especially learning from the TPAS events attended by JG, SBa, and JW. MS suggested that other similar boards in other authorities have seen success with formats whereby workshops and forums are conducted with particular customer groups to target their specific opinions, and proposed the idea that smaller, less wide ranging enquiries might be held alongside the larger enquiries to improve the agility of the board, with multiple teams able to hold independent small reviews and feed results back to the larger group.

There is still, however a challenge as to how to best engage with the wider tenant voice, as annual home visit data suggests that 8,000 tenants would like to be involved, but that number becomes significantly lower when a tenant is asked if they would like to attend meetings. MS suggested that adopting a workshop format or holding forums with tenants and staff over a number of days might provide evidence for more intensive scrutiny. Engagement could also be further digitalised through online surveys and forums, however this would be more experimental.

MS concluded by reiterating that the housing service supports the role and aims of the board, and that through development of the methods of the board their suggestions for improvement can become even more robust.

JG thanked MS for her update, and commented that the TSB are aligned with the Environment and Housing Scrutiny board which also conducts shorter investigations. JG prefers longer investigations as they offer more opportunity for everyone to be involved with the same project, but accepted that during previous investigations the board had divided into smaller groups to cover more topics. JG agreed that smaller investigations would allow the board to be more mobile, and engage with a topic closer to the time it arises. The board could produce a list of topics of investigation and reduce it based on votes from the members, so no member would have to engage with a large project that may not ultimately affect them.

SI reiterated his earlier suggested the creation of a presentation to demonstrate the work of the board might better attract younger members. Since younger members would more than likely be in work or seeking work, SI also suggested the provision of training or qualifications similar to TPAS as a part of being a member, as this could then be used as experience on a CV and improve the prospects of members seeking employment. MS agreed that the offer of qualifications has not been trialled before, however it can be pursued through links with colleges and training providers. JG suggested that dedicated training on how to chair a meeting would be

beneficial for all members of the board previously, recalling similar training delivered by TPAS attended by some members of the board. MS suggested that a skills audit of the current board members could be undertaken as a future agenda item to identify the members' skills as well as any areas in which training would be beneficial, as more focussed training could then be targeted.

JG commented that the current make-up of the board could still better reflect the wider demographic of Leeds, suggesting the timing and location of the meetings can be a barrier for those considering joining the TSB for those in work. JG said the Civic Hall location can add authenticity to the meetings, but agreed that meeting elsewhere on occasion should be considered by the board.

SI disagreed that the TSB meetings had to reflect the other council scrutiny boards, and that their suggestions should also not impact what the TSB choose to investigate. JG responded saying that the comment 'reflect' was not wise as the impression given is that TSB copy other Scrutiny boards which isn't the case. The terms of reference of the TSB are similar but that was the way LCC set this up. JG disagreed that the suggestions about future inquiries from the likes of Environment, Housing, and Communities Scrutiny Board played a big part in deciding which service the board investigates, and wherever the suggestions come from are left in no doubt the final decision is made by TSB. Over the past four investigations only one inquiry suggested to the board and taken up was from VITAL which is made up of tenants.

SI suggested the formality of the meetings can put off potential members who would much rather be involved at a more local level. SI asked if a pool of interested residents can be created who may be consulted for their concerns on relevant topics, and who might be able to attend more local meetings with less pressure on LCC officers to be on the record and to prepare their statements. JG replied that the HAPs are already a local forum for tenants, but SI continued that the issue is that nobody knows what any of the forums do if they are sent an email, and that there is little up to date information online about the HAPs and other areas of the council owing to the long approval times of minutes.

MS agreed that regarding recruitment, the kind of activity that tenants want to be involved with is not recorded on the annual home visit data, but the contact can be followed up and those that express interest can be signposted to the appropriate forums. MS continued that in her opinion, the meeting location feels very formal and does not promote the type of natural discussion that could yield better outcomes, and a more diverse approach to venues and discussion could prove beneficial. MS agreed with SI about the website and its content, and following a review of the repairs pages is also being improved to become more user-friendly, and updated more often.

KM reminded the board that the recent round of recruitment where over 1,000 emails that were sent out to interested tenants, only seven responses were received. KM accepted there was the potential for more sophisticated approaches to be utilised to target more specific groups and interests. KM acknowledged members' views that whilst consulting the senior managers was important for the board to understand a services aims and objectives, the evidence gathering and

investigation process could be strengthened by holding conversations with tenants in forums and workshops and encouraging the evidence to come out organically. SBU added that as a new member he perceives the current meeting format as very formal, and a more informal environment could be beneficial.

JG asked if MS could produce a report regarding recruitment for the various tenant panels for the May meeting. MS replied that she could produce a report, however she would prefer to work with the Board to jointly develop some proposals for the future development of Tenant Scrutiny work in Leeds. JG asked if the May meeting could be held at Navigation House as a workshop to trial a less formal approach.

JG thanked MS for her attendance at the meeting.

#### **79 TSB Work plan**

JG informed the board that the LASBT review is not yet ready, but that they will be attending a meeting before the end of the year.

#### **80 Election Process for Chair and Vice Chair**

JG advised the board of his intention to resign from the chair and the board at the April meeting, and asked that expressions of interest for either the Chair or vice Chair position should be submitted to KM or IP by email or phone before the 12<sup>th</sup> of April.

JW subsequently asked if due to the uncertainty of the board moving forward JG could stay as chair until June. A vote of board members suggested there was a consensus for this hence JG agreed to accept JW's proposal. Board members agreed that a vote for election of a new chair will be postponed up to the June meeting.

**RESOLVED** – The election of a new chair/vice chair will take place during the June meeting (Expressions of interest for either the Chair or vice Chair position should be submitted to KM or IP by email or phone before the Friday 7<sup>th</sup> June).

#### **81 Date and Time of Next Meeting**

**RESOLVED** – The next meeting will take place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April.  
(Pre-meeting for all board members at 1:00pm)

THE MEETING CLOSED AT 3:00 PM