

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 25TH FEBRUARY, 2021

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, J Bentley,
A Blackburn, D Collins, A Gabriel,
P Grahame, A Khan, P Gruen, N Sharpe,
K Brooks, T Smith, M Dobson and
N Dawson

81 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

82 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information.

83 Late Items

There were no late items.

84 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Although there were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests made at the meeting, Councillor Khan required it to be recorded that he had an interest in Agenda Item No. 7 (Standards in the Private Rented Sector) because he held a selective license for a property in Beeston and Harehills.

85 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mulherin. Cllr Dawson attended as substitute.

86 Minutes - 14 January 2021

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held 14th January 2021, be confirmed as an accurate record.

Matters Arising

Minute 78 – Initial Budget Proposals and Financial Health Monitoring.

Following the publication and consideration of the final budget proposals, members were informed that the board had recommended that ward based information be provided to the Executive Board in order to inform decision making about specific proposals and that no reference was made to this in the final documents. This had also been highlighted in a joint note from all Scrutiny Chairs to the Chief Officer (Financial Services), which provided some

initial feedback on the consultation process between September 2020 and February 2021.

87 Private Sector Housing - Update

The report of the Director of Resources and Housing submitted a report, which provided members with an update on the Council's interventions to address housing conditions and the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- Neil Evans, Director of Resources and Housing
- Mark Ireland, Head of Private Rented Sector
- Gerard Tinsdale, Chief Officer Housing
- Gavin Dick, National Residential Landlords Association

The Head of the Private Rented Sector introduced the report, and provided the Scrutiny Board with an overview of the following:

- The increase in market growth in the PRS and the quality of housing - the inner city areas having the poorest quality;
- The Council's vision to improve private homes by supporting landlords and owner/occupiers to provide good quality homes;
- The Council's vision will be achieved by working with landlords via the Leeds Rental Standard and targeting landlords who fail to meet their legal obligations. Further measures would include implementing selective licensing in Beeston and Harehills and considerations around other areas, proactively targeting long term empty homes and supporting homelessness prevention;
- The Leeds Rental Standards scheme;
- The Reactive Service including the number of inspections, notices served and people benefitting from improvements to their home;
- HMO activity and the need to address space standards - a Supplementary Planning Document is currently being consulted on;
- Rogue Landlord Unit and the ongoing partnership work to target criminal landlords and sharing intelligence to improve outcomes;
- Leeds Neighbourhood Approach (LNA) and the Exit Plan for Holbeck;
- Selective Licensing figures in terms of licenses applied for, fees paid, unlicensed properties and cases;
- Homelessness prevention in terms of support mechanisms and new cases;
- Empty homes including net reduction statistics since March 2012 and COVID-19 implications.

Members' discussed a number of matters including:

- Whether sufficient legislation has been made available for private rented sector interventions, including measures around enforcement. Members heard that one of the main issues included difficulties around identifying which properties are private, rented and unoccupied. It was

noted that the service continue to lobby the Government to license the private rented sector as a whole. Currently legislation means that there is a need for a business case to be developed for discretionary licencing and it is unlikely that this could be successfully achieved for a city wide scheme;

- Clarity on whether Selective Licensing would be broadened. Members were informed that options moving forward would be dependent on criteria laid down by the Government. It was noted that no further areas have yet been identified, and next steps for the service would continue processing and issuing licences as part of the Beeston and Harehills scheme and to commence property visits as soon as the pandemic allows the service to do so safely;
- It had been acknowledged that the PRS required improvements on access to the service, and Members were informed that investment had been secured to provide a better service for customers;
- Clarity was sought on the mechanisms in place for empty HMOs. Members were informed there is a target of 6 months, before measures are taken with the landlord to encourage bringing the property back into use. Additionally, the Council can use its Compulsory Purchase powers as a last resort;
- Whilst acknowledging the decrease in empty homes, clarity was sought on how the Council can incentivize landlords in bringing their properties back in use. It was noted that partnerships such as the Empty Homes Doctor are able to act independently of the Council to focus on returning long term empty properties back into use and there are options the Council can offer in terms of equity release and personal loans. Additionally, Leeds Housing Options can link accredited landlords with people;
- It was requested that ward specific data in relation to empty homes be circulated to Board Members. The Head of the PRS informed Members there are limitations in terms of the data regarding private rented properties being put in the public domain via Council mechanisms. However, data can be published in terms of how many empty homes there are per ward and listing those belonging to companies / Local Authorities and Housing Associations.

The National Residential Landlords Associate was of the opinion that the Council's targeted approach had been doing well in terms of tackling homelessness and issues in the housing sector, and broadly outlined his concerns with city wide schemes. Challenges were set out post covid, particularly in relation to perception that the student market is moving away from the city centre, and financial pressures. Additionally, the proposed change to minimum efficiency standards by 2025, would pose significant challenges in all parts of the UK and in particular, pre-1919 building stock. It was noted that there was further work that can be done to support home owners and the PRS.

The Executive Member for Communities highlighted the importance of partnerships to ensure good quality housing across the city, and informed

Members of the Board that the matter on Selective Licensing will continue to be lobbied to the Government.

The Chair thanked those in attendance.

RESOLVED –

- a) To note the contents of the report;
- b) That information be made available to Board Members in relation to empty homes on a ward basis;
- c) Requested that the successor Scrutiny Board schedule a space on the work programme in the 2021/22 municipal year, and be minded that the following matters be considered:
 - i. Broadening Selective Licensing;
 - ii. The role of the Private Rented Sector in meeting housing needs;
 - iii. Resourcing available to landlords in terms of financial mechanisms;
 - iv. To monitor and identify issues in relation to empty properties;
 - v. Post COVID considerations in terms of homelessness;
 - vi. To receive an update on the Strategic Housing Board;
 - vii. To seek clarity on the location of private rented properties, and identification of landlords;
 - viii. The effectiveness of the available legislation;
 - ix. That a joint letter from the Scrutiny Boards be sent to ministers outlining concerns as stated above.

88 Climate Emergency: Annual Climate Emergency report & CEAC update

The report of the Head of Democratic Services submitted a report that provided the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) an update on the work of the Council's Climate Emergency Advisory Committee, and provides an opportunity to explore the Annual Climate Emergency report.

Appended to the report included copies of the Executive Board Annual Report on the Climate Emergency, the Leeds Climate Commission Annual Report 2020 and the Annual Report to Full Council.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Hayden, Executive Member for
- Councillor Walshaw, CEAC Chair
- Neil Evans, Director of Resources and Housing
- Polly Cook, Chief Officer Sustainable Energy and Air Quality

The Chief Officer Sustainable Energy and Air Quality introduced the report, providing a general overview of the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee (CEAC) in terms of its public engagement, ongoing work with businesses and community events, as well as the strategies and policies being looked at by the various working groups with the climate emergency being a main priority. It was noted that 45 million pounds had been secured to deliver retrofitting on housing.

Members were provided with a short presentation setting out the Council's responses to questions on behalf of the Local Government Association. The following had been highlighted:

- The understanding of the Council on the need to take action locally;
- The declaration of the climate emergency and the appointment of a Cabinet Member with responsibility for climate change;
- The Council's plans for the climate emergency and the main adaptation work of the Council being the Flood Alleviation Scheme;
- The Council's commitment in embedding the climate emergency in every procurement process and the benefits to Leeds from a piece of West Yorkshire consultancy work to Build Carbon Reduction into Local Authority Procurement Processes;
- Plans such as the large scale district heating system and addressing the carbon footprint to integrate sustainability and resilience into the Council's transport and energy plans;
- The measures in place to promote climate education, diversifying the labour market and focusing on sectors that are sustainable;
- The creation of a vulnerability index to monitor those who are at most risk of climate change the flood prevention measures taken;
- The Leeds Climate Commission brings together key organisations, providing advice on steps towards a low carbon and climate resilient future.

Members' discussed a number of matters including:

- The latest position on replacing gas with hydrogen. Members heard that money has been set aside from the Government to undertake testing, and work is ongoing nationally to ensure it is safe; there would be a pilot scheme in Gateshead around a number of homes. Further work would focus on renewable electricity, carbon capture and storage;
- The mechanisms in place to support residents lacking off street parking through the expansion of the charging network across the city. Members heard that discussions are ongoing with the Highways and Transport Service to develop an approach to further community hub charging provision for those households without off street parking. It was noted that Leeds had successfully secured funding towards charge infrastructure;
- To consider how the Council will engage its residents on climate-related issues, particularly in terms of tree planting initiatives. Concerns were raised in relation to site maintenance / ownership of new public forestry. It was noted that whilst trees had the capability to look after themselves, long terms considerations were required;
- Planning considerations around water surface run off and including minimum conditions as a standard. Members were informed that the Local Plan Review would consider climate emergency issues, and a report will be considered at Executive Board in March 2021 and subject to agreement, this will go out for consultation.

Councillor Collins provided the Scrutiny Board with an update on progress of the Biodiversity and Food Working Group. Members were informed that the

initial meetings focused on biodiversity projects and shared support of the White Rose Forest Strategy. It was acknowledged there would not be enough council land to plant a sufficient number of trees and support from the Government would be required in finding private land; additional work to be considered around incentivizing land owners. The working group had more recently moved onto food, and further work was required around educating people on growing their own. The group had heard from the vertical farming community to explain the process in more detail; future work with partners to consider developing a food action plan for Leeds.

The Director of Resourcing and Housing reiterated the ongoing challenge with retrofitting housing stock and minded the successor Scrutiny Board to look at:

- The Council's housing stock and district heating;
- The Private Rented Sector and owner occupation;
- The immediate effect to changes on the economy as greener energy is delivered and to consider those vulnerable to that change.

The Climate Emergency Advisory Committee Chair confirmed that a developers working group had been set up to help influence the planning process, particularly on retrofitting issues and to set good practice for future developers.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED –

- a) To note the contents of the report and appendices;
- b) To request that the successor Scrutiny Board be minded to receive an update on the progress every 6 months and monitor issues in relation to the retrofit of housing stock and planning legislation changes;
- c) To notify and request that the successor Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth) schedule a space on their work programme in the 2021/22 municipal year and be minded to consider green economy matters.

89 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Democratic Services submitted a report that invited members to consider the Board's Work Schedule for the remainder of the current municipal year. Copies of the Board's draft work schedule were appended to the report and the remote minutes of the Executive Board meeting held on 10 February 2021.

The Board discussed items on the upcoming work schedule, noting that March would be the last meeting of the 2019/20 municipal year. It was also noted that an upcoming working group to be held 10 March, would consider an item on the anti-social use of fireworks.

RESOLVED – That the work schedule for the remainder of the municipal year be noted.

90 Date and Time of Next Meeting

To note the date and time of the next meeting as 25 March 2021 at 10.30 am (pre-meeting for Board members at 10 am).

(The meeting concluded at 12:40 pm)