

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 23RD JANUARY, 2025

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors B Anderson, A Maloney,
A Hannan, A McCluskey, N Harrington,
S Ali, L Cunningham, L Farley, K Haigh,
Z Hussain and M Iqbal

74 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

75 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

76 Late Items

There were no late items.

77 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

78 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

There were no apologies.

79 Minutes - 21 November 2024 and 6 December 2024.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held on 21 November 2024 and 6 December 2024 are a correct record.

80 The Proposed Budget 2025/26 and Provisional Budgets for 2026/27 and 2027/28

Those in attendance for this item were:

- **Cllr Harland** – Executive Member, Communities, Customer Services & Community Safety
- **Cllr Rafique** – Executive Member, Climate, Energy, Environment & Green Space
- **Cllr Lennox** – Executive Member, Housing
- **David McNutt** - Head of Finance
- **James Rogers** - Director of Communities, Housing and Environment
- **Polly Cook** - Chief Officer, Climate, Energy & Green Spaces

The Chair noted that this item was being received due to the Scrutiny Board's responsibilities under the Budget and Policy Framework.

Reflecting on the process of Scrutiny engagement with the budget, the Chair confirmed that each of the five Scrutiny Boards had conducted a private working group in December 2024 to consider the proposed budget 2025/26 and provisional budgets for 2026/27 and 2027/28 so far as they relate to their respective remits.

The five scrutiny boards will submit a joint statement to the Executive Board in February 2025, setting out their collective response to the proposed budget. The Chair reminded colleagues that the statement includes a page dedicated to the feedback from each of the scrutiny boards. It also sets out joint conclusions and recommendations where concerns have been raised by more than one board.

Cllr Golton confirmed that the five Scrutiny Board chairs met at the start of January 2025 to discuss common themes that emerged from the discussions at the December working groups.

The Chair provided a summary of the areas of common interest identified by Scrutiny Chairs. That summary included:

- **Deliverability of the budget:** Assurance was sought about the deliverability of the budget savings given the scale of the challenge.
- **Levels of Reserves:** Concern was raised about the financial sustainability of the Council's reserves, which the budget report recognises as "lower than those of other comparable authorities of a similar size."
- **Impact on groups with protected characteristics:** It was recommended that the views of the Member Champion (Equality) Working Group should also be sought with regards to the overall impact of the budget proposals on groups with protected characteristics.
- **Third Sector Partnerships:** Members reiterated the need to ensure the budget setting process recognises the 'added value' delivered by third sector partnerships and the consequential impact on services and citizens of diminishing grant funding.
- **National Insurance Employer Contributions (NI ER):** Clarity was sought regarding the anticipated impact of NI ER increases on the cost of services provided by suppliers and the potential impact therefore on the deliverability of directorate savings. This was noted as a particular concern for services including Adult Social Care. Assurances were further sought about the level of compensation anticipated to be provided by Government in response to increased NI ER costs for LCC.

- **Trade Union Engagement:** Assurance was sought about Trade Union engagement in relation to the redesign of services and planned staff reductions, including via voluntary mechanisms.
- **Technical Capacity to Support Business Transformation:** Assurance was sought about the organisation's technical capacity to support business transformation, which underpins many proposals within the budget. This assurance was sought in the context of planned reductions in overtime and a structural review of IDS.

David McNutt was invited to update the Scrutiny Board on developments since the Scrutiny Board's December working group. He informed the Scrutiny Board that the provisional local government settlement has been received since the budget papers were published as part of the agenda for the Executive Board meeting on 11 December 2024.

Members were advised that additional resources are included in the provisional settlement that exceed the assumptions built into the December Executive Board reports. Consideration is being given to how that money will be allocated. Members were further advised that there may be movement in some assumptions relating to matters such as business rates.

Members were further advised that a significant proportion of the additional resources relate to 'one off' funding and some elements are linked to specific responsibilities such as preventing homelessness, reducing domestic violence and children's social care. Further information will be provided in a report to the Executive Board in February 2025.

Members requested more information about proposals to reduce the number of community committees from 10 to 8 and the associated member consultation on those changes. In response, Cllr Harland confirmed that she anticipated proposals being available for consultation with members from the end of January 2025.

Members sought clarity about increases in charges for brown bins. It was confirmed that the charge would represent full cost for developers but residents would be charged a lower administrative fee.

Reflecting on the Service Review relating to Bowling Green Efficiencies, members welcomed the decision to enable clubs to remain open during summer 2025.

Concern was raised about discrepancies in membership information held by clubs and the Council.

Polly Cook confirmed she and colleagues have offered to meet individual clubs to work through the figures available and the different costs involved in future operating models. She noted that the consultation had focused on a need to either reduce the number of clubs or increase income to avoid confusion. However, it is anticipated that a blended approach will be reflected

in the final proposals. Members were informed that only one club has pursued community asset transfer since 2020 so that had not been included in the initial consultation.

Polly Cook advised the scrutiny board that the membership information held by the Council reflects the number of season tickets linked to individual clubs and is provided by the clubs themselves. However, she noted there may also be a range of day rates for players, which would not be part of the Council held data.

Cllr Golton sought clarity about how the £140k annual saving relating to bowling green efficiencies will be calculated. He requested further information about the costs included within the total proposed saving so that members and clubs can understand how specific action by the club and/or the Council could reduce those costs.

Polly Cook confirmed that officers will share a 'Frequently Asked Questions' document with clubs in February which will include more information about costs such as direct labour, machinery, fuel costs and fertilisers.

Members requested further information about the anticipated impact of over 2,500 Right to Buy applications following changes in the discount rates coming into force on 20 November 2024. Concern was expressed about the potential impact on the housing revenue account through lost rent, as well as levels of housing stock and housing quality.

Cllr Lennox noted that the Council has submitted a response to a government consultation on reform to the right to buy system. She highlighted the significant demand for housing in the city. This already exceeds available stock and demonstrates why the loss of more houses through right to buy would be damaging for the city as it tries to respond to a housing crisis.

Members sought more information about the future approach to Council reserves. David McNutt confirmed that there is a plan in place to begin to replenish reserves post 2025-26.

James Rogers noted that the cross-cutting matters identified by Scrutiny Chairs are being addressed through several pieces of work including a full equality impact assessment.

RESOLVED:

- a) Members noted the report and its appendices.
- b) Members requested that the Principal Scrutiny Advisor reflects the views of the Scrutiny Board expressed at both the December 2024 working group and the public meeting in January 2025 in the joint scrutiny report for the Executive Board.

81 Performance Report

Individuals in attendance for this item were:

- **Cllr Harland** – Executive Member, Communities, Customer Services & Community Safety
- **Cllr Rafique** – Executive Member, Climate, Energy, Environment & Green Space
- **Cllr Lennox** – Executive Member, Housing
- **James Rogers** - Director of Communities, Housing & Environment
- **Ian Strickland** - Business Development Manager
- **Nick Hart** - Head of Customer Contact
- **Elisha Barker** - Head of Customer Contact (Tele & Digital)
- **David Fryer** - Head of Welfare & Benefits
- **Kerrie Murray** - Head of Homelessness
- **Mandy Sawyer** - Head of Housing & Neighbourhood Services
- **Adam Crampton** - Head of Asset Management
- **Paul Money** - Chief Officer, Safer, Stronger Communities
- **John Woolmer** - Chief Officer Environmental Services
- **Polly Cook** - Chief Officer, Climate, Energy & Green Spaces

Cllr Golton began by extending the thanks of the Scrutiny Board to officers from Leeds Housing Options who had facilitated a site visit and working group for Scrutiny Board members.

The Chair noted that a performance report is received twice a year as part of the Scrutiny Board's responsibilities under the Budget and Policy Framework. It sets out progress against a suite of city and Council priorities that sit within the Scrutiny Board's remit.

He noted that Scrutiny Board members had requested additional information about housing matters and confirmed that had been included in the performance report.

In addition, in June 2024 the Scrutiny Board requested that future reports include case studies in some areas to illustrate impact and challenges for services and service users. Cllr Golton therefore welcomed the inclusion of case studies in the January 2025 report.

Nick Hart provided an introduction in relation to Accessible Services and Support. He highlighted that between April 2024 and November 2024 the Jobshops have registered 3,448 new starts, as well as advising members about the ongoing impact on the Welfare and Benefits Service of the migration of working age Housing Benefit to Universal Credit. He welcomed the acknowledgement from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) of the Council's strong performance in Housing Benefit speed of processing.

Members sought more information about support for people with English as a second language and those who are not digitally engaged. Members welcomed several community-based events and partnership initiatives that aim to develop confidence and skills for those looking to secure employment.

This includes locality-based work with young people who are not in education, employment or training.

Nick noted that footfall at community-based recruitment events tends to be lower than footfall at events held in the city centre. However, he advised members that officers are seeking to expand connections to employers in the city including through partnerships with DWP.

Nick further advised the Scrutiny Board that the team will be exploring digital solutions to support a wider range of options in relation to language translation as part of work on the Customer Strategy.

The Chair noted that the Scrutiny Board is keen to explore more broadly how digital solutions can deliver better outcomes for customers as part of the developing strategy.

Members sought additional information about the triage of customers who may benefit from attending a second language course to improve their English to allow them to access more employment opportunities.

Cllr Harland thanked the staff working within the Jobshops, customer services and the Welfare and Benefits team for their commitment and innovative approach to their work. She noted that this was particularly evident during the period of recent severe weather.

Kerrie Murray provided an introduction in relation to reducing homelessness and thanked scrutiny members for visiting Leeds Housing Options.

Kerrie highlighted the demand pressures on the service, noting that Leeds continues to open the third highest number of homelessness assessments in the country. She highlighted that in quarter two of 2024/25 the team completed 54% of assessments on a preventative basis at the stage when those involved were threatened with homelessness. This compares to a national average of 41%. Other sources of demand include the discontinuation of asylum support, which created further pressure on temporary accommodation.

It was proposed that members could play a role in better linking the Leeds Housing Options team to community, faith and third sector groups in their wards so that anyone presenting as homeless can be signposted to support. Members agreed to this approach.

Members reiterated their thanks for the access provided to the Leeds Housing Options service, particularly regarding access for people with disabilities.

Paul Money confirmed that 57 individuals were identified as rough sleepers at the last head count. That is an increase of 10 when compared to the same count at the same time last year.

Members noted the positive pathways to homelessness support via the hospital.

Cllr Lennox agreed to share details of the Homelessness Prevention Forum to assist members with signposting.

Mandy Sawyer introduced metrics relating to Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs), noting that at the end of quarter three overall satisfaction levels remain at 66% which is the same as at the end of 2023/24. She provided an overview of further highlights – with 5 indicators having improved on the position at 2023/24 and 7 having reduced. Members were advised that the process of submitting information to the Regulator of Social Housing has also provided an opportunity to benchmark against other authorities. She identified strengthening communication and engagement as a key priority.

Members reflected on feedback from residents about the difficulty of contacting the local housing office. In response, Mandy Sawyer advised members that the team is working to provide more consistency of practice across housing offices, reviewing web content to improve ease of access and has developed a communication and engagement policy with which sets out robust expectations.

Members explored the changing methods of tenant engagement including a reduction in traditional tenant and resident associations. Mandy Sawyer provided an update on the virtual Tenants Voice Panel, which involves around 350 tenants. The service seeks the views of the panel when service changes are proposed. Surveys are also being used to inform policies.

The regulator of Social Housing has been clear about the need for the customer voice to be at the heart of what the service does.

Cllr Lennox advised the Scrutiny Board that there is an increased focus on complaints management through Leeds Housing Board.

Members requested that opportunities for tenant engagement are shared with ward members so they can also encourage involvement through their community networks. Mandy Sawyer confirmed she was happy to do so.

Members highlighted the positive outcomes delivered through estate 'walkabouts' with housing officers.

Further information was sought about the recruitment, retention and training of housing office staff.

Members sought to understand how the comparative performance of different housing offices is monitored and understood. Further detail was requested about long term trends in the subject matter and locality of complaints. The Scrutiny Board highlighted a connection to locality as a strength for housing officers.

Cllr Lennox confirmed that in its consideration of tenant complaints Leeds Housing Board will be examining locality-based data and subject matter.

Mandy Sawyer confirmed that principles of asset-based community development are embedded within the team.

Cllr Lennox further noted that methods of tenant engagement will be explored as part of the community committee review.

Adam Crampton introduced metrics relating to property management. He reminded the Scrutiny Board that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic void properties equated to around 1% of stock. This increased after pandemic but since June 2024 has returned to 1%. As a result, efforts are now focused on increasing the speed of turnarounds including long-term voids.

In response to member queries, Adam confirmed that there has been a reduction in recent months with only 8 properties now having been void for over 6 months. In each of these cases, there is significant damage to the property, which must be rectified.

Adam went on to provide an overview on work to prevent and respond to damp and mould. He highlighted the success of a partnership with British Gas Energy Trust to issue free fuel vouchers to residents in most need over the winter.

Members sought more information about efforts to improve tenant education about damp and mould, especially for those with English as a second language. It was suggested that 'easy read' materials could be beneficial. Cllr Lennox signposted members to a video that was shared with elected members in December 2024 and had been endorsed by the Tenant Scrutiny Board.

Adam Crampton confirmed that education is a key part of efforts to tackle damp and mould with two thirds of cases relating to condensation. Work is ongoing with Leeds Housing Board to identify how to extend current work to target particular groups of tenants more effectively.

An overview was provided of ways in which the service aims to prevent damp and mould including investing in energy efficiency and low-cost heating solutions.

Information was sought about whether air source heat pumps are more effective at preventing damp and mould given ongoing investment in heating solutions such as these in new properties.

Paul Money introduced updates relating to anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and hate crime. He highlighted a small reduction in incidents of anti-social behaviour being reported to both the Council and West Yorkshire Police and emphasised the importance of partnership working in tackling such behaviours. Noting previous member interest, he confirmed there has been a

reduction of 8% in reports of motor vehicles associated with anti-social behaviour.

In providing an overview to the Scrutiny Board Paul Money acknowledged the known underreporting of incidents of domestic violence and hate crime. There continues to be an increase in faith-based hate crime, predominantly linked to the current situation in the middle east.

Members explored the ways in which the impact of Public Space Protection Orders are reviewed and maintained in localities across the city.

Members welcomed work to better understand the needs of vulnerable victims-survivors of domestic violence who have no recourse to public funds. Links to modern day slavery were noted, as were challenges relating to trust in institutions.

Concern was raised about the extent to which the Council can provide a view on budget proposals at the mayoral authority so far as they relate to crime and policing. In response, Paul Money reiterated the close working relationship between the Council and West Yorkshire Police on shared priorities.

Cllr Harland reflected on the extensive work taking place in this area and recognised a recent award for work in relation to cuckooing that involved council officer Heather Ashby.

John Woolmer provided an introduction in relation to waste management, highlighting an overall collection rate of 99.83% as at the end of October 2024. He referenced a number of challenges in collection rates over the summer as new routes were tolled out but detailed the action taken to direct additional resources to tackle bins missed as a result.

The Scrutiny Board was asked to note that performance figures are provided for a rolling 12 months to the end of June 2024 and do not yet reflect the benefit of introducing new glass collection from August 2024.

Members asked John Woolmer to pass on their thanks for the efforts over the recent periods of severe weather.

An update was requested in relation to the roll out of the route review. In response, members were advised that the service is currently working through second phase, rolling out increased recycling to a further 40k residents.

Members considered ways in which performance is reported using both the detailed end of day report and data based on resident reports of missed bins. It was noted that the data based on resident reports has followed the same format for over two decades, follows national practice and is intended to allow long-term comparisons of trends in performance. However, it was acknowledged that this does not capture every bin that is missed in the city.

Members sought assurance that the service has an accurate understanding of the full situation in relation to missed bins. John Woolmer confirmed the team meets daily and uses a variety of information sources to best direct crews across the city to maximise performance.

Members asked whether it is possible to provide a one-off illustrative comparison between the information reflected in the end of day reports in relation to missed bins and the collated via resident reports.

Polly Cook responded to questions in relation to woodland creation and agreed to provide statistics for survival rates for whip planting outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- a) Members noted the latest performance information contained in the report and the issues which have been highlighted.
- b) Kerrie Murray (Head of Homelessness) will provide details of how members can signpost third sector, community and faith groups to support for anyone presenting as homeless.

*Cllr M Iqbal left the meeting at 11.30am

*Cllr A Hannan and Cllr Z Hussain left the meeting at 12.30pm

*Cllr S Ali left the meeting at 12.35pm

*Cllr B Anderson has left the meeting at 12.55pm

82 Work Schedule

Members noted a request to have a variety of representatives attend the meeting on 20 February 2025 to contribute to the debate on selective licensing.

Members requested that the work programme is scheduled first on future agendas (after the formalities of standing items 1-6).

RESOLVED:

Members noted the work schedule and requested that the Principal Scrutiny Advisor progresses the actions noted above.

83 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Scrutiny Board will take place on **20 February 2025** at **10.30am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at **10.00am**.