

Present: Councillor Gary Hewson (*in the Chair*),
Councillor Pat Vaughan, Councillor Alan Briggs and
Councillor Liz Bushell

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Natasha Chapman

44. Confirmation of Minutes - 25 November 2024

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2024 be confirmed and signed by the Chair as a true record.

45. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Pat Vaughan declared a Personal Interest with regard to the agenda item titled 'Discretionary Housing Payments Update'.

Reason: His granddaughter worked in the Finance Department at the City of Lincoln Council.

46. Lincoln Tenants Panel (LTP) Project Update

Mick Barber, Chair of Lincoln Tenants Panel (LTP), provided a written report which highlighted the Panel's continued work on a variety of projects with tenancy services, fire safety assurance, maintenance, business management and resident involvement teams. The briefing note, designed as a regular update to members of Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee, covered the following areas:

- Mick Barber continued to attend Social Housing Quality Network Panel and ARCH committee meetings
- All members of LTP continued to attend training and seminars hosted by Four Million Homes and engaged with Tenant Participation Advisory Services (TPAS) national involvement week
- LTP were working with the Resident Involvement Team for the co-creation of a digital newsletter/magazine - HOME covering important updates, how to stay connected in communities, tips and advice, updates from Lincoln Tenants Panel (LTP) and more. The newsletter was due to be launched in February.

Members discussed the content of the report in further detail. The following questions and comments emerged:

Question: What would happen to the paper copy of the newsletter/magazine that had always been sent to tenants?

Response: The co-creation of a digital newsletter/magazine was in the early stages; work was in progress. Every avenue had been investigated as to how communication with tenants could be made. Circulation of the newsletter/magazine would take place differently; perhaps sent out with rent statements.

RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted with thanks.

47. Council Dwelling and Garage Rents 2025-26

Daren Turner, Strategic Director of Housing and Investment:

- a) presented a report to members to propose an increase to Council rents of 2.7% for dwellings, within the terms of the Government's rent policy for social housing, and 3% for garages, respectively; and to seek approval for the introduction of revised rents from Monday 7 April 2025
- b) confirmed that Lincoln Tenants Panel LTP were consulted on the proposed increase to rents for the 2025-26 financial year, at their meeting on 7 January 2025
- c) added that the average 52-week net rent for Council dwellings would increase by £2.36 per week, across all property and rent types, under the proposed 2.7% increase. The average 52-week rent for Council garages would increase by £0.27 per week under the proposed 3% increase
- d) explained that annual increases to housing rents were capped at CPI + 1% per annum for dwelling rents. The CPI figure used was from September of the year prior to the annual increase, with September 2024 being the applicable CPI figure for rent setting for 2025-26. CPI in September 2024 was 1.7%. Therefore, the maximum housing rents can be increased in 2025-26 is 2.7%
- e) highlighted that there was a total of 7348 properties that were charged at social rent as at week commencing 2 December 2024. The average increase per property could be seen at paragraph 5.1 of the report on page 16 of the agenda pack
- f) added that there was a total of 441 properties that were charged at affordable rent as at week commencing 2 December 2024. The average increase per property could be seen at paragraph 5.2 of the report on page 16 of the agenda pack
- g) stated that an increase in garage rents of 3% was proposed in line with the Authority's general Fees and Charges increase. The result in an average increase in the rent charged to £9.27 per week for 2025/26 (based on a calculated 52-week charge period), an increase of £0.27 per week
- h) concluded that a review of garage provision was ongoing, and City of Lincoln Council (CoLC) were committed to a fundamental revaluation of the garage rent structure as part of the wider garage strategy
- i) welcomed comments and questions from Members of the Committee.

Members discussed the content of the report in further detail. The following questions and comments emerged:

Question: Was the rental period for 50 weeks or 52 weeks per year?

Response: At present, the rental period was a 50-week rent year however consideration had been given to the movement to a 52-week rent year under new tenant agreements. A rent reduction scheme over four years resulted in a loss of circa £11M.

Comment: There were a lot of people out of the city that garage income could be generated from; a good way of additional revenue. There were some problems experienced in some areas but not others and therefore, all area should be different. Consideration should be given to the areas where parking spaces were in demand.

Response: In consultation with the Portfolio Holder, a differential pricing model had been considered where there would be a different price for tenants and non-tenants. In addition, the possibility of bands going outwards from the city centre. It was understood that some garages were quite small and whether they were let out for storage. It was also understood that a lot of inner-city garages were used as commuter sites. The number of void garage had dramatically improved.

Comment: Garages already let out only paid approximately £2/£3 more than a tenant paid.

Response: It was within the gift of the Committee to make the decision on the charging regime and how that fits in with the strategy of garages. Informed decisions could be taken further to information presented.

Question: Reference was made to the number of properties that were charged social rent. Would the figure be affected by Right to Buy and were more properties lost from right to buy than were being built?

Response: The incoming Government made significant changes to the Right to Buy regime. In mid-November 2024, the discounts through Right to Buy was moved back to the initial discount in the 1980's. Individuals submitted applications quickly to remove the risk of losing the larger discount; approximately 100 applications were received compared to approximately 60 per year ordinarily. we received approx. It was thought that the number of Right to Buys would drop off significantly, the reasons that rent levels looked more positive moving forward. There would be net increase in stock numbers. Rent was not affected by Right to Buy, only the number of properties that rent could be charged for.

Comment: Reference was made to paragraph 4.2 of the report. The market value of a property based as affordable rent was only considered when the property became void. Reference was made to paragraph 5.2 of the report. Such properties were considered as a market value for rentable purposes. Therefore, it could be the case that two individuals lived in two houses but paid different rent. Whilst living in our affordable properties, tenants only paid a small increase instead of the increases experienced on the open market.

Response: The increase was for £128.55 if the formula worked correctly. Market rents regularly changed.

Comment: Reference was made to Hermit Street. The houses were charged social rent, not affordable rent.

Response: The houses at Hermit Street were partly funded by Homes England grant, as such, they had to be social rented houses.

Question: Where money was received from Homes England, was it the case that the authority had to charge social rent and not affordable rent?

Response: If the grant was specifically related to building the property, not the infrastructure, then depending on which fund Homes England use, social rent could be insisted upon. They don't not always insist on social rent however they could. In the Hermit Street case they insisted on social rent however the City of Lincoln Council felt social rent was correct for the area.

Supplementary Comment: The Housing Revenue Account was a business. There demand to be placed in Council housing was high as the prices and rents

were a lot lower than the open rental market. If rents were not brought somewhere in line with keeping properties up to date, it was possible some services would have to go.

Supplementary Response: The counter argument was that if an organisation covered 40% of the build cost, the authority only covered 60% but collected all of the rent for the property.

RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted with thanks.

48. Discretionary Housing Payments Update

Laura Brown, Benefits Team Leader:

- a) presented a report to provide Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee with information in relation to the Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme
- b) confirmed that LTP was consulted regarding the draft report and responses had been forwarded to the Resident Involvement Manager and incorporated within the report
- c) added that Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were available to local authorities to assist customers who needed additional help with their housing costs. A Central Government grant was awarded each year, specified to individual local authorities based on historical spend/anticipated need
- d) explained that DHP was completely separate from the statutory Housing Benefit (HB) scheme apart from the fact that HB must be in payment and the weekly DHP amount awarded must not exceed the maximum HB that could be awarded in each case. Since Universal Credit (UC) had also been introduced in recent years, DHP could also be used to 'top up' the housing component of UC. DHP can, and was, also used for rent deposits and rent in advance, for appropriate cases
- e) highlighted that a joint DHP Policy was agreed for the Shared Revenues and Benefits Service between City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council in early 2013, to ensure consistency of decision-making and robust criteria to take account of impacts of welfare reforms
- f) added that the City of Lincoln Council's DHP grant allocations from Central Government, from 2012/13 through to the upcoming financial year 2025/26 could be seen at paragraph 4.1 of the report on page 22 of the agenda pack
- g) stated that the allocation of DHP up to the end of Quarter 3 2024/25 and the number of applications received and awards made could be seen at paragraph 5.1 of the report on page 23 of the agenda pack
- h) concluded that there had been a reduction in the number of DHP awards made to City of Lincoln Council tenants since including Disability Living Allowance (DLA)/Personal Independence Payment (PIP)/Attendance Allowance (AA) as income within the income and expenditure calculation to assess DHP awards, which in turn had allowed officers to increase the amounts awarded to those in the private sector. This helped to largely keep spend within the Government grant allocated

- i) welcomed comments and questions from Members of the Committee.

Members discussed the content of the report in further detail. The following questions and comments emerged:

Question: Thanks were given for the informative report. Reference was made to page 23 of the report. Under what circumstances would DHP be refused?

Response: DHP could be refused due to excess income, so if a person had more income than expenditure. A refusal for DHP could also be because the applicant had not provided requested information and evidence or that a person did not qualify for example if they had their rent paid in full.

Question: Reference was made to the number of ongoing awards and tenure type at paragraph 5.1 of the report. What was the '30+ months' on-going awards? How long was the period over 30 months and where was the data?

Response: The 30+ months referred to people who had received DHP for over 30 months. A person may have received DHP for financial years 2023/24, 2024/25 etc.

Question: Why was DHP considered for refusal to move?

Response: When the downsizing incentive came in, it was a pilot. Customers were written to and if someone refused, they were not helping their situation. It was not possible to afford to pay for someone who was not willing to help themselves

Question: Of the Government contribution, £132,330 had been grant and £98K had been spent. Were surplus funds able to be used?

Response: If funds were not spent, the money was returned to Government. The remaining £30K covered the final 3 months of the financial year.

Comment: DHP was intended as a short-term payment. Some individuals had received DHP for 3 or 4 years.

Response: If an individual was as on basic job seekers allowance with no other income and lived in a one bedroomed property within private accommodation, there was little they could do for their situation to be improved. There was a long Council waiting list. DHP aimed to keep them in a property rather than ending up with the Housing Solutions team.

Supplementary Question: Could housing priority banding be moved to get an individual moved quicker?

Supplementary Response: Council housing banding was a different department.

Question: Thanks were given for an informative report. Had downsizing helped with DHP?

Response: Yes. Downsizing helped to move people into the right sized property and therefore left funding for individuals within the private sector where rent was considerably higher than social sector rent.

Question: What was the longest DHP payment currently?

Response: Officers would investigate further to the meeting.

Comment: DHP was intended as a short-term payment which allowed people to change their circumstances. It would be useful to further scrutinise the 9 long

term cases where DHP was awarded for 30+ months. It was a considerable amount of money to be tied up for such a long period of time.

Response: A piece of work was carried out a number of year ago and the number of long-term awards at that time was very high. Officers were proud to have reduced the number to 9 cases of which would be scrutinised further for the reasons of the longer-term award to be analysed.

RESOLVED that:

1. Officers be tasked with further scrutiny of the 9 cases awarded DHP for 30+ months and present the findings to Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee at a future meeting.
2. The content of the report be noted with thanks.

49. Change to Order of Business

RESOLVED that the order of business be amended to allow the report entitled 'Estate Inspections Review' to be considered as the next agenda item.

50. Estate Inspections Review

Mick Barber, Chair of Lincoln Tenants Panel (LTP):

- a) confirmed the LTP had requested an update on the wider review of Estate Inspections at the Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting on 25 November 2024
- b) added that the LTP had been and were currently involved in the area of work. Five members of LTP attended the Estate Inspections this year
- c) highlighted that the LTP working group had been meeting to review the issues raised on the 2024 Estate Inspections and to consider if the current process was delivering the outcomes that tenants wanted
- d) stated that the next meeting was booked for 14 February 2025 and the group had asked the Tenancy Services Manager to consider and feedback on four strands of work. The Tenants Panel Chair would update Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee on this workstream during future Lincoln Tenants Panel Project Updates as part of the Committee's standard agenda
- e) welcomed comments and questions from Members of the Committee

Members discussed the content of the report in further detail. The following questions and comments emerged:

Comment: Work was in progress of which took time. It was hoped that there would be some documentation for the next meeting.

Comment: The idea was that there should be more documentation within each area such as anti-social behaviour (ASB) and fly-tipping etc. The old mechanism needed to be changed.

Comment: It would be interesting to discover if having three officers for rent, ASB and estates, had made a change. It appeared to work better.

Comment: Work had taken place in the background and LTP had worked alongside the Tenancy Services Manager. It had been recognised through the Committee that improvements were needed to estate inspection work. As a result of the request, there was a working group with the LTP for the four strands of work to be considered. Alternative options for estate inspections had been considered to ensure more was taken from them and for best practice elsewhere to be considered. It was necessary for the 2025 estate inspections to be planned in order that a model that provided more information and better outcomes be created. The range of audiences was difficult as some individuals wanted to consider grounds maintenance, some wanted to consider ASB and some wanted to consider repairs. It was difficult for an area to be covered in a few hours on one afternoon. More time may be required which would take longer.

Comment: The estate inspections were to discover how the quality of life for tenants in a given area could be improved.

Comment: Issues had been identified on estates last year which were sent to Investment however a timescale had not been received.

RESOLVED that:

1. The LTP continued to work with the Tenancy Services Manager to co-create a process that worked effectively for the tenants and the Council.
2. The content of the report be noted with thanks.

51. Tenancy Agreement Update

Daren Turner, Strategic Director of Housing and Investment:

- a) presented a verbal report to provide Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee with an update on Tenancy Agreements
- b) stated that reviewing the tenancy agreement was very important which took time to redraft in order that legislative changes since it was last reviewed were considered
- c) added that an internal consultation process would begin over the coming weeks and once completed, an extensive consultation with tenants would be commenced
- d) highlighted that once the consultations had been completed, the final draft would be presented to Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee in order that it be scrutinised and comments and appropriate change be received. Once the process had been completed, the final draft would be progressed through to Executive for formal approval
- e) welcomed comments and questions from Members of the Committee

Members discussed the content of the verbal report in further detail. The following questions and comments emerged:

Comment: A request for an update on tenancy agreements to be added to the Work Programme for the new municipal year.

Comment: Best practice had been considered elsewhere and a summary of key points on the front page of a tenancy agreement was best moving forward in order that a new tenant be prevented from the requirement to read a 30/40-page document. Many individuals were so relieved to have been given a Council property that they did not want to read a long document. Tenants still needed to be made aware of the key points in any instance.

Question: Could a probationary period be included in new tenancies?

Response: A probationary period of one year was included.

Supplementary Question: Could the period be amended to six months and then yearly afterwards? Was there anywhere for Council tenants that abused staff?

Supplementary Response: There was a section within the tenancy agreement with regard to treating people fairly and with dignity and respect. Abuse towards staff had sadly become more prevalent. Lifetime tenancies, at times, made behaviour and upkeep of properties difficult. If a tenancy was to be reviewed every 5 years to consider how a tenant treated their Council property and neighbours, notwithstanding rent arrears, there may be more of an incentive. Lifetime tenancies were problematic.

Question: Could individuals be vetted prior to being granted a tenancy?

Response: In the case of regular moves, references would be requested. However, there were individuals with chaotic lifestyles that needed a lot of help and extra support. The Council was a landlord, not a provider of social care however staff always went further than required.

Comment: When an individual caused issues, sometimes it became a big issue. The Council had a duty to find a property which included for those not on the housing waiting list but had become homeless and therefore, a priority. However, there was also a duty to good tenants to ensure that they weren't placed in a vulnerable position.

Response: The Council worked hard to place people in the right areas in the right circumstances, both for them and existing tenants however the Council only had so many properties available.

Comment: LTP had been involved with the agreement and agreed with the safety of staff and the use of less complicated wording. The right house needed to go to the right person/people. Arguably the probationary period should be extended, perhaps to 18 months. If individuals experienced problems, they needed to talk to officers. It would be interesting for the new copy to be compared to the old copy in order that the volume of work carried out could be seen.

Question: Would staff receive training on the new signing in order that key areas of the agreement were highlighted to new tenants?

Response: The handover process would be adapted for an abridged and shortened version. All staff needed to understand what the new tenancy agreement contained and the implications. There was no reason that all staff couldn't be included in the training regime.

Comment: It would be positive for homeless and rough sleeps to be provided a copy of the agreement ahead of being given a property in order that they could read ahead. Many homeless and rough sleeping individuals had a mobile phone.

Question: How could the suggestion be put forward to change tenancies from lifetime tenancies to 5 years?

Response: The issue of tenancy length was a matter for members to dictate. Lifetime tenancies gave limited recourse in order that people were encouraged to behave correctly. There were considerable legal connotations, and existing tenancies could not be altered, only the granting of new tenancies. It was possible for probation periods to be extended. Identification of needs and support could be offered for individuals that had not held a tenancy before. There was a range of measures available such as more frequent inspections or fortnightly visits.

Comment: Many tenants were unaware of the housing officer that covered their estate.

Response: There were a high number of individuals that were aware of the housing officer relevant to their property. Similarly, the authenticity of an individual's claims not to have known their housing officer, could not be proved.

Comment: Concentration should be given on the approximately 4-5% of properties within an area that were a problem.

Question: The housing list was a large problem. It was necessary for older people and younger people to be integrated. When looking at housing, was consideration given to people already in the surrounding houses?

Response: Yes. Sensitivity was given to the makeup of an existing street and people were placed appropriately. However, there was only a certain number of properties available, and the Council had a legal obligation to house people. It was very expensive for individuals to be kept in B&B properties and statutorily, it could only be done for a certain period, especially for families. If officers were concerned about an individual, intense wrap around support would be offered in order that good behaviour and positive integration be ensured. However, it was sometimes the case that people, on the face of their application and process, appeared to be fine upstanding citizens. It could be a different scenario once they were in a property.

Supplementary Response: It was not possible to always judge an individual on their past behaviours as behaviours could change.

Comment: Only so much information could be obtained by the Council. If the incoming tenant did not provide all the information, it was difficult.

Comment: The Council did not always receive all information from partner organisations.

RESOLVED that the content of the verbal update be noted with thanks.

52. Work Programme 2024/25

The Democratic Services Officer:

- a) presented the work programme for Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee for 2024/25 as detailed at Appendix A of the report
- b) highlighted that the work programme could be further populated in accordance with Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committees requests for topics of discussion and areas of preferred scrutiny to be used as a working document, added to or amended at members discretion at any time during the 2024/25 Municipal Year

- c) confirmed that the work programme included those areas for scrutiny linked to the strategic priorities of the Council and themed housing matters, to ensure that the work of the committee was relevant and proportionate.

Councillor Gary Hewson, Chair of the Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee requested that a Tenancy Agreement Update be brought before Committee for consideration at a meeting in the new municipal year.

RESOLVED that the content of the Work Programme for 2024/25 be noted, subject to the following additional items to be included on the agenda for Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee to be held on 17 March 2025:

- Further scrutiny on long awarded Discretionary Housing Payments (Laura Brown)