

- Present:** Councillors Councillor Gary Hewson (*in the Chair*), Liz Bushell, Christopher Reid, Edmund Strenjiel and Loraine Woolley
- Also Present** Councillor Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing
- Apologies for Absence:** Councillor Pat Vaughan
- Also in Attendance:** Mick Barber (Chair of LTP), Steven Bearder (Member of LTP), Caroline Coyle-Fox (Vice Chair of LTP), Debbie Rousseau (Member of LTP) and Sheila Watkinson (Member of LTP)

109. Confirmation of Minutes - 25 January 2021

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2021 be confirmed.

110. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

111. LTP Matters

Mick Barber, Chair of LTP updated Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee on the activities of the Lincoln Tenants Panel, which included:

- Involvement in the new work programme for Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee 2021/22 which was in the process of being drafted.
- Work on scheduled repairs which was going well.
- Involvement in the new complaints procedure.
- Fire safety walks
- Regulators were due to attend the next LTP meeting.
- Inspections of communal areas had been carried out by Mick Barber with Keeley Johnson and Ben Jackson, housing officers in Moorland Ward which had proved most satisfactory. They had all been very impressed with the cleanliness of communal areas. The only issue seemed to be fly tipping. It was not just the case for the Council to take away the rubbish. It was for tenants to be educated of their responsibilities in disposing of unwanted waste carefully which had to be addressed.
- Estate inspections were being arranged. These were difficult times but we were getting there.

RESOLVED that the content of the verbal report be noted.

112. Annual Report from Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing- Councillor D Nannestad

Councillor D Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing

- a) presented his report regarding activity and the achievements within his portfolio
- b) reported that the City of Lincoln Council Housing Strategy 2020-25 had been approved by Executive and Council following a pleasing consultation process with the next step to be the implementation of the business plan
- c) advised that his report covered the following main areas:
 - Homelessness
 - Tenancy Services
 - Housing Repairs
 - Voids
 - Housing Investment
 - New Build/Allocations
- d) highlighted that the Scheduled Repairs Pilot Scheme had driven down carbon reduction with mileage by operatives having been reduced by 4,200 miles a month
- e) reported that although the effect of Covid 19 had been quite severe, repairs were still ongoing with the percentage of repairs fixed first time at the end of quarter 2 standing at 90.11% and 99.95% of appointments kept
- f) praised housing staff for their extreme flexibility during the pandemic being involved in jobs they had never known would be asked of them
- g) thanked members of LTP for their involvement in the new complaints procedure
- h) invited questions from Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee on the content of his report.

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

- Question: Were we currently building more Council houses than we were losing through Right to Buy?
- Response: The cumulative net gain stood presently at 293. It was also a function for housing associations and other housing providers. From 2014 to date in terms of our own stock there had been an increase of 18 properties.
- Question: What were the plans to build more pure Council houses?
- Response: In terms of plans for the future:
 - The scheme was on schedule at Dewint Court to build 70 units for tenants requiring different levels of care.
 - A planning application would shortly be submitted for 40 new houses on Rookery Lane.
 - There was further progress to be made at Queen Elizabeth Road.
 - The Western Growth Corridor if it progressed forward would offer an element of social housing.
 - The council was also buying flats under the Next Steps Programme having secured 5 already with another 10 still to come forward.
 - Members of the public desired council houses as they offered security of tenure.

- The Authority would always look at ways forward to provide more council houses in the future.
- Comment: It must be careful not to attribute carbon reduction entirely to scheduled repairs. Once things were more back to normal in relation to the pandemic a measure could be taken.
- Comment: Repair times were at detriment to the tenants as there could be a 3 month wait for a leaky tap. Tenants were paying rent for this service.
- Response by Mick Barber, Chair of LTP: There was an update report to come forward on scheduled repairs which would highlight savings to the service and improvements going forward.
- Question: In respect of housing staff having been redeployed to other work which was not related to the Housing Revenues Account due to Covid 19, was the cost of this work repatriated to the appropriate area?
- Response: The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) did get repatriated for non HRA roles and vice-versa.
- Comment: The council had a statutory duty to support homeless people although this was at a loss to the General Fund. Those provided with accommodation automatically joined the housing waiting list.
- Response: It was not the case that clients presenting to the authority as homeless were automatically housed by us. They were advised to return to their home town or referred to private sector housing associations. As a landlord the Council needed funds to cover homelessness, hence it used the General Fund. It was not making money elsewhere.
- Comment: Collection of rent arrears would be less the following year due to the impacts of Covid 19 on local residents' ability to pay. This would be at the detriment to those people paying full rent in terms of the Authority having less cash to spend on repairs/improvements/new council houses.
- Response: The increase in rent arrears was mirrored by the amount of people awaiting Universal Credit payments to be processed. The collection of rent was a priority to the Council, and it was doing everything it could to recover rent arrears in very challenging circumstances. Indeed it was performing better than other local authorities. There were people with no income at the current time. Officers encouraged people in difficulty to engage with them to offer support and help. A new 'Right to Breathing Space' scheme would give legality to any tenure whether private rented or owner occupier a period of time to evaluate their options, with all further action suspended. This would further impact on rent recovery. It would take a few months after lockdown ended to achieve improved rent arrears collection.
- Comment: It may be useful to obtain comparisons with other local authorities in other aspects of HRA including rent arrears performance for inclusion on the work programme for this Committee in the new Council year.
- Response: He had met with various Council leaders. Our rent arrears collection figures were much better than others. Only a like for like comparison with authorities having similar housing stock would prove be useful.
- Question: What about the arrangements when the Kier contract came to an end on 31 March 2021. Would the majority of the work be done in-house?
- Response: Reasons for making this change had been considered by Executive, for example, less travel, using local companies, engaging more directly, using local employees who then spent cash in the City. Essential Decent Homes work already being completed in different areas of the

Authority would not be compromised, however corresponding savings would be realised. The gas contract was not affected.

- Question: Why was the planning application for new homes Rookery Lane pulled from Planning Committee a month ago?
- Response: The planning application had been deferred for further testing by the lead local flood authority to take place up to the end of February 2021 and was due to be considered by Planning Committee anytime soon.
- Question: Would the 'Right to Breathing Space' scheme affect rent payments or ASB cases as well?
- Response: Only rent.

RESOLVED that the content of the report and discussions held be noted.

113. Costs of Voids

(It was noted that Councillor Woolley had lost connectivity during the discussion of the last item.)

At the request of the Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee, Councillor Hewson, an extract from quarter three financial report presented to Performance Scrutiny Committee on 18 February 2021 in relation to the Housing Revenue Account was made available to give members an insight into expectations for losses on void properties.

RESOLVED that the content of the associated extract report be noted.

114. Update on Allocations Policy 2021

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director of Housing:

- a. presented a report to update Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee on the introduction of the Council's amended Allocations Policy from January 2021
- b. advised that an amended Policy was agreed by members in March 2020 with an initial target date for implementation of June 2020, however due to the outbreak of Covid 19, our IT suppliers were unable to complete the IT amendments and testing as anticipated which had resulted in slippage in the implementation of the new Policy until January 2021
- c. reported on one of the main changes being the introduction of a 24 month residency qualification having taken advice from our MHCLG Homelessness Advisors and in line with the provisions of the Localism Act 2011
- d. provided a summary of the current position including the number of active applicants allowed to bid on the Waiting List as at 23 February 2021 and details of 40 properties having been allocated to households with a local connection to the City as summarised at paragraph 3 of her report
- e. reported that in total, we housed 28 households from Band 1, 11 from Band 2 and 1 from Band 3

- f. noted that the majority of properties becoming available to let were 1 bed units as a result of the ongoing pandemic encouraging people to stay at home and only move in exceptional circumstances
- g. added that customer enquiries continued to be high particularly from family households who would like to move but we continued to experience reduced turnover of stock particularly for 3 and 4 bed houses and it was difficult to predict when the supply of family accommodation would change
- h. highlighted that we also continued to experience low demand for independent living properties, in part due to the reluctance of older people to move during the pandemic
- i. requested members' comments on the content of the report.

Members discussed the report in further detail. Questions and comments were made as follows:

- Question: There was a long waiting list for four bed accommodation with ground floor bedrooms. Did we have any at all?
- Response: There were very few properties in this category. This type of accommodation would probably be required for families with disabled children. Workable solutions could involve creating downstairs bedroom/bathroom space and/or installing adaptations to the property.
- Comment: It was noted that 21 people were homeless at Band 1 and 6 at Band 2, this amounted to 27 people associated with the City which was disappointing.
- Response: The Authority did everything it could to try to prevent homelessness. There was the option of utilising other accommodation projects/private rented sector accommodation. The majority of homeless people were currently single people having been successfully removed from the streets. This may change as we moved out of the pandemic. In those circumstances where the authority had a statutory duty to homeless people it could not refuse to provide accommodation. Band 1 housing criteria required people to be statutorily homeless and Band 2 housing for people who must have a local connection.
- Question: So people coming into the city were still given priority over local people having 24 months residency?
- Response: Government legislation required the authority to house homeless people as a statutory duty. Everyone on the waiting list had a local connection.
- Question: Where did the figures for sofa surfers fit in?
- Response: These were categorised within Band 2 Homeless.

RESOLVED that the implementation of the new Allocations Policy and information regarding the waiting list since the change in policy as detailed within the officer's report be noted.

115. Target Setting 2021/22

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director, Housing:

- a. provided a report to advise Members of the proposed performance indicator targets normally reported to Scrutiny for 2021/22, to agree the

targets and consider how performance information could be monitored and reported throughout the year as Covid restrictions eased

- b. reported that performance information was reported to the Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee on a quarterly basis, and targets reviewed on an annual basis with both tenants and the Committee at the March meeting
- c. highlighted that throughout the lock down period normal management information had been collated however performance against targets had not been formally reported as this had not always been possible due to changes in service delivery, although management information had been provided wherever practically possible and members made aware of reasons for any changes to service and performance during this challenging year
- d. noted that as it was likely that Covid restrictions should be lifted at the end of June 2021, we were now considering how this may impact on our services
- e. reported that throughout 2020/21 there had been delays in repairing and allocating empty properties due to the pandemic and Government restrictions on non-essential moves and holding properties for homeless households, therefore the council was currently reviewing voids performance and procedure considering these measures against external restrictions on performance
- f. added that discussions with the Portfolio Holder regarding Scheduled Repairs had taken place to allow amended performance measures to be brought forward once the Working Group had concluded its work
- g. referred to proposed realistic targets for 2021/22 based on current performance, national guidance and benchmarking with similar authorities as detailed at Appendix A to her report for members consideration
- h. reported that LTP members had also been consulted on the proposed indicators, expressing some concerns regarding changes to the voids target and the requirement to ensure the complaints response target fell in line with the new national ombudsman target for complaints resolution, as a result of which the Director of Housing had given assurances that the voids target would be reviewed at 3 and 6 months and if required would be brought down
- i. highlighted that the Portfolio for Quality Housing had agreed the proposed targets and the review of targets after quarter 2
- j. requested members' feedback on the content of the report.

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

The Chair commented that he was happy with the input given by LTP in respect of the proposed targets. He noted that LTP had raised concerns regarding the voids target and the requirement to ensure the complaints response target fell in line with the new national ombudsman target for complaints resolution. He also noted assurances received from the Director of Housing that the voids target

would be reviewed at 3 and 6 months and brought down if necessary. The Tenants Panel represented the rent payers and we must be realistic.

The Chair continued by saying that the situation of not keeping check of performance could not be continued. He expected people working from home to provide the same service as when they were working at City Hall. Tenants expected a service and a duty for rents to be collected. Moving forward he wanted to see the same service as that delivered before the COVID outbreak and a successful Sustainability team at the end of the year.

Mick Barber, Chair of LTP Chair, responded that meetings had been held with the Tenant's Panel and he understood the difficulties being experienced. It would be different when things got back to normal but it was not right to put figures forward that were not realistic at the current time. Hopefully things would return to normal. Meantime the situation continued to be monitored.

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director, Housing emphasised how hard officers had been working. She highlighted recent success with achieving £70,000 of Discretionary Housing Payments for tenants in arrears. It remained the council's priority to offer support to people to enable tenants to arrive in a position to be able to pay their rents. The Tenancy team was doing all it could to keep rent arrears as low as possible in difficult circumstances.

Councillor Reid queried in relation to the New Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code targets:

- Why the logging and acknowledgement of repairs was set at 5 days although the target was currently 1 and 3 days for priority/urgent repairs.
- The target for repair appointments with 1 in 20 being missed. Was the target perhaps a bit low
- Whether the 10 day complaints target referred to the time to respond or acknowledgement of the complaint

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director for Housing explained that

- The repair target applied to working days. The 5 day indicator was used to take into account a weekend period.
- The proposed repair target for appointments was still performing well with actual performance Q3 being closer to 100%. The target proposed was to take into account monitoring/review during the COVID period.
- The complaints target at 10 days represented a local offer agreement period to respond to tenants. However, an extension could be agreed with the customer if the complaint was likely to take longer to resolve.

Andrew McNeil, Assistant Director, Housing and Investment confirmed that on average it was taking the Council 6 days to reply to complaints. Repair targets would be reviewed at the end of Quarter 1 as the Council's roadmap for services through the COVID period became clearer.

RESOLVED that

1. The proposed performance targets for 2021/22 be approved.
2. The agreed review of all targets post Quarter 2 October 2021 be approved.

The Chair

- a. advised members that a draft work programme for 2021/22 had been circulated to officers for comments and had been forwarded to the Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee and the Chair/Vice Chair of Lincoln Tenant's Panel today for individual input/comments ready for use as a working document at the first meeting of the new Municipal Year
- b. reported that the work programme 2021/21 would be regularly updated in consultation with the Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee and Chair/Vice Chair of Lincoln Tenants Panel
- c. highlighted that the work programme included those areas for scrutiny linked to the strategic priorities of the Council and housing matters, to ensure that the work of this committee remained relevant and proportionate

RESOLVED that the circulation of a work programme for 2021/22 to officers, Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee and the Chair/Vice Chair of Lincoln Tenant's Panel for individual input/comments ready for use as a working document at the first meeting of the new Municipal Year be noted.