

**Present:** Councillors Councillor Pat Vaughan (*in the Chair*), Liz Bushell, Rebecca Longbottom, Christopher Reid and Edmund Strengiel

**Apologies for Absence:** Councillor Loraine Woolley, Steven Bearder, Debbie Rousseau and Sheila Watkinson

**Also in Attendance:** Mick Barber (Chair of LTP), Caroline Coyle-Fox (Vice Chair of LTP) and Mike Asher (Substitute LTP Member)

**23. Confirmation of Minutes - 9 August 2021**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 August 2021 be confirmed.

**24. Matters Arising**

In relation to Minute No 18, 'Other Matters' Mick Barber, Chair of Lincoln Tenants Panel, asked whether there was any further update as to when Housing Appeals Panel hearings would recommence?

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director of Housing, confirmed as that as soon as there were appeals in the system to be heard a meeting of Housing Appeals Panel would be called.

**25. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were received.

**26. LTP Matters**

Mick Barber, Chair of LTP reported as follows:

- LTP had undergone a great deal of restructuring over the last two-year period.
- LTP members had been involved in working groups together alongside officers to carry out this task; he gave thanks to the support given by officers especially in such difficult times.
- Chris Morton, Resident Involvement Manager was leaving the employment of the City of Lincoln Council on 26 November 2021. He had worked so hard for the LTP and expressed total respect for all his commitment and support.

**27. Quarter 2 (2021/22) - Performance and Finance Report**

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director of Housing:

- a. provided Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee with a quarter two report on Performance Indicators for the 2021/22 financial year (April 2021-September 2021), as detailed at Appendix A of her report, which combined all performance relevant to Housing Landlord issues

- b. advised that of the 21 measures, 7 were on or exceeding targets for the year (year-end), and 13 had not met the normal targets set
- c. highlighted that of the 13 measures that did not meet the target, 6 of these were within 5% tolerance of their respective targets (Amber rating), 3 of the 6 were year-end targets (Decent Homes and 2 financial measures) and one measure did not have a target set (Complaints replied to in line with corporate policy)
- d. reported that over the last eleven years the Council had been working with the Lincoln Tenants Panel to improve external scrutiny and to meet the standards implemented by the Tenant Services Authority
- e. reported that from April 2010 all social landlords were required to have local offers in place alongside the national standards, as set out in the new Regulatory Framework for Social Housing, amended with effect from April 2012, although the principles remained the same
- f. referred to Appendix A which attempted to simplify the overall analysis of the data by listing performance on a service functional basis (rents, repairs, etc) and then showing the source of the indicator (reason)
- g. added that for comparison purposes each indicator showed last year's performance against the target for the current year (where applicable) and progress made in the current year
- h. referred to paragraph 4.3 of the report and highlighted areas of good performance:
  - Anti-Social Behaviour
  - % of Rent Collected as a % of Rent Due
  - Repairs Indicators
- i. reported at paragraph 4.4 of the report on reasons where we were close to achieving our targets (amber rating) as follows:
  - Arrears as a % of Rent Debit
  - % of Homes with Valid Gas Safety Certificate
  - Housing Investment and Programmed Maintenance
- j. further highlighted a brief explanation of reasons where we had not achieved our targets as detailed at paragraph 4.5 of the report:
  - Voids Performance
  - % of Urgent (3 days) Repairs Carried Out Within Time Limits (HRS)
  - % of Complaints Replied to Within Target Time
- k. stated that although there were no direct financial implications arising from the report, there were several indicators that did affect the HRA including the amount of rent collected and repairs and improvements; we continued to monitor our financial position with our finance colleagues
- l. invited committees' questions and comments.

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

- Current performance was promising to see with only a short dip due to circumstances surrounding COVID.
- There was currently a general shortage of staff across the country in all professions. Hopefully the red rating in the area of urgent repairs carried out within 3 days would disappear in time.
- The average number of days to resolve Anti -Social Behaviour cases for quarter 2 at 49.1 days represented good performance.

The following key questions emerged:

- Question: Performance in relation to the percentage of Anti-Social Behaviour cases resolved/closed was showing as 98.54%. What proof did officers have to back up this data?
- Response: Each case opened was allocated a case file and progress was tracked accordingly. A case could not be closed until it was resolved with full compliance. A customer satisfaction survey was also completed prior to closure.
- Supplementary Question: Were cases closed because the customer received a satisfactory conclusion or because the case couldn't be taken any further? Whose decision was it?
- Response: The figures quoted related to tenancy services. There may be cases on occasions which took a long time to resolve but these were exceptional cases.
- Question: Was the percentage of customer telephone calls answered within 90 seconds at 18.2% in this quarter, set against a target of 80% due to having staff shortages?
- Response: Advice taken from Joanne Crookes, Customer Services Manager revealed that calls were more complex and taking longer to deal with. There were also instances of staff absence due to COVID and recent staff turnover meant that staff were in training. Figures obtained from the Customer Services Manager recorded average waiting times in September 2021 as follows: Of the 10,691 calls answered the average waiting time to get through to an agent was 7.13 minutes, with 28% of calls being answered within 90 seconds. (Subsequent to the response provided at the meeting, figures obtained for October 2021 showed a marked improvement: Of 10,574 calls answered the average waiting time to get through to an agent was 5.16 minutes, with 42% of calls being answered within 90 seconds.)
- Question: Were callers informed what number they were in the telephone queue?
- Response: Yes. They were also offered a call back in this duration and referred to the online service available as an alternative.
- Question: Why had the percentage of all priority repairs carried out within the time limit by Aaron Services dropped from Quarter One to Quarter 2?
- Response: Performance had dropped slightly. Regular meetings were held with Aaron Services, who also had recruitment issues and illnesses due to COVID. There were solid reasons for the current situation. The company

worked very hard in partnership with the Housing Service and provided good value for money

- Question: Performance in terms of complaints was improving, however, still along way from reaching the target. When was the target last reached and how recently were the actions identified to address the problems implemented? If this was recently, why had it taken so long?
- Response: The nearest the service had been to the target was 90% in April 2020. The targets in relation to the Housing Service were much more stringent than corporate targets. There was also a significant higher number of complaints received compared to other departments. Many instances registered as complaints were in fact service requests. An action plan was in the process of being implemented to deal with these anomalies and complaints monitoring reviewed.
- Question: Could officers provide additional detail regarding measures ongoing to address the shortfall in % of urgent repairs carried out within time limits i.e., flexible recruitment campaigns, job advertisements, how success was measured?
- Response: The service was currently undergoing a flexible recruitment process for fixed term/part time/ afternoon/evening workers. It also linked up with local colleges to give opportunities for school leavers. (Council policy required all vacancies to be advertised internally first which caused some delays. Also, employees were entitled to resign with only a month's notice) Recruitment open days were being arranged/recruitment videos introduced. Progress would be measured in the next 4-8 weeks as new operatives were recruited. The benefits of working for a local authority were being advertised e.g., pension scheme, good working hours, tools and PPE equipment provided. It was very challenging to recruit staff in a 'boom' economy.
- Question: How was performance measured for repair appointments kept compared to appointments made measured?
- Response: This data was provided by the Performance Team
- Question: There were examples where customer services had contacted tenants to book repairs that had already been completed. Was this an occasional occurrence?
- Response: Officers were not aware of such issues; however, they would investigate further if provided with greater details.
- Question: What was the current position regarding the delay in completion of electrical safety testing work?
- Response: There was currently a six-week back log of electrical testing work compared with gas inspections over a 5-year period; gas inspections were being continued.

LTP members requested that data be prepared to propose instigation of a 5-year electrical testing scheme to reach the same standards as gas inspections.

RESOLVED that:

1. The current performance outcomes during the financial year 2021/22 be noted.

2. Data be prepared on a 5-year electrical testing scheme to reach the same standards as gas inspections
3. A commitment to continued reporting on a quarterly basis and to determine a programme to have more interim in-depth reviews of service specific performance particularly in relation to Anti-Social Behaviour be noted.

## **28. Mutual Exchange Policy**

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director of Housing:

- a. presented Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee with a copy of the Council's Mutual Exchange Policy and Procedures
- b. advised that the policy had been amended during the COVID pandemic in line with the Governments directive not to allow any non-essential moves during lockdowns or at other times when the movement of people should be avoided
- c. highlighted that the only discretion in respect of changes to the Mutual Exchange Policy related to repairs as the scheme was governed by statute
- d. reported that a meeting had taken place with members of LTP to advise on the legal position in relation to mutual exchanges, after which LTP Members agreed to look at the repair's procedure relating to mutual exchanges
- e. highlighted that any proposed changes would need to be costed and their impact on the HRA considered before changes in policy could be recommended
- f. welcomed a further report from LTP members with any recommendations for areas of review.

Members discussed the content of the report in further detail.

Mick Barber, Chair of LTP summarised the following main points:

- A working group had been set up made up of officers and Members to review and make suggestions regarding tweaks to the Mutual Exchange Policy.
- The issues surrounded tenants undergoing mutual house exchanges and making requests for additional work to the new property.
- An annual Mutual Exchange Conference held annually in the City had encouraged a good response from tenants wishing to exchange.

Councillor Reid asked whether COVID measures to restrict the movement of tenants were still in place?

Yvonne Fox explained that when the country first went into lockdown non-essential moves were not allowed. These restrictions were no longer in place; however, the housing authority was still cautious in line with the amended policy.

Councillor Reid queried the legality of text within paragraph 2.2 and 3 of the amended policy to allow the Assistant Director of Housing/Tenancy Services

Manager to defer any requests where the move was not 'essential'; wording he felt needed clarification.

Daren Turner, Director of Housing clarified that the Government had made it clear that essential meant 'high medical need'. This was not defined in law, but in terms of reasonableness/not to be detrimental to the health of the person in the household. Legal advice had been taken.

Councillor Vaughan, Chair, asked how many Mutual Exchanges had been deferred?

Yvonne Fox explained that the policy had been amended to reflect restrictions during the first and second COVID lockdowns. Tenants had cooperated with the housing service during this period and had been happy to wait.

Mick Barber, Chair of LTP highlighted that there was an agreed timescale for deferred mutual exchanges which could be appealed against if a specific request was prolonged further.

Councillor Strengeil referred to the ten grounds for refusal of a mutual exchange at paragraph 5.2 of the policy. He asked whether circumstances where one of the houses was in perfect condition but the other in need of refurbishment would be grounds for refusal?

Yvonne Fox clarified there was no legal ground to refuse an exchange if both tenants were in agreement.

Matt Hillman, Assistant Director of Housing, and Investment suggested that further guidance be set down to manage expectations/responsibility of the tenant accepting a mutual exchange to agree with the tenant leaving the property any specified repair work required which should be recharged back to the new tenant. This would allow a consistent process to be followed similar to voids

Mick Barber highlighted that the working group was looking into the time limit for non-essential repairs following mutual exchanges.

Daren Turner advised that the majority of mutual exchanges went very smoothly, although he had seen instances of a signed document for the property to be 'taken as seen' with no repairs within 12 months, followed shortly after by requests for repairs to the same property.

RESOLVED that:

1. Legal advice be sought on the relevance/suitability of the wording within paragraphs 2.2 and 3 of the amended Mutual Exchange Policy.
2. A further report be awaited from LTP on potential areas for review of the Mutual Exchange Policy.
3. The current Mutual Exchange Policy be noted.

## **29. Numbers of Properties Offered to People on Council Waiting List/Others**

Yvonne Fox, Assistant Director of Housing:

- a. provided statistical data in respect of allocation of council properties April-September 2021 as detailed within her report
- b. advised that at the end of Quarters 1 and 2, 200 properties had been allocated
- c. referred to her allocations update which detailed types of applicant/banding successful bids were made to; broken down further by percentage property types across all properties
- d. highlighted that the authority was still required by law to ensure that any household threatened by homelessness or being actually homeless were prioritised for accommodation
- e. added that the Council also had a quota for transfer applicants to move into more suitable accommodation that met their changing needs, set at 25% of all lettings to ensure that local needs and Government priorities were met
- f. welcomed comments on the content of her report.

Members raised questions as follows:

- Question: It would be useful to see a comparison against data for previous years, was the percentage number of homeless people higher now than pre COVID times?
- Response: Since legislation had changed a full year's figures were not yet available. However, homelessness cases pre COVID were approximately 25% compared to a likely 40/45% at the end of the year.
- Question: Further information would be helpful on what types of property people had transferred from, whether homeless people had moved out of private sector housing, where they came from, who they were in terms of age/family situation. This would give a fuller picture over time.
- Response: This type of data could be brought to a future meeting of Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee. The figures were available. There had been many changes over the years particularly post Homelessness Reduction Act legislation. People had complex needs, in difficult circumstances such as fleeing violence and rough sleeping was more prevalent. The profile was changing and would probably always do so.

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

### **30. Work Programme Update 2021-22**

The Chair:

- a. presented the work programme for Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee for 2021/22 as detailed at Appendix A of the officer's report
- b. advised that this was an opportunity for committee to suggest other items to be included on the work programme.

RESOLVED that the content of the work programme be noted.

**31. AOB**

Councillor Vaughan, Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee extended his heartfelt thanks to Chris Morton, Resident Involvement Manager on behalf of all Members for his support to Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee and City of Lincoln Council tenants/LTP members over recent years. He wished Chris all the best in his new career as he left the employment of the City of Lincoln Council on 26 November 2021.