

30. Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2024/54

Daren Turner, Strategic Director of Housing and Investment:

- a) presented Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee (HSSC) with a report which detailed the long-term Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for 2024/54 which could be seen at Appendix A to the report
- b) added that HRA Business Plan built on the previous five-year plan, demonstrated the current situation and outlined the aims and objective for the 30 years from April 2024. In addition, the HRA Business Plan included financial assumptions and projections during the lifespan of the plan
- c) confirmed that the Council had a legal duty to ensure the account remained solvent and would review financials on a yearly basis
- d) reported that the Business Plan focussed on 4 key objectives:
 - a. Develop and Improve Core Housing Services
 - b. Delivering New Homes
 - c. Estate and Neighbourhood Regeneration
 - d. Addressing Climate Change
- e) added that extensive consultation had taken place in collaboration with LTP, Tenants and also included five Member workshops. A shorter synopsis of the Business Plan was expected to be made available to all Members.
- f) offered thanks to Members of LTP for their involvement and for the attendance to workshops of all elected Members
- g) invited comments and questions from Members of the Committee.

Members discussed the content of the report, commented, asked questions and received relevant responses from Officers as follows:

Comment from Mick Barber, Chair of LTP: The hard work of the officers involved in the creation of the plan and the commitment of LTP was valued.

Comment from Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing: The dedication of officers for the vast amount of work that had been undertaken was recognised and appreciated. The document would be reviewed and amended over time as the situation would look very different in 30 years' time.

Question: Had the consultants work now been completed?

Response: The contract for the consultants was not for one specific part of the plan only. There would be a presentation by the consultants in the future.

Question: How many times throughout the year would consideration be given to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)? Should HSSC decide how many times the HRA was reviewed per year?

Response: The financial performance of the HRA had not historically appeared as a regular agenda item for consideration by HSSC. Instead, it had been presented to Performance Scrutiny Committee. Review of the financials was conducted within the department on a quarterly basis.

Comment: It may prove beneficial for a financial update to be presented to HSSC on a bi-annual basis for scrutiny.

Response: It would be a matter for the Chief Finance Officer to present financial information and discussions with finance colleagues would take place further to the meeting. Democratic Services had already commenced enquiries for bi-annual presentation of financial information, prior to the meeting.

Question: Where did the money to support emergency accommodation in hotels come from? The General Fund Account or the Housing Revenue Account?

Response: The General Fund Account. The long-term aim was to secure individuals into our housing stock and to have long term secure accommodation. Once under tenancy services, individuals would still be provided with support to ensure that the tenancy was sustainable.

Question: Why had there been an option appraisal for only two of the three high-rise blocks?

Response: Shuttleworth House had benefitted from significant investment approximately 4-5 years ago and was in good condition. Shuttleworth House also benefitted from two stairwells at both the front and the back of the block. Therefore, it was very well equipped in respect of fire safety. The other two high-rise blocks only had one stairwell each.

Question: Had consideration been given to the improvement of energy efficiency for properties with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band D or lower?

Response: We were committed to achieving an EPC Band C or above for all properties over the lifespan of the plan. Achievement was difficult for a range of reasons. Successfully gaining physical access to some properties was difficult and some tenants that had resided in their home for a number of years, opposed modernisation of the property. Residents that allowed entry were considered within the plan and the total number of properties affected was now in single figures.

Comment: Changes contained within the Government's new Housing Bill which received Royal Assent on 20 July 2023, were required to be in place by 1 April 2024. Any organisation with over 1000 homes would be inspected once every four years to review compliance with the consumer standards. Social landlords would be required to collect and publish a range of 22 satisfaction measures and the City of Lincoln Council (CoLC) had a contract in place to provide that, as an external method to provide baselines and dashboards. The CoLC's performance as a landlord would be accessible by any person and provided a transparent view to the public and potential tenants.

Question: The Act contained a charter that laid out seven commitments that residents should expect from their landlord. Further to the tragic death in Boultham Ward, how were we going to ensure people were safe in their home?

Response: Incidents of that nature were handled on a case-by-case basis with consideration given to the nature of the incident. On some occasions, not always a serious case review was instigated and all public bodies involved in said case would be required to take part in a review of the response. If that occurred, reports would be published at a set time dependent on the nature of the enquiry which could take many months or years to complete.

Question: Was it possible to view the results of investigations, given the Council's role as landlord?

Response: It was not possible to comment on the processes of the Police, judiciary, and mental health services in connection with the tragic incident in Boultham Ward. Further to the incident, CoLC conducted an internal review of its own processes. A wider review had been commissioned, to be led by the Business Manager – Lincolnshire Safeguarding Adults Board. Reports would always be considered, and messages fed back. The decision to publicise records was not a CoLC decision.

Comment: Two senior officers conducted the internal review. Neither officer nor their department were involved in the case.

Comment: The Charter had proposed criteria for how inspection of registered providers would be implemented, but it had not been agreed. Agreement was likely to be after Christmas. The information from the consultation could still be viewed even though it was closed. The CoLC had considered the proposals as a guide to our current performance.

Comment: Transparency was important and the only way to assess the impact of policies was to have sight of them.

Response: Consideration had been given to internal mechanisms only. Any change to policy would require presentation to the Policy Scrutiny Committee to be scrutinised by elected members prior to approval of Executive. The review of the Boultham Ward incident concluded that the CoLC could not have done more.

Comment: It was important to understand what the regulator meant in regard to being safe in your home. When we talked about being safe in your home, we considered health and safety risks, property condition and damp and mould. Anti-Social Behaviour was a strand of safety however that element of the Charter regarded the structure and property condition.

Question: There was to be a review in 'early 2024'. Had a date been received?

Response: The guidance from Government was expected imminently and it would be presented to HSSC once received.

Question: Would the 22 Tenant Satisfaction Measures be scrutinised?

Response: The Tenant Satisfaction Measures were standardised and it was not possible to shape the questions asked as the measures had been nationally agreed. The results would be publicly accessible.

Question: There would be a requirement for individuals at Scampton who passed refugee status to be housed. Did the Business Plan consider the long-term provision of housing?

Response: It was not possible to estimate the impact. As of the latest correspondence, the Home Office stated that the decision for those individuals to stay or not stay would not be made locally. The total number of 2000 would not have a decision made locally in West Lindsey. Individuals would be unable to use local connection to gain duty. Once given their decision, individuals would be transported to wherever in the Country they chose through a national dispersal arrangement according to the Home Office. We had a duty to provide housing to those that chose Lincoln.

Comment from Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing: A number of individuals may request to go to cities, especially single people.

Comment: In terms of the 30-year Business Plan, the CoLC had to consider homelessness and temporary accommodation but it was for the General Fund Account, not the Housing Revenue Account to pick up the related costs. Under homelessness legislation, CoLC had a duty to assist an individual to find housing. It did not have to be from our own Council stock.

Comment: The provision of 1700 additional homes was in order to address the losses from Right to Buy. The Council had looked to be ambitious to close the gap created by the need in Band 1 of the housing register.

Comment: The Government added on white paper, the Right to Buy was to be encouraged which was a cause for concern in respect of housing provision.

Question: Under Welfare Reform, the Business Plan stated the rental profile of tenants. What percentage were under discretionary housing?

Response: As of 31 July 2023, 56 family homes that are currently under occupying were in receipt of discretionary housing payment. The number of council tenants in receipt of DHP was twice as high 18 months ago.

Question: Further to the Covid-19 pandemic, 'it is now much more difficult to recruit or retain staff...' Was this in relation to housing officers?

Response: The recruitment and retention of staff remained a challenge across all departments of the Council and across different employment sectors. The Council had not seen a large movement of construction workers from private sector companies into the Council. That position may change as the effects of soaring inflation were felt. Consideration had been given to different forms of more regular recruitment exercises.

Question: There appeared to be a lack of trades staff specific for a job. Were trades staff employed as specific staff or multipurpose staff?

Response: There was a specific skill set however staff were also offered opportunities to enjoy a multitasked role. Such roles enabled resources to be deployed more effectively. The availability of specific skill sets was a traditional approach and given the nature of modern education and training, prospective employees did not present in that way. The standard of workmanship had not been adversely affected.

Question: How did the Council intend to approach Lincoln's ageing population and encourage people to downsize in the future?

Response: Consideration was given to socioeconomic factors prior to development works commencing in order to identify the future housing needs for the city. Developments offered a range of property sizes and composition.

Comment from Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing: Rookery Lane offered a wide range of properties which ranged from bungalows and flats to 4 bed properties.

Comment: Consideration was given to the internals of properties prior to build, to identify what design features were needed for now and in the future to provide homes that adapted along with the resident's needs. Some of the housing stock was ageing, not suitable for modern day living and needed to be rectified.

Question: What was the terminology used for rent payments?

Response: Local Housing Allowance.

Question: How many of the housing stock properties were above the Local Housing Allowance?

Response: Individuals who used their benefits to pay their rent would be able to access properties at Rookery Lane. It was important to have a variety of properties and to bridge the gap between social housing rent and private sector rent.

Question: Had the consultant's report considered this area?

Response: There were four areas of work which included a review of two of the high-rise blocks, a review of sheltered accommodation and estate regeneration and how they could be improved. Other pieces of work were mentioned in the documents and were reflected. There was a detailed financial model that we had committed to use which was specifically designed to manage the HRA and the 30-year plan.

Question: Referred to Table 1 on page 15 of the HRA Business Plan 2024/54. Under Band 1, March 2023, there were a total of 344 applicants on the housing register. What help was given to private renters? Did support come from the HRA?

Response: No. Support came from Homelessness Prevention under the General Fund.

Question: The HRA Business Plan detailed a variety of approaches to increase housing stock which included a review of existing assets. Could there be a review of empty garages that produced no rent and a breakdown, per ward of occupied and lost revenue per ward? It was important that the HRA generated as much revenue as possible.

Response: The use and management of garages had not been the focus for a number of years. Moving forward, we needed to consider them in a different way. Discussions had taken place with the Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing, to consider differential pricing strategies and use of the sites. It was important to recognise non-tenants who parked in garages. It was often the case that it was more cost effective for those individuals to rent a garage than park in Council car parks and pay the appropriate fee. The continuation of illegal access to properties

via our garage sites was also an issue. There was currently approximately 60% occupied and 40% unoccupied.

Comment from Donald Nannestad, Portfolio Holder for Quality Housing: Consideration had been given to a varied charge for the use of garages, e.g. storing items inside would incur a higher fee and a non-Lincoln resident would incur higher charge.

Question: If there was rear access gained to a property, should the Council be paid?

Response: Yes.

Comment: When assets had not generated an income, it was important to consider what to do with them.

Comment: There had been fantastic levelling off work carried out in the Sincil Bank area, an excellent example of future proofing. In addition, great work had been carried out on Walnut Place and the Ermine which needed to be rolled out across the City. Many Council garages had been used to store items in which was not allowed.

Question: What would happen to the green space at Queen Elizabeth in the West?

Response: This had been factored in under the Local Plan. It would be developed upon.

Question: Bollards had been installed on the garage sites at Walnut Place. Was it possible to negotiate with tenants, that bollards would not be installed in front of gardens if the appropriate fee was paid?

Response: It was not possible to comment on illegal access to properties through Council land. The possession of an appropriate licence would make access, lawful behaviour.

RESOLVED that:

1. Additional information be provided by Officers in relation to:
 - Confirmation of a bi-annual presentation of the Housing Revenue Account financial information to Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee. The Democratic Services Officer be tasked with the addition of the item to the Work Programme
 - A figure, in monetary terms relating to lost revenue in respect of garages.
2. The HRA Business Plan 2024/54 be proceeded to Executive for formal approval.