

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Wednesday, 11 January 2023
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor R. Child (Chair)

Councillors J. Wilkinson (Vice-Chair) S. Atherton
S. Carter P. Chandler
J. Douglas E. Holmes
P. Posnett MBE T. Webster

In Attendance Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Finance and Resources –
Councillor R. de Burle (via remote link)
Portfolio Holder for Climate, Access and Engagement – Councillor A.
Freer

Officers Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive)
Director for Corporate Services
Assistant Director for Housing
Housing Asset Manager
Interim Revenues and Benefits Manager (via remote link)
Tenancy Services Manager (via remote link)
Senior Democratic Services and Scrutiny Officer

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46	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE An apology for absence was received from Councillor Evans.</p>
47	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST A personal interest in respect of Councillor Posnett was noted as being on record for any matter which related to Leicestershire County Council.</p>
48	<p>DEBT MANAGEMENT UPDATE The Interim Revenue and Benefits Manager, Kevin Legg, introduced the debt management update report and outlined the Council's performance in relation to Council Tax; Business Rates; Council Tax and Business Rate Arrears; Former Tenant Arrears; Sundry Debts and Write offs. Members were informed that a write off report will be submitted to the Cabinet on 8 February 2023.</p> <p>The Tenancy Service Manager, Doug Stother, outlined the position with regard to Council house rent and current tenant arrears figures for rented properties and garage units.</p> <p>Following a query regarding the number of tenants in rent arrears, the Committee were surprised to learn that between 800 and 900 tenants are in rent arrears. However, it was explained that some of the tenants pay their rent using housing benefit which pays four weeks in arrears and that would account for a significant proportion of residents.</p> <p>It was noted that some tenants in rent arrears are at the stage that court is required and whilst Officers have confirmed that this is the case, Members were informed that the approach is to engage with tenants at an early stage of rent arrears, around two to three weeks. There is also a recognition that external factors have affected tenants' ability to pay.</p> <p>A question was raised on whether the wording of letters to inform tenants that they are in rent arrears had been reviewed as the wording can be perceived as overly threatening and that a better worded letter may lead to more engagement and willingness to resolve ongoing arrears. In response Members were informed that Officers are reviewing the letters, as well as using other methods of communication with a view of creating greater engagement with tenants.</p> <p>Concern was raised with the amount of legal work that could be required to process the number of cases, however reassurance was given that most cases are handled within the team and legal only get involved if the case is complex, which few are.</p> <p>Officers were asked how many of the debts were over two years old, however Members were informed that the data would need to be checked before a definitive answer was given.</p> <p>A Member asked that where garage rents were not being paid was it possible to seize garages and sell the contents assets, however Officers were not sure whether this would be possible but undertook to investigate whether this is an option.</p>

Members commented that the historic sundry debt needs resolving and removing from the balance sheet. In response, it was confirmed that Officers have to follow a process before debt can be written off. In addition, with some debts it could be the case that the debtors, once reminded, could be able to pay the debt that they owe.

A Member raised a concern regarding, what appears to be, debt owed by staff, however it was noted that the debt was allocated to the incorrect cost codes and needs to be reclassified.

The Committee considered the Council Tax and Business Rates arrears, however Members weren't too concerned considering the Council's collection rate in comparison to both neighbouring authorities and nationally is favourable.

A discussion ensued regarding unpaid invoices for one-off hire of rooms at Phoenix House. A Member queried why the Council was not requesting payment prior to the hiring of the rooms.

The Director for Corporate Services stated that Officers require more delegation therefore a more flexible approach can be adopted when deciding whether to write off debt. This proposal would be coming forward to a future Council meeting for approval. The Committee thought is a sensible proposal and would enable Officers to be more agile when considering whether to write off debt.

RESOLVED

The Scrutiny Committee

- 1) Noted the Council's performance as set out within the report regarding the collection of debts.**
- 2) Noted the proposed future action including the use of Charging Orders, Winding up Orders and Bankruptcy Orders for Council Tax/Business Rate arrears in line with the Corporate Debt Policy.**
- 3) Requested that a further report is presented to the Committee in April outlining the progress on sundry debts, housing rent arrears and garage rent arrears.**

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LEICESTERSHIRE RESOURCES AND WASTE STRATEGY

The Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive), Michelle Howard, introduced the Leicestershire Resources and Waste Strategy. It was explained that the strategy was developed by the district and county council partners that form the Leicestershire Waste Partnership. Members were informed that some of the pledges can only be implemented if sufficient ongoing additional funding is provided by Government to cover all additional costs. The example provided to the Committee is that the Government is considering making garden waste collection free to the resident.

The Chairman commented that the report was well written and structured. In addition to this, a Member commented that it was pleasing to see a good response to the countywide consultation exercise that was undertaken in order to support the development of the strategy.

Members were pleased with the service provided by the existing waste collection contractor and noted that the service has improved greatly over the years.

In response to a question regarding the contamination of bins, Members were informed that after the collection contractor has informed the Council, the Council will then adopt an educational approach with the offender. If the contamination persists then the decision would be taken not to collect. A Member cautioned that the non-collection could risk an increase in the occurrence of fly-tipping.

A discussion on fly-tipping ensued and it was noted that an action against fly-tipping had been added as a specific pledge. The importance of understanding reasons for fly tipping was noted by Members. The Committee were keen to see greater clarity of expectation for timescales for collecting fly-tipped waste and reiterated the importance of taking robust enforcement action against fly-tipping where possible. It was noted that the use of 'what three words' helps pinpoint the location of fly tipping when reported. A Member added that it is possible that having a higher police presence in rural areas, as initiated by the Police and Crime Commissioner, could lead to a reduction of fly-tipping incidents

Members discussed the role that the wombles and other community groups play in local communities in collecting litter. Officers stated that those groups can use 'what three words' to report where they have left the litter they have collected and the waste collection contractor will collect as soon as they can.

In response to a question regarding the provision of bulky waste collection service, Members were informed that the service is still provided, however alterations have to occur due to legislative changes relating to the collection and disposal of items containing Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) such as: sofas; kitchen and dining chairs; home office chairs and sofa cushions. The Committee then raised a concern that the legislative changes could result in increased fly-tipping which would negatively impact the environment.

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DAMP AND MOULD

The Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive), Michelle Howard, introduced a report on Council's approach to damp and mould across the rented sector and as a landlord. The Committee were informed that in the last 12 months, the Council has had to deal with worst category of damp and mould in two properties.

The Committee welcomed the report and commented that it was well written and structured.

Concern was raised regarding damp and mould in social housing not owned by the Council such as Housing Association property. In response, reassurance was given that in such instances, the Council would liaise with the landlord and housing options would work with the tenant to assist in achieving an appropriate resolution. In some cases, if required, the Council could take enforcement action if a satisfactory resolution could not be achieved and would assist in accessing alternative accommodation in appropriate circumstances.

Following a comment regarding work completed on void properties, Members were reassured that work on resolving damp issues are carried out before a void property is returned to the market and that this forms part of the void standard for reporting purposes.

The response of the service was praised by a Member after they were alerted to a particular case of damp and mould.

In response to a concern that the damp and mould leaflet had not been circulated to tenants, Officers explained that the leaflet would be circulated with the next tenant's newsletter. In addition, the letter had also been added to new tenant welcome packs and discussed with the Council's tenant group.

The meeting closed at: 8.05 pm

Chair