

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Thursday, 28 November 2024
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor M. Brown (Chair)

Councillors A. Thwaites (Vice-Chair) S. Atherton
R. Child H. Cliff
M. Gordon S. Lumley
R. Sharp

Officers Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive)
Assistant Director for Customers and Communities
Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities
Senior Democratic Services and Scrutiny Officer

Minute No.	Minute
17	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Apologies for absence have been received from Councillors Chubb and Pritchett.</p>
18	<p>MINUTES The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2024 were approved.</p>
19	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST Councillor Gordon declared a personal interest, in Minute Number 22, as she is a tenant of a Melton Borough Council property.</p>
20	<p>REVIEW OF THE FORWARD PLAN The Chair introduced the Cabinet Forward Plan and invited Members to comment.</p> <p>Members were reminded that Forward Plan is a list of key and non-key decisions to be taken by the Cabinet rather than a list of operational matters.</p>
21	<p>MID-YEAR REVIEW OF THE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME The Chair introduced the mid-year review of the Scrutiny Work Programme which was a planned review to allow for opportunity to reflect on the work programme content and emerging areas of interest or focus for the Committee.</p> <p>The Chair informed Members that it was suggested that the topic Cyber Security Strategy would be better dealt with as a workshop item and confirmed he agreed. After an explanation as to why it should be dealt with in this way, the Committee agreed to deal with the item through a workshop.</p> <p>Members were informed that this frees up a slot at the March 2025 meeting of the Committee. Due to the changing landscape of the topic at a local and national level, the Chair suggested homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures be added as a work plan item. The Director for Housing and Communities provided an outline scope for this item following consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair. The Committee agreed to add the item to the work programme.</p> <p>After a short discussion, the Committee agreed undertake the Waste Strategy workshop in the week commencing 6 January.</p>
22	<p>SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATION With the aid of a presentation, the Assistant Director for Customers and Communities and the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities introduced the Social Housing Allocation report which provided context about the service delivery arrangements and confirmed that the policy had been updated and would be considered for approval by Cabinet in December 2024.</p> <p>A query was raised in respect to the tenants on the low priority banding in particular</p>

what are the waiting times and how do they move to the next level. In response it was explained that the low priority was introduced for applicants for sheltered schemes and extra care scheme because whilst they may be adequately housed, their circumstances may change in the future, and they would require a particular type of property which is of a restricted type (by age / health need). In addition, Members were informed that the banding priority assesses tenants based on their medical needs, the size of their household based and their housing need. Each case is assessed in line with the policy framework to determine banding and priority.

In response to the question what is proactively being done to meet with private landlords and the housing associations to increase the rent supply in the Borough, it was explained that the Council are liaising with private landlord and lettings agents in order to try and prevent tenants being evicted in the first instance. A rising issue is that, due to forthcoming changes in legislation, Officers are finding that there are a significant number of landlords selling their properties. In such cases, the Council won't be able to resolve the issue but can be proactive in trying to prevent a homelessness situation.

The question was asked on how the Council would manage the increase in demand and reducing access to social housing as the private rented sector is becoming increasingly unaffordable to those on low incomes. In response, the Committee was informed that for the last 18 months, Officers have been proactive in telling people and telling residents that the Council is here to try and stop tenants leaving their properties in the first place. Officers noted that it is important to encourage tenants to approach the Council for advice and support. It was noted that it is positive that more people are approaching for advice and assistance, as they know that it is available.

A query was raised about the ease of applying, in particular those who can't apply on the internet, and the communication around the process, in response the Committee was informed that Officers are always looking at ways to strengthen awareness and communication, but that there is a holistic approach between Housing Options, Tenancy Services, Community Support Hub and Community Safety teams. In terms of access to the internet, the Council offer facilities at the digital clinic at Phoenix House and do encourage applicants to seek the help of family or friends where possible. It was explained that Officers can also complete application via the back-office system on an applicant's behalf, can attend Parkside to meet with an officer or can apply (and be supported on an ongoing basis to place for properties) over the telephone.

A Member raised the comment that they have received comments from residents where they have made a bid for a property and they feel that they're at the top of the list and then suddenly when it gets allocated to someone else. It was queried how would the resident get that perception and how can the Council probably better feed the message back to them on if they've been successful. In response it was recognised that the perception would be from the bid position on the website at the time the bid is placed, which is subject to change based on other bids placed

including auto-bids, which are placed automatically, immediately before the bid cycle closes. A Member commented that a simpler way to avoid the elation and deflation could be to state that the bid has been accepted and the order of bids doesn't appear until after the bidding is closed or explicitly stating that the order shown may change once the bidding period is closed.

It was noted that the Housing Allocations Policy has been refreshed and will be presented to Cabinet on 11 December. The policy has been made simpler for customers to read and understand and follows a format that better aligns with the process.

In response to query regarding the lack of internet access and how a person can bid on properties, Members were informed that they can request to be on an auto bid. Generally, it would only be people in a priority band who are on auto bid but if they are in a lower band they can request to be on that or they can telephone and apply through customer services or in person via the support hub.

The query was raised on whether there is a way that the Council can get properties out of void sooner to have them available for applicants. Members were informed that all Council voids will go through a process including gas and electric safety checks and that there is ongoing work to reduce voids times.

Following a comment, the Committee were reminded that the Council can't just say that because you live on X street and the next-door property becomes available that applicants can have that, because the Council have to follow the policy and meet housing need. It was confirmed that the Council gives the same priority to private rented and housing association tenants.

It was noted that there are instances where a parent and child are only allowed a one bed property. It was stated that those decisions are made for parents who don't have their child 100% of the time and that the circumstances of each case are assessed. In addition, the Council do take account of its space standards, so we are trying to encourage people that if they have their child at a weekend that maybe they can do things like sofa beds or whether the bedroom could be partitioned.

A query was raised on whether those tenants with mental health issues could request a property with an extra room for family/friends so that support can be provided. In response, the Committee were informed that it would depend on whether the tenant requires a permanent carer (the qualification is five out of seven nights). The Council would also require relevant evidence and confirmation that the person acts as the carer.

In response to the query on whether there is a statutory framework for banding, Members were informed that the guidance is that the Council is required to prioritise applicants in housing need and follows guidance on reasonable preference as well as being obliged to adhere to the Public Sector Equality Duty. It was explained that there are also statutory duties in respect to households assessed as homeless, to whom duties to accommodate may be in place.

A comment was made that there might be residents living in a three-bedroom property who no longer require three bedrooms, e.g. children may have grown up and left home and wish to downsize. Under the policy they would only be eligible for a one-bedroom property, however may want a two-bedroom property. It was queried whether there was scope for a pragmatic approach in those situations because by taking a one-bedroom property, would take away the stock that the Council requires. In response it was stated that Officers would look at what flexibility can be given to situations like this, taking account of financial and legal constraints such as bedroom tax. It was noted that giving consideration to policies around downsizing may help address homelessness and housing availability pressures.

A question was asked what the Council does in regards to tenants with pets, in response Members were informed that Government guidance is that claimants should not be separated from their pet, so they would wait for a property with a garden. However there are some areas that don't allow pets. It was noted that some flat tenants have a dog and therefore it wouldn't be a necessity for a pet owner to have a property with a garden. It was noted that giving consideration to policies around pets may help address homelessness and housing availability pressures.

It was queried whether Officers know the size of reception rooms and bedrooms in each property. Members were informed that measurements would be considered in the context of national space standards.

The issue of the panel referred to in the report was raised, and the Committee were told that the Panel is for appeals. On the Panel is the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities; the Housing Options Support Officer; an Officer from the rents team; an Officer from the Safer Communities Team and the Tenancy Services Manager.

In respect to problem tenants, the Council can't do criminal checks but can do checks with the Safer Communities Team and can exclude applicants from the housing register in some cases (where the offence is assessed as tenancy related). There are local lettings policies in place in some areas, but they have to be proportionate and specific to an issue or area. It was confirmed that the council must also adhere to the requirements of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and also that applicants may be allowed a second chance dependent on the specific circumstances and access to the support needed.

Following a query regarding adaptations for people who are in private rented properties or are owner occupiers, Members were informed that the Council would refer them to the light bulb project, a county project which can then put them forward for assessment from an occupational therapist for adaptations, for example, through disabled facilities grants. It was noted that being able to adapt a property could prevent a homelessness situation occurring.

When asked about the bidding process and frequently asked questions, it was

confirmed that these could be put onto the internet so that applicants can be directed there for answers. Officers offered a guide to members on the things they are asked about most, which the committee felt would be very helpful to manage enquiries and expectations.

In terms of providing holistic support for people, it was clarified that Housing Options would focus on housing need but that support is offered and that officers connect applicants with support for example through the Community Support Hub or external partners.

A Member asked what the Council does in the case of somebody coming out of a rehab facility and the guidelines for those coming out of a detox facility. It was explained that the Council has statutory guidance in respect to someone coming out of rehab but not detox unless they haven't got a home to go to. Officers confirmed that each case would be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Following a query on what would happen if someone in rent arrears has a health issue in the meantime and what is the most prevailing need, it was confirmed that the Council wouldn't exclude people who have a genuine need but would have to assess every case on a case-by-case basis.

Officers reiterated the need to make private rented tenants aware that if they get section 21 notice, they need to present to the Council as soon as they get the notice to enable advice and support to be provided.

A query was raised on how does the Council feedback information on housing need into the planning process and housing associations. It was confirmed that the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities puts forward information and evidence where appropriate to support planning considerations.

In explaining the application process, it was clarified that people want a council property over a private rented one as the rent is lower. Bids are sorted by the system and Officers do a sense check before the bid moves to a pre-tenancy assessment which is carried out by the tenancy services team.

It was suggested that it would be useful for the Council to better define what is meant by local connection.

In terms of the appeals process for a homelessness offer, it was confirmed that the relevant information and guidance is on the letter sent to the applicant / household. When a query was raised of where is the letter sent for homeless people, it was noted that there are very few rough sleepers and that most homeless people have an address, such as a current address, or a care of address if they are staying with friends or relatives.

Upon the conclusion of the item, the Chair thanked the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities, the Assistant Director for Customers and Communities and the Director for Housing and Communities for their input. Members commented

on what a good job the team do and gave examples of the support provided to applicants in their wards.

(At 8:01pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Child left the meeting and did not return.)

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URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at: 8.24 pm

Chair