

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Tuesday, 12 November 2019
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor P. Cumbers (Chair)

Councillors R. Bindloss (Vice-Chair) R. Browne
R. Child J. Douglas
C. Evans R. Smedley
J. Wilkinson

In attendance R. de Burle, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finances and Resources

Officers Democratic Services Manager
Director for Corporate Services
Democratic Services Officer (HA)

Minute No.	Minute
27	<p>Apologies for Absence Apologies were received from Councillors Holmes and Fisher.</p>
28	<p>Minutes The minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2019 were approved and authorised to be signed by the Chairman.</p>
29	<p>Declarations of Interest There were no declarations of interest.</p>
30	<p>Review of the Scrutiny Annual Work Plan and the Forward Plan During the discussion the following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chairman proposed that a report be provided to the next meeting from the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Access and Engagement to include the financial breakdown of the Community Lottery. Councillor Cumbers had worked with Councillor Child to produce information in relation to the financial position with regard to the Community Lottery, this information had been circulated to members of the Committee. The People Manager had also provided details of the operator costs and contribution to the Community Grants Budget. Members agreed this item should be added to the Scrutiny work plan and a report to be brought back to the next meeting. • Members raised concerns in relation to the Housing Improvement Plan and the relevant service charges. Mrs Garton, the Director for Corporate Services, advised that there would be a budget Scrutiny meeting taking place in January 2020 which would look at the budget and the setting of rents, following members' comments she would investigate whether service charges can be included in this. Members requested that the relevant Director be consulted as to whether an update on service charges can be brought to a future meeting. • Members commented on Climate Change and requested what plans are in place with the Council's commitment to improving its carbon footprint, Mrs Taylor, Democratic Services Manager (Scrutiny Officer) advised members that, a working group has been set up and could bring a report back to the committee or alternatively the relevant Portfolio Holder could provide an update. • Members raised concerns about the complex nature of Universal Credit and would like to have a better understanding, Mrs Taylor would look into adding this to the Member Development Programme. Members agreed that this would make a good topic for a Scrutiny review. • Members agreed that some of the items on the work plan could be moved into the next financial year so that items can be looked at in more detail.

- Members supported an additional meeting in January 2020. Mrs Taylor would liaise with the Chair to arrange a suitable date.
- Members highlighted the importance of hearing presentations from the individual portfolio holders to provide them with an understanding of the roles they play. The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Access and Engagement which was deferred at the last meeting, will make a presentation to the committee in due course.

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Housing Voids/Temporary Accommodation Task & Finish Group Update

Councillor Pat Cumbers, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, provided a verbal update on the work undertaken by the 'Task and Finish Group - Housing Voids and Temporary Accommodation' as follows:

"As you know, this Committee formed our first 'Task and Finish Group' to consider the Housing Voids Process.

A void being the gap between a council dwelling being vacated and then occupied by new tenants.

I shall give a short update this evening but you will, of course, receive a full report when we have finished, along with copies of all the evidence we have gathered.

The Committee saw the importance and relevance of undertaking this work and it was prioritised. We then agreed the scope and the 'Terms of Reference'.

We were to consider the voids process, including current performance and costs and to propose improvements.

We were also to consider the Council's provision of temporary accommodation, the current costs, performance and the impact of the 'Homeless Reduction Act'.

The 'Centre for Public Scrutiny' states that "good scrutiny needs evidence", evidence which is current and based on up-to-date statistics and performance measures.

And that is what we have been doing. We have been collating information and evidence upon which to base robust and relevant proposals for improvement which will form the basis of our report to Scrutiny Committee and, with your support, to Cabinet.

I will give you a brief summary of what we have been doing:

Firstly, the Group has met monthly and we have reviewed and provided feedback on:

- *Current review of housing services systems thinking and methodology*
- *Current voids processes and performance analysis*
- *Draft revised tenancy agreement*
- *Feedback on show and tell sessions*
- *Allocations Policy*
- *Voids Standards Policy*

Secondly, we have held a series of evidence sessions and have heard evidence from:

- *Tenant Forum Executive Committee (TFEC)*
- *North West Leics (NWL) District Council's Head of Housing and Asset Manager*
- *MBC Customer Service Lead*
- *MBC Housing Officer*

And this week we have additional sessions to include:

- *Housing and Commercial Manager*
- *Voids and Responsive Repairs Officer*
- *Housing Options Team Leader*
- *Contractors (Repairs and Gas Safety)*

Thirdly, information has been circulated electronically to the Group – including information from other local authorities which we have obtained from the internet, from Councillor Browne and including this Council's 'Tenancy Agreement' and the 'Tenants' Handbook'.

We are very grateful for the support we have received from the Director for Growth and Regeneration, the Housing Communities Manager and officers from Democratic Services especially Natasha and Catherine.

We were also very grateful to those officers from NWL who travelled some distance to share with us their experiences re void properties and lessons learned.

We recognise that there is much work going on in this area and hopes that the work of the 'Task and Finish Group' will further enhance and assist in the improvement journey.

We are already beginning to get a clear picture of the current issues in relation to voids and temporary accommodation through consideration of existing policies and processes and with reference to best practice from other authorities/organisations. We have already provided feedback in relations to the revised Tenancy Agreement and Tenants' Handbook and we will summarise this in our final report. In addition, we will be formulating further recommendations for your consideration. Once we have collated and evaluated our evidence base, we will begin to draft our report which is due to be presented to you in January 2020.

If Members have any questions on the review so far, or would like to contribute to the review, I would be more than happy to take comments now, or can be contacted by email should you wish to do so”.

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Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Resources (including Workforce Strategy)

Councillor R de Burle, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Resources gave a presentation (appended to the minutes) setting out current performance, focus and challenges for the portfolio, including a presentation on the Workforce Strategy and debt management.

Prior to the meeting, Councillor Pat Cumbers, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee posed a series of questions, (questions and answers appended to the minutes).

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Councillor Browne left the meeting and did not return.

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During the discussion of the presentation the following points were noted:

- Mrs Garton, Director for Corporate Services, advised that bad debt provision is currently being looked at and the department is constantly assessing which debts can be reclaimed. Currently there was not sufficient resource in place to focus on the historic debt.
- A solution was being sought to increase resources so that each service could be risk profiled separately in order to establish levels of outstanding debt.
- Any debts over £2,500 require Cabinet approval to be written off
- Members requested information on transferring debts to external agencies. Mrs Garton advised that the use of external debt collectors was something that could be considered, each individual case would have to be closely assessed. Those that are vulnerable would benefit more from support and advice. There are different types debt some types are more difficult to recover dependant on the circumstances.
- Members highlighted the importance of being proactive in enforcing debt within the 90-day period.
- Members requested further information regarding receipt and monitoring of Section 106 monies. It was confirmed a report was going to the Audit and Standards Committee on 19 November 2019 following a recent internal audit.
- Members asked whether the council undertook ethical investments, Mrs Garton confirmed that the Council's investments were heavily monitored and constrained by regulation. Full details could be found in Treasury Management Reports which are presented to Cabinet and Council periodically but that the ethical nature of investments was not currently a factor
- Members commented on the excellent collection of council tax and business rates since the introduction of the secondment of a sundry debt collector from January 2018 until March 2020.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Portfolio Holder confirmed that a new Policy on Corporate Debt was due to be taken to Cabinet for approval shortly.• Members were advised that a report could be brought back to committee in six months with the progress made following the implementation of the Corporate Debt Policy.
33	Urgent Business There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at: 8.00 pm

Chair

Scrutiny Committee 12 November 2019

Item 6 – Portfolio Holder Presentation

Questions Asked in advance by Councillor Cumbers and Responses provided:

- 1. You advised that 15 insurance claims have been handled over the last 12 months. Were these by, or against, MBC. ?**

These were a mixture of claims against MBC and where we are putting a claim in ourselves. In total 8 remain open of which only 3 are against MBC. The other 7 were closed / defended without any payments made.

Can you provide some information about the claims e.g. Total value and the reasons?

Examples of claims against MBC are slip, trip fall at one of our assets such as country park or at one of our HRA properties. Some of the areas MBC are claiming are for things like the broken glass door in reception or the shattered window in the Cleves. For the 8 open claims still from 2017-18 the estimated value is circa £21k with the addition of one potential subsidence claim which hasn't been given a value. Of this the excess totals £16k that would have to be covered by MBC and the remainder being covered by insurance.

Were the claims and their causes reported to members? Are such claims reported as a separate item in the Annual Accounts?

Claims aren't routinely presented to members as the majority are low value and the volume isn't that high for a local authority. Where there were concerns these would be reported to the Portfolio Holder initially. For any claims outstanding where it had been settled a provision would be made in the accounts.

- 2. I understand that MBC is committed to supporting armed forces personnel and veterans as part of the Armed Forces Community Covenant. Does the workforce strategy action plan include any reference to employing former armed forces personnel ?**

No the WFS does not make specific reference to the Armed Forces Covenant . The WFS is more about our aspirations for the future. We have a reservists policy which outlines the time off we give to people.

- 3. Procurement – can you explain what is meant by 29 procurements being Melton Specific ? How hard does MBC try to ensure that contractors from elsewhere use local labour when feasible?**

Members may be aware that the Welland Procurement Unit which is hosted by MBC delivers procurement advice and support to a number of local authorities (Blaby, Wellingborough, East Northants, Rutland, South Kesteven, Newark & Sherwood) as

well to MBC itself. Of all the procurements being support 29 of those are specifically related to MBC contracts and services.

In terms of using the local labour market the Council has always worked hard to ensure that local suppliers are able to access opportunities advertised by us. The Social Value Act (2012) has reinforced this work. All procurements valued at over £25,000 are now advertised as widely as possible and the 'Doing Business with the Council' pages on the website are regularly reviewed to provide help and support. Where possible and legal / procurement rules allowing we can put into tenders the request for large contractors to use an element of local workforce which would then be checked / challenged through contract management by officers.

- 4. Scrutiny members were quite shocked re the sundry debtors – the value and some of the actual debtors. Eg BID owed £3000 in March and it still owed the money in September. Why doesn't MBC demand that money immediately and threaten legal action as BID does with their business payers ?**

A £3,000 invoice to the Melton BID is raised on a quarterly basis, this relates to a BID administration fee. Melton BID currently owe £0.0 and the next invoice is due to be raised on 01/12/19.

- 5. Re the Debt, especially the Sundry Debtors, Scrutiny members believe Scrutiny should receive regular updates. Will you be updating Cabinet on a regular basis which would be available to all ? Or could you update Scrutiny separately ?**

It is suggested that regular updates are provided to Cabinet, however, a separate update could also be provided to Scrutiny if needed.