

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

**HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS O&S COMMITTEE –
PUBLIC MEETING**

1400 hours on Thursday 16 March 2023

Committee Room 6, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1 1BB

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Mohammed Idrees (Chair)

Councillors: Kerry Brewer, Marje Bridle, Ray Goodwin, Roger Harmer, Lauren Rainbow and Ken Wood

Also Present:

Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness (On-line)

Asha Patel, Repairs and Maintenance Project Lead

Stephen Philpott, Director of Housing Solutions and Support

Natalie Smith, Head of Service, Housing Management

Jayne Bowles, Scrutiny Officer (On-line)

Amelia Wiltshire, Overview and Scrutiny Manager

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair advised that this meeting would be webcast for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's meeting You Tube site (www.youtube.com/channel/UCT2kT7ZRPFCXq6_5dnVnYlw) and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there were confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Saqib Khan.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Councillor Ray Goodwin declared a pecuniary interest as his wife works for the Rent Service.

4. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

(See documents No 1 and No 2)

RESOLVED:

- That the action notes of the meeting held on 16 February 2023 were agreed;
- That the action tracker was noted.

5. VOIDS – IMPROVING STANDARDS

(See document No 3)

The Chair invited members of the committee to give their feedback on the recent visits to void properties and the main points included:

- With regard to the visits in the North, the property which was ready to let was in a reasonable condition.
- With regard to the visits in the South, the property that had just become void, which was in an elderly sheltered accommodation flat, needed a bit of care and attention but was in a reasonable condition and the property that was fit for let was absolutely spotless, which would indicate it had been well looked after by the previous tenant.
- However, Cllr Wood had taken up the offer to visit a third property which had just become void and described that property as being in an horrendous condition, with specific issues including every single plug socket, light switch and ceiling rose having been removed and wires left hanging, loose and missing floorboards, a strong dog smell and poor décor. A lift that went up through the floor had also been installed, which when down prevented access to the back door.
- This raised questions about tenancy management and when that property was last visited by a council officer as it would appear the tenant had been failed.
- The need for there to be a multi-agency approach with integration across services, for example where there is Occupational Health and Social Services intervention. This could include highlighting issues of disrepair but also to ensure works are being completed in a reasonable way (for example the lift above).
- Members were told that in that particular case the individual had not been living there for a while and they were going through the eviction process but there were issues within the property that needed to have been rectified and visits would have addressed that.
- The importance of a visiting programme was stressed to ensure people are maintaining their homes in order to avoid serious damage to properties

leading to expensive repairs and officers are starting to get back out and make those visits.

- It was acknowledged that a more robust housing management offer is needed and this is being looked at as part of the new operating model.
- The performance of the Council in this respect needs to be looked at, as well as the performance of the contractors.
- A question was raised about what action can be taken against tenants who are not looking after their property and Members heard that where there is wilful neglect, re-charges are applied.
- There is also an opportunity with the Allocations Policy to exclude people and this is being explored. Dudley take that approach and will exclude people from transfers where there has been damage to properties.

The Chair then welcomed Councillor Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness (who was in attendance on-line), Stephen Philpott, Director of Housing Solutions and Support (substituting for Paul Langford, Interim Strategic Director, City Housing, who had sent his apologies), Asha Patel, Repairs and Maintenance Project Lead, and Natalie Smith, Head of Service, Housing Management, to the meeting.

Natalie Smith and Asha Patel gave a presentation on the City Housing Voids Project, which included:

- Voids Performance Overview
 - Current Voids Performance
 - Contractor Performance
- Voids Management Project Overview
 - Aim, purpose and anticipated benefits
 - Scope
 - High-level project roadmap
 - Workstreams
 - Progress to date and future activities
 - Risks.

During the discussion, and in response to questions from Members, the following were among the main points raised:

- In response to a question in relation to the condition of void properties and how many are in a more neglected state, Members were told there is an internal operating system which identifies whether a void is routine or major and they are working on making that process more streamlined.
- With regard to property standards, there is some benchmarking being done with Dudley and Sandwell and a new standard is being drafted which will be looked at with the new tender.
- One of the things the Committee would like to do is look at Registered Providers and other Local Authorities and it was confirmed that requests have been put in to Pioneer, Sandwell and Leeds.
- It was pointed out to Members that as far as Registered Social Landlords are concerned, standards do differ as a lot of Housing Associations have been able to get investment in their stock over a number of years. It is also true that the age and variety of housing stock in Birmingham makes

this more challenging than for providers who have a more modern and consistent type of stock.

- The Council does want to get a good basic standard and it was noted that there is a need to be mindful of the level of investment and time to turn properties around, with properties kept empty for a longer period of time resulting in rent loss and customers waiting for properties.
- In response to a question in relation to empty properties, Members were told the responsibility sits with the Private Rented Sector Licensing Team who have a strategy and target in terms of the number of empty homes that are brought back into use and Housing work closely with them in terms of opportunities to access those properties.
- There is also the exempt supported sector where there is a strategy to try and bring that number down and if those properties are going to be brought back into use how the Council invests further into them.
- As an illustration of that, Cabinet has agreed a £60m programme to purchase properties in Birmingham, eg properties lost to the Council under Right to Buy, properties offered up by private individuals, and also looking at under-utilised properties which can be used as temporary accommodation.
- The Decent Homes Standard is no longer a requirement but still remains for authorities that choose to measure their homes against it and the Government is intending to issue a Future Homes Standard.
- At this moment in time, Birmingham still chooses to use the Decent Homes Standard and if a kitchen or bathroom is not fit for use it will be replaced.
- With regard to the EPC B and C Aspirational Standard, it was noted that the Council declared a climate emergency four years ago and the Council should be taking advantage of a property being empty to do the work to achieve this. It was queried why this has not been done and also whether in bids submitted to Government for work to improve the standard of insulation in our properties, if successful, that we will be able to use that funding to improve all voids up to a B or C when they become voids.
- Members were told that the aspirational standard is there because it is a policy decision and an opportunity has been created to be able to have the flexibility to invest in those properties if we need to get them to EPC B and C.
- In terms of trying to do the work when a property becomes void, the retrofit programme – the big bids to get our properties thermal efficient - is for properties that are in streets that are occupied and have an impact on multiple households and the community as a whole. It might not be as efficient to do work on individual properties so a view would be taken on the condition, age and EPC rating of other properties in the area in making those decisions.
- The Ombudsman has said the Council needs to be taking advantage of the void period and intelligence led data to establish the best investment method.

- It was suggested that there are elements of getting to a B or C rating which are not dependent on neighbouring properties, for example loft insulation and properly insulated windows.
- This does all have to fit in with the long term Asset Management Plan and balancing of Revenue and Capital. Once there are costings for all of the standards they can be modelled into the Asset Management Plan and the Business Plan to identify the best way to progress.
- With regard to hard to lets, reference was made with regard to issues of anti-social behaviour in sheltered accommodation and Members were assured that people placed in these properties do still have to meet eligibility criteria and needs of individuals are taken into account, for example where wraparound support is required.
- The Target Operating Model has identified the need to develop a locality housing model focusing on a robust housing management offer and it was accepted that tenants getting a property at a higher standard will enable better conversations when managing that tenancy.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation was noted.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document No 4)

The following items were confirmed for the April meeting:

Voids – further session on good practice from elsewhere.

Localisation – Leader attending.

Reducing Fly-tipping – Follow-up report with Legal attending as well as the Cabinet Member for Environment and Assistant Director, Street Scene.

Cleaner Streets - Cabinet Member for Environment formal response.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme was agreed.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

8. REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN/COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/PETITIONS RECEIVED (IF ANY)

None.

9. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

10. AUTHORITY TO CHAIR AND OFFICERS

RESOLVED:

That in an urgent situation between meetings the Chair, jointly with the relevant Chief Officer, has authority to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 1516 hours.