

**PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY PANEL
22ND AUGUST 2017**

PRESENT: Councillors Parsons (Chair)
Councillor Jukes (Vice-chair)
Councillors Brookes, Campsall, K. Harris, Huddleston, Jones,
Paling, Radford, Rollings, Savage, Smidowicz and Tassell

Head of Customer Experience
Head of Finance and Property Services
Head of Landlord Services
Head of Strategic Support
Democratic Services Officer (NC)

APOLOGY: Councillor Seaton

12. MINUTES

A member of the Panel queried whether minute 6 was an accurate reflection of the meeting, in particular, whether the Panel had requested the issue of agency staff within the Council to be raised with the Scrutiny Management Board.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 4th July 2017 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

13. DISCLOSURES OF PECUNIARY AND PERSONAL INTERESTS

No disclosures of interest were made.

14. DECLARATIONS – THE PARTY WHIP

No declarations of the existence of the Party Whip were made.

15. QUESTIONS UNDER OTHER COMMITTEE PROCEDURES 11.17

No questions had been submitted.

16. GENERAL FUND AND HRA REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

A report of the Head of Finance and Property Services was submitted (item 6 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Head of Finance and Property Services attended to assist the Panel with the consideration of the item.

In response to issues raised by the Panel, the Head of Finance and Property Services and the Head of Landlord Services stated that:

- it was difficult to predict the shortfall in property related income as planning fees and pre-application advice were linked to when planning applications were submitted.
- costs for council property improvements and adaptations were covered by Capital expenditure. Maintenance costs were included in the Revenue budget. The planned maintenance programme was on hold due to contractor issues.
- Dwelling Rent arrears and court costs were £47K higher; the division between the two costs could be seen in Table 2 of Appendix 3 of the report. This would be closely monitored after the introduction of Universal Credit.
- the term 'Compliance subcontractor' related to contractors working on behalf of the Council who ensured compliance with relevant legislation (e.g for gas safety, legionella and asbestos).
- the YTD variance for 'charges for services and facilities – void loss' related to empty properties where work could be required to bring the property back into use, or empty sheltered units.

Reference was made to the underspend due to vacant posts and whether these posts had been vacant for a particular reason and for a long period of time. The Head of Finance and Property Services agreed to pass the enquiry onto the Head of Landlord Services.

Members of the Panel raised concerns regarding the number of Council properties that were vacant, the reasons for this and the time taken to bring the properties back into use.

RESOLVED

1. that the Panel be provided with further information in relation to the underspend for Asbestos Surveys and the number of completed asbestos surveys in Council properties;
2. that the Panel be provided with a copy of the published report to be submitted to the next meeting of the Housing Management and Advisory Board in relation to Council Voids;
3. that the information contained in the report of the Head of Finance and Property Services be noted.

Reasons

1. To provide Members of the Panel with further clarification regarding the underspend for Asbestos Surveys;
2. The Panel wished to understand about Council Voids to determine whether further investigation was required into the Council's performance in this area.
3. The Panel were satisfied with the information provided.

17. COUNCIL TAX ARREARS – UPDATE ON COUNCIL TAX RECOVERY

A report of the Head of Customer Experience was submitted (item 7 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Head of Customer Experience attended to assist the Panel with the consideration of the item and in response to issues raised by the Panel, stated that:

- the key performance indicator measured the total amount of council tax collected and this was 97.79% for 2016/17.
- the high levels of recovery activity for properties in Barkby Thorpe could be a result of determining Council Tax banding for a recent housing development. It was unclear as to why some of the smaller villages had a high recovery activity figure. The higher recovery percentage for Loughborough was likely to be due to higher numbers of benefit claimants, higher turnover of properties and landlords being liable when tenants moved out of properties within a month.
- Council Tax costs, unlike Housing Benefit, could not be diverted to the Council for collection. Council Tax Support (CTS) and discretionary support payments were available to assist vulnerable people who found it hard to pay Council Tax, which was not paid directly but discounted from the Council Tax bill. The introduction of Universal Credit was likely to impact the collection of Council Tax.
- Houses in Multiple Occupation were liable to pay Council Tax. Although the Council could be losing money through unidentified HMOs, there was a team who proactively reviewed licensing and collection of Council Tax.

RESOLVED

1. that the Panel be provided by email with the following information:
 - a) the internal process for Council Tax collection and recovery action,
 - b) the reason why Beeby Parish showed a recovery activity score of 43%,
 - c) the costs and charges of enforcement action;

2. that the next Council Tax Arrears Update report submitted to the Panel at its meeting scheduled on 10th April 2018, includes information about how much tax is collected, how much tax is written off, the costs of enforcement and the number of enforcement actions divided by parish;
3. that the Head of Customer Experience evaluates the resource required to collect data in relation to analysing yearly trends for smaller villages showing high levels of recovery activity and to consult with the Chair and Vice-chair whether to provide this information in a future report;
4. that the information contained in the report of the Head of Customer Experience be noted.

Reasons

1. Members of the Panel wished to understand the process for the collection of Council Tax, and be provided with further clarification on some points in the submitted report.
2. To enable the Panel to monitor the performance of Council Tax collection and recovery action effectively.
3. Members of the Panel wished to understand if the high levels of recovery activity for smaller villages were part of a yearly trend but were mindful of ensuring best use of Council resources.
4. The Panel was satisfied with the information provided.

18. HOUSING RENT ARREARS – INTERNAL MECHANISMS

A report of the Head of Landlord Services was submitted (item 8 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Head of Landlord Services attended to assist the Panel with the consideration of the item and in response to issues raised by the Panel, stated that:

- as Housing Benefit was given directly to the landlord, it was anticipated that the introduction of Universal Credit which was given directly to the tenant, could result in an increase in rent arrears. The Council were proactively asking tenants to contact them in relation to Universal Credit and had increased the team handling rent arrears with the recruitment of additional Financial Inclusion Officers. Officers were meeting with the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) to identify new Universal Credit claimants.
- there was a fixed time period before the Council could ask the DWP for an alternative arrangement where tenants were in arrears. Tenants on Universal Credit appeared more likely to get into rent arrears but it was noted that when tenants moved onto this benefit they could already owe the Council rent.

- if a tenant was evicted they had a right to make a homeless application and the Council would decide whether a statutory duty existed for re-housing, this would include the consideration of whether a person had made themselves intentionally homeless.
- maintaining the Council's housing stock enabled the Council to meet the housing needs of the Borough. The law stated that a tenant couldn't part with possession of a property in entirety, and part-subletting of Council properties would require the landlord's permission.
- Taking a tenant through the rent arrears recovery process through to eviction, could take approximately four months, however the process could take longer due to factors outside the Council's control.

RESOLVED that the information contained in the report of Head of Landlord Services be noted.

Reason

The Panel was satisfied with the information provided.

19. HOUSING REPAIRS COMPLAINTS

A report of the Head of Landlord Services was submitted (item 9 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Head of Landlord Services attended to assist the Panel with the consideration of the item and noted that of the 163 complaints at stage 0 in 2016/17, 26 of those had moved to Stage 1 and 4 of those had moved to stage 2 so there had been some double accounting in the figures.

In addition to the information contained within the report, and in response to issues raised by the Panel, the Head of Landlord Services stated that:

- the complaint reasons of service failure, service delay and communications indicated when the Council had upheld a complaint at stages 1 and 2 and had failed to give an acceptable service, it was not due to customer perception.
- the types of complaints were tracked and monitored for learning opportunities. Customer satisfaction for the in-house responsive repairs team was high, less so for the planned works under the Decent Homes programme. The communication methods surrounding complaints had been included in the procurement process for the new Decent Homes Contract.
- concerns regarding the planned works carried out under the Decent Homes programme had been considered during the Decent Homes Scrutiny Panel. No supplier was precluded from participating in the procurement process for the new service.

- one of the tasks this year for the Tenancy and Estates Management team was to recommence walks around the Borough to identify problem areas.

RESOLVED

1. that the Panel be provided with a breakdown of 427 complaints for 2016/17 into categories of complaint type;
2. that the information contained in the report of the Head of Landlord Services be noted.

Reasons

1. the Panel wished to understand the kinds of complaints received and whether there were particular reoccurring issues.
2. The Panel was satisfied with the information provided.

20. WORK PROGRAMME

A report of the Head of Strategic Support was submitted to enable the Panel to consider its work programme and to propose to the Scrutiny Management Board any additions, deletions and amendments as appropriate (item 9 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Head of Strategic Support assisted the Panel with the consideration of this item.

RESOLVED

1. that the item 'Council Tax and Housing Rent Arrears – Internal Mechanisms' scheduled for its meeting on 10th October 2017 be removed from the Work Programme and added to the Work Programme for its meeting in October 2018;
2. to note the current position with the Panel's Work Programme.

Reasons

1. To enable the report to return to its six-monthly pattern whereby it is considered by the Panel every April and October.
2. To make the Panel aware of the current position with its Work Programme.

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation as a correct record at the next meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Panel.