

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 13 July 2023

Present:

Members: Councillor M Ali (Chair)
Councillor G Hayre
Councillor M Heaven
Councillor A Hopkins
Councillor A Kaur
Councillor S Keough (substitute for Councillor J Gardiner)

Other Members: Councillor D Welsh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities)
Councillor S Agboola (Deputy Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities)

Employees (by Department):

Adult Services and Housing J Crawshaw, L Pain

Law and Governance G Holmes, U Patel, T Robinson

Streetscene and Regulatory Services D Blackburn, A Chowns

Apologies: Councillors R Bailey, J Gardiner, B Gittins and R Thay
Councillors P Hetheron (Cabinet Member for City Services)
G Lloyd (Deputy Cabinet Member for City Services)

Public Business

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 March, 2023 were agreed and signed as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

3. Review of the Implementation of the Homefinder Allocations Scheme

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note of the Housing and Homelessness Lead and received a comprehensive presentation from the Housing and

Homelessness team which provided an update following the 12–18 month review report of the Coventry Homefinder Policy and accompanying IT system following their implementation in September 2021 alongside the wider context of social housing supply and demand. Specifically, the new scheme means that only those with an assessed housing need qualify to join the housing register.

The Coventry Homefinder Policy has five key objectives:

- Operate within the legal framework
- Be realistic, simple, and transparent
- Make best use of housing stock
- Lettings properties quickly
- Create balanced and sustainable communities

At the point that the new policy was introduced, the service committed to carrying out a review of the impact and effectiveness of both the new policy and the operation of the new IT system after both 6 and 12 months. This review report included data from both 12 and 18 months of operation.

The review examined feedback from partners of the scheme, including Registered Housing Providers that operate within Coventry, and representatives from Coventry Advice Agencies. The review evaluated each objective that the policy aims to achieve, recognised achievements, and addressed any issues that have been raised by partners for further development of the scheme.

An Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out alongside the review, to measure and mitigate against any impact that the policy has had on particular groups within the City.

The report outlined the current position of the scheme and the role that it has had in the first 18 months on those requiring social housing in Coventry and the subsequent impact that is linked to those owed duties by the statutory homelessness service. The report also outlined the current needs of those who are presently on the housing register and provided a breakdown of numbers in each key priority group who are able to bid for available properties on the register.

The report also demonstrated both the supply and demand of social housing within the City and the number of properties that have come available for letting within the first 18 months of the scheme being active. It also outlined the current level of need that is presently on the housing register and gave a breakdown of those in each priority band and the reasons for their housing need.

Members asked questions and received responses on the following items:

- Transparency and expectations for applicants on the scheme.
- Data regarding those waiting for accommodation.
- Refugee home finders and Ukrainian refugees on the scheme.
- Accommodation allocations received from housing associations including Citizen Housing and Midland Heart.
- Temporary accommodation both within and outside of the city, with prioritisation of finding temporary accommodation within the city for applicants.

- The crisis situation of social housing and the need for new social housing to be built.
- Accommodation prioritisation for those with a connection to the city.
- Accommodation repossessions in the context of rising mortgage interest rates and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Third party registration on the scheme.
- Accommodation stock for applicants with disabilities and mobility issues.
- Cost of living mortgage support and one-off payments to landlords.
- Application signposting and administration.
- The shortage of 3, 4 and 5 bedroom properties on the scheme.
- The prioritisation and possible motivators to encourage applicants to downsize and free up space for larger families requiring accommodation with more bedrooms.
- Targeted contact to better ascertain those requiring the appropriate prioritisation.

Councillor D Welsh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities) alongside the Board recognised, commended and thanked the Housing and Homelessness team for attending the meeting, sharing their successes and challenges of the Homefinder Allocations scheme, and for their continued work in the difficult environment of citywide social housing.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:

- 1) Notes the information and key findings detailed within the report**
- 2) Notes that a progress report on the recommendations identified following the review to be submitted to a future meeting of the Board. This to include an update on providing transparency to Homefinder applicants as to allocation wait times.**

4. Review of Additional Licensing Scheme

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Head of Safer Housing and Communities and received a comprehensive presentation which provided information about the review of the Additional Licensing Scheme for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and provided Members an opportunity to take part in that review.

The duty to licence Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) was introduced in July 2006 through powers provided under the Housing Act 2004 (the Act), at that time HMOs that were 3 or more storeys in height and occupied by 5 or more persons required a licence through the HMO mandatory licensing powers.

In October 2018 the definition for HMOs requiring a mandatory HMO licence was changed to include any HMO occupied by 5 or more people forming two or more households, in effect removing the three-storey requirement.

Additional licensing of HMOs is a discretionary power that, if introduced by Local Authorities, can be applied to those HMOs which are not required to be licensed under the mandatory licensing powers.

The provision of good quality housing for Coventry residents is a priority for the City Council and additional Licensing of HMOs was first introduced on the 4th May 2020. The scheme can only run for a period of 5 years, during which time the Council must carry out a review. The Additional Licensing scheme means that all HMOs, including those properties converted into self-contained flats without building regulations approval (Section 257 HMOs) require a licence.

The private rented sector (PRS) is an important part of our housing market, with 4.7 million households in England. The sector has undergone rapid growth over the last ten years and is now the second largest tenure in England.

HMOs form a vital part of this sector, often providing cheaper accommodation for people whose housing options are limited.

HMOs are known to be commonly occupied by students but there are also a growing number of young professionals and migrant workers sharing houses and flats. Some HMOs are occupied by the most vulnerable people in our society.

These people live in properties that were not built for multiple occupation, and the risk of overcrowding and fire can be greater than with other types of accommodation. The government wants to support good private landlords who provide decent well-maintained homes and not impose unnecessary regulation however, the nature of HMOs means that regulation of this part of the sector is widely agreed to be necessary.

Mandatory licensing of HMOs came into force in 2006 under the Housing Act 2004 (the Act) and originally applied to properties of three storeys or more with five or more people making up two or more separate households living in them.

As demand for HMOs increased in the decade since mandatory licensing was first introduced there has been a significant increase in properties with fewer than three storeys being used as HMO accommodation, notably two storey houses originally designed for families and flats.

Some have been used by opportunist rogue landlords who exploit their vulnerable tenants, and rent sub-standard, overcrowded and potentially dangerous accommodation. The growth of HMOs has also had an impact on the local community, including where inadequate rubbish storage leads to pest infestation and health and safety problems.

In May 2020 the Council introduced a citywide Additional Licensing Scheme which required all HMOs in Coventry to be licensed.

Within the Act there is a legal requirement to review the scheme “from time to time” following its operation. To fulfil this requirement the Council intends to commence a review of the Additional Licensing Scheme.

Members asked questions and received responses on the following matters:

- Consultation dates, venues and times.
- Comparative data with regards to the impact, if any, that this scheme has made.

- Enforcement activity undertaken and specifically how many landlords were fined and a breakdown by ward.
- Potential landlord re-application loopholes.
- Licensing fees.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:

- 1) **Notes the information provided in the Briefing Note and Appendix 1 & 2.**
- 2) **Agrees to receive the final Cabinet report, which will provide information on the progress of the Scheme thus far following the conclusion of the review.**

5. Work Programme 2023-2024

The Scrutiny Board considered their Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2023/24.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board (4):

- 1) **Notes the Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2023/24 with the inclusion of the following items identified at the All Member Scrutiny Session:**
 - a) **Local flooding and water quality**
 - b) **Housing retrofitting**
- 2) **Agrees that the Work Programme be updated to include the following items for the 21 September 2023 meeting of the Scrutiny Board:**
 - a) **Local Plan Review**
 - b) **Dog fouling to be brought forward and included as part of 'Reducing litter on our Streets – Community Initiative'**
- 3) **Notes that the following items will be added to the work programme for consideration at a future meeting:**
 - a) **Working with social housing providers to increase supply as part of the Housing and Homelessness item**
 - b) **Wildlife Reserve Management**

6. Any other items of public business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 11.50 am)