

Nottingham City Council

Housing and City Development Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held in the Ground Floor Committee Room - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 15 July 2024 from 2:00pm to 3:11pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Michael Savage (Chair)
Councillor Kevin Clarke
Councillor Sam Harris
Councillor David Mellen
Councillor Samina Riaz

Absent

Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall
Councillor Adele Williams

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Jay Hayes - Executive Member for Housing and Planning
Mark Lowe - Head of Housing and Regeneration
Adrian Mann - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Kate Morris - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Debbie Richards - Head of Housing Solutions
Geoff Wharton - Consultant Strategic Director of Housing

- As the Chair of the Committee, Councillor Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall, was absent, the Vice-Chair, Councillor Michael Savage, chaired the meeting.

10 Apologies for Absence

Councillor AJ Matsiko - work commitments
Councillor Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall - unwell
Councillor Adele Williams - personal reasons

11 Declarations of Interests

None

12 Minutes

The Committee confirmed the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2024 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

13 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

Councillor Jay Hayes, Executive Member for Housing and Planning, Geoff Wharton, Consultant Strategic Director of Housing, Mark Lowe, Head of Housing and Regeneration, and Debbie Reynolds, Head of Housing Solutions, presented a report on the current position in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping in Nottingham. The following points were raised:

- a) There are currently 235 households in nightly paid accommodation, compared to 115 last year – and 85% of these households are families. There are 776 people in all forms of temporary accommodation, 430 of which are families. Demand for nightly paid accommodation has risen, though the Council has reduced costs through making block bookings and adopting more efficient commissioning strategies. A great deal of work is being done to seek to prevent homelessness from occurring as part of the overall strategic approach.
- b) There are a number of drivers for homelessness both locally and nationally. There is a lack of affordable housing across the country, with cost pressures on social housing providers due to newly introduced regulatory standards, resulting in a reduced investment programme in social housing new builds. Locally, there has been a significant rise in house and rent prices. The Local Housing Allowance has not risen at the same rate as house prices and rents and, combined with significant levels of deprivation in parts of the city and low wages, it makes it increasingly difficult to rent privately, particularly for those in receipt of benefits. Another contributing factor is the tight boundary lines in the city, meaning there is less available suitable land for development for housing. There has also been a recent spike in the number of asylum seekers at risk of homelessness following being granted leave to remain in the UK, as they are then given notice to quit Home Office accommodation. The Council has been working hard to introduce measures to seek to mitigate the impacts of this.
- c) The Council has a range of statutory duties in respect of homelessness including offering advice services, providing emergency accommodation for eligible people in priority need, creating personal housing plans, providing temporary accommodation and supporting people into a secure tenancy, all of which are provided by the Housing Solutions service. There are a number of initiatives in place to reduce the level of homelessness in Nottingham. The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy has been in place for some time and is being refreshed in response to the recent increase in demand. There has been an increase in capacity within Housing Solutions with an aim to expand in order to meet demand, with caseloads having reduced from 165 cases per officer to 72. The focus of work continues to be prevention, with ongoing activity to engage effectively with the private rented sector.
- d) Rough sleeping is a significant challenge nationally. There are currently 51 known rough sleepers in the city, though this number peaks in the summer months and dips through the colder part of the year. It is well documented that many rough sleepers are affected by severe multiple disadvantage and often have a mistrust of institutional services, which can make working with them effectively to support them into stable accommodation a complex challenge. The perception of rough sleeping can be made worse as some street beggars may appear to be rough sleepers, but do in fact have access to accommodation. However, Council teams have worked hard to help over 150 people off the streets and into accommodation.
- e) Funding for rough sleeping services primarily comes from the Government, with Local Authorities bidding for funds for a range of programmes – with the Council achieving awards of over £20 million since 2021. There are a number of services for rough sleepers that are designed to deliver wrap-around care to enable

individuals and support them into sustainable accommodation. The Council works with other partners, including faith groups and the voluntary sector, to help provide support to sustain accommodation. There is a specific Winter Plan for supporting rough sleepers and, in extreme weather, there are places that offer a warm space and food. Other services available are an outreach team to target engagement and help people navigate the different services available, with specialists offering support through mental/physical health and release from prison services.

- f) Robust contract management and block bookings have helped to reduce the unit cost of nightly paid accommodation, and a programme to repurpose underused accommodation to temporary accommodation has increased capacity. There is also an ongoing programme to bring void properties back into use and a reorganisation of temporary accommodation resources to increase capacity.

The Committee raised the following points in discussion:

- g) The Committee raised concerns about proposals to end the staffing of the main reception at Loxley House and the impact that this would have for vulnerable people attempting to access Housing Solutions' services in an emergency. It was reported that, as part of having to reduce costs across the Council, the staffing of the main reception at Loxley House will cease, which will have an impact on people entering Loxley House to access services, including Housing Solutions. In response, services across the Council are looking at self-service models. It will be necessary to work at a corporate level to ensure that the right systems are in place that ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and citizens using the building.
- h) The Committee asked how homeless households were allocated appropriate properties for their needs. It was set out there are a number of criteria that impact on access to properties, including the previous length of time waiting and the assessment of need and priority. Those in secure accommodation already yet seeking to change will be assessed as a lower priority than those in temporary accommodation or otherwise homeless. All properties are provided in accordance with the formal Allocations Policy, so households will be told why any bid for a given property was unsuccessful.
- i) The Committee asked what the current level of vacancies within Housing Solutions was and what was being done to fill these. It was explained that there are currently 14 full-time equivalent vacancies across the Housing Solutions team. Recruitment is ongoing, with a cycle of advertising and interviewing currently underway for six of these posts, which should be recruited to by the end of September 2024. The team has been positive and proactive around recruitment and post-matching to ensure that roles are filled by the best candidates.
- j) The Committee asked how void properties were brought back into use as soon as possible, to help meet demand. It was reported that between 300 and 400 properties become vacant throughout the year across the social housing portfolio, with around 10,000 people on the waiting list for a property. Demand significantly outstrips the supply, so the Council has recently launched an initiative to ensure that all currently occupied properties are still suitable for the needs of their tenants, or whether they could be moved to somewhere more appropriate. In

terms of voids, those that can be turned around quickly and put back into use are dealt with by one contractor, while other contractors refit those properties that need additional works to bring them back into a suitable condition for new tenants. Where a property becomes void due to the death of a tenant, there can be circumstances where the tenancy can then directly pass to a spouse or partner, but it is unlikely that a tenancy would pass to the adult child of a deceased tenant. The Service works as sensitively as it can with families in these circumstances.

- k) The Committee queried whether it was considered appropriate to provide accommodation for families in high-rise buildings. It was set out families were not placed in high-rise accommodation wherever possible but that, on some occasions, this was required due to the very high level of demand – as it was still a better option for families to living in otherwise temporary accommodation.
- l) The Committee asked what could be done to encourage people in Council properties to downsize when their space requirements reduced. It was reported that an initiative has been launched to ensure that tenants are in the right size property to meet their need. As part of a full Stock Condition Survey, it has been easier to identify where downsizing could be a viable option and, where appropriate, tenants have been offered the opportunity to move to better-sized properties. There is some demand from tenants to downsize, and there are incentives to do so, including funded packages for moving.
- m) The Committee asked what potential there was for new build social housing delivery by Housing Associations. It was set out that there are some new schemes in development, but many Housing Associations are focusing on ensuring that their current stock complies with new regulatory requirements, for the time being. Land within the city boundaries is also at a premium and limited availability is leading to higher costs that Housing Associations are unable to afford, though there are a number of schemes by Housing Associations to develop existing buildings. In the past, Section 106 funding agreements with commercial developers have been used to deliver affordable housing schemes. However, more frequently in recent times, Section 106 requirements for commercial schemes have been waived due to developments otherwise becoming unviable.
- n) The Committee asked whether there had been any national policy changes in relation to the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme, or how income from RTB sales could be used. It was explained that engagement is taking place with Government on the current parameters of the RTB scheme, as there are challenges for the Council in terms of the level of discount in RTB sales, the timescale within which RTB income can be spent, and the reduction of housing stock faster than it can be replaced.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Housing and Planning, the Consultant Strategic Director of Housing, the Head of Housing and Regeneration and the Head of Housing Solutions for attending the meeting to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

Resolved:

- 1) To request that information is provided on the current number of people at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping as a result of being evicted from temporary accommodation provided by the Home Office.**
- 2) To request that the Committee is updated as to the number of remaining full-time equivalent staff vacancies within Housing Solutions at the end of September 2024.**
- 3) To recommend that consideration is given to how people who are seeking to downsize their property could be identified and engaged with effectively, and to what support could be provided to assist them in finding and moving into an appropriate smaller property that would be more suitable for their needs.**
- 4) To recommend that engagement is carried out with the Customer Services team and the Executive Member with the associated remit to consider what appropriate 'front of house' provision could be sustained in the public area of Loxley House to help support vulnerable people seeking to meet with Housing Solutions staff in person, and to ensure that the reception area is a welcoming and safe environment for everyone.**

14 Responses to Recommendations

The Chair presented the latest responses received from the Executive to recommendations made to it previously by the Committee. The following points were discussed:

- a) The Committee noted that, in general, the most recent responses provided to its recommendations were relatively short and lacking in detail. The Committee considered that, ultimately, the Executive's written responses to recommendations reflect the formal outcomes of the Scrutiny process – so it requested that the appropriate Executive Members work as closely as possible with the relevant Council officers and Scrutiny Committee Chairs to ensure that future responses to recommendations are full, considered and appropriately detailed.

The Committee noted the responses of the Executive to its recommendations.

15 Work Programme

The Chair presented the Committee's current Work Programme for the 2024/25 municipal year. The following points were discussed:

- a) The Committee noted that its next meeting, scheduled for 16 September 2024, would occur at the same time as a formal meeting of the East Midlands Combined County Authority, creating a diary clash for the Executive Members who needed to attend both meetings. As a result, the Committee's September meeting will be rescheduled to ensure that the needed Executive Members are able to attend for the planned business items within their remit.

The Committee noted the Work Programme.