

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 15th July, 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Dave Shaw in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Lauren Mitchell,
Warren Nuttall, David Walters and
Caroline Wilkinson.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

SA.1 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

SA.2 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 18 February 2021, be received and approved as a correct record.

SA.3 Scrutiny Review: Tenancy Support

The Chairman welcomed Members to the meeting and reminded the Panel that the Tenancy Support review topic had been introduced at the February 2021 meeting. Following initial discussions, the Panel had focussed on the cessation of the eviction ban which had initially come into force during the height of the pandemic, and how the Council would offer support to those tenants being evicted from private sector households and looking for new accommodation.

The previous meeting had been extremely informative and Members had access to the Council's Service Manager, Housing Management & Tenancy Services, Nicky Moss and the Service Manager, Strategic Housing & Lettings, Phil Warrington, who were present at the meeting and who contributed fully to the initial discussions.

The Scrutiny Research Officer gave an overview of the content of the report presented to Members which included:

- baseline data in relation to tenancy rent arrears and homelessness
- the rights and responsibilities of tenants (through their tenancies) and landlords

- the latest situation regarding the ban on evictions and the Government's pre-action protocol for possession
- answers from the Housing Team to questions raised by Members at the initial meeting.

In relation to tenancy rent arrears, these were still predominantly coming from Universal Credit claimants and it was acknowledged that these figures were continuing to rise. However, the Housing Team had a number of dedicated officers that continued to assist tenants with managing money and budgeting their finances.

One of the questions raised by Members was in relation to the success, or otherwise, of the Selective Licensing Scheme and the Services Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services expanded on the response and advised that the original scheme was due to end in February 2022 and a review would be commencing shortly to determine its continuance or cessation at the Council.

The Selective Licensing Scheme has improved management and maintenance of privately rented properties in two designated areas (New Cross and Stanton Hill) but problems in the areas still existed. The primary driver of the scheme was to improve the quality of private sector housing and demand for private housing continued to rise as more people continued to seek rental accommodation within the District.

The creation of the Selective Licensing Scheme was a Government initiative aimed at improving the quality of private sector housing and enabling landlords to have more productive relationships with their local Councils. It was envisaged that Councils would also benefit from the scheme as they would have access to additional good quality private rental accommodation that could be offered to people on their waiting lists as a viable alternative.

Tenancy issues were often multi-faceted and usually commenced with poverty struggles and poor standards of accommodation. Tenants would find themselves in arrears with their rent which would often result in eviction by private landlords culminating in the tenants presenting themselves to the Council as homeless and desperately needing ongoing support and alternative accommodation.

Housing officers were equipped to deal with all aspects of tenancy support which included:

Debt Management
 Tenancy Sustainment Support
 Private Sector Liaison
 Management of Waiting Lists
 Mitigating against lack of housing supply
 Tackling poverty
 Managing Rent Arrears
 Reducing homelessness and rough sleeping.

To conclude it was suggested to Members that it might be useful to ascertain the views of housing officers administering the Selective Licensing Scheme to inform the review and assess whether implementation of the scheme had brought tangible benefits to both tenants and staff, or otherwise.

The Scrutiny Research Officer drew Members' attention to the current number of people on the Housing Register which stood at around 3903 and noted that the figure had continued to increase. Each 2-bed flat was now averaging around 150+ bids which was unprecedented and gave insight into the rising demand for social housing.

Homelessness had also increased over the past 12 months with rough sleeper figures rising the most.

Members went on to discuss the information contained in the report and considered, amongst other things:

- the vicious cycle of debt, losing tenancies, homelessness, housing waiting lists and then back into social housing
- the increasing reliance and use of private sector accommodation due to the rising demand for social housing
- the importance of private sector housing being at an acceptable quality and standard for tenants
- acknowledgement that many landlords under the Selective Licensing Scheme have passed on the joining fee of £350-£500 to tenants through increased rents
- further acknowledgement that many private sector accommodation was now being snapped up by working families leaving a low supply of suitable accommodation for families on benefits or low income
- evidence emerging that some landlords were exploiting the Scheme and hiking up rents on properties as a result
- the plethora of Government schemes in existence to assist landlords to install proper boilers/ windows etc.
- difficulties being experience by landlords who had to repeatedly soak up the cost of ongoing damage from unsatisfactory tenants
- acknowledgement that the Selective Licensing Scheme was established with the best of intentions to enable landlords to become accredited but was exploited by some rogue operators along the way
- should the Scheme be extended, there should be consideration of introducing a cap on rents to avoid any future exploitation.

To conclude the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services reminded the Panel that at the previous meeting they had indicated a desire to examine how the Council worked with the private sector and so working with officers on the upcoming review of the Selective Licensing Scheme would be an ideal platform to gain such information.

Members were also keen to consider the Council's Housing Register and its impact on the Council's plans to build social housing, planning regulations, under-occupancy in properties and the requirement to make inroads into reducing the numbers on the list.

The Scrutiny Research Officer concluded that it was a stark reality that it was impossible for the Council to house everyone on the waiting list and it was imperative that relationships with private sector landlords were strengthened to close the gap. To address this issue, two new jobs had recently been advertised for Early Intervention Officers within the Housing Team to intervene and support struggling tenants at an earlier stage thus endeavouring to avoid unnecessary evictions and money management difficulties later down the line.

RESOLVED

that consideration as to how the Panel could effectively assist officers and contribute to the Selective Licensing Review and the current status of the Council's Housing Register and its impact on Council priorities, be discussed and agreed at an informal meeting of the Scrutiny Panel in September 2021.

The meeting closed at 7.50 pm

Chairman.