

Meeting	Housing and Community Safety Policy and Scrutiny Committee
Date	7 December 2022
Present	Councillors Fenton (Chair), Pavlovic (Vice-Chair), Baker, Cuthbertson, Fitzpatrick, Vassie and Wells
Officers in attendance	Tracey Carter, Director of Housing, Economy and Regeneration Vicky Japes, Head of Housing Strategy and Performance Patrick Looker, Head of Service Finance Denis Southall, Head of Housing

13. Declarations of Interest (17:34)

At this point in the meeting, Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interest or other registrable interest they might have had in respect of business on this agenda, if they had already done so in advance on the Register of Interests. None were declared.

14. Minutes (17:34)

Resolved: That the minutes of the last meeting held on 18 October 2022 be approved and signed as an accurate record.

15. Public Participation (17:36)

It was reported that there had been two registrations to speak under the Council's Public Participation Scheme.

Councillor Webb spoke on the urgent business item - damp and mould in social housing, and stated that York is not doing enough and that tenants are having their mould and damp problems ignored. He explained that in Bell Farm, a damp metre was used on the walls and it measured a 50% saturation before stating that cold and damp housing is a contributing risk factor to health and life expectancy.

Hilary Platt, who is the chair of the Bell Farm Community Association, also spoke on the urgent business item. She questioned what action was being taken to deal with black mould in homes and asked the Council to bring in standing water and window works to alleviate these issues. She concluded by stating that the Council needs to bring in a clear plan of how to report and deal with these issues when they arise.

16. Housing Support Around Cost of Living Increases (17:44)

Members considered a report on the challenges faced by Council housing tenants as a result of the cost of living increases. The Committee raised concerns over the causes and effects of the increased number of social housing tenants in rent arrears. Officers explained that there are several factors that have caused the increase, including the migration from legacy benefits to Universal Credit due to waiting periods and changes in how housing costs are paid, amongst other factors. Officers also stated that there are support packages available for tenants if they fall into arrears and that Council staff regularly engage with them to provide support. In response to questions from Members, Officers agreed to provide the Committee with information on the trends in rent arrears and how many eviction notices/court applications have been issued in the last year due to arrears.

The Committee discussed the rising energy costs for tenants and Officers stated that the Council expects to deliver over 500 substantial energy efficiency improvement measures to around 250 homes in the current financial year. Members also discussed the impact of people's energy bills and how this may cause rent arrears, and Officers confirmed that they take an individual assessment of tenants' circumstances to best support them before any enforcement takes place.

Support for tenants was discussed further by Members and they enquired about the roles of housing management officers and local area coordinators (LAC). Officers noted that housing management officers receive regular training to deal with a wide array of issues, spend one day a week supporting tenants with arrears, amongst other issues, and are closely supported by their team leaders. Furthermore, they stated LAC also support residents to engage with local services before explaining that the Council also works with organisations, such as Citizens Advice York, and information is shared through between the network of organisations to best support residents.

Resolved:

- i. That the information in this report is noted.

- ii. That further information on rent arrears is provided to the Committee.
- iii. That information on how many eviction notices/court applications have been issued in the last year due to arrears is provided to the Committee.

Reason: To update the Committee on the challenges council housing tenants face as a result of the cost of living increases.

17. Urgent Business - Damp and Mould in Social Housing (18:42)

Members received and discussed an oral update on how City of York Council plans to address risks relating to damp and mould in social housing to feed into a response to the Regulator of Social Housing.

The Committee enquired about the process of reporting damp and mould problems and how the Council monitors and checks on these issues. Officers explained that they respond to issues that are reported to the Council or that they come across, whether through stock quality checks, survey works or during annual gas checks. They also stated that the Council ask contractors to look at causes of damp or damage to properties to avoid further problems later on before explaining that they plan on doing tenancy checks in the future and that letters will be sent out to tenants urging and empowering them to report any issues they currently have.

Officers confirmed that 120 Council properties have been identified with damp and mould problems and are waiting for structural work to be completed. Members asked for some further information on these properties, including how many are in each ward and what the likely timeline for repairs will be and Officers agreed to provide this information to Members. Officers also highlighted that the Council have financial and resource limitations to deal with these issues.

Members spoke about the need to communicate with residents on how to avoid mould and damp in homes, especially as energy costs have increased, and Officers stated that the City of York Council has a video on this on its website, which they agreed to share with Members. They also agreed to provide advice for residents in private rented properties on what to do and urged them to raise any concerns with landlords first and then the Council will step in if necessary. Officers confirmed that the Council will also be working with the landlord association to help them better understand how to deal with their stock.

Resolved:

- i. That an oral update on how City of York Council plan to address risks relating to damp and mould in social housing is received by the Committee.

Reason: To scrutinise and have input into the Council's response to the Regulator of Social Housing on risks relating to damp and mould in tenants' homes.

- ii. That the Committee receive an update on the Council's action plan to deal with structural repairs at the next meeting.

Reason: To keep the Committee updated on the damp and mould repairs in social tenants' homes.

[Cllr Baker left the meeting at 19:17]

18. Q2 22-23 Finance and Performance Monitor (19:17)

Officers presented the main points of the report, and Members began discussion of the item. Members queried the £121.5m debt figure that HRA incurred in 2012 and the repayment plans that are commencing in 2023/24 despite a cost of living crisis. Officers explained that the debt and interest repayments will come out of the HRA budget and that the timing for repayments has come at an unfortunate time. They explained that the Council can look at whether the loan can be repaid or refinanced to ease the financial problems but warned this may come with increased interest rates.

Members queried the number of voids and the turnaround time for them, and Officers confirmed that there is an ongoing process to upgrade the void properties and there is a programme with a specialist voids team to oversee this and work through the backlog. They also stated that they are struggling to recruit the trade staff and contractors needed to complete works. In response to questions from Members, Officers agreed to provide the Committee with information on the number of voids per month.

Energy costs in communal housing areas were discussed by Members who asked about investment to improve energy efficiency in these areas and Officers explained that there needs to be further analysis on a case-by-case to ensure it is worthwhile investment.

[Cllr Fitzpatrick left the meeting at 19:36]

Resolved:

- i. That the financial and performance management position across Housing & Community Safety be noted.
- ii. That a further update relating to the number of void properties per month be shared with the Committee.

Reason: to ensure expenditure is kept within the approved budget and performance is effectively scrutinised.

19. Work Plan (19:41)

The Chair reported that there may be an additional meeting in January 2023 for the Committee to discuss an update from the Safer York Partnership. He also agreed to try arrange an update from the fire services in York.

The Vice-Chair requested an update on and a review of the resettlement services in York over winter period at the next scheduled meeting in March 2023.

Resolved:

- i. That the Work Plan is noted.
- ii. To arrange an additional meeting in January 2023 to discuss the Safer York Partnership and potentially hear an update from the fire services.
- iii. To receive an update on the resettlement services in March 2023.

Reason: To ensure the Committee has a program of work for 2022-23.

Councillor Fenton, Chair

[The meeting started at 5.34 pm and finished at 7.44 pm].

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