

WDC Public Rent Consultation Meeting,

Thursday 3rd November 2016, 6PM , Committee room 3, Garshake, Dumbarton.

Present

Isobel Rankin Dalmuir TRA + WDTRO
Harry McCormack Tullichewan TRA + WDTRO
Jim Hendry Risk St + WDTRO
Craig Edward Dalmuir TRA + WDTRO
Frances McGonagle Littleholm TRA + WDTRO
Robert Carson South Drumry TRA
John Hainey South Drumry TRA + WDTRO
Mary de Wal OTTRA
Patricia McLaughlin OTTRA
Janette Donlin Dalmuir TRA + WDTRO
Jacqueline Wilkie Dalmuir TRA + WDTRO
Rita Howard Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Paul Moore Tenant Scrutiny Panel
June Todd Interested Tenant
George Rowe Tenant
Councillor David McBride (Housing Convenor)- chaired meeting
Richard Cairns (Strategic Director)
Peter Barry (Strategic lead, Housing & Employability)
Janice Rainey (Finance Business Partner)
John Kerr (Housing Development and Homelessness Manager)
Jane Mack (Tenant Participation Officer).
Dawn Conner (Tenant Participation Development Officer)
Stefan Kristmanns (Housing Development Co-ordinator)

Apologies

Pat Dougan, Margaret Stevenson, Mary Paton and Peter Richards

1. Welcome and introductions.

Councillor David McBride welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the officers present.

2. Overview of Housing services (Peter Barry)

Copy of presentation circulated and additional paper copies available from Tenant Participation Team or can be viewed on Council website.

Peter Barry gave an overview of his ambitions for Housing Services and stated he is very aware that Housing is more than just a property and the service wants to give people good, quality homes and attractive neighbourhoods to live in.

In that respect, tenants needed to scrutinise, challenge and work with Housing Services to continue the ongoing improvements to the service.

A Housing Improvement Board has been set up to focus on performance improvements and key priorities of Rent Collection, Tenancy Sustainment, More Homes, Better Homes, Homelessness and Void Management. Clear action plans have been created and responsible managers will be held to account.

PB praised the work tenant volunteers were undertaking within the Joint Rent Group to increase transparency and wants all tenants to understand and trust Housing Services to deliver value for money for tenants. He emphasised the commitment to improving transparency and decision making within the Housing Revenue Account .

Tonight's meeting is just part of the process and after tonight's discussion, the Business Plan will be refreshed to identify efficiencies and develop options for the rent increase which can then be put to wider consultation. A second event to assess feedback and agree proposals will be arranged for early January and the final rent level will be agreed at the February Housing & Communities Committee (HACC).

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Financial summary (Janice Rainey)

A methodology of the draft estimates for the HRA budget for 2017/18 was also circulated which explains what the HRA must pay for and the Guidance principles it should adhere to.

A copy of the HRA methodology was circulated and additional paper copies available from Tenant Participation Team or can be viewed on Council website.

Janice advised that she had been able to take a fresh look at the HRA and been able to work with the Scottish Housing network to use their template to help explain how the HRA is spent. An explanation of the main costs was given. She advised that 2 void officers had been employed to focus on improving void management and will be self financing by meeting agreed targets in reducing void numbers and increasing rent income.

Repairs costs have been reduced because of the amount the Council has invested in stock over the last few years but not by as much as would be expected which will be further scrutinised. Breakdown of repairs by type give a flavour of type of repairs being done but improvements through the delivery of the IHMS will help improve this information.

Are predicting an underspend of £422K this year. £400K roughly equates to 1% change to the rent charge across all stock so can look at the assumptions for next year and see what further could be reduced.

The Business Plan for next year had estimated a rent increase of 4% and Council committed to ensuring that it is no more than that and that services are not affected.

3. Main discussion.

Meeting was then opened up to questions.

WDTRO wanted confirmation that there was 'wiggle room' available and Peter Barry confirmed that there was and were in agreement that wanted to reduce the rent increase as much as possible, without reducing the service tenants receive.

Clarification was sought about what 'movement' refers to and Janice confirmed that it was the monetary difference between what was thought an item/service would cost last year compared to what the current position was.

From the breakdown of repairs given it was questioned why such a high percentage of work was left as 'miscellaneous' (12.5%) and tenants keen to be clear about what repair work is done.

Action : Peter confirmed that a further breakdown and understanding of miscellaneous work would be given.

Quality of repair work and the length of time work took were also raised as concerns by tenants. Peter confirmed that Value for money was necessary and the cost of work is being looked at internally to identify improvements.

Suggestion that able-bodied people decorate their own homes rather than the Council doing work as part of relet standard was welcomed as a good idea at least as a trial. Could help with sustainability as well as reducing void relet times so is something that Peter is pursuing through the Void Workstream Group.

Tenants keen to know what a 4% rent increase would pay for. SHQS is a national standard, However fuel poverty was highlighted as a serious problem particularly for tenants in Dalmuir flats. Concern that the 4% increase would allow inefficiencies to continue as tenants had expected the jobbing repair bill to have reduced more now due to the investment work.

Peter confirmed that the investment within the Capital programme was part of what the 4% increase covers and that internally were questioning costs to ensure that value for money was achieved. IHMS gives good opportunity to improve but also need to work more joined up and effectively to maximise the impact.

A number of questions regarding voids were raised in relation to turnover and why performance has not improved in terms of time taken to let.. Peter acknowledged that efficiencies were still needed but was an area of work that continued to be prioritised and focus was on improving communities as well as the properties.

4% rent increase is double inflation and tenants concerned about affordability. It was explained that the rent strategy that predicted a rent increase of 4% was based on the investment decisions the Council took in 2012 to retain housing stock in Council ownership. Rent had previously been kept low for too long and failed to provide required investment in stock. Main issue is to get balance between the quality of the homes we provide and the cost so that people can afford to pay rent. Massive challenge and need to increase the amount of rent collected to help improve services. Peter confirmed joint effort needed – people need to pay their rent and Housing Services need to be more efficient.

Question was raised about the saving that the IHMS would provide. John Kerr confirmed that the whole system was partly paid through approximate contributions from HRA (60%) and 40% from General Fund. As it is Capital spend it is spread over a minimum of 30 years. There is a £20k reduction in system charges straightaway as well as estimated efficiencies close to £300K identified through different ways of working. An annual saving of £1.2M in saving is anticipated once fully operational.

Concerns about whether these saving are feasible were raised but Peter confirmed that confident could be delivered and implementation plan included training and culture change to ensure success. Ambition is not to be paperless but to improve efficiencies.

Was noted that Housing Officers already have digital equipment and able to send in photos of rubbish etc. but process needs to be joined up for it to work.

Tenants wanted assurances that Council will deliver on commitments– example of close cleaning money given years ago. Councillor McBride commented that was hoped that trust had been built up since then and were committed to ensure that tenants are clear about what they will get for the rent increase. Reaffirmed the commitment to improving the rent setting process and tenant involvement.

Tenant concern is that focus for repairs is to get minimum work done and example of plasterwork given that due to age of some properties could be more efficient and better for tenant if whole section of walls are done rather than small sections at a time. Some type of properties needing heating on all year round which is expensive for tenants. Peter was keen for tenants to use complaints process when problems like this arise so that solutions can be developed. Housing Improvement Board also looking at why we do certain work in certain properties – stock condition survey information does dictate what gets done but need to also consider what tenants want and is an area looking to improve and make more effective. More Homes, Better Homes, is looking to improve these processes to ensure bigger picture taken into account rather than focus on short term repairs.

Concerns been raised by tenants in S Drumry as windows being renewed in some properties but not others and unfair on tenants not getting work done as still paying

rent increase. Peter confirmed that there have been discussions about the Capital work in S Drumry and are looking to scheduling the work more effectively.

Query was asked if there was a limit to the amount that the Council could put aside and it was confirmed by Janice Rainey that there wasn't but there was a debt cap that could not be exceeded.

Question was asked if the current underspend could be put towards reducing the rent increase rather than being put aside in slush fund and it was confirmed that that could be an option.

Was also clarified that the 2 void officers focusing on voids were targeted with reducing the overall void figure by at least 20 properties to be cost effective.

- 4. Next steps** were confirmed as efficiency options will be assessed and the Business Plan rerun to provide information on different rent options available.

These options will be made public and tenants surveyed on their preference in December.

A further meeting in January will be arranged to discuss the feedback from the survey and agree proposals to go to the February Housing & Communities Committee.

