

Councillors Written Questions and the Responses

Full Council – 20 October 2021

(Questions in *italics* and Answers in **RED**)

1) Questions to Councillor Irvine (Cabinet Member for Housing) from Councillor Crow

In May this year, it was announced that as part of the political deal for the Council's sole Independent member to keep the Council's minority Labour Administration in power, that despite the fact that eviction proceedings are only ever a last resort, that the Council would not evict any housing tenants for substantial arrears in any circumstances, even if they had refused to engage with the Council about making arrangements to stagger their arrears payments over time.

1. *How long is it planned for this policy to remain in place?*

As set out in the report, the decision was to replicate the protections for evictions until 31 May 2022.

2. *What was the overall level of arrears for Crawley Homes tenants at the time in May when the Council Leader made this announcement?*

£565,358

3. *What is the current overall level of arrears?*

£569,936

4. *What level of arrears would cause enough financial difficulties for Crawley Homes to potentially impact on the provision of good services and repairs for our tenants?*

Our transfer to reserves this year for the HRA is £19.9m. Yearly this funds approx £10m worth of capital programmed repairs. For arrears to impact on the provision of services/repairs for our tenants, arrears would therefore have to reduce this transfer to reserves below the level to fund this capital expenditure. In other words arrears would need to hit £10m which would equate to nearly 25% of our yearly rental income.

5. *While working with and supporting any tenants in difficulties who do have arrears, what strategy does the Council have to reduce arrears from any tenants who refuse to engage in any meaningful way?*

Its important to note that the vast majority of tenants do engage. There are various options for assisting those who are unable to meet their rental obligations including; referring to our financial inclusion officer to ensure they are in receipt of all benefits they may be entitled to;

applications for a discretionary housing payment for those in receipt of some UC housing costs or housing benefit (this can assist with support for those who are benefit capped, those subject to the spare room subsidy, and those experiencing hardship);
applications for direct payments of universal credit to cover the rent and an arrears element to ensure ongoing obligations are met;
for those in properties too large for their needs we promote downsizing to a smaller property which can include an a downsizing payment award of up to £1000;
where there are significant support needs we also engage with other services for example, the mental health team, social services and GP services.

However, where arrears do continue to rise, enforcement action is commenced by serving notices of seeking possession and this would be followed by an application for a possession order if arrears continue to rise. Under the current approach, the application could be made six months after the notice was served.

Most initial possession applications for rent arrears result in a suspended possession order on terms to pay the current rent plus a contribution towards arrears as the council's approach is always to sustain the tenancy if at all possible. Under the current circumstances, if there was no engagement and the arrears continued to rise at the point of the possession application, an outright order could be applied for but not executed until after the current protections expire.

2) Questions to Councillor Mullins (Cabinet Member for Wellbeing) from Councillor Crow

I have received reports via residents that on the instruction of the Council Leader, that the Council is not accepting bookings for our Community Centres from 7pm onwards. One such impact has been a planned Diwali celebration in early November by members of Crawley's Hindu community at one Community Centre being refused. Assuming this '7pm curfew' is correct:

1. What is the rational and justification for this policy?

This policy has remained in place while the rolling case numbers in Crawley have remained high. These activities carry greater Covid transmission risk because of a combination of:

- there are large numbers of people in a confined space,*
- alcohol is commonly consumed,*
- community centre windows are commonly required to remain closed because of proximity to residential properties.*

Although pubs / clubs may have re-opened, community centre parties are self-managed on site and the Council therefore has limited ability to enforce Covid measures such as distancing, sanitising, checking Covid

Passes on entry or restricting access to anyone with Covid symptoms. Although we can advise hirers to undertake such measures (and no doubt some customers would be diligent), there is a greater risk as the function is self-managed and the ability to enforce control measures is therefore limited.

2. *How long is it planned for this policy to remain in place?*

The policy is reviewed on a monthly basis and with due regard to the local case rate at the time of the review. The policy has recently been extended for November, in part on the basis that the rolling 7 day case rate for Crawley remains around 300 cases per 100,000 population. The local case rate has been around this level for a number of months and the Council is taking a sensible and pragmatic approach in restricting these activities as part of wider control measures.

3. *Does the Cabinet Member recognise that this policy could simply drive people hiring premises elsewhere, or that people may host events in their own homes instead, potentially becoming a more crowded environment than at a spacious Community Centre?*

The Council cannot stop people from holding an event in their own home. Although the majority of people will take a responsible approach, given the current local case rate, restricting large indoor gatherings at Community Centres is considered prudent

4. *What is the projected financial cost to the Council in lost income from this policy?*

This is difficult to project as enquiries for adult social events are significantly lower than pre pandemic. Equally, some hirers who have enquired about provisional bookings have postponed or cancelled events because of the continued prevalence of the virus and the potential impact on numbers attending.