

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

RECORD OF DECISIONS taken by the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Darren Sanders, at his meeting held on Tuesday, 12 March 2019 at 5.00 pm in the Executive Meeting Room - The Guildhall (floor 3)

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the chair)

Councillor Tom Coles
Councillor Luke Stubbs

10. Apologies for Absence (AI 1)

None.

11. Declaration of Interests (AI 2)

Councillor Luke Stubbs declared that he has an investment property that he will let but did not believe this to be a direct interest for this meeting.

Councillor Darren Sanders made a non-pecuniary declaration in that his mother lives in Ladywood House, which was mentioned in the Maintenance of Council Housing item.

12. Financial Assistance to enter private sector housing (AI 3)

Mark Sage, the Tackling Poverty Co-ordinator presented the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Buildings, and explained the financial assistance currently provided and the options to extend help to those who do not qualify now. It was reported that roughly 7 households per week use either the Homelessness Prevention Fund or the Discretionary Housing Payments to secure a private rented home, and the number of those assisted is significantly higher this financial year than last year.

Maria Cole from the Residents' Consortium, asked if loans could be repaid back with rent; in response it was reported that the council are working with private sector landlords who will receive the rent direct, and may not wish to collect loans on behalf of PCC and that rent affordability is a significant problem. The idea would however be explored.

Councillor Stubbs, Conservative Spokesperson, asked why the numbers of people assisted using the Homelessness Prevention Fund had seemed to double in a year? It was reported that the Homelessness Reduction Act had meant that a wider group of people were being helped and more were also being directed to Housing Benefits for Discretionary Housing Payments. Councillor Stubbs supported exploring links with a credit union.

Councillor Coles, Labour Spokesperson, asked if a Local Housing Letting Agency had been considered? Councillor Sanders responded that this had previously been looked at approximately 5 years ago but a lot of options were being investigated and this could be revisited.

Councillor Sanders, as Cabinet Member for Housing, stressed the need for easier access to renting privately so he wished to investigate expanding the rent deposit scheme and looking further at guarantors and the level of demand. This also tied in with the Homelessness Strategy with people coming to the council having lost private rented tenancies and the reasons needed to be known for this.

DECISIONS:

- (1) The Cabinet Member for Housing noted the current forms of provision and the criteria under which residents can access this.**
- (2) The Cabinet Member for Housing instructed officers to update the information published by the council outlining the current offer of assistance with rent deposits, as part of a plan to update the information we provide online to tenants and landlords.**
- (3) The Cabinet Member for Housing stressed the administration's desire to expand access to the private rented sector beyond the current offer, to help more residents secure affordable and sustainable tenancies.**
- (4) Officers will review the potential options, and risks, in expanding financial support beyond the current schemes and return to councillors with a detailed options paper regarding the expansion of financial support to access the private rental sector. In order to expand provision beyond the current schemes, the Cabinet Member for Housing will identify and make available a source of funding, in agreement with the Director for Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services and the Section 151 Officer.**

13. Empty Private Property Strategy (AI 4)

Clare Hardwick, Acting Head of Private Sector Housing, presented the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Buildings. The aims were to reduce the number and impact on communities of these empty properties which were a valuable resource and should be brought back into use.

Councillor Stubbs asked for further information on the hot-spot areas in the map at 5.4 in the city centre. Councillor Sanders requested that this information be sent to both opposition spokespersons and to him as Cabinet Member for Housing.

Councillor Stubbs also asked why Portsmouth was performing badly and if void council owned units were included in the statistics? In response it was

reported that whilst the data had been provided by Council Tax the data would also include local authority owned housing (such as the decanted tower blocks) as well as university properties.

Councillor Sanders was keen for empty private properties to be brought back into use and asked if intervening at 6 months rather than the legal guideline of 2 years would be a problem to enforce? Clare Hardwick responded that a proactive approach was being taken, with enforcement action only being one tool to be used when trying to make improvements for local communities.

Councillor Sanders welcomed the report.

DECISION:

The Cabinet Member for Housing approved the council's Empty Private Property Strategy 2019-2024.

14. Purchasing Property for Homeless Accommodation (AI 5)

Jo Bennett, Head of Business Relationships, Growth & Support, presented the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Buildings, which set out the duties of the local authority in working to prevent homelessness at an early stage and this proposal was to provide secure accommodation. The demand in Portsmouth at the night shelter was for roughly 45 to 60 rough sleepers and there were 2000 families on the housing waiting list, thereby demand is outstripping supply. There would be feasibility studies to identify suitable properties to purchase and use in this way which would also address the high cost of current crisis accommodation.

Wayne Layton, Finance Manager, reported on the Council's provision of £1m which had been set aside in the Capital Budget approved in February, but there was the need to ensure rents could be collected and there would be a portfolio of properties, with some having regular tenancy and others being used for move-on accommodation.

Maria Cole of the Residents' Consortium welcomed the report and its proposals.

Councillor Stubbs spoke on the findings of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel which had looked at the use of temporary accommodation and housing needs in the city and had found the need for more move-on accommodation and affordable housing. He asked if there had been consideration of conversions to smaller units that are cheaper to provide and use of Permitted Development rights to convert offices where appropriate?

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing, responded that the accommodation would need to be suitable for a mixture of needs, with single people and families needing housing and the locations would also need to be appropriate - with some being near schools. There would also be increased use of the private sector to help meet these needs.

Councillor Sanders emphasised the need to have the financial model for the portfolio and there would also be utilisation of existing buildings, all of which would provide assistance to those needing it and he thanked all involved and would wish the accommodation to be of a suitable size.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing:

(1) approved a Capital Expenditure of £1m provided by Portsmouth City Council to enable the delivery of a portfolio of properties to address homelessness, which will be held within the Housing Revenue Account.

(2) delegated authority to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance & S151 Officer to decide the composition of the portfolio.

(3) delegated the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building to apply for any available grant funding to support the scheme.

15. Council Housing Maintenance & Improvements and Housing IT Business Software 2019/20 (AI 6)

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director Buildings, presented the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Buildings. The report send out the details of the revenue budget of £24m (outlined in appendix A) and capital budget of £22m (outlined in Appendix B) as well as the geographical details of where the spending is taking place in the 7 housing areas.

Graham Fairbrother, as Housing's IT Business Partner, explained the IT spending which included systems development (such as developing the Housing Options system and use of homelessness data) and improving the year end system for rent adjustments. There were also changes to the database and document management system taking place as well as the council-wide move to Windows 10.

With regard to the £1m work for sprinklers in Ladywood House and Handsworth House Councillor Sanders made his non-pecuniary declaration of interest, in that his mother lives in Ladywood House, and for transparency he asked that officers explain how these 2 blocks had been chosen for the installation of sprinklers. Steve Groves, Head of Buildings Maintenance, reported that sprinklers will be installed on a priority assessment criteria basis and that these blocks had been chosen as they were the tallest highest blocks with single escape stairways, which also included sheltered accommodation. This criteria had been adhered to in making the selection.

Maria Cole asked about the Legionella testing provision - it was reported that this covered testing costs only and any further works would be via other budgets. She also asked why there were more works identified for Wilmcote

House which had recently been refurbished? It was reported that the works included decoration to escape staircases and store areas which had not been within the original contract. Mada Abrahams was also in attendance for the RC/CLG but did not have any further questions.

Councillor Coles asked about the environmental improvements; it was reported there were for hard and soft landscaping works around the blocks.

Councillor Sanders asked about the security of cloud storage; Graham Fairbrother reported that this is part of PCC's general IT strategy for Microsoft systems using secure storage in cloud.

Councillor Sanders asked why the major works did not identify improvements needed at Portsea; it was reported that planned works are assessed on a demand and priority assessment of the condition of the assets.

Councillor Sanders, as Cabinet Member for Housing, supported the proposed programme of works and welcomed the safety measures with the start of a rolling programme of sprinkler installation. He closed the meeting by thanking all involved in his decision meetings over the last municipal year.

DECISIONS the Cabinet Member for Housing agreed that:

- (1) the area programmes and allocation of finance for the funding of the Revenue Budgets for repairs and maintenance of dwellings be noted.**
- (2) the capital budgets listed in Appendix B and Appendix C commencing in 2019/2020 be approved and the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services be authorised under Financial Rules, Section B14 to proceed with schemes within the sums approved.**
- (3) The Director of Finance and Section 151 Officer's financial appraisal be approved for the capital programme - global provision.**

The meeting concluded at 6.04 pm.

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Councillor Darren Sanders
Cabinet Member for Housing