

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

RECORD OF DECISIONS taken by the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Darren Sanders, at his meeting held on Monday, 27 January 2020 at 4.30 pm at the Executive Meeting Room - The Guildhall, Floor 3

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (Cabinet Member for Housing)

Councillor Cal Corkery, Labour Housing Spokesperson
Councillor Scott Payter-Harris, Conservative Housing Spokesperson

1. Apologies for Absence (AI 1)

Councillor Scott Payter-Harris had sent his apologies for late arrival.

2. Declaration of Interests (AI 2)

There were no declarations of interest at the start of the meeting but during the meeting when reference was made to Ladywood House by another councillor, Councillor Sanders made a non-pecuniary interest in that his mother lives there, but did not have parking (which was referenced).

3. Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy (AI 3)

Paul Fielding Assistant Director of Housing introduced the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services accompanied by Sharon George, Housing Needs, Advice and Support Manager and Daniel Lake, NTO and Accommodation Manager. He explained the background to the report and the need for prioritisation in allocation of the range of properties, some of which was owned by external providers. The policy was to bring clarity and would be published, pending approval at this meeting.

The comments made are not minuted in full but a webcast of the meeting can be viewed here:

<https://livestream.com/accounts/14063785/Cabinet-Housing-27Jan2020>

Maria Cole, on behalf of the Residents' Consortium, asked questions regarding the numbers and age range of children needing temporary accommodation and their schooling needs and multi-agency work. Mr Lake responded that the exact number was not known as there were daily variations and the ages would range from babies up to 18 years old. Work took place with families to look at the proximity to schools and offer travel assistance where necessary. There is a legal right to review in which the

reasons which led to refusal are considered. Work takes place with other agencies as part of this process.

Councillor Corkery asked about notifications from other local authorities; Councillor Sanders confirmed there had previously been notifications of placements made by other local authorities in Portsmouth and some people would enter into arrangements with private landlords.

Councillor Sanders welcomed the report which sought to address the increasing problem with strained resources since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, with an increase of a third on numbers requiring temporary accommodation. This was also being tackled by Portsmouth City Council buying back properties and developing suitable accommodation.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing

(1) recognises the important role that temporary accommodation has in supporting people who are in crisis as a result of homelessness.

(2) recognises that the policy formalises the working practice and ensures the fair allocation of temporary accommodation and meets its legal obligations.

(3) approved the council's Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy which will be published on the council's website.

4. Helping people secure a private rented home to reduce homelessness and housing need in Portsmouth (AI 4)

Mark Sage, Tackling Poverty Co-ordinator, presented the report on behalf of the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services, which set out a range of options (set out in section 7.4 of the report) to help access to the private rented sector properties. The exact demand is still not known.

Councillor Sanders invited comments and questions from the Residents' Consortium/CLG representatives. Madha Abrams raised the need to provide help in training to get homeless people into employment. Maria Cole asked if there was an impact on the Housing Revenue Account; it was confirmed there is not. Ms Cole raised several queries, including regarding the data in the report; the exact number of landlords is not known by PCC or the Portsmouth & District Landlords Association and licensing is not mandatory. It was reported that PCC's Discretionary Housing Payments funding level for 2020/21 had still not been confirmed at the time of this meeting. It was anticipated that the pilot scheme would start, once approved, in early March. Mark Sage reported that for those on Universal Credit a suitable payment date during the month would be arranged to help prevent arrears.

Councillor Corkery asked how the community bank (Option 4) would operate to be accessible; Paul Fielding reported that the details, such as opening hours, would need to be confirmed and were being worked on. Councillor Corkery welcomed the aim of improving access to help people to move into suitable accommodation and this would help take pressure off the Housing Waiting List, and supported the approach of a pilot scheme.

Councillor Payter-Harris felt that there were gaps in the data; officers responded that the pilot scheme would help gather information on the market. Councillor Payter-Harris also queried the funding source and was wary as the comments from the City Solicitor and Director of Finance and Resources highlighted the element of risk, so stringent rules would need to be in place to safeguard public money and he favoured a review process. Wayne Layton responded that there would be an assessment of the ability to repay for those applying for loans to help minimise risk.

Councillor Sanders drew members' attention to Appendix 2 which assessed the possible risks and compared the options, and those options which were not financially viable were discarded. He was keen to help remove barriers for those on lower incomes, and rent controls were not possible so incentives were being considered, which needed to be sustainable. Councillor Sanders welcomed the pilot review and stated that it was important not to have people struggling with finances getting into further debt through interest on loans; hence he would pursue the no-interest loan option 4b. He had received written confirmation from Councillor Vernon-Jackson CBE that use of the Leader's Portfolio reserves for this project was agreed, and he amended the recommendations to reflect his decisions on the way forward.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing:

(1) noted the current difficulties that renters have in entering the private rented sector (PRS).

(2) considered the options for providing additional support to enter the PRS. This may be either extending the range of support for those that already receive it, or new support for those that the council currently does not have a legal duty to support. Officers recommend the widening of a bond scheme and the use of a community bank to provide low cost loans.

(3) Agreed to the officer's recommendation to proceed with extending the bond scheme and enabling a community bank to provide low-cost loans (Options 2 and 4). The Cabinet Member decided that the loans should be made available to residents interest-free, as outlined in option 4b. The Cabinet Member also agreed with the officer recommendations on eligibility and to adopt Scope 2, allowing those threatened with homelessness, not currently living in suitable self-contained accommodation or seeking a move into the private rented sector to benefit.

(4) Delegate to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Building Services the authority to develop and operate a 12 month pilot of the chosen scheme(s) in order to fully develop a working scheme, understand the demand from residents, and expose the financial risk for

the council, and that a review of the scheme's effectiveness and options for future development will be conducted and completed in the third quarter of the pilot to facilitate planning for the future.

(5) Agreed that funding for the operation and any financial liability incurred by the pilot comes from the Leader's portfolio reserve, in line with the Leader's constitutional obligation to tackle poverty in the city.

5. Council Housing Budget 2020/21 (AI 5)

Wayne Layton, Finance Manager, presented the report on behalf of both the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services and the Director of Finance and Resources. He outlined the background, with the effect of the Welfare Reform Act reducing rents impacting the Housing Budget with a £12m reduction in Reserves. With the removal of the borrowing cap the council had been able to build properties again. Against this background it was recommended that rents rise by 1.7% (level of the Consumer Price Index) plus 1%, totalling 2.7%. General Service Charges were recommended to rise in line with inflation and for Sheltered Housing just above inflation (to cover the cost of the service and some use of agency staff). It was not proposed to increase laundry or heating charges (with PCC using buying in power for energy supply). For garage and parking charges the rise was generally 1.7%, but a rise for out of area/non domiciliary use of up to 5%. Projections were for a £1.2m deficit in the budget. There had been consultation meetings held with residents to explain these proposed changes and ask for feedback.

Peter Burton of the CLG was happy with the consultation exercise and Maria Cole agreed that there had been a lot of involvement and corrected the report at 4.2 to refer to 'resident engagement' rather than 'resident development'.

Councillor Corkery asked if the parking charges were set to break even for maintenance or to create a surplus? Mr Layton explained that the levels were linked to the demand in each area, with there not being enough spaces for all residents, so there is a nominal charge and this is something that will receive further review before next year's budget round. He confirmed in response to Councillor Corkery's question that rents would not go above the affordable rent level with the proposed increase.

Councillor Corkery commented that there had been a low response rate but he had received general feedback that the rents were reasonable. However residents had raised with him some concerns regarding the parking charges, especially in Somerstown, where there were variations with Hyde Park Road permits costing £30 and Ladywood House £50, and individual parking space at Ivy Close costing £200. He also queried the use of agency staff at a higher cost by the council.

Councillor Payter-Harris referred to the year on year deficit, which was explained in Appendix 3. He queried the youth clubs outturn and forecast position varying by £22k. Mr Layton responded that there had been an additional £15k grant for youth clubs from the Police & Crime Commissioner and that there had been an adjustment in September when staff should have

been accounted for in community centres. James Hill, as Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services, reported that there has been movement towards consistent fee charges, which had been applied across the community centres managed by Housing and they were increasing their own income through hiring out spaces. Mr Layton reported that there had been an extraordinary bill for £50k for a burst water main at Paulsgrove Community Centre. With regard to community wardens Councillor Sanders stressed that there had been a doubling of staff, funded only in part by the Housing Revenue Account. Officers undertook to provide further information to the Housing Members regarding the variance of £22k as highlighted by Councillor Payter-Harris. It was noted that a further report on community wardens was being considered by the Cabinet Member for Community Safety the following day.

Councillor Sanders responded to the points that had been raised, such as the use of agency staff, for which a pilot scheme for a sheltered housing scheme was being undertaken to try to reduce the level of use in line with the Ethical Care Charter. The level of rents were being set at a level for people to be able to afford and the intention was to maximise the social rent properties in the city. The Cabinet Member for Housing regretted that rents would need to rise this year to address the deficit position, as the £12m reduction in income had meant that improvements to properties had been impacted. The parking fees would be further investigated in the future, with integration with transport officers. Councillor Sanders did not propose to put up heating or laundry charges.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member for Housing approved the following:

- (i) The Revised Budget as set out at Appendix 3 of the report.**
- (ii) All rents and charges to be effective from 1st April 2020 or such other date as determined by the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources.**
- (iii) Dwelling Rents for 2020/21 to be set in accordance with Central Government's Social Rent Policy (rise of 2.7%).**
- (iv) General Service charges for 2020/21 to be set at this meeting as set out in the report, and in accordance with Appendix 5.**
- (v) Sheltered Housing Service charges for 2020/21 to be set at this meeting as set out in the report, and in accordance with Appendix 6.**
- (vi) Laundry charges for 2020/21 to be set at this meeting as set out in the report, and in accordance with Appendix 7 (no rise).**
- (vii) Heating charges to be set in accordance with Appendix 8 (no rise).**

(viii) Garages and parking site rents as shown in Appendix 9 be approved and authority to let garages at reduced rents where demand is low be delegated to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources.

(ix) Revenue Budget 2020/21 as set out in Appendix 3 be approved and authority given to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources to amend the budgets to reflect the latest available information prior to finalising budgets for 2020/21.

(x) The relevant Managers be authorised to incur expenditure in 2020/21.

(xi) The forecast Revenue Budgets for 2021/22 to 2022/23 as set out in Appendix 3 arising from the proposals contained in this report, be noted.

The meeting concluded at 5.56 pm.

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Councillor Darren Sanders
Cabinet Member for Housing