

## **CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS**

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Monday, 25 January 2021 at 3.30 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

### **Present**

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery  
Scott Payter-Harris

#### **1. Apologies for absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

#### **2. Declaration of interests**

Councillor Sanders declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as he is a private tenant. The City Solicitor had advised him this does not preclude him from making a decision on agenda item 5 (Private Rental Sector Strategy). Councillor Corkery declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as he is a council tenant. The City Solicitor had advised him this does not preclude him from discussing council housing matters. Councillor Payter-Harris said as he was on the Planning Committee he would not participate nor vote on agenda item 6 (Pathway for rough sleepers and purchase of associated property) at the Planning Committee.

#### **3. Council Housing Budget (including rents) 2021 / 2022**

Wayne Layton, Finance Manager, presented the report, noting that feedback on the consultation mainly comprised comments on residents' individual circumstances. Very little had changed since the Winter 2020 edition of Housetalk. The main reason why the in-year deficit is lower than expected is because less money has been spent on repairs and maintenance due to being unable to access properties during Covid. Any backlog arising will need to be managed. The predicted £1.2m deficit next year will be met by the Housing Revenue Account's (HRA) ring-fenced reserve. Although the current reserve is sufficient in the short-term if the situation continues it will not be possible to meet obligations over the HRA's 30-year business plan. The increased depreciation costs arising from the age and type of housing stock also increases the deficit.

In response to a question from Maria Cole, Mr Layton said the amount of bad debt caused by furlough or unemployment was not as bad as first thought. In the first wave of Covid there was delinquent debt when people were trying to claim Universal Credit. Bad debt has increased by about £600,000.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris, Mr Layton said the current level of bad debt provision is £2.2m whereas it is usually around

£1.5m. With regards to factoring in price increases incurred due to the backlog of repairs and maintenance, for example, increased contractor costs, the HRA has two sources of funding: one is for repairs and maintenance and is about £24.5m per year; the other figure is the depreciation charge which is put towards planned maintenance. Housing has traditionally underspent against the £24.5m, providing for about £1,700 for each property (which is where the £24.5m comes from). Some costs are met from depreciation and planned maintenance so Housing is confident pressures will be met going forward. The cost of repairs which have not been done has been considered but is not reflected in reports.

James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services, said although work on the efficiency programme has been delayed Housing still wants to proceed with it. Much work was done with contractors like Mountjoy before Covid to reduce costs while not impacting on delivery. Housing has been active in buying properties and anticipates it will have bought more properties than it has sold by the end of the year which will increase rental income. The report gives a clear signal that Housing needs to address the deficit and hopefully when Covid ends will present a revised plan to the administration. If repairs had been done the deficit would have been a million more than the current figure.

Councillor Corkery commented that overall tenants receive good service and that Housing is well run; the Local Housing Offices are good. He suggested a dedicated ring-fenced hardship fund as some other local authorities do. Vivid housing association has a welfare fund which can provide items like white goods and flooring. Funds could be reviewed after a year to see how they have been spent. Councillor Sanders asked James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services, to comment on the idea. James Hill suggested that we begin by looking at what the housing service currently offer, reflecting that we provide support through, for example, our Money Advisers, our funding of the Tackling Poverty Co-ordinator's work, funding in kind for services like the Moving On Project, many of which provide support to our tenants. It may well be the case that whilst we do not specifically have a hardship fund we provide support in different ways. The Tackling Poverty Co-ordinator is bringing an update on the support on offer to the Cabinet and that report could also include the support for our housing tenants. Members thought a hardship fund was a good idea but were concerned where the money would come from. Councillor Sanders noted many people were in hardship and sought help as they were behind with rent payments; having payment plans in the private sector would tackle debt and hardship. Members and Ms Cole agreed with examining existing provision and joining up services rather than duplicating them.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders requested that officers pursue how to help social housing tenants whose positions may worsen in the next few months because of Covid. He thanked Ms Cole and members for their insights and questions. Despite the bleak economic picture of the past year the aim is still to keep housing and residents safe. The importance of protecting the environment is shown by the new heating contract that provides totally renewable electricity with no increased charges for residents. He was pleased

to see funding provided for initiatives like the Landport Community Garden and youth clubs. He thanked officers for their reports.

## **DECISIONS**

1. The Forecast Revenue Outturn for 2020/21 arising from monitoring discussions with Managers, as set out at Appendix 3, be noted.
2. All rents and charges to be effective from 1st April 2021 or such other date as determined by the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources.
3. Dwelling Rents for 2021/22 to be set in accordance with Central Government's Social Rent Policy.
4. General Service Charges for 2021/22 to be set at this meeting, as set out in this report, and in accordance with Appendix 5.
5. Sheltered Housing Service Charges for 2021/22 to be set at this meeting, as set out in this report, and in accordance with Appendix 6.
6. Laundry Charges for 2021/22 to be set at this meeting, as set out in this report, and in accordance with Appendix 7.
7. Heating Charges for 2021/22 to be set in accordance with Appendix 8.
8. Garages and Parking Site Rents for 2021/22, 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.
9. The Revenue Budget for 2021/22, 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 2021/22.
10. The relevant Managers be authorised to incur expenditure in 2021/22.
11. The Forecast Revenue Budgets for 2022/23 and 2023/24 arising from t

## **4. Cabbagefield Row Housing Development**

Jo Bennett, Head of Business Relationships, Growth & Support, presented the report.

Councillor Payter-Harris queried the lack of details, noting that the development's approximate £38m cost means each property costs about £253,000. Ms Bennett explained the situation is vague but officers did not want to move forward in delegated matters at this stage, more for members to realise there are several questions to be considered, for example, if the planning outline will allow 100% council homes on the site with 70% allocated to Portsmouth and 30% to Havant. In order to be more transparent and prudent it is better to limit spending until these questions are answered and matters closed down before coming back to members. Once outline planning consent is obtained a more detailed report showing what the development will look like will be written. Mr Layton said an outline design had been drawn up and quantity surveyors had given a potential cost but because of the scale of work more needs to be spent on formulating the design, which is why £260,000 is requested.

In response to questions from Councillor Corkery, Ms Bennett explained that officers need to be as prudent as possible at the outline feasibility stage. It is not known how the development will be mixed but having more larger properties allows greater feasibility. The biggest issue is whether outline permission will allow 100% council homes on the site, how the nominations will be split and the priorities of people on the nomination lists.

How the development will work and take into account the needs of those who will live there is something the architect does with informed knowledge of people on the nomination lists. Discussions on nominations and allocations need to be brought forward and to be acceptable to Havant.

Other recent builds were used a benchmark for the unit cost for the quantity surveyors. At this stage the main issue and cost is maintaining the site's ecology. The local centre is Strouden Court and officers have to consider how it will be served and supported. A detailed design and report on Strouden Court will allow members to see how the picture is developing.

If today's report is agreed and it turns out that housing of an acceptable standard cannot be delivered, no land is devalued by understanding what can be built on it, so although the sum is not insignificant it is in fact safeguarding an asset. If the land is unsuitable for 150 council homes the matter would be brought back to members.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders noted the situation was more complex as Havant Borough Council were involved. The site should be as green as possible with good community facilities. He requested that "at most" be added to recommendation no.1.

## **DECISIONS**

1. That the Cabinet Member for Housing approves Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Expenditure of £260,000 at most to deliver outline planning consent for a development of circa 150 council housing dwellings on the land known as Cabbagefield Row, Havant.
2. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness note that a further report will be brought once outline planning consent is achieved to detail the consent and to request permission for the build and future capital spend. The build standard and make up of units will also be included in the future paper as they are not yet decided.

## **5. Private Rental Sector Strategy**

Patrick Lee, Interim Head of Private Sector Housing, introduced the report.

Councillor Corkery was concerned that aspects such as officers being trained to a professional standard were not already in place. Landlord licensing is the single measure which would have the biggest effect on renters and should be pursued.

Mr Lee said landlords were asked about additional licensing rather than selective licensing. 66% of private renters compared to 48% of landlords who

took part in the survey gave a 62% rating of high or very high priority in favour of further consultation on re-introducing additional licensing. Councillor Payter-Harris requested updates on proposals, for example, the pilot with the MHCLG. He acknowledged the council is limited in what it can do; for example, it cannot make landlords and tenants go to mediation.

Councillor Sanders noted that all groups see the need for change. There are people on housing waiting lists who would use the private rented sector but are deterred by the lack of security. Selective licensing has been discussed for years but does not seem to achieve what it purports to do. Evidence shows there are complaints in areas with a large amount of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO), for example, parts of Somerstown. It is interesting how little has changed between the first and second consultations despite Covid. Landlords and tenants need help and want the council to do more and better. The council should improve what it does already, for example, dealing with problem HMOs and supporting those who cannot enter the housing market, especially after Covid restrictions on evictions are lifted. He thanked officers for their report and asked them to report back on mediation and the MHCLG pilot.

## **DECISIONS**

1. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness notes the consultation feedback on the draft Private Rental Sector Strategy amounting to 458 responses.

2. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves the Private Rental Sector Strategy 2021- 2026 for Portsmouth. (Appendix 1) and agrees the final strategy will be published on the PCC website.

3. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves the implementation of the actions within the strategy and delegates to the Director for Housing Neighbourhood and Building Services the ability to deliver those actions within existing resources or to provide necessary information to allow the Cabinet Member to make decisions in relation to any requirement for additional resources necessary to implement these actions.

4. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves that the following actions that were included in the 2020 PRS consultation are prioritised as they received the highest level of support. These actions are outlined in sections 6.7 & 7.3 of this report but are summarised below.

4.1. **Unlicensed HMOs:** To continue to deal proactively when an unlicensed HMO is reported (88% of consultation respondents said very high or high priority) and **Professional standards of regulation:** Ensure that officers responsible for regulating the PRS are trained to a professional standard and capable of meeting the needs of the strategy (84% of respondents said very high or high priority). These actions are expected to be achieved in year one of the strategy.

4.2. **Workshops: (A)** To work with landlord groups to provide workshops on how to be a good landlord. **(B)** To work with tenancy groups to provide workshops on how to be a good tenant, aimed at helping a tenant to maintain a tenancy (76% of respondents said very high or high priority) and **Mediation:** Create a mediation service between landlords and tenants to help improve

security of tenure. (72% of respondents said very high or high priority). These actions are expected to be achieved in year one of the strategy.

4.3. That the following action is also brought forward as it will help to support people to find homes in PRS as the impact of the lifting of the COVID-19 eviction ban is felt. **Financial support:** To undertake a pilot of the rent deposit and bond scheme. This action is expected to be achieved in quarter one of 2021/22.

5. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness notes that the following additional actions are expected to be achieved by 31 March 2022. These actions are summarised. Full details are in section 6.8 of this report. These actions are expected to be delivered within current budgets.

5.1. Communication/information: To provide information for tenants, expand the current website, investigate a single communications and web strategy with stakeholders.

5.2. Governance: To develop the current HMO governance board into a multiagency partnership group to oversee this strategy

5.3. Shared services: To work with stakeholders to increase the understanding of the services that could be provided across Portsmouth to support the PRS.

5.4. Council internal processes: To implement the revised supplementary planning document for HMOs. Review enforcement policies to make them more transparent. Work with other local authorities to find new ideas to support the PRS. Ensure that data sharing is maximised within legislation.

5.5. Pilots: To approach the MHCLG to look for support for the implementation of this strategy, including piloting some of the changes identified in section 7 of this report.

5.6. Additional licencing for HMOs: A Decision will be required on the appropriateness of a consultation on reintroducing additional licencing for HMOs. This decision is anticipated to be made in the summer or early autumn of 2021 as the PRS becomes more stable and we move away from the pandemic. Further information is contained in section 7.3.5 of this report.

## **6. Pathway for rough sleepers and purchase of associated property**

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director of Housing, introduced the report. It is intended planning applications for the properties can now go to the Planning Committee in late February or early March.

Councillor Corkery said the properties were a welcome addition to temporary accommodation in Portsmouth and was proud that one was in Charles Dickens ward. Often rough sleepers with the most complex needs will not feel able to go in this type of accommodation so more work may need to be done. Sharon George, Operational Support, Rough Sleeper Adviser, said officers have always wanted to tailor the approach to individual needs and circumstances and use a flexible approach to find suitable accommodation. The key is work on the streets along with outreach services such as Community Wardens.

Councillor Payter-Harris thanked officers for their hard work since March 2020. It was encouraging the council was working and forming links with the private rented sector.

Councillor Sanders hoped the accommodation would give occupants a life to lead and not just a place to stay. If lessons have been learnt from Covid it is to think ahead, not fall behind, and this proposal will change lives. He thanked Councillors Corkery and Payter-Harris for their support and officers for their report.

## **DECISIONS**

1. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves the new pathway model to support rough sleepers in the city, as outlined in section 4 of the report.
2. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves the use of the Next Step Accommodation Programme (NSAP) grant to procure support services for the pathway for 2021-2024, as outlined in section 4 of this report.
3. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness approves capital expenditure of £7,311,200 in addition to the NSAP grant funding of £2,152,100 to purchase a portfolio of accommodation (formerly student accommodation) comprising three properties, known as The Registry, St Michael's Road; 155-157 Elm Grove and Kingsway House, Elm Grove, creating accommodation for 110 self-contained rooms (bed spaces) for rough sleepers.
4. That the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness delegates authority to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources & S151 Officer to negotiate the acquisition of the portfolio of accommodation and to commission the necessary works to ensure the buildings are fit for purpose to accommodate rough sleepers, whilst ensuring that the schemes remain financially viable.

## **7. Full Fibre to Home - City Fibre**

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director of Building Services, introduced the report.

Councillor Suzy Horton, Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education, gave a deputation in support of the report. Deputations can be viewed here:

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Mr Hughes said CityFibre started work in March 2020 to provide full fibre to 90,000 homes within the Portsmouth city boundary. There will be upheaval when roads are dug up and there were some teething problems in the early days but it is important residents have access to improved digital infrastructure. Wayleave is being set up with CityFibre so they can access properties and agree individual building route packs to ensure ducts and conduits are installed correctly. There will be a dedicated point of contact with CityFibre to liaise with residents. Once Wayleave is agreed a full communications package, including Housetalk, Facebook and Instagram, will

be rolled out to residents in the affected blocks. Progress, including feedback from residents, will be brought back to members.

Councillor Payter-Harris commended the report and hoped lessons have been learnt from the problems with Milton Road.

In response to a query from Councillor Corkery about having communal internet access as a way to help people with bills and lessen the digital divide, Mr Hughes said the scheme was to install the infrastructure and then service providers tap into provision; some cities have an open protocol where anyone can use the infrastructure. He will ask CityFibre about communal broadband when he meets them in ten days.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders said good internet access was now very important for schooling and it was shocking to have children in poorer homes without it; it was as important as heating. He asked members to update their colleagues, particularly Councillor Udy (Charles Dickens ward), and gather any feedback from residents.

The Cabinet Member thanked officers for the report and noted it.

The Cabinet Member noted the report. The report is for information only and is not subject to call-in.

The meeting concluded at 5.28 pm.

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Councillor Darren Sanders  
Chair