

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, 20 September 2021 at 4.30 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Scott Payter-Harris

19. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Cal Corkery.

20. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

21. Management of energy provision in local authority housing whilst void

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director of Buildings, explained that the proposed pilot with Utilita to manage gas and electricity supplies in void properties has been temporarily ceased due to the current sudden rise in energy demand and prices (gas prices had risen 12% in one day last week). In view of the crisis Utilita cannot take on new customers; however, they have ensured the council that service to existing customers is a priority. Utilita say the current situation is temporary but do not know how long it will last though they are still keen to work with the council on the pilot. Officers are in constant contact with Utilita and will update members as and when more information is available.

Councillor Sanders noted as Utilita was keen to work on the pilot he proposed deferring the report but it could still be discussed. Comments made could be incorporated into a revised report. Those present agreed with his suggestion.

Councillor Payter-Harris noted the crisis was a worldwide issue and was the biggest price rise since the last global financial crisis. He was concerned with the ripple effect on other commodities like food and oil, which is worrying when inflation is quite high in Europe. Predicted increased demand in Asia and bad weather in North America are other factors which add to the uncertainty.

Officers read out Councillor Corkery's comments. Deputations are not minuted but can be viewed on the council's website

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With regard to using tariffs which use 100% renewable energy, Councillor Payter-Harris said start-up costs with renewable energy will cost more than

Utilita's proposals; in addition, wind energy is currently at low levels. Councillor Sanders noted the current situation will have a major impact on all local authorities and no-one knows what is happening. Using green energy as far as possible is good but not if it means having people on tariffs they cannot afford and having to choose between heating and eating. Firstly, the cost benefit analysis (start-up costs versus long-term savings) has to be considered, and secondly, the impact on rapidly rising energy prices. Members' comments will help officers navigate the minefield of the current crisis.

Mr Hughes said the current arrangements for managing energy in voids will continue. Learning from work done over the last six months will feed into work across other areas. Residents can get advice from Switched On Portsmouth and social media platforms are being updated in the light of the crisis.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders noted the council's Energy Services Team had recently won a Green Public Service award from iESE (Innovation and Efficiency South East). Switched On Portsmouth results in residents having cheaper bills and a greener environment.

DECISION

Agreed to defer the report in view of the current energy price crisis.

22. Update on assistance for people to secure a private rented home, to reduce homelessness and housing need in Portsmouth

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing, together with Nicola Clannachan, Temporary Head of Housing Needs, Advice & Support, and Janice Davis, Private Rented Sector Access Manager, presented the report.

Maria Cole said it was disappointing that the Credit Union had not proceeded with the rent deposit loan scheme pilot. She very much commended the Private Rental Sector Access Team for their work, especially during Covid; there has been a visible reduction in homelessness in the city. Less NHS support would be needed if people lived in good quality housing. She was very glad to see LEAP was still available; they had helped her when her electricity tariff changed.

In response to questions from Ms Cole, officers explained that

The Leader of the council decides how the Cabinet reserves are used; the matter does not have to go to a Cabinet meeting.

Neither Housing Needs, Advice and Support nor Private Sector Housing give money to landlords of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to improve properties. Officers constantly talk to landlords about what they can offer to encourage and convince them to accept tenants with disabilities, including advising on adaptations. Private sector housing is not necessarily the best option for these tenants; social housing may be better.

With regard to linking the bond scheme to employment support for residents, the Resident Engagement Team is funded by the Housing Revenue Account, which is ring-fenced for social housing tenants, but there is other work being done across the council to help people into employment.

Officers read out Councillor Corkery's comments. Councillor Sanders noted the cuts referred to are cuts made by the government not the council.

Councillor Payter-Harris said the council was waiting for confirmation of government funding and budget pressure was not yet being seen. He was not surprised the unsecured loan scheme was not going ahead. The report was well-written and the pilot scheme is great work which could encompass other areas like resident engagement. Maria Cole had made a good point about tenants with disabilities, which Housing Options could investigate and factor into existing work. He asked if the team could share data on how many people with disabilities access the private housing sector, the cost element and what the team need would need to deliver improvements. He does not want people to be marginalised. Officers said most people with disabilities they helped have hidden rather than physical disabilities and a lot of properties are difficult to adapt. Councillor Payter-Harris asked for the pilot to be brought back at a later date as he was keen to see how it works.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders said he did not recall a barrier to using any additional funding where it is required though he sympathised with the cuts to the Discretionary Housing Payment as the council needs "all the tools in its armoury." He was disappointed with the Credit Union's decision. A key reason for homelessness is eviction when people are behind with the rent and do not know what to do. The private rented sector plays an important part in reducing homelessness. So far the Private Sector Rental Access team have helped around 200 households into the sector, which has the added side benefit of saving the council money. The bond scheme is an example of forward planning that helps reduce homelessness.

DECISIONS

- 1. Approved that the 0% rent deposit loan scheme pilot is no longer suitable for delivery.**
- 2. Subject to funding, agreed to proceed with the development of the bond scheme, piloted over the next 12 months, as one element in a range of options offered to landlords to increase access to the private rented sector.**
- 3. Agreed to submit a request for use of up to £85,600 from reserves to fund the pilot of the bond scheme for one year.**
- 4. Recognised and thanked the work of the pilot PRS Access team in helping over 70 families and 123 single people to access the private rental sector. Approved the completion of the pilot to understand if a longer-term service can be sustainably provided.**

23. Update on the actions from the Private Rental Sector Strategy 2021-2026

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing, together with Clare Hardwick, Head of Private Sector Housing, and Sam Rickeard, Acting Housing

Regulations Manager, presented the report. He personally thanked the Private Sector Housing Team for their work during Covid.

In response to questions from Maria Cole, Mr Fielding said when the Housing Standards and HMO Licensing teams merged there had been no redundancies as there were already a couple of vacant posts and the new team was resourced against demands. He said he would send the cost saving resulting from the merger to Councillor Payter-Harris.

The results of the pilot with the Portsmouth Mediation Service will be reviewed and fully analysed at the end of September.

Officers read out Councillor Corkery's comments.

Councillor Sanders disagreed with some of the comments. He himself had brought in additional licensing for HMOs. After five years the policy can only be kept if it has failed which is not ideal as he wanted it to remain. The legal position with regard to implementing additional licensing is outlined in the report.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris, Ms Hardwick confirmed that the council was currently reviewing data to inform an approach on additional licensing and could be legally vulnerable if it was introduced without justification. Councillor Payter-Harris thought additional licensing would increase rents for tenants as landlords would pass on costs to them; the local landlords' association may challenge it. Officers said there has to be some incentive for landlords to accept accreditation; officers would have to talk to them to see what would incentivise them.

There are very strong links with Planning and they share intelligence with Housing, for example, when dealing with unlicensed HMOs without planning permission, although they operate under different legislation and have different powers. In some cases Planning have power to take action where Housing cannot and vice versa. Councillor Payter-Harris thought it was bizarre to have related legislation with different enforcement powers.

Officers are reviewing the Rent It Right accreditation scheme so it can achieve more potential as it is not being fully used. There are discussions with key stakeholders such as the local landlords' association and the scheme will probably go through the Private Rented Sector Governance Board. There are opportunities for residents, tenants and landlords to participate in the Governance Board.

Officers confirmed mediation cannot be mandated though how to get buy-in from parties and what they want to achieve is being explored as part of the pilot. Many landlords do not want to evict tenants; they want good tenants and to find a way to reduce barriers to successful tenancies. Councillor Payter-Harris thought "nudge" behaviour may be more successful than enforcement. For example, if a landlord tried mediation three times and it was unsuccessful they would not engage further. Councillor Sanders noted about one-sixth of landlords are "accidental" landlords and that additional licensing will not

necessarily improve property standards or reduce rent arrears. He agreed with "nudge" policies. Mediation has worked reasonably well for the council as a social landlord and there has been extensive work on it with private landlords. The council will take on board what works and what does not. The Strategy can be fluid to reflect how mediation is working as at the moment the first round of evaluations has not finished yet.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders noted continuing efforts were being made to align Planning and Housing's licensing functions. Licensing HMOs is not a statutory service but the council wants to do it to improve Portsmouth. An improved private rented housing sector is a crucial way of dealing with the city's housing crisis. He would like to receive ideas from all political groups on how to improve the sector. He thanked Janice Davis and her team for the report and for changing relationships and people's lives.

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

The meeting concluded at 5.43 pm.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair