

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Tuesday, 22 March 2022 at 5.00 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery
Scott Payter-Harris

8. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

9. Declarations of interest

Councillor Sanders declared a personal interest as he is private sector tenant and knows people in Ian Gibson Court. Councillor Corkery declared an interest as he is a Portsmouth City Council tenant.

10. Forward Plan Omission Notice - Council Housing Maintenance and Improvements and Housing IT Business Software 2022/2023

1. Noted the omission to the Forward Plan for 15 February to 15 May 2022.
2. Noted the publication of the omission notice.

11. Council Housing Maintenance and Improvements and Housing IT Business Software 2022/2023

Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director (Buildings), introduced the report, talked through the Revenue and Capital Budgets, the allocation of monies to work type and area office location and highlighted some key work streams including continued fire safety works and decarbonisation works.

He also gave an update on the 2021/2022 Budget Plan and the amount of projects worked on. As of March 18th, 23 projects had been completed over the last 12 months, a further 23 were a work in progress and nine were delayed because of changes in resources. Work was completed on 251 blocks across the estate and on nearly 4,200 properties.

Merrick Trevaskis, IT Business Partner, introduced Appendix C, IT Capital Schemes and explained to plan of forthcoming work.

In response to questions from Councillor Corkery, officers clarified that the Landport Courts project extends over two financial years which is why the figures reported are higher than in the Budget Plan.

The council has a legal obligation to keep a register (held digitally) of asbestos in its properties. It has to inform contractors of asbestos. There is no information where there has not been a survey. If contractors anticipate or come across asbestos the council will carry out a survey. Residents are encouraged to approach Housing if there are concerns as they can advise. Housing have just produced a leaflet on DIY and asbestos for tenants; it is available at Area Housing Offices.

Regarding a longer-term strategy on retrofitting the entire housing stock for Zero carbon, Housing refreshed the asset management plan for the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) last year and will be revising it to assess the costs of decarbonisation. Work on the decarbonisation pilot will feed into the strategy. Housing have been improving properties for some time, for example, with insulation, new windows, heating systems, but the strategy will set out clearer steps.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris about contingency, officers said that part of the revenue budget and the HRA currently has a £20m reserve which could be dipped into. There is a separate ringfenced capital major repairs reserve and about £20m is available once the commitments in the report have been met. Councillor Payter-Harris suggested bringing back a report during the next financial year to see how the budget is progressing, especially in view of the changing situation, for example, with the supply chain.

The budget is monitored very thoroughly, including the effectiveness of the hardware and software projects in Appendix C, for example, how much the public access computers are used. Officers are happy to share information with members. The computers have been deployed though there were a few delays with scanners due to supplier issues. Phase 2 includes remote desk top usage so people can use them from their own devices. Members thought remote access would benefit residents and would like to be updated on progress.

The conversion in Northern Parade and Phoenix Square refers to the former Kendricks' newsagents, which members were glad to see was progressing.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders was pleased to see the budget tackling the climate and nature emergencies. He noted the severe volatility in the market place due to construction costs and withdrawal from contracts with Gazprom. A budget monitoring report would be helpful.

DECISIONS

- 1. Noted the area programmes and allocation of finance for the funding of the Revenue Budgets for repairs and maintenance of dwellings.**
- 2. Approved the capital budgets listed in Appendix B and Appendix C commencing in 2022/2023 and that the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services be authorised under Financial**

Rules, Section B11 to proceed with schemes within the sums approved.

- 3. Approved the Director of Finance & Resources and Section 151 Officer financial appraisal for the capital programme - global provision.**
- 4. Approved that a report monitoring the delivery of the housing capital programme and the performance of the budget against set spend is brought back to a portfolio meeting during the next financial year.**

12. Private Rental Sector Mediation Pilot for Portsmouth

Patrick Lee, Lead Business Housing Manager, introduced the report.

In response to questions from Maria Cole, officers said there were no plans at the moment for other organisations such as the Portsmouth & District Private Landlords' Association to contribute to the cost of the pilot but after one more year other sources of funding will be considered. Members agreed with Maria Cole that as landlords benefitted from the scheme they should contribute and other sources of funding should be sought.

Councillor Payter-Harris noted the pilot was still in its early inception and it would be good to hear from both tenants and landlords when it finished to see how they experienced it. This would be more effective than data and measures. If the scheme works that is great but the council should not keep spending money on it indefinitely.

Officers confirmed that mediation can run alongside other private sector housing processes such as enforcement.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders said he would like the scheme to work but only if evidence shows it is working. Mediation is part of the overall package that makes renting in the private sector easier and safer. Processes have to run in parallel. The key point is to bring people together but it is recognised there are differences in power and balance. He is delighted to be offering more value for money than government mediation schemes. He thanked officers for their work.

DECISIONS

- 1. Noted the referral information and approved an extension of the mediation pilot until 31 March 2023.**
- 2. Approved that the extension of the pilot is funded from the Homeless Prevention Grant in the sum of £10,000 for 2022/23.**
- 3. Approved that councillors are given the information they need to promote the pilot service to their constituents.**
- 4. Approved that officers arrange for the extension to the pilot to be publicised via social and other media channels and local representative groups including the Portsmouth & District Private Landlords Association (PDPLA).**

13. Private Sector Housing Fees and Charges

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director (Housing), introduced the report.

Martin Silman, Chairman of Portsmouth & District Private Landlords' Association (PDPLA), made a deputation. Deputations are not minuted but can be viewed on the council's website at

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In response to questions from Maria Cole, officers said there are about 6,000 houses of multiple occupation (HMO) in Portsmouth, of which around 4,800 are unlicensed. Prospective tenants can check if an HMO is licensed on the council's website. The licensing fee is paid once for the five-year period.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris, officers said Housing and Planning operate under different legislation but they work closely together. Councillor Payter-Harris agreed with Mr Silman's suggestions for higher fees for late applications to help with enforcement, and landlords using their own surveyors because as well as being cheaper for landlords it releases the council's surveyors for other work. He thought the proposed fees should be reviewed.

Officers explained that a commitment was made at Full Council to change fees so that they recover full costs. If they do not change Housing will carry a deficit into the next financial year, creating uncertainty. The fees could be agreed then reviewed annually. The model can be adapted or alternative ones explored during the financial year. Officers could work with the PDPLA as Mr Silman's proposal is worth following up though not all its members may agree. Although other local authorities' fees may be lower officers would have to compare "like for like" and see if the services offered are the same. They may have more tenancies or issue more licences but have a smaller cost basis. It may not be known when their fees were set (they may not have been reviewed for several years) or if they will change after 1 April 2022. The council is not making a profit on the fees and they are reviewed annually. Officers have already contacted Southampton about their model. If landlords used their own surveyors it would make forecasting very challenging as the take-up could vary greatly each year. Bristol has similar fees to Portsmouth.

Officers can examine different models and talk to relevant parties but it would be difficult to commit to bringing a report to the first meeting of the new municipal year as Housing will be working on the consultation on additional licensing of HMOs (requested by the Cabinet that day) and homes for Ukrainians; September or October would be better. Councillor Sanders approved the report as it stands but added a recommendation requesting officers to explore alternative models.

DECISIONS

1. **Approved the proposals for Private Sector Housing (PSH) fee increases for the city council's Home Improvement Agency Service as outlined in Appendix 1, to commence from 01 April 2022.**
2. **Approved the proposals for PSH fee adjustments for the city council's Mandatory HMO licensing fees as outlined in Appendix 2, to commence from 01 April 2022.**
3. **Approved the proposals for PSH fee adjustments for the city council's Private Sector Housing Enforcement fees in Appendix 3, to commence from 01 April 2022.**
4. **Approved the proposal process to vary fees at the start of each new financial year for PSH Home Improvement Agency Service Fees, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licensing fees, and Private Sector Housing Enforcement fees to achieve full cost recovery, as outlined within this report.**
5. **Approved that if fees need to be adjusted to continue to achieve full cost recovery, an annual report will be brought to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness for decision.**
6. **Approved that officers explore alternative models for HMO licensing fees with relevant stakeholders, with a report outlining the outcome coming back to a decision meeting at the earliest opportunity during the next financial year.**

14. Update on Ian Gibson Court Care

Mark Fitch, Head of Local Authority Housing, introduced the report.

Members and Maria Cole (a resident of Ladywood House) were impressed with the in-house care provision at Ian Gibson Court as it is achieving what it set out to do. The gradual approach to expansion is sensible in view of the difficulties in recruiting care staff. Having in-house carers is more efficient than multiple care agencies going in and out all day. When Councillor Corkery visited Ian Gibson Court he found residents were happy with their surroundings and care service. The scheme provides a decent standard of living for older people which should be aspired to. It shows that carers can be paid the living wage and better conditions for carers are better for everyone.

Officers did not know if or when the extended pilot at Ladywood House would be made permanent as it depends on how quickly numbers grow and how many staff are needed. Packages of care for current Ladywood House residents are with different care agencies but they could gradually move to the Ian Gibson Court arrangement. If the Residents' Consortium has any comments they are welcome to send them to officers.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders noted that recruitment issues for carers go deeper than wages. There are capacity issues for the roll-out of the scheme so a pragmatic and incremental approach is needed. However, he is delighted to see plans for progression. He thanked all those involved and the opposition spokespeople for their contributions over the last year.

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

The meeting concluded at 6.34 pm.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair