

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Friday, 30 September 2022 at 10.00 am at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery
George Madgwick

20. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Daniel Wemyss.

21. Declarations of interest

Councillor Corkery declared an interest as he is a Portsmouth City Council tenant.

22. Special Lettings Plan - Doyle Avenue Review

Jo Bennett, Assistant Director of Housing Need and Supply, introduced the report.

In response to questions from the Residents' Consortium representatives on how tenants were selected for consideration for the special lettings plan (SLP), officers explained that the data analyst used the housing register to extract all eligible tenants. Then officers looked at the subsequent housing chain, for example, the two families who were in temporary accommodation moved into properties that other tenants had left rather than being made the first allocation.

All those involved in the SLP were on the register as they were overcrowded and were expecting and wanting to move so would probably have been aware of possible costs relating to moving. New build properties might not have had certain fixtures and fittings but Housing helps with this, also with snagging issues in other properties. Additional waste collections were arranged at first where tenants had had communal bins in their previous properties. Apart from that there was no financial help for moving. No comments had been received about moving costs.

Officers said they would deal with queries about individual cases and specific circumstances outside the meeting.

The representatives thought the SLP "sounds brilliant" and members agreed that any initiatives to reduce overcrowding were fantastic.

In response to questions from Councillor Madgwick, officers clarified that tenants were not told or asked to downsize. Officers talk to them about living in an appropriate home and finances but those involved in the SLP are on the register because they are asking to be moved.

Councillor Madgwick said he knew of tenants who had been asked to move, which he was not comfortable with, but he realised the need to release homes. In his ward (Paulsgrove) there were families of eight in a three-bedroom property and of six in a two-bedroom property. Councillor Sanders asked Councillor Madgwick to forward details of instances of tenants feeling forced to move, which Councillor Madgwick agreed to do.

Councillor Corkery raised several points:

Some tenants felt coerced into moving because of the "bedroom tax", effectively a cut to benefits, introduced by the coalition government in 2012. He objected to the use of coercion or strong encouragement to make people move. Encouraging, incentivising and providing alternatives that meet tenants' needs should be used. However, he was generally in favour of the SLP as overcrowding is a massive issue and anything that gives space is good. Overcrowding is the main issue in Charles Dickens ward. The 2011 census showed 23% households in the ward were overcrowded and that may be a massive underestimate as there could be other people living there unofficially.

The wording in the report suggests there was the opportunity to comment but in practice no-one was told the SLP was on the council's website. It was a little bit misleading and he would not want to see this replicated as consultation should not be just a box ticking exercise.

It was surprising that three-bedroom houses with gardens were allocated to households in the low band on the register when there are hundreds of households in the higher and medium bands who need a three-bedroom property.

As there is a significant need in the housing stock for people to move to reduce overcrowding he asked if there was potential to place some of the learning from the SLP in the standard allocation policy.

Officers said while they were working on merging the homelessness and rough sleeping strategies they would incorporate the learning from that with the learning from the SLP to review the housing allocation policy and ensure it is fit for purpose.

Councillor Sanders agreed learning is always important. The impact of the difference the SLP makes can now be examined to see how it affects the allocation policy and provides lessons for future lettings. There should be transparency and openness around the lettings policy. The council had built 700 homes and bought back 300 former council homes since 2018 so can now consider the lettings policy. Some tenants may want to move to a particular part of the city but that is their choice and choice is important. Some

tenants are in properties that are too big for them but it is a difficult issue when they have lived there for a long time. Some interventions like the "bedroom tax" and the policy on the Local Housing Allowance harm people. Councillor Sanders thanked all those involved and also the Residents' Consortium representatives.

The Cabinet Member noted the report.

23. The Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (Amendment) Regulations 2022

Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, introduced the report, noting that to date 35% applicable properties have had carbon monoxide alarms fitted. An article in the autumn edition of House Talk will give advice and additional information to residents about the alarms to help speed up installation.

Councillor Sanders thanked Mr Groves for the report as matters relating to tenants' safety should be in the public domain.

In response to questions from the Residents' Consortium representatives, Mr Groves explained that wherever there is a boiler or a flue in a habitable room it needs a carbon monoxide alarm. The alarm is an additional safety measure.

James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services, said the focus of the report was about social housing properties; he understood that regulations are already in place requiring private sector housing landlords to fit carbon monoxide alarms and compliance comes under the Private Sector Housing team. Under the stewardship of the Assistant Director (Buildings) and the Head of Building Maintenance a third of council properties have been fitted with alarms and the work is likely to be complete by the end of the year. Councillor Sanders said it would be good to have the figures for private sector housing as a recent survey found 30% houses in multiple occupation (HMO) had category 1 (the most severe) hazards. There are different regulations for different types of housing but there may be more work on this later.

Councillor Corkery supported the work. It was interesting to note that social housing is regulated to a lesser standard than private sector housing so it was good to see the former now having the same standards. He noted the impressive progress on implementation so far. If additional licensing for HMOs is introduced the Private Sector Housing team could check alarms whereas at the moment there was no awareness or intelligence if the regulations have been implemented or not.

Councillor Madgwick thanked officers for answering his questions and giving a detailed report as he is new to the portfolio. In response to his questions, officers confirmed there was no government grant or funding for the work and there is a duty of care to complete the work by a certain time. There are penalties linked to the regulations but the short timescale given for implementation would probably be taken into account. Officers are taking all opportunities when visiting properties to install alarms.

Summing up, Councillor Sanders said Grenfell Tower had been a wake-up call to the obsession with deregulation and it will be interesting to see how much the new government rolls back regulation. Usually governments give financial help for a "new burden" but not in this case. However, everyone has the right to a safe home.

The Cabinet Member noted the report.

The meeting concluded at 10.45 am.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair