

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Thursday, 23 March 2023 at 10.00 am at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)
Councillor Charlotte Gerada

Resident Consortium Representatives

Maria Cole
Sue Gordon

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors George Madgwick and Daniel Wemyss. Apologies also received from Trevor Lovett, Residents Consortium.

8. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Darren Sanders declared for transparency, that he was a private tenant.

9. Council Housing Maintenance and Improvement and Housing IT Business Software 2023/2024

Meredydd Hughes, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services and Merrick Trevaskis, IT Business Partner (Housing IT Capital Element) presented their report and the revised 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 Housing Investment Programme capital budgets together with the proposed programmes for 2024/2025 to 2028/2029 which were approved by the City Council on 28 February 2023.

The Council Housing Repairs & Maintenance revenue budgets for 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 were approved at the Housing and Preventing Homelessness Cabinet Decision meeting on 2 February 2023.

The purpose of the report was to inform Members of the spending proposed for the next financial year for revenue and capital funded maintenance and improvement programmes for the City Council's retained housing stock together with Housing IT Business Software. It was also to seek approval to incur expenditure in respect of the capital schemes and rolling programmes and to show how the budgets have been allocated on an area office basis.

The report was also to update the Cabinet Member on the year end position on the delivery of the 2022/23 Repairs & Maintenance capital programme, the forecast spend against the approved budget and to highlight any future issues.

Merrick Trevaskis highlighted the following:

- Hardware Expenditure Plan of £200,000, including a hardware refresh to the CCTV infrastructure, Migration to the Local Full Fibre Network for sheltered housing & the upgrade to the NEC Housing Management servers.
- Software Expenditure Plan of £130,000, including the setting up of the NEC Document Management system, the HAF web portal and the Rent Monitor Application replacement.

Residents Consortium questions

Sue Gordon advised she had not received her papers until Monday 20 March and so had not had time to thoroughly read through them.

In response to Resident Consortium questions, officers clarified:

- In respect to the removal of asbestos, whilst 50% of properties had been completed, officers were unable to advise how many further properties would require this to be done. There was no planned programme for removal of asbestos, but this would be undertaken when carrying out other works.
- Whilst some properties may contain asbestos, reassurance was provided that it is safe whilst undisturbed. However, should residents have any concerns at all regarding asbestos, there are a number of leaflets detailing what to do and contact can be made with the repair support team or the local housing area office, who are able to provide advice over the phone or who can arrange for a surveyor to visit the property.
- There was ongoing work on the electrical heating upgrades and the team had been charged to undertake a feasibility study to determine the cost of changing from a communal system to an individually controlled system. The key was ensuring residents could make an informed decision about the pros and cons of switching from a communal system to individual systems.

Resident Consortium Comments

The Resident Consortium representatives were pleased to see work would be carried out in the Court blocks.

In relation to the Integrated Impact Assessments (IIA), the Resident Consortium was pleased to see the wide range of people covered within the equalities assessments. The Chair noted the omission of people with mental health issues as they are not considered a protected criteria under the Equalities Act. It was noted that the links within the IIA were being updated.

Members' questions

In response to Members' questions, officers clarified:

- There had been an increase, over the last 6 months, in the number of enquiries in relation to condensation and mould. The Service had revisited its approach to make sure that visits were undertaken to look at the causes, as this could be for a range of reasons. The Service also had a process for follow up appointments to ensure the issue had effectively been resolved and remedied.
- In addition to the above, the service ensured residents were fully aware of all other options available to them. 400 LEAP referrals had been made by officers within surveying and housing and around 80 referrals from other contractors within the last period. Consideration was given as to whether additional funding can be made to residents for such measures as LED lighting, additional white goods or replacement boilers.
- All offers of support and help were promoted through the Housetalk magazine with the next issue referencing the cost-of-living crisis and help available.
- Switched on Portsmouth work across the private and public sector and with social housing residents. Councillors had been provided with details of the range of leaflets and electronic information in terms of where help was available.
- Building cost inflation had increased over the last 3 - 4 years and the indications were that the costs of construction would remain at these levels going forward and certainly into the next year.
- Allowance had been made for inflationary pressures within the revenue and capital programmes but wage levels being settled at higher levels was not expected. The effect this may potentially have on budgets would be brought back to the Cabinet Member in due course.

The Chair noted it was important to be open and honest with tenants and leaseholders on the situation being faced. He highlighted the following from the report and answers to questions:

- The focus on de-carbonisation and stressed the importance of this for future generations and applauded the work being done to try and achieve this for the PCC housing stock.
- Empty properties and the tough action being taken to ensure the time on waiting lists can be reduced.
- The overall focus of the report in ensuring tenants and leaseholders are safe.
- The focus on helping people through the cost-of-living crisis.
- The fantastic achievement in relation to the number of referrals by staff and contractors.

- In relation to IT, the Chair noted, in particular, the HAF portal ensuring easier access to holiday activities and projects across the city.
- The £1.7 million Household Support Fund to support those residents most in need.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- **Noted the allocation of finance for the funding of the Revenue Budgets for repairs and maintenance of dwellings listed in Appendix A.**
- **Agreed the allocation of capital budgets listed in Appendix B and Appendix C for 2023/2024 and that the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services be authorised to seek approval from the Director of Finance and Resources (Section 151 Officer) under Financial Rules, Section B11, to process with schemes within the sums allocated.**
- **Noted the year end position and progress of the 2022/23 Repairs and Maintenance budget plan and capital spend.**

10. Updated Safeguarding Policy for the Play, Youth and Community Services (PYC)

Nicola Clannachan, Head of Housing Community Services, presented her report and advised that the purpose of the report was to seek approval for the implementation of the updated Safeguarding Policy for the Play and Youth and Community Services operated by Housing, Neighbourhood and Building (HNB) Services.

Residents Consortium Questions

In response to Resident Consortium questions, officers clarified:

- All staff and volunteers are required to have an enhanced DBS check. There was a monitoring programme in place to ensure the check was refreshed every three years. Staff and Volunteers are aware when the checks go through.

Members' Questions

In response to Members' questions, officers clarified:

- PYC identify safeguarding concerns frequently - probably one per week and act as an Early Help Service so will respond to concerns. Multiple referrals are also put into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) annually.

The Chair noted it is crucial to ensure young people are able to engage with the service whilst being as safe as possible.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- **Approved the policy attached and marked as Appendix A.**

11. Update on Housing Revenue Account Asset Management Strategy

Meredydd Hughes, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services and Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance presented their information only report. They advised the purpose of the report was to provide the Cabinet Member with an update on the progress of the revision of the Portsmouth City Council (PCC) Housing Revenue Account Asset Management Strategy (HRAAMS), the purpose of which was to ensure that PCCs social housing portfolio would continue to be managed with financial prudence, ensuring the health, safety and security of tenants and the communities in which they live. The HRAAMS would also inform the long-term strategic maintenance decisions for the housing stock over the next 30 plus years including estate renewal.

A further update would be brought back to the Cabinet Member in October.

Resident's Consortium Questions

In response to Resident Consortium questions, officers clarified:

- Void performance was an area the service was seeking to improve and was a key priority for the service. A working party was in progress which included housing officers, technical staff, and contractors with the aim of improving the process and the turn-around time. A void sub-lot had been set up to ensure faster turnaround of complex and larger voids.
- The average void time presently was 48 - 50 days.
- James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services suggested that officers attend a Resident Consortium meeting to discuss the improvement plans in place.

Members' Questions

In response to Members' questions, officers clarified:

- The PassivHaus standard was in relation to the new build housing developments, one of which is Stroudham Court in Leigh Park. A further three sites were being considered in Wecock Farm. There were ongoing feasibility studies to aim to achieve the PassivHaus standards. Technical and financial issues may stop this being achieved but the developments

would be built to the highest environmental standards that the service could achieve.

The Chair noted that the report was a companion report to the capital strategy item presented earlier. He highlighted the following from the report and answers to questions:

- The focus on decarbonisation and ensuring people live in decent homes and the need to consider anything that emerged from the Grenfell enquiry.
- The biggest PassivHaus project in Britain was at Wilmcote House in Somerstown which was something PCC as an authority could be proud of.
- The need to make sure local communities feel part of their future as happened with the regeneration developments of Leamington House and Horatia House.
- The importance of a long-term strategy to put finance on a sustainable footing in order to improve people's lives.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- **Noted the information only report.**

12. Private Rental Sector Mediation Pilot for Portsmouth

Clare Hardwick, Head of Private Sector Housing, presented her report and advised that the purpose of the report was to present a summary of the performance of the Private Rental Sector mediation service pilot.

The report also provided several measures of performance of the service including the number of referrals and the outcomes and cost for the pilot mediation scheme to date.

Residents Consortium Questions

In response to Resident Consortium questions, officers clarified:

- A lot of work had been done to promote the scheme, but it was found that the demand for the scheme was lower than anticipated and the outcomes not as hoped. Funding was initially from one off grants from Central Government. If the scheme had had the positive impact anticipated further avenues for funding would have been explored. However, the evidence suggested this was not a viable scheme.

Members' Questions

There were no questions.

The Chair noted the government had introduced a court-based ombudsman/mediation system which had fewer cases across England in a year than was seen in this scheme in Portsmouth. The Chair expressed disappointment the scheme had not produced the results expected as the biggest single cause of homelessness across the city was people leaving the private rented sector. He noted the work of the Rough Sleeping team at PCC in lobbying the government and the work of the Prevention Hub. The Chair was also surprised at the low numbers using the scheme. Of note was that the scheme had not been funded out of people's rent but had been funded from the general fund.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- **Noted the information in the report regarding the demand for the mediation service and the outcomes of the cases that have gone through the system.**
- **Agreed to end the Pilot scheme on 31st March 2023.**
- **Agreed to review the situation if there is a need for the service in the future and demand supports it.**

Before the meeting concluded, the Chair took time to thank Meredydd Hughes who would be leaving the council in July after 37 years' commendable service for the Council and the Housing Property Service. The Chair drew attention to Meredydd's leadership throughout the Pandemic when he continued to deliver a service approaching normal during the most abnormal of situations.

The meeting concluded at 11.21 am.

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Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair