

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND TACKLING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Tackling Homelessness held on Thursday, 13 July 2023 at 9.30 am at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery
Charlotte Gerada
Daniel Wemyss

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Raymond Dent.

14. Declarations of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

15. Public Artwork - PCC Housing Blocks and Estates

Andrew Malbon, Acting Head of Design Service presented his report which was to seek approval to the principle to incorporate public art (murals/sculptures etc) on Portsmouth City Council housing buildings, housing owned assets and within the housing estates across Portsmouth and Havant, and to agree the core principles and the process that would be followed in identifying and approving locations for the installation of public art as and when requests arise.

The report was also to seek approval to explore the opportunity to work with Articulate Sage to incorporate into the planned Portsmouth Art Festival 2023, housing buildings and housing owned assets, and in doing so to pilot the application of the core principles and processes as set out in the report.

Resident Consortium questions and comments

Maria Cole asked whether officers had considered contacting paint manufacturers to seek support with the supply of paint in order to help maintain the budget neutrality as noted in section 4.11 of the report. Officers noted this suggestion and agreed to take this forward.

Maria Cole agreed with the report and noted that adding art to blank walls around the city was uplifting for residents. In addition, by using local artists the community takes ownership and vandalism is reduced.

Members' questions

In response to Members' questions, officers clarified:

- The project will be funded by Articulate Sage with a grant from the Arts Council. They are also sourcing other sponsorship.

- In relation to the budget neutrality bullet point 4.11, the council contribution would be in kind, using officer time to assist with the organisation of the project and engaging with residents. No funding is coming from the HRA budget.
- The report focuses specifically on council buildings that the housing service own, but conversations are happening with Culture and Leisure about taking an approach that is city wide as part of a public art strategy which will also include opportunities for local artists to have access to other walls.

Members' Comments

Members agreed it was a fantastic idea and a great way to brighten up the city and a great opportunity to celebrate and recognise local artists who are gaining international attention.

Members considered that meaningful community and resident engagement would be critical to the success of the project, the longevity of the pieces of art and to ensuring the art is wanted and appropriate for a particular space.

Members suggested residents being given the opportunity to be actively involved in the creation of the pieces of work with the potential for training and employment opportunities alongside the internationally renowned artists.

Members noted that agreement for funding had also partly come through the Neighbourhood CIL alongside the Arts Council and other funding pots.

Officers further noted that although the Articulate Sage Festival will be concentrated in Portsmouth, in the future there could be further opportunities to incorporate housing blocks in Havant where Portsmouth are a significant landlord.

Chair's comments

The Chair agreed with the comments that it is crucial residents are involved as much as possible, and was something he was keen to encourage. He agreed with the observation that working with ordinary working people on estates to encourage them to be part of the artistic scene is a major way of removing the perception of culture, art, and public art as something that is elitist and not for them.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- **Approved the principle to incorporate public art (murals/sculptures etc) on Portsmouth City Council housing buildings, housing owned assets and within our housing estates across Portsmouth and Havant, and agreed the process that will be followed in identifying and approving locations for the installation of public art as and when requests arise.**

- **Approved the exploration of a Portsmouth Art Festival 2023 using Housing buildings and housing owned assets to pilot the application of the core principles and process as set out in the report.**
- **Delegated to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Building Services and relevant officers, as appropriate, the application of the core principles and process.**
- **Requested officers bring an information report following the Portsmouth Art Festival 2023.**

16. Managment of energy provision in local authority housing whilst void

Mark Fitch, Head of Local Authority Housing and Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director Building Services presented the report, the purpose of which is to recommend an improved system of managing gas and electricity supplies in local authority social housing dwellings when the property is void. They highlighted the benefits a new system would offer tenants and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Residents Consortium questions & comments

Maria welcomed the report and explained her personal difficulties with the utilities when moving into a property that had previously been empty. She stated she was very much in favour of it.

Maria commented on the general issue of expensive utility standing charges and welcomed the news that vulnerable customers would be placed on priority services register.

Members' questions

In response to Members' questions, officers clarified:

- During the pilot scheme, an update report will be brought back to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Tackling Homelessness in approximately 9 - 12 months to report on how the scheme is working, the benefits, and to outline any queries that may have arisen, with the intention of moving forward to a full tender process based on those learnings. Regarding the information that is commercially confidential, updates will be provided in regular meetings with officers.
- The current void process involves trying to ascertain who the current utility providers are, which can often be a difficult exercise. When new tenants move in, they are informed who the providers were and they are then responsible for contacting them. With the Utilita service, everything is done on an online portal, the tenants' details are entered online and Utilita proactively make contact with the new tenant. A smart meter will have been fitted meaning the reading is sent through automatically.
- The Smart meters can be switched from pre-payment to credit but will be defaulted to pre-payment at the beginning of the tenancy.

- Any savings, however they are derived, will be ringfenced for the HRA. The HRA budget position remains under pressure so any savings made will be a helpful contribution to the deficit position.
- PCC had received feedback from Together Housing in the northwest about their dealings with Utilita. Their relationship was positive, particularly around customer satisfaction with the process. Other positive feedback was around Utilita working closely with the contractors providing the service.

Members' comments

Members expressed some concern regarding the default to a pre-payment meter especially for those tenants who may not have the best credit history and then may not be able to switch to the more affordable credit meter. The process could potentially make some tenants financially worse off. The suggestion was that the £36k savings from the contract with Utilita be ringfenced for the provision of energy top-ups for council tenants, in addition to any existing funds.

Members agreed with the report and recommendations.

Chair's comments

The Chair observed that the earlier the tenant is contacted about which type of meter they have, and the situation assessed to ensure they are not financially disadvantaged, the better. This would be part of the review of the scheme. He considered the scheme would be beneficial for tenants. A confidential review would be undertaken after 3 months with a public report brought back to a decision meeting within 12 months.

Decision

The Cabinet Member:

- 1. Noted the positive impact of the pilot with Utilita which includes benefits to tenants and a more efficient process for officers and contractors.**
- 2. Agreed to a large scale pilot encompassing all of the housing stock for a maximum period of 2 years and requested a report to be brought back evaluating the impact of the pilot with a view to making the scheme permanent.**
- 3. Delegated to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services to undertake all necessary and procedural actions to formalise the process for void energy management with a single supplier in the long term, undertaking a suitable procurement process if and when required.**
- 4. Noted that a review of Utilita's tariff rates will be undertaken on a quarterly basis, in line with the Energy Price Cap updates, to ensure that their rates meet or beat other available rates.**

The meeting concluded at 10.25 am.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair