

HOUSING & SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 15 December 2016 at 3.00 pm at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth.

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Jennie Brent
Alicia Denny
Frank Jonas
Leo Madden

59. Apologies for absence (AI 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gemma New.

60. Declaration of Members' Interests (AI 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

61. Minutes of the previous meeting - 17 November 2016 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Housing and Social Care Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 17 November 2016 be approved as a correct record.

62. Current review: Housing Need and Empty Properties in Portsmouth and the impact of Government Policy on them (AI 4)

Carole Damper MBE, the Chief Executive of The EC Roberts Centre, David Mearns, Assistant Housing Manager, Owen Buckwell, Director of Property and Housing Services, Nick Haverly, Finance Manager and the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Steve Wemyss made the following points during the discussion.

Housing Need

- Private renters are facing a challenging time with an increasing trend with people struggling to meet the Local Housing Allowance (Capital HLA) in private sector rented accommodation. Could potentially become a strain in housing options.
- Private rents have increased. The LHA is frozen for 4 years so any increase in rent poses a problem for people.
- The worst hit will be those who are employed but are on a low salary.
- Housing association rents have risen and there are increasing numbers of people who cannot meet the top up and are at risk.
- People cannot afford rent deposits and money up front in the private sector. Some even require guarantors.

- Carole Damper commented that Council tax arrears are another pressure and from her experience assisting vulnerable families it appears that legal action is being taken much sooner these days.
- The top-up is untenable for some people resulting in eviction.
- Homelessness applications are increasing.
- Children may get taken into care from families made homeless.
- Increasing number of private sector landlords who will not take anyone receiving any kind of benefit.
- There are not enough affordable properties for people to live in. As a consequence tenants are becoming more and more vulnerable.
- The Council will work with these tenants and provide support to enable them to stay in their property, to help them resolve their problems and manage their lives to keep them together. As a result the council has reduced our current rent debt.
- The bedroom tax initiative a few years ago to target tenants in large properties to downsize and free up some of the larger properties. Problem with that there are too many sentimental personal attachments to the property and didn't want to move to a smaller property. Also the tenant has the Right To Buy.
- Even with more properties there would still be a core of vulnerable tenants who need support.
- Do not believe that the private sector will build the properties required.
- The Council's best properties are sold off under the Right to Buy and we tend to end up with flats in high rise blocks. This means we are offering families with small children this type of accommodation.
- Primarily we need 4 or 3 bedroomed properties.
- There are a number of private landlords who have 25 plus ex council properties and charge private sector rent. This pushes up the cost of housing benefit.

Empty Properties

- 99% of the council stock is let. Some of those empty properties would be empty as part of a refurbishment programme. Do try to get them back into use as soon as possible and Portsmouth has one of the lowest void rates amongst local authorities.
- There are sufficient buildings in the city which could reduce our housing demand. There may be hundreds of empty privately owned properties mainly over shops and commercial properties which could be utilised.

Impact of Government Policy

- The spare room subsidy. 1500 tenants were affected when the 'bedroom tax' policy came in. The council worked with them to either down size, take on a lodger or maximise their income.
- Government policy designed to reduce Central Government spending but it is left to local authorities to deal with the tenants.
- Housing benefit payments now go to the claimant rather than direct to the landlord except for council properties. There are less rent arrears and evictions, which if paid, go direct to the landlord, as once was.

Possible solutions which were discussed:

- Employ a rent adjudicator to determine rent prices against building size, type of accommodation. This would provide protection for people in the private sector, particularly the most vulnerable, who have been evicted from local authority and housing association properties.
- Fair rents - could explore this option if the council are rushing too much to involve legal action too soon in council tax debt situations.
- Provide more accommodation - build or lease it.
- Could build 3 & 4 bedroomed properties and give them charitable incorporated status through a legal entity.

In addition Councillor Wemyss explained that he had recently met with the Government Minister for Housing and that the government are well aware that there are a number of policies which work against each other. These are being worked on. He included the following points:

- The council has commissioned over 200 homes to be built over the next few years.
- There is a need to recognise that some policies are counter-productive.
- Small rooms are not legally rentable and then become useless, but in reality in some cases could still be used.
- Land banking schemes (buying undeveloped land with the intention to split it up into smaller plots and then sell the plots on to buyers at inflated prices) is a current problem and not producing homes which are needed. The government are keen to support the smaller builders, which were hugely reduced after the recession, to get involved with new build.
- It would be worth looking at different ways of tenancies and perhaps this is one. Tenancy agreements with the tenant and not the property. Introduce fixed term tenancy agreements which could be tailored to suit the tenant, e.g.: a family with a 3 year old child has a 15 year tenancy which is then reviewed alongside a mandatory review at age 50.

The meeting concluded at 5.05 pm.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair