

HOUSING & SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel held on Monday, 11 February 2019 at 10am at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Luke Stubbs (in the Chair)
Claire Udy
Tom Wood

- 1. Apologies for absence. (AI 1)**
Councillors Jason Fazackarley, Leo Madden and Steve Wemyss sent their apologies for absence.
- 2. Declarations of members' interests. (AI 2)**
No interests were declared.
- 3. Minutes of the previous meeting. (AI 3)**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 October 2018 be agreed as a correct record.

- 4. The provision of temporary accommodation (AI 4)**

Present

Lucy Smith, Accommodation Manager
Daniel Lake, Accommodation Manager
Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing
Elaine Bastable, Head of Housing Options

RESOLVED that the scoping document was agreed as sent out with the agenda with the addition of Councillor Darren Sanders, Cabinet Member for Housing as a witness.

Lucy Smith and Daniel Lake Accommodation Managers introduced the presentation that had been published with the agenda.

Councillor Darren Sanders, Cabinet Member for Housing asked the panel to note his views:

There is a series of interlocking issues and therefore a range of solutions is required.

Most homeless people and those at risk of homelessness tend not to be visible.

It is very important to understand the reasons people are presenting as homeless.

He felt that it is immoral that the council does not have a statutory duty to house rough sleepers. It is the council's duty to deal with everyone. The homelessness working group is working to identify the numbers and evaluate the reasons.

The void intervention programme should stabilise and then reduce the number of empty council properties.

A better provision of accommodation is required and the council is looking into this.

Southsea Community Centre has been vacant for a long time. Using it for temporary accommodation would be his preference but he acknowledged that by the time it was developed, the market may have changed.

He hoped that the panel could contribute to the draft homelessness strategy which is currently out for consultation.

In response to questions, he explained that:

There is need to improve and increase provision of temporary accommodation as quickly as possible.

The introduction of the Housing Reduction Act had a significant impact on the number of people presenting as homeless.

The council is considering expanding the Rent Deposit Scheme.

At the request of this panel, he would look into the feasibility of developing Edinburgh House and Hilsea Lodge to use as temporary accommodation.

In response to questions on the presentation, officers explained that:

The reasons for homelessness.

The graph covers the last three years.

Private tenancies often end because the tenants' circumstances change and the rent is no longer affordable. Some people cannot afford the top up they were required to pay towards their rent after the introduction of the benefits cap.

Some tenancies end because of anti-social behaviour.

Some people present because they feel it is time to move out of their parents' home but cannot afford to rent privately. Or family and friends are no longer able to accommodate them.

There have not been a large number of former service personnel.

Housing needs assessments for overcrowding are based on housing benefit rules.

There have not been a large number of former service personnel presenting as homeless.

A significant number of people who approach the housing service and present as homeless have complex mental health or substance misuse issues.

Although there has been an increase in approaches since the introduction of the HRA, there has not been a corresponding increase in placements.

It is important that HB recipients inform the council as soon as possible if they have adult family members living with them as their HB entitlement will decrease.

The introduction of universal credit.

Since its introduction 3-4 months' ago, rent arrears plateaued for a time and then increased a bit. It is not possible to predict the long-term affect. Nationally where universal credit has been in place for a number of years, rents have increased significantly.

Housing Officers.

Housing Officers work closely with tenants to offer support as early as possible if there are financial problems.

Local Housing Allowance.

In April 2019 this will be increased. This is the first rise for a while. The rate is assessed based on a broader market rental area than just Portsmouth.

Out of city accommodation.

The possibility of moving to an area where the rents are cheaper is discussed with the applicant but it is important to consider the costs for travelling to school, work and to see families. Houses in Leigh Park are not in high demand because it is 12 miles from Portsmouth city centre and travel by bus takes a long time.

Some applicants have been placed in B&Bs in Southampton due to a lack of vacancies in Portsmouth. The team is working to bring them back into the city.

Short term temporary accommodation

There are 30 two or three bedroom, self-contained flats. The council has a service level agreement with the Roberts Centre to furnish the flats and to liaise with the tenants to provide support, links to medical and other services and to carry out maintenance checks.

Medium term temporary accommodation

A block of 20 2-3 bedroom self-contained flats in Southsea is owned by the council. There are also four flats and one house leased and 25 rooms in five Houses of Multiple Occupancy. The latter is a new venture for the council. Managing tenants who do not know each other is difficult.

Emergency accommodation

The number of small hotels accepting referrals has decreased. The council has flexible contracts with three independent B&Bs/ hotels. A tendering exercise carried out three years ago was not successful as only hotels that were already working with the council responded. Due to lack of available accommodation the council has had to more recently start using chain hotels. The rates vary depending on the season and the size of the household.

General temporary accommodation

More cost-effective and self-contained accommodation is required.

105 temporary accommodation units are currently used by the council. To become sustainable, the number of people moving into temporary accommodation and those moving on should be equal. At the moment people are not moving on as quickly as would be ideal.

Student accommodation

The use of student accommodation has been considered. It depends on availability and is relatively expensive.

Service Users

Many service users have complex needs and may have been evicted from their accommodation due to smoking or drug use on the premises. It is important to realise that the council still has a duty to rehome them in these circumstances.

The graph on page 26 of the presentation showed all the accepted offers (move ons) not solely for homelessness applicants. Transfers between tenants in council accommodation due to decants from Horatio and Leamington House are not included.

During the discussion that followed, members noted that:
There was a discontinuity of the figures from April to July 2018 at the same time that Horatio and Leamington House became a concern.

Council Properties.

There is no significant fluctuation in the number of voids becoming available to the council. Between 900 and 950 properties are let every year. This figure includes people moving because they are leaving hospital, moving for medical needs or under occupation.

Move on Accommodation

Additional move on stock is required.

There are many demands for social housing. It would not be possible to give homelessness people priority as this would impact unfairly on others on the waiting list.

Office to residential conversions.

The possibility of using Roebuck House in Cosham for temporary accommodation was discussed. The developers have received prior planning approval for more than 200 flats which would be below the standards for room sizes.

The council has competing priorities; more properties are required in the city and the private sector housing team look at space standards.

Demand

It is increasingly difficult to find move on accommodation for families of 5 or more.

It is important that future demand is modelled so that the council does not end up with stock that is no longer needed in five years' time.

Work in progress

There is a trial for using low demand council flats for short term accommodation in Wecock Farm. These are one 1 bed self-contained first floor flats in blocks.

Work with other Local Authorities.

The council has a good working relationship with the rehousing team in Gosport and Fareham councils and learning is shared. Although homelessness is a national problem, different areas tend to have different problems.

Gosport council has two long stay hostels.

Fareham does not deal with a significant number of homeless applicants and not provide temporary accommodation.

Offers of accommodation from the private sector

The council receives offers of temporary accommodation from private companies. Generally these are too expensive and not all have managers on site to support the tenants.

Help with deposits for private rented accommodation.

When assessing applications, the focus is on affordability. A full loan, part loan or grant may be granted depending on the financial circumstances of the applicant.

Deposits are not the only barrier for finding private accommodation. Others include paying a letting agent's administration fee, a months' advance rent, finding a guarantor and passing credit checks.

The council is looking into providing guarantor schemes.

Discretionary HB payments.

Referrals are made to the HB team for discretionary payments. The fund available is not usually spent, but this year it may be used in full.

It was agreed that the following issues would be discussed at the next meeting:

- Work already in progress to reduce the use of temporary accommodation.
- Modelling of future demand for temporary accommodation.
- Discretionary HB payments.

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Councillor Darren Sanders, the Cabinet Member for Housing would be also invited.

The meeting concluded at 12pm.