

HOUSING & SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel held on Tuesday, 5 March 2019 at 10am at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Luke Stubbs (in the Chair)
Leo Madden
Tom Wood

5. Apologies for absence. (AI 1)

Councillors Jason Fazackarley, Steve Wemyss and Clare Udy sent their apologies.

6. Declarations of Members' Interests. (AI 2)

No interests were declared.

7. Minutes of the previous meeting. (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 February 2019 be agreed as a correct record.

8. Review of the provision of temporary accommodation. (AI 4)

Present

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing
Lucy Smith, Accommodation Manager
Daniel Lake, Accommodation Manager

Officers introduced the presentation that had been tabled at the meeting.

In response to questions from the panel, they clarified the following points:

Approximately 18 people join the housing list every week and are assessed as being in the high priority band for rehousing. This equates to about 900 a year.

Although some people on the housing waiting list (in the high priority band) are already in council accommodation, the majority are homeless.

Asylum seekers who have been granted leave to remain are rehomed in accordance with current homeless legislation.

In order to reduce the number of people in temporary accommodation, it is necessary to make more use of the private sector because there is insufficient council and social accommodation to house everyone.

The developers of the scheme in Goldsmith Avenue have a nomination agreement with the council. Although the developers of the former Kingston Prison site are not required to have one of these, they have one in place.

When a person or family declares themselves as homeless and asks the council to help them find accommodation, the Housing Officer will ask about their circumstances. If there is nowhere else available and the applicant is eligible and in priority need they would be offered emergency temporary accommodation. The council assesses their case and keeps them informed. The council has a legal duty to pay for their belongings to be stored.

Ideally the council would house people in emergency temporary accommodation for two or three days, but the current average waiting time is three months.

An intervention into the allocation and letting of council properties has been undertaken and a new way of working is now being rolled in the Area Housing Offices. It is expected that one of the outcomes will be to reduce the time it takes for empty council properties to be made ready for new tenants. This currently takes an average of 55 days. There are approximately 25 vacant properties at the moment. During the void period the council is responsible for all the bills associated with the properties. The outgoing tenants usually give about two weeks' notice of moving out.

The council could, via the Priority Housing Panel, give additional priority to homeless applicants in temporary accommodation. However, the impact on the others on this list must be considered.

Three 1 bedroom and one 3 bedroom low demand properties have recently been taken on for temporary accommodation and now have homeless households placed in them.

Two weeks ago, officers met with the hotel chain it uses for temporary accommodation to negotiate better rates due to increased usage over the last 18-24 months.

The council can offer to help homeless tenants with deposits for privately rented properties.

Properties in Wecock Farm are traditionally in low demand amongst applicants on the waiting list. There is also hard to let sheltered accommodation in the Crookhorn area as no one on the list wants or needs that type of property in this location. The council is reviewing how it could better use that building.

Councillor Darren Sanders, Cabinet Member for Housing was invited to give his views on this subject and explained that:

It would be incorrect to assume that everyone in temporary accommodation is eventually moved into council accommodation.

It is not ideal to place people in B&Bs because of the cost.

The council does not want to place people outside of the city because they may be far from their support networks.

It is important to understand why people are presenting as homeless. The top two reasons reported are that private sector tenancies have come to an end and that families/ friends have asked them to leave. It is therefore essential to talk to private landlords to try to reduce the number of people finding themselves homeless.

He has instructed officers to review the reasons that there is low demand for some empty council properties.

A range of measures is required to tackle this problem.

Despite the increased demand for rehousing, the government has reduced funding by 8.5%.

He hoped that this panel would feed into the homelessness strategy.

During the discussion that followed, members commented that:

Private sector landlords may be reluctant to take some tenants because of concern over Universal Credit payments.

Wecock Farm is a lovely area but is very different to Portsmouth. Unemployed residents must sign on in Cosham. This is a significant barrier for some people.

It was noted that nearly all the budget for discretionary housing benefit payments had been spent.

The meeting concluded at 10.55am.