

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

AGENDA

HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL

Date: Thursday, 5 November 2020

Time: 6.00 pm

Venue: Microsoft Teams Virtual Meeting

Members:

Councillor Mrs K Mandry (Chairman)

Councillor S Dugan (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors G Fazackarley
Mrs C Heneghan
Mrs C L A Hockley
Ms S Pankhurst
Mrs K K Trott

Deputies: Mrs L E Clubley

L Keeble

J G Kelly



1. Apologies for Absence

2. Minutes (Pages 5 - 10)

To confirm as a correct record the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 10 March 2020.

3. Chairman's Announcements

4. Declarations of Interest and Disclosures of Advice or Directions

To receive any declarations of interest from members in accordance with Standing Orders and the Council's Code of Conduct and disclosures of advice or directions received from Group Leaders or Political Groups, in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

5. Deputations

To receive any deputations of which notice has been lodged.

6. Executive Business (Pages 11 - 12)

To consider any item of business dealt with, or due to be dealt with shortly, by the Executive since the last meeting of the Panel that falls under the remit of the Housing Portfolio. This will include any decisions taken by the Executive Member during the same time period.

(1) Approval for disabled adaptation works at 46 Lincoln Close (Pages 13 - 14)

(2) Fareham Housing Disposals and Re-developments at 28 Queens Road and 15 & 17 Crossfell Walk (Pages 15 - 16)

(3) Nitrate Credits for Fareham Housing Schemes (Pages 17 - 18)

(4) Stubbington Lane Development Site, Hill Head (Pages 19 - 20)

(5) Fareham Housing development at the former Scout Hut site, Montefiore Drive, Park Gate

The decision sheet for this item will be tabled at the meeting.

(6) Sea Lane Housing Site, PO14 2NB

The decision sheet for this item will be tabled at the meeting.

7. Affordable Housing Update (Pages 21 - 22)

To receive a presentation by the Affordable Housing Strategic Lead on progress with Fareham Housing sites and other relevant strategic housing matters.

8. Rough Sleeping Initiative Funding 2020/21 (Pages 23 - 26)

To consider a report by the Deputy Chief Executive Officer which provides an update on the Rough Sleeping Initiative Funding 2020/21.

9. Covid-19 Impact on Housing & Homelessness Services (Pages 27 - 32)

To consider a report by the Deputy Chief Executive Officer which provides members with information in respect of the Covid-19 impact on Housing & Homelessness Services.

10. Housing Scrutiny Panel Priorities

To provide an opportunity for Members to consider the scrutiny priorities for the Housing Panel.



P GRIMWOOD
Chief Executive Officer

Civic Offices
www.fareham.gov.uk
27 October 2020

**For further information please contact:
Democratic Services, Civic Offices, Fareham, PO16 7AZ
Tel:01329 236100
democraticservices@fareham.gov.uk**

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Panel

(to be confirmed at the next meeting)

Date: Tuesday, 10 March 2020

Venue: Collingwood Room - Civic Offices

PRESENT:

Councillor Mrs K Mandry (Chairman)

Councillor S Dugan (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: I Bastable, Mrs C L A Hockley, Ms S Pankhurst, Mrs K K Trott
and L Keeble

Also Present: F Birkett



1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies received at this meeting.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Panel meeting held on the 07 November 2019 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no Chairman's announcements made at this meeting.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISCLOSURES OF ADVICE OR DIRECTIONS

There were no declarations of interest made at this meeting.

5. DEPUTATIONS

There were no deputations made at this meeting.

6. TWO SAINTS

The Panel received a verbal presentation from James McDermott (Regional Director) and Georgina Joyce (Contract and Performance Manager) from Two Saints, providing details to Members on the matters outlined in the scoping report which was agreed by the Panel at their meeting on the 07 November 2020. Two Saints also provided a report to Members which has been tabled.

The Panel considered the contents of the report and asked questions, primarily around the funding of the service and circumstances Two Saints struggle to support clients. The reduction in funding has had an impact on the services that Two Saints can provide, although Members agreed that they are providing an invaluable service with the monies they do currently receive. The lack of varied accommodation is the main struggle for homeless people across the Borough, as the options that are currently available are not always appropriate meaning Two Saints are not able to support these people.

It was highlighted to Members that, although the funding is sufficient, the current funding streams are applied for annually, meaning funds aren't guaranteed. This causes problems with securing staff and doesn't allow the service to have a long-term strategic plan. The service is therefore providing reactive support for vulnerable people. If funding could be secured for a 3-year period, for example, the service could start to be proactive and support a greater number of local people who are at risk of homelessness.

There were also discussions around the potential impact that a Coronavirus outbreak could have on the homeless community in Fareham. James McDermott advised that meetings are taking place across the area and Two Saints Business Continuity Plan will be discussed to minimise the impact on

staffing and the clients who have underlying health conditions and may contract the virus.

The Chairman thanked Two Saints for attending the meeting and providing the Panel with a very informative report.

RESOLVED that the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered the contents of the verbal presentation and tabled report, making comments and raising questions for clarification.

7. AFFORDABLE HOUSING UPDATE

The Panel received a presentation from Robyn Lyons, Affordable Housing Strategic Lead, which updated the Panel with a detailed overview of the progress of the key sites managed by Fareham Housing.

A copy of the presentation is appended to these Minutes.

Members asked if the delays to the Bridge Road and Highlands Road developments had any financial implications. Officers advised that there are likely to be cost implications for the delays but until the construction is complete these figures couldn't be confirmed.

The presentation also outlined how Fareham Borough Council funds New Council Homes. Several different funding sources are available which all have different rules and restrictions on how and when they can be used. The Affordable Housing Strategic Lead, with the help of the Finance Business Partner, Kate Busby, provided a detailed explanation of this very complex subject to allow Members of the Panel a better understanding of how the Council's new homes are funded and why it is not always possible to easily utilise all the funds available.

RESOLVED that the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered the contents of the presentation.

8. MOTION RECEIVED FROM COUNCIL

The Panel considered a Motion received by Councillor Mrs K K Trott which had been referred to the Housing Scrutiny Panel from the 21 February 2020 Council meeting: -

"I propose that Fareham Borough Council calls upon the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to review the way Councils can use the proceeds from the 'Right to Buy' policy, in order to facilitate the provision of more, much needed, Affordable homes including those for Social Rent."

Councillor Mrs K K Trott addressed the Panel to provide details to the Panel on her Motion to Council. She thanked Officers for assisting Members in understanding the complex issues that influence the use of funding sources for Council homes during Item 7 – Affordable Housing Update. Members expressed frustration at the difficulties facing all Councils with the rules surrounding the funds received from the sale of Council houses through 'Right

to Buy'. Currently these funds have several constraints, including; which sources of funding can be used on the same project, time restrictions and that these funds have to be used in conjunction with a large percentage of funds from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

The Affordable Housing Update presentation (Item 7) attached to these Minutes provides an explanation of these funding sources and how they can be used.

The Motion was proposed and then seconded with Members unanimously agreeing that a letter be sent to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government from the Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

RESOLVED that the Housing Scrutiny Panel: -

- (a) considered the Motion received from Councillor Mrs K K Trott; and
- (b) asked Officers to write a letter on behalf of the Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel to send to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, requesting a review of the way Councils can use the proceeds from the 'Right to Buy' policy, in order to facilitate the provision of more, much needed, Affordable homes including those for Social Rent

9. EXECUTIVE BUSINESS

The Panel considered the Executive items of business which fall under the remit of the Housing Portfolio, including individual Executive Member decisions, that have taken place since the last meeting of the Panel.

(1) Housing Software

Members asked for further clarification on the decision to replace the current software, seeking confirmation that it is good value for money. Fleur Allaway, Policy Officer, advised Members that it will take some time for the new software to be fully implemented across the Housing Service. Once complete it will save a significant amount of Officer time and allow the Service to become more efficient. She advised that an update could be provided to the Panel at a future meeting if requested by Members.

At the invitation of the Chairman the Executive Member for Housing, Councillor F W Birkett addressed the Panel to provide details on his decision to approve the purchase of the new software. Councillor Birkett explained he was confident that the decision to procure new software was a good investment for the Council and he agreed that a review of the new software once fully implemented would be a good way for the Panel to be assured that the correct decision was made.

In order to answer a question put to Officers by Members of the Panel during discussion on this item, a request was made for the meeting to go into private

session as defined in Paragraph 3 Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

RESOLVED that in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972 the Public and Press were excluded, as the Panel considered that it is not in the public interest to consider the matters in public on the grounds that they will involve the disclosure of exempt information, as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of the schedule 12A of the Local Government Act.

Following the answer being given to the satisfaction of the Chairman the meeting was brought back into public session.

Members of the Panel requested that an update on the implementation of the new Housing Software be brought to a future meeting of the Panel for Members to review the benefits of the new Housing Software in operation.

(2) Draft Fareham Housing Greener Policy

No comments were received.

(3) Housing Allocations Policy

No comments were received.

(4) Assheton Court, Portchester

No comments were received.

10. HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL PRIORITIES

The Chairman invited Members of the Panel to consider the Scrutiny Priorities for the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

Members enquired as to when an update on the intentions to provide Affordable Housing through the new Local Plan might be available to bring to the Housing Scrutiny Panel. Officers agreed to investigate this item being brought to the Panel at an appropriate time within the delivery of the Local Plan.

The Head of Housing and Benefits addressed the Panel to advise that a Member of the Panel had contacted her, requesting an update on the new funding that had been received to help tackle the issue of rough sleepers. It was agreed by Members that an item will be brought to the next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, currently scheduled for the 09 July 2020.

RESOLVED that the Housing Scrutiny Panel: -

- (a) considered the Scrutiny Priorities for the Housing Scrutiny Panel;
- (b) asked officers to investigate bringing an item at the appropriate time, updating the Panel on the affordable housing offer within the draft Local Plan; and

- (c) that a report be brought to the 09 July 2020 meeting to update Members on the allocation of funds received to tackle the issue of rough sleepers.

(The meeting started at 6.05 pm
and ended at 8.06 pm).

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date **05 November 2020**

Report of: **Deputy Chief Executive Officer**

Subject: **EXECUTIVE BUSINESS**

SUMMARY

One of the key functions of this Scrutiny Panel is to hold the Executive Portfolio Holder and Senior Officers to account in the delivery of the service and the Improvement Actions identified in the Council's Corporate Priorities and Corporate Vision.

Members are therefore invited to consider the items of business which fall under the remit of the Housing portfolio and have been dealt with, or will shortly be dealt with, by the Executive since the last meeting of the Panel. This also includes any decisions taken by individual Executive Members.

The relevant notices for decisions that have been taken are attached for consideration. Any remaining notices to be considered will be tabled at the meeting.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members consider the items of Business discharged by the Executive since the last meeting of the Panel and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

2020/21
Decision No.
2185

Record of Decision by Executive Portfolio for Housing

Thursday, 11 June 2020

Portfolio	Housing
Subject:	Approval for disabled adaptation works at 46 Lincoln Close
Report of:	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priority:	Providing housing choices

Purpose:

To seek approval for expenditure on a disabled adaptation at 46 Lincoln Close, Titchfield Common, Fareham.

This report provides the Executive Member with information on works to provide a disabled adaptation at 46 Lincoln Close. Approval is sought to exceed the £30,000 threshold (in accordance with the Council's Disabled Adaptations Policy) for any individual Council-owned property.

Options Considered:

Councillor Mrs K K Trott addressed the Executive Member on this item.

As recommendation.

Decision:

RESOLVED that the Executive Member agrees that approval be granted to exceed the £30,000 threshold of disabled adaptation works to Council-owned properties.

Reason:

To provide accessible living accommodation.

Confirmed as a true record:

Executive Member for Housing (Councillor Fred Birkett)
Thursday, 11 June 2020

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

2020/21
Decision No.
2184

Record of Decision by Executive Portfolio for Housing

Thursday, 11 June 2020

Portfolio	Housing
Subject:	Fareham Housing Disposals and Re-developments at 28 Queens Road and 15 & 17 Crossfell Walk
Report of:	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priority:	Providing housing choices

Purpose:

To obtain approval from the Executive for the disposal of 117 Gosport Road and 8 Addison Road.

To seek approval for the funding arrangements to deliver 2No. 3 bed Affordable Rent homes at Queens Road and to demolish 2No. fly-over design flats at 15 and 17 Crossfell Walk and replace with 1No. 3 or 4-bed home.

To also seek approval of the process toward the appointment of contractors for the schemes.

This report asks the Executive to approve the disposal of 117 Gosport Road and 8 Addison Road through the open market and to use the Capital Receipts to fund delivery of affordable housing in the borough.

This report also seeks approval for the funding arrangements to deliver affordable housing at Queens Road and 15 & 17 Crossfell Walk.

Options Considered:

Councillor Mrs K K Trott addressed the Executive member on this item.

As recommendation.

Decision:

RESOLVED that the Executive Member:

- (a) approves the disposal of 117 Gosport Road and 8 Addison Road through sale on the open market;

- (b) delegates authority to the Deputy Chief Executive Officer, following consultation with the Executive Member for Policy and Resources, to accept the best offer for each house;
- (c) approves the use of the Capital Receipt to improve existing, or fund further delivery of, affordable housing in the borough;
- (d) approves the funding mechanisms, as outlined in the confidential Appendix A attached to this report, for the delivery of the Crossfell Walk and Queens Road schemes; and
- (e) agrees that the award of contract and the appointment of building contractor(s) for the Crossfell Walk and Queens Road sites be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive Officer, following consultation with the Executive Member for Housing.

Reason:

To ensure the disposal of 8 Addison Road and 117 Gosport Road, and the funding arrangements to deliver Crossfell Walk and Queens Road schemes, are acceptable. This will enable a time efficient process to deliver the schemes when a formal planning consent is available on the site.

Confirmed as a true record:

Executive Member for Housing (Councillor Fred Birkett)
Thursday, 11 June 2020

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

2020/21
Decision No.
2197

Record of Decision by Executive

Monday, 3 August 2020

Portfolio	Housing
Subject:	Nitrate Credits for Fareham Housing Schemes
Report of:	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priority:	Providing housing choices

Purpose:

For the Executive to note the approach being used in order to achieve nitrate neutrality for Fareham Housing schemes.

The report explains how water use efficiency measures will be installed on some existing Fareham Housing properties in order to provide 'nitrate credits' which can then be used to offset water use/nitrate generation on Fareham Housing new build projects.

The approach, which has been found acceptable by Natural England, should ensure the nitrate issue does not prevent planning consent from being granted on Fareham Housing new build schemes. Thereby allowing the programme for the provision of new affordable homes to continue.

Options Considered:

As recommendation.

Decision:

RESOLVED that the Executive notes the content of the report and the approach to nitrate neutrality for Fareham Housing developments.

Reason:

To ensure the Executive are aware of the nitrate neutrality approach for Fareham Housing schemes.

Confirmed as a true record:

Councillor SDT Woodward (Executive Leader)

Monday, 3 August 2020

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

2020/21
Decision No.
2177

Record of Decision by Executive Portfolio for Housing

Thursday, 30 April 2020

Portfolio	Housing
Subject:	Stubbington Lane Development Site, Hill Head
Report of:	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priority:	Strong, safe, inclusive and healthy communities

Purpose:

To seek approval for the funding arrangements to deliver 11No. new affordable houses for shared ownership on land at Stubbington Lane in Hill Head.

To also seek approval of the process toward the appointment of contractors for the scheme.

The attached report provides Members with an overview of the funding arrangements proposed to be used to deliver new affordable homes on land at Stubbington Lane, a site which is owned by Fareham Borough Council and allocated for residential development.

Further details surrounding the funding arrangements, including the total estimated cost to deliver the project, are provided in the Confidential Appendix A attached to this report.

The report also seeks Executive approval for delegated authority that will allow a time efficient appointment of an appropriate contractor to build out the scheme.

Options Considered:

Councillor J Forrest Ward Councillor for Stubbington, was in support of the scheme.

Councillor Mrs K K Trott addressed the Executive Member in support of the proposals.

As recommendation.

Decision:

RESOLVED that the Executive Member agrees:

- (a) the funding mechanisms, as outlined in the confidential Appendix A attached to this report, for the delivery of 11No. new shared ownership properties; and

(b) that the award of contract and the appointment of building contractor(s) for the Stubbington Lane development be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive Officer, following consultation with the Executive Member for Housing.

Reason:

To ensure the funding arrangements are acceptable and to enable a time efficient process to deliver the scheme when a formal planning consent is available for the site.

Confirmed as a true record:

Executive Member for Housing (Councillor Fred Birkett)

Thursday, 30 April 2020

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Presentation to The Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date: 05 November 2020
Report of: Affordable Housing Strategic Lead
Subject: AFFORDABLE HOUSING UPDATE

SUMMARY

The purpose of the presentation is to inform Members of the Panel of the progress with the Fareham Housing sites and other relevant strategic housing matters

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members consider the contents of the presentation and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date **05 NOVEMBER 2020**

Report of: **DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

Subject: **ROUGH SLEEPING INITIATIVE FUNDING 2020/21**

SUMMARY

At the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Panel in March 2020, Members requested an item be brought to a later meeting to update them on the new funding received to tackle the issue of rough sleeping in the Borough. This report sets out details of the funding received following a bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Rough Sleeping Initiative programme.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Housing Scrutiny Panel consider the content of this report and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Rough Sleeping Initiative was first announced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in March 2018 and funding was allocated to 83 areas across the country with the highest levels of rough sleeping to help people off the streets. In December 2018, the MHCLG set out their approach for allocating the remaining £11m to support those local authorities outside of the 83, develop or extend short term interventions to prevent and relieve rough sleeping.
2. Fareham Borough Council made a successful bid for funds and we were allocated £59,850 for the financial year ending 31 March 2020. We were able to increase the Outreach Service in Fareham with an additional 1.6 FTE posts and provide a small personalisation fund. The posts were hosted by Two Saints and worked alongside the existing Hampshire County Council contracted service.
3. These posts have made a significant difference to the level of support provided to rough sleepers and have been key to getting some rough sleepers into sustainable housing solutions. In 2018 Fareham reported 19 rough sleepers in the annual rough sleeping snapshot exercise. This figure had reduced to 10 rough sleepers in the borough during the exercise for 2019. Whilst we recognise the limitations of a snapshot figure, the exercise provides for a consistent comparison that shows the broad trend of rough sleeping in the area.
4. The next annual rough sleeping snapshot exercise is scheduled for 18 November 2020.

2020/21 FUNDING

5. In December 2019 we worked in partnership with MHCLG, Two Saints and Gosport Borough Council to review the Outreach posts and to consider the gaps and challenges we faced in further reducing rough sleeping in both areas. As a result, we made a further bid to the Rough Sleeping Initiative fund and in February this year, we were notified that we were to be granted £141,450 to continue the existing 1.6 FTE Outreach roles for the coming year (to cover Fareham only) and to appoint a Complex Needs Navigator and an Accommodation Procurement Officer (to cover both Fareham and Gosport).
6. Preparations for the new posts commenced however due to the national lockdown and Public Health England guidance, the decision was taken to postpone recruitment whilst we prioritised our resources to respond to the pandemic. MHCLG were fully supportive of this postponement and as with all other Rough Sleeping Initiative funded local authorities, agreed to amend the delivery timeline accordingly.

NEW POSTS

7. The two new roles are designed to provide more intensive support and focus particularly on assisting those leaving prison and those with complex needs (such as substance misuse issues, mental health needs and behavioural challenges) to find and maintain suitable accommodation. The roles work together to identify rough sleepers for whom traditional housing solutions are not working and to find other more bespoke housing options.

COMPLEX NEEDS NAVIGATOR

8. Local systems can often be complex and for some of the people who sleep rough, finding a way to access the support they need can be challenging. Navigators are key workers with a small, distinct caseload of people who sleep rough. Their work is targeted at those who would benefit from tailored support due to higher complex needs and who are often entrenched rough sleepers. Many of these individuals will traditionally have been hard to engage with and may have cycled through numerous services in the past. Key to success lies with the building of a trusting, non-judgemental relationship with the individual that is maintained throughout their journey to sustaining positive outcomes.
9. The post, hosted by Two Saints, was filled in June 2020 by an experienced Outreach worker who had recently returned from maternity leave and is currently working with 10 individuals in Fareham. The following outcomes have been achieved:
 - No contact to daily contact with services (Navigator & 101 Gosport Road)
 - Support to contact Gas and Electric Companies
 - Support to manage tenancy – i.e. locks changed
 - Accessing pregnancy test
 - Registration with GP and supporting those needing to accessing a dentist
 - Support to obtain a mental health assessment and access to specialist drug and alcohol services
 - Support to attend court/bail dates
 - Support to obtain colostomy bags from the supplier
 - Support to claim correct benefits and creation of budgeting plans
 - Support with food parcels and clothing
 - Support to access furniture – creating good relations with charities to ensure quick movement for clients. Good access to a number of items needed to furnish accommodation.
 - Support to contact with external partner agencies including probation, police, local authority/support to provide proofs
 - Support to get GP appointment and blood tests
 - Wellbeing checks and calls
 - Obtaining funds through donations to provide essential household items for those moving into accommodation. For example, white goods.
 - Raising/sharing concerns to all those partner agencies in Fareham, whom may encounter these clients
 - Communication with discharge teams for clients being discharged as homeless

ACCOMMODATION PROCUREMENT OFFICER

10. This role works closely with our Housing Options Team, Two Saints, the Outreach Team and the Complex Needs Navigator to identify suitable housing solutions to meet the needs of rough sleepers and those moving on from supported housing.
11. Key tasks include
 - (a) Developing opportunities to access private rented sector accommodation, including direct lets, property purchase and private leasing schemes
 - (b) Developing creative, bespoke housing solutions for those currently sleeping

rough and for those ready to move on from supported housing

- (c) Researching examples of housing solutions that work nationally for rough sleepers and share best practice models

12. The successful candidate took up the post in July 2020 and whilst some progress has been made with local landlords and research projects, there are unfortunately no tangible outcomes to date.

MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS

13. MHCLG require all Rough Sleeper Initiative funded local authorities to report progress and achievements. However, due to the pandemic, MHCLG suspended this requirement and therefore monitoring has been undertaken at a local level between us, Gosport Borough Council and Two Saints.

CONCLUSION

14. This report provides panel members with an update about the funding received to help tackle the issue of rough sleeping in the Borough.

Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

None

Reference Papers:

MHCLG Rough Sleeping Strategy August 2018

MHCLG Rough Sleeping Initiative funding 2020 to 2021

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman. (Ext. 4645)

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date **05 NOVEMBER 2020**

Report of: **DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

Subject: **COVID-19 IMPACT ON HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS SERVICES**

SUMMARY

This report focusses on how each of the Housing service areas were impacted by the pandemic and highlights actions that were taken to enable the continuation of essential services, respond to Government directives and ensure the safety of our residents and staff.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members consider the contents of this report and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

INTRODUCTION

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the Council and our community. Immediate response efforts were required to maintain key Council services and to rapidly adapt to new requirements which helped to support residents and businesses in the Borough.
2. The Chief Executive's Management Recovery Team met regularly throughout the pandemic in order to manage the Council's response.
3. In order to guide the on-going recovery process following the lockdown, a COVID-19 Recovery Framework was developed to focus on key areas of recovery. This was approved by the Executive at the meeting of 3 August 2020 as were a set of Recovery Plan Objectives for the Council to follow.
4. This report focusses on how each of the Housing service areas were impacted by the pandemic and highlights actions that were taken to enable the continuation of essential services, respond to Government directives and ensure the safety of our residents and staff.

BACKGROUND

5. The Housing department began preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 by reviewing our Business Continuity Plans and services were prioritised in anticipation of possible staff shortages. Service reviews took place regularly in the lead up to the official national lockdown announcement.
6. On 18 March 2020, the Government stated that vulnerable groups should 'shield' and work from home. This resulted in a reduction in the number of front-line staff within Housing services and from 23 March 2020, the majority of staff began working from home in accordance with Government guidelines.

HOUSING BENEFITS & COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

7. The Benefits service saw an immediate increase in calls and emails from residents requesting advice on what help they may be entitled to when wages reduced due to the furlough scheme and/or subsequent loss of employment.
8. We saw a marked increase in the workload for existing Housing Benefit cases with us needing to update the current income information held due to it reducing. We also saw a marked increase in claims for Council Tax Support. We initially prioritised cases where the benefit needed to increase or was being awarded for the first time and stopped resourcing certain activities such as case reviews so as to concentrate on the real time need for fast payments.
9. We streamlined the demand routes into the service to ensure we had sufficient resources behind each route. Limiting the demand routes enabled us to concentrate on what mattered which was getting through advantageous changes and new claims quickly and it did not cause any problems for the customer as there were no direct complaints as to not being able to speak to someone immediately or to visit the office. In fact our productivity increased as we were able to target the work demand flow and very quickly we started to receive comments from customers surprised at our ability to get back in contact with them within 24 hours and our ability to speed through their applications.

10. The team adapted very quickly while contending with daily bulletins from the Department for Work and Pensions explaining how to treat furlough payments, self-employed support grants, what income to include in any assessment and what was to be disregarded and other welfare/support measures introduced..
11. We undertook mass caseload updates in order to incorporate the reassessment of claims due to the increase in Universal Credit allowances and Tax Credit disregards and ensure customers understood the impact of these changes on their Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support.
12. On 27 March 2020, the Government announced the launch of a Hardship Fund which would enable local authorities to provide a further reduction in the 2020-21 Council Tax liabilities for working age people in receipt of Council Tax Support. Following the testing and implementation of the necessary software changes, all cases were re-assessed and awarded a further reduction in their Council Tax bill of £150.
13. We have recently implemented the Test and Trace Isolation Support Payment Scheme and are currently monitoring the impact on our resources as this evolves particularly if COVID-19 transmission rates rise locally.
14. We are expecting to see another surge in claims from the end of October as the Government's furlough scheme changes again and further changes to the financial support provided to the self-employed. We are also preparing for further rises in unemployment locally and the subsequent increase in Universal Credit and Council Tax Support claims.

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

15. Following the start of lockdown, all contact with our tenants was made by telephone or email and a voicemail service was implemented so if contact was made by telephone, customers could leave their details and an officer would call them back. This has proved to be a very efficient way of dealing with our tenants as most calls were returned within the same day and issues often resolved during that call. This system is still in operation whilst there is a reduced number of officers working in the Civic Offices.
16. From 27 March 2020, all housing possession action already in the court system or any about to go into it was suspended. This suspension was initially set to last for 90 days (to 25 June 2020) but was subsequently extended until 20 September 2020. This prevented the team from taking any formal action in respect of rent arrears throughout this time. The Neighbourhood Officers were instructed to contact their tenants with rent arrears to discuss how the lockdown had affected them financially and to provide appropriate guidance and support. Those tenants who were experiencing financial hardship due to lockdown were encouraged to keep in regular contact with their Neighbourhood Officer and to pay as much rent as they could during this time. Unsurprisingly, the level of arrears has increased, in part due to a larger number of our tenants now receiving Universal Credit which is paid monthly in arrears but is also attributable to tenants struggling financially whilst on the furlough scheme.
17. In recognition of the increasing rent arrears, a new temporary post has been created within the team to engage with all tenants who have rent arrears and agree mutually acceptable repayment arrangements. Full support will be given to those tenants who "can't pay" however formal action will be taken against those who "won't pay".

Progress will be included in the Tenancy Management Report due to be presented to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in March 2021.

18. Multi-agency meetings have continued throughout this period using remote working technology such as Microsoft Teams
19. We saw an increase in bulky waste being dumped in the communal bin areas at some of our blocks. Our colleagues from Streetscene Services responded to all reports thereby ensuring the health and safety of our tenants and members of the public. Letters were sent to all our tenants living in accommodation with communal areas to remind them of their responsibility to keep communal areas clear and tidy.
20. We also experienced an increase in calls relating to anti-social behaviour between neighbours and claims of people not adhering to the Government's social distancing rules. This proved quite challenging to manage as officers were working from home so with the help of the Neighbourhood Police Team, we addressed these issues either by telephone, email or letter and in the most extreme cases, the Police visited on our behalf.
21. From 23 March 2020 to 4 July 2020 we were unable to facilitate any house moves unless an emergency arose. Since the lifting of restrictions, lettings have commenced again with appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety of our staff and tenants.
22. Our Welfare Support Officer has maintained contact with her customers throughout lockdown via phone, email or letter and liaised with other agencies on their behalf to ensure that existing debts were still paid, or arrangements made.
23. Sheltered Housing Officers have continued to provide support to our elderly and more vulnerable tenants. All communal areas such as community lounges and kitchens have been closed to residents since 23 March 2020 and will remain closed until the Government announces that these restrictions can be lifted. The cleaning of our core Sheltered Housing Schemes has increased to ensure more regular cleaning of touchpoints and communal areas such as the corridors and laundry rooms. Sheltered Housing Officers responsible for a core scheme have remained on site since March undertaking phone welfare checks instead of visiting tenants' flats. The out-of-hours service and emergency service has remained in place and officers have been provided with the appropriate PPE to enable them to undertake visits where absolutely necessary. Visits to our dispersed sheltered schemes by Sheltered Housing Officers were also suspended and replaced by weekly telephone welfare checks. Visits have recently started again with most tenants happy to be visited however some are still very anxious and have continued with a telephone welfare check

BUILDING SERVICES

24. Upon lockdown, the maintenance service immediately moved to delivering urgent and essential repairs and services only. All non-essential reactive repairs were held off, details of repair requests were logged until it was possible to respond in accordance with government guidance. Fortunately, demand for non-essential work was very low during this period and because many contractors furloughed their employees, Council trade operatives were redeployed to work on void properties in a successful effort to provide emergency housing during this period. The Responsive Repairs service desk operators worked from home to manage calls from our tenants and deploy operatives and contractors where appropriate. A core team comprising the Maintenance

Manager, Voids Inspector and Maintenance Surveyor remained at the depot to oversee and support all areas of the service.

25. All planned maintenance was put on hold to concentrate our resources to urgent and essential repairs, and voids.
26. Most of the servicing and compliance work, undertaken by specialist contractors continued in accordance with government guidance, e.g. gas servicing, fire alarm equipment, lift maintenance etc. Periodic electrical inspections were suspended however have now resumed.
27. During the summer, contractors gradually started providing COVID safe risk assessments and method statements to undertake non-essential works in an effort to normalise the service. Our in-house operatives have recently started to undertake works that are 'safe to do' whilst protecting those that are more vulnerable by enabling them to undertake tasks that are outside or limited contact with tenants. However, while the repairs service is quickly moving back to "normal", there are some non-essential tasks are still not safe to do within homes due to the location of the task and proximity to vulnerable tenants.

HOUSING OPTIONS AND HOMELESSNESS

28. Following the start of lockdown, all contact with Housing Options customers was made by telephone or email and a voicemail service was implemented so if contact was made by telephone, customers could leave their details and an officer would call them back. This system is still in operation whilst there is a reduced number of officers working in the Civic Offices. We initially saw a reduction in the number of people contacting the service for housing advice, presumably as a result of the suspension of possession proceedings, however since the commencement of court actions in September 2020 enquiries and requests for help have increased.
29. People experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping are at an increased risk of COVID-19, due to their poor underlying health and difficulties in self-isolating should they contract the virus. Following the Government's 'Everybody In' directive issued on 26 March, FBC sourced and offered accommodation to all known rough sleepers and customers contacting us to say they were threatened with homelessness.
30. Since that date, 49 individuals were provided with emergency accommodation in local hotels and guest houses, Fareham Borough Council voids and other vacant accommodation units. Two individuals continued to refuse offers of accommodation throughout the lockdown period and remained on the streets.
31. The cost of providing this accommodation throughout lockdown has been significant and whilst we received some funding from Government in May and have been able to offset some expenditure through Housing Benefit, the cost has been predominately charged to the Council's General Fund. A small sum of money from Hampshire County Council's Local Welfare Assistance Grant was made available to us for the purchase of basic furniture and equipment where needed.
32. On 2 May, the Government announced a new government taskforce to assist and advise local authorities on plans to support rough sleepers into long-term accommodation once lockdown was lifted. Subsequent to this, the Next Steps Accommodation Programme was launched, aimed at providing financial resources to

local authorities to ensure as few individuals as possible return to the streets following time spent in emergency accommodation as a result of the pandemic. We submitted two bids and have received funding to ensure the longevity of the supported housing scheme in East Street and at the time of writing, we are awaiting a decision on the other bid which will enable us to provide further emergency accommodation in the borough.

33. Settled accommodation has been found for the majority of individuals accommodated during lockdown through a combination of private rented sector tenancies, allocation into social housing, supported housing or sub-let arrangements with Two Saints.
34. Whilst the hostels have plans in place for infection control, there is still a high likelihood of outbreaks as the opportunities for viral containment is minimal. Shared spaces, such as communal lounges and kitchens present challenges to managing risk and relies upon compliance by residents to self-isolate and therefore manage an outbreak. Public Health England have powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to impose proportionate requirements and restrictions on individuals whom they suspect are infected and there is a risk that they will infect others. Use of these powers is a last resort when all other options to support and encourage the individual to self-isolate have been exhausted. To support the need for self-contained accommodation where individuals fail to comply, we are currently keeping four council-owned bedsits empty.
35. All local authorities are required to have adequate provision in place to ensure rough sleepers have access to overnight accommodation during severe weather, especially in winter months. In previous years, Fareham Borough Council and Gosport Borough Council have jointly funded emergency access beds at 101 Gosport Road between November and March as an alternative to B&B. Under current restrictions, this dormitory style arrangement would not be permitted due to the risk of infection in such communal settings therefore alternative provision is currently being investigated. On 13 October 2020, MHCLG wrote to all local authorities confirming additional support would be made available to them to ensure rough sleepers have overnight accommodation during severe weather and we are currently awaiting the detail about how we access this winter funding.

CONCLUSION

36. Whilst social distancing measures remain in place, the Government's metre-plus guidelines have allowed more staff to return to the office and for operational staff to work with greater ease. As a result, most of the Housing services are now operating effectively within the constraints of complying with Government guidance.
37. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-changing guidance continues to provide new challenges for the service. Overall, the service has adapted well to the new way of working and the unprecedented demand placed upon it since March 2020.
38. Our response is largely thanks to the dedication, resilience and flexibility shown by the team throughout this incredibly challenging time.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman (Ext. 4645)