

Minutes of the meeting of the **HOMELESSNESS PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Wednesday, 13 December 2017 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor K E Morris

Councillors: P M Brivio
M D Conolly
N S Kenton
K E Morris
N A G Richards

Officers: Director of Finance, Housing and Community
Head of Strategic Housing
Housing Options Manager
Accounting Technician (Housing and Leasehold)
Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance: Councillor S F Bannister
Councillor R J Frost

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

The Democratic Services Officer advised that, in the absence of Councillor J S Back, the Chairman of the Homelessness Project Advisory Group, there was a requirement to elect a chairman for the meeting.

It was moved by Councillor M D Conolly and duly seconded and

RESOLVED: That Councillor K E Morris be elected Chairman of the meeting.

2 APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Councillors J S Back and B Gardner.

3 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4, Councillors N S Kenton and N A G Richards had been appointed as substitute Members for Councillors J S Back and B Gardner respectively.

4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was noted that there were no declarations of interest.

5 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Group considered the Terms of Reference that had been approved by Cabinet.

RESOLVED: That the Terms of Reference be noted.

6 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

That, under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the remainder of the business on the grounds that the items to be considered involve the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

7 MANAGEMENT OF HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS IN THE DOVER DISTRICT

Members received a presentation from the Director of Finance, Housing and Community. He advised that some of the comparative data and project information were sensitive and should not, therefore, be disclosed.

The Group was advised that there had been an increase in homelessness presentations and acceptances by the Council. These, together with the increased use of temporary (i.e. Bed & Breakfast (B&B) and nightly paid) accommodation, the length of stays in what was expensive accommodation and a shortage of Council and private 'move on' (or permanent) accommodation had placed significant financial pressure on the Council. The cost of B&B and nightly accommodation fell largely on the General Fund, although homeless households or individuals accommodated in such accommodation would be able to claim Universal Credit or Housing Benefit and, as such, the Council could recover some of these costs. Compounding the situation was the fact that the Council had not been very diligent in recovering charges associated with B&B accommodation and benefit payments.

Comparing data with other councils was difficult due to the lack of standardisation in data collection. However, a review undertaken by an independent consultant indicated that the Council was likely to be under-recording homelessness enquiries. This then distorted Dover's figures in such a way that the ratio of acceptances to presentations was very high when compared with neighbouring authorities.

In response to Councillor N A G Richards, the Housing Options Manager estimated that there were 13 rough sleepers in Dover, an annual figure based on information gathered from Porchlight, the night reach shelter and the street pastor. It was acknowledged that some individuals did not wish to interact with the authority or receive help to address their situation.

The Head of Strategic Housing advised that no trend had been detected in more applicants coming from London. Most of those presenting were from the district or neighbouring authorities. There was anecdotal (but no hard) evidence that landlords were being offered better rates from London authorities.

To achieve improvements, internal processes had already been reviewed, and the use of home visits and family mediation would be increased. The Private Sector Housing team was also planning to hold a landlords' forum in February to try and increase the amount of 'move on' accommodation available. Other measures included acceptances being approved at a more senior level and earlier intervention with landlords whose tenancies were coming to an end.

The Housing Options Manager added that more work needed to be done to educate people that council housing was limited and that, even if the Council found emergency accommodation for them, they would be expected to find their own permanent accommodation quickly. The Department for Communities and Local Government had set up a new advisory support team which was due to visit and provide support to Dover. A Senior Housing Options Officer had been recruited and was exploring various schemes and measures, including lodgers and cooperation

with Ashford Borough Council. It was clarified that the Council had plans to establish its own social lettings agency which was considered preferable to using housing associations. At the suggestion of Councillor Richards, she undertook to look at Southern Housing which offered a mix of private and social housing.

The Head of Strategic Housing reported that there had been challenges managing the recovery of income due to the processes associated with Universal Credit. However, the Government had undertaken that, from 1 April, people in temporary accommodation would revert to receiving Housing Benefit which would be paid direct to the landlord. Whilst this change would assist the Council in its budgeting, Universal Credit would continue to be a challenge. That said, improvements had already been made in recovering payments due under Universal Credit or Housing Benefit.

In response to Councillor M D Conolly, the Head of Strategic Housing advised that the independent consultant had worked with the team and did not consider it under-resourced or overloaded, although it was too early to assess the potential impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The Director of Finance, Housing and Community added that the intention was to take stock and try to alleviate the problem using existing resources.

In respect of efforts to increase the amount of alternative accommodation in order to reduce the pressure on the General Fund, Members were advised that options being explored included the leasing of two houses which had recently been refurbished by a charitable organisation. Leasing these would be cheaper than using temporary accommodation and the costs incurred would fall to the Council's Housing Revenue Account. Eight properties had also been purchased for this purpose and another purchase was in the pipeline. In addition, several sites were being considered on which to put modular housing. These dwellings would be permanently sited and used as temporary accommodation. Whilst shared accommodation for single people was also being looked at, there were difficulties related to collection of rent, tenancies, etc.

In response to Councillor K E Morris, the Director of Finance, Housing and Community agreed that there was a need to explore several options in case some proved undeliverable or were subject to delays.

The Senior Housing Options Manager reported on work that had already been undertaken, such as looking at ways to help people aged 35 and under, and attending 'void' meetings to ensure that Council accommodation was moved on quickly. Referring to the presentation, the Group was advised that the number of people in nightly paid accommodation had stayed the same but those in B&B accommodation had gone down, and would decrease further once the January figures were available. The number of housing acceptances had also dropped sharply in October. Updates on these figures, including the proportion of acceptances to presentations, would be given at future meetings.

Councillor Morris commented that income recovery figures also needed to be factored into the savings projected by these projects. The Housing Options Manager advised that, should there prove to be an over-provision of temporary accommodation, properties purchased by the Council for this purpose could be added to the stock of social housing to assist in reducing waiting lists. Councillor Conolly commended the breadth of work and activities by Officers to address homelessness.

The Head of Strategic Housing advised that it was hoped that an Officer would be in place by the end of January to lead on a community-led housing initiative. He acknowledged the benefits of pursuing the 'No Use Empty' scheme. Members were also advised that Officers were working on a tenant incentive scheme which would be advertised on the website and in reception.

In response to Councillor Richards, the Housing Options Manager undertook to follow up complaints that the landlords of some temporary accommodation were turning up without giving advance notice.

In response to Councillor Morris, the Housing Options Manager reassured Members that Officers always looked at the underlying reasons for people presenting as homeless and considered what preventative action could have been taken. However, they often presented to the Council at a stage where it was too late to take such action. Councillor Morris requested that the performance indicators and charts be circulated monthly.

RESOLVED: (a) That a report, including income recovery rates, be circulated monthly.

(b) That the next meeting be held in March.

The meeting ended at 6.50 pm.