

Minutes of the meeting of the **HOMELESSNESS PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Thursday, 9 August 2018 at 5.04 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor J S Back

Councillors: P M Beresford
P M Brivio (Minute Nos 20-27 only)
M D Conolly
B Gardner

Officers: Director of Finance, Housing and Community
Head of Strategic Housing
Housing Options Manager
Senior Housing Options Officer
Democratic Services Officer

20 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor N A G Richards.

21 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4, Councillor B Gardner had been appointed as a substitute member for Councillor N A G Richards.

22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

23 MINUTES

The notes of the meeting of the Group held on 12 April 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

24 HOMELESSNESS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Senior Housing Options Officer (SHOO) presented the report, advising that the use of Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation as temporary and interim accommodation was continuing to reduce, with a more robust approach being taken towards putting people in temporary accommodation. It was clarified that people suffering from domestic abuse were housed in self-contained units rather than B&Bs. The current total for those in B&B and nightly-paid accommodation was 74, with an overall total of 104 in all types of accommodation.

The Housing Options Manager (HOM) advised that, whilst the number of people presenting as homeless could not be controlled, it was encouraging that people were not staying as long in temporary accommodation. Whilst Officers had predicted a spike in applications in the summer months, this had not happened. In response to a query from Councillor M D Conolly regarding trends, the SHOO reported that there had been an increase in applications from families, domestic abuse victims and tenants who were the subject of Section 21 notices. The HOM clarified that if people were accepted as homeless too soon, they were less likely to seek help or do anything themselves. For this reason, the Council waited 56 days

before accepting that it had a duty to house them, as recommended by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. In response to Councillor P M Brivio, it was explained that there was now less emphasis on encouraging tenants who were the subject of a Section 21 notice to stay in a property until a court order had been issued. The SHOO added that in such cases Officers would often negotiate with the landlord with a view to extending the tenant's stay in the property. In response to a query from Councillor Conolly, she undertook to investigate the number of landlords withdrawing from the market as a result of tax changes which she viewed as another pressure on housing capacity.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

25 UPDATE ON HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT

The Group received a paper which gave an overview of the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act. The HOM advised that there had been a 2.7% increase in homeless applications between April and June, with 17 applicants accepted as being homeless. This compared to 38 acceptances during the same period in 2017.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

26 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.

27 HOMELESSNESS AUDIT - DRAFT REPORT

Members received a report on an audit that had been carried out earlier in the year. The HOM reported that a meeting had been held with the East Kent Audit Partnership (EKAP) that morning where most of the audit recommendations had been agreed. EKAP had accepted that changes had been made to address the audit's findings and, in recognition of this, EKAP would be amending its report and assurance levels. The Director of Finance, Housing and Community commented that it had been a constructive audit which had highlighted several areas that were already being addressed. The HOM confirmed that many factors affecting the service were outside Officers' control, including the introduction of Universal Credit which had been challenging to deal with. On this point, it was anticipated that some monies owed through Universal Credit would be recovered.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

28 PROJECTS UPDATE

The Head of Strategic Housing (HSH) presented an update report on a number of projects being progressed by Officers. Plans to establish a social lettings agency had not progressed as well as expected. However, Officers continued to work with Ashford Borough Council on a way forward as it was considered to be a key element in increasing the supply of private rented housing available to the Council, particularly at a time when landlords were leaving the market.

Members were updated on the progress of a project to provide modular homes at three sites in Dover and Deal. In response to Councillor J S Back, the HSH confirmed that the sites would only be developed if it was cost effective to do so. The consultants who were managing the project had indicated that the tender stage could potentially be only a matter of weeks away. Another project on land adjoining The Ark in Dover was progressing but Cabinet sign-off was still needed.

In respect of purchasing properties to provide temporary accommodation, offers on twelve had recently been accepted. With the latest property purchases it was considered that the Council had achieved sufficient capacity to meet its need for temporary accommodation.

The Director of Finance, Housing and Community explained that, before housing finance reform, the Council would have received £100,000 from the sale of a house valued at £200,000 and sold at a 50% discount. The Council had then been required to give 75% of this receipt to the government. As a result of the reform, the Council was now required to give the government the first £300,000 of any 'Right to Buy' receipts and then use some of the receipts to cover outstanding Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt and the cost of sale. The remainder could then be used to replace the houses sold. This meant that, on average, the Council was left with £49,600 per 'Right to Buy' property with which to replace sold properties. However, if not used within three years, the retained 'Right to Buy' receipts had to be handed back to the government. Moreover, there was a further restriction in that the remaining receipts could only comprise 30% of the total spend on a project. Finding the other 70% funding for projects had become more difficult with the imposed reduction in rents and the resultant reduction in HRA surpluses. A further complication was that the monies could not be used if other funding (such as Section 106 monies or grants) was being applied.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 6.05 pm.