

Minutes of the meeting of the **HOMELESSNESS PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Tuesday, 18 December 2018 at 2.03 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor J S Back

Councillors: P M Beresford
P M Brivio
M D Conolly
B Gardner

Also Present: Councillor K E Morris
Mr James Moorhouse (Porchlight)

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

29 APOLOGIES

It was noted that there were no apologies for absence.

30 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that there were no substitute members appointed.

31 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

32 NOTES

The notes of the meeting held on 9 August 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

33 ROUGH SLEEPING REPORT

The Housing Options Manager (HOM) introduced the report and advised that this year's rough sleeper estimate had been based on the number of rough sleepers counted during a sweep carried out by Porchlight during the week before 22 November, as well as on information received from other agencies. This year's return was twenty rough sleepers, an increase of seven on the previous year's total, mirroring a county-wide trend. It was clarified that, unlike Canterbury, Thanet and Maidstone, the Council had not been invited to bid for additional funding from the Government due to its relatively low number of rough sleepers.

Referring to page 4 of the report, the HOM advised that, whilst the Council had been unsuccessful in its bid for 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' funding, it was being considered for three other funding streams. Whilst Canterbury had the highest number of rough sleepers, this probably reflected the fact that it was a city with better facilities.

The HOM advised that the Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) had been triggered for three nights, with four people accommodated during that time in nightly-paid accommodation. The maximum number accommodated in the winter shelter to date had been eleven. It was hoped that at least one or two of these rough sleepers would engage with Porchlight with a view to resolving their problems.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

34 PRESENTATION BY PORCHLIGHT

Mr James Moorhouse advised Members that Dover was currently carrying a vacancy for its one outreach worker which it was hoped would be filled shortly. Outreach workers went out on the streets in the early morning to deal with welfare issues and inform people about the support available. Many homeless people did not choose to live on the streets but were unable to cope with everyday life because of alcohol or drug addiction. Some viewed life on the street as 'better' because it meant that they did not have the responsibilities or pressures associated with 'normal' life. Porchlight's aim was to get them into supported accommodation and linked up to welfare services. As there was a long waiting list for Fern Court, the supported accommodation in Dover, privately rented accommodation was also used. Universal Credit had made the situation worse because rent was no longer paid direct to landlords. It was also sometimes difficult to engage with social services. Where people had no particular link to the area, they were encouraged to go home or to relocate to places with more plentiful accommodation such as Durham and Birmingham.

In response to Councillor J S Back, Mr Moorhouse surmised that Dover's position at the end of the train line and being a port explained why some people with no local connections chose to stay here, particularly those coming back from, or thinking of returning to, Europe. The HOM commented that the same faces turned up regularly, and one or two would probably never be helped.

Mr Moorhouse advised that Porchlight was a charity funded by grants and monies raised by its fund-raising team. It had recently won a contract with Kent County Council to provide services for homeless people in mid and east Kent. He emphasised the importance of preventing people going onto the streets as a result of losing their tenancy. The HOM added that East Kent Housing now had a greater focus on trying to prevent tenancy arrears/evictions.

It was agreed that the presentation be noted.

35 HOMELESSNESS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Senior Housing Options Officer (SHOO) presented the report, advising that twenty applications had been received in November. Although there had been twelve acceptances in the same month, the figures were not necessarily related as the acceptances could relate to applications received before November. Referring to page 7 of the report, she advised that work was being done to address the number of private sector tenancies being brought to an end. There was evidence that this was mainly due to landlords wishing to sell properties rather than increasing the rent. In respect of page 8 of the report, the SHOO explained that an accounting error had led to the November figure for rent arrears being wrong. This had now been corrected. The figures for temporary and interim accommodation for November 2018 were lower than for November the preceding year. This indicated

that Council staff had understood the legislation and implemented it effectively; this had not been the case with some other local authorities.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

36 HOMELESSNESS SERVICE OVERVIEW

The HOM introduced the report which updated Members on actions taken since the homelessness audit conducted earlier in the year. Of the 23 recommendations made by Audit, fifteen were fully completed, five partially completed and three outstanding. The majority of areas originally given limited assurance had now received reasonable assurance. It was recognised that the Housing Options Officers (HOO) had heavy caseloads compared with their peers in other authorities. However, the employment of two apprentices allowed HOOs to focus on the investigative and relief elements of their casework. The SHOO advised that it was proposed to change some of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) reported to the Group since the current KPIs did not reflect legislative changes nor recommendations made by Audit. In summary, the Director of Finance, Housing and Community reported that the Council was offering a good service in terms of protecting the homeless, but was not doing so well on debt recovery.

In response to Councillor M D Conolly, the HOM advised that body cameras were not worn by staff visiting people's homes. The Director of Finance, Housing and Community commented that filming in someone's home would require permission and could prove counterproductive. Following a recent incident, Officers were considering whether the Whitfield reception should be redesigned. However, it was recognised that a balance needed to be struck between staff safety and public access.

It was agreed to recommend: (a) That the proposed changes to the Key Performance Indicators be approved.

(b) That the report be noted.

37 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 item to be considered involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

38 PROJECTS UPDATE

The Head of Strategic Housing (HSH) presented the report which outlined progress on a number of housing projects. In respect of the social lettings agency, it was hoped to meet Ashford Borough Council shortly to try to develop a more realistic proposal.

Councillor J S Back expressed concerns at slow progress and suggested that the housing projects should be split up. The HSH advised that there was a cost advantage in developing all three sites together and procuring project management services for all three. These were substantial projects which needed to be delivered in a way that did not leave the Council open to risk or liability. The sites would need to be surveyed before procurement of the design and build contracts. It was therefore likely to be twelve months before Officers were ready to seek planning

permission. The Director of Finance, Housing and Community advised that a report would go to Cabinet in January which, if approved, would kick-start progress on the development of the Triangles site. The HSH clarified that the site adjoining the Ark in Dover was better suited to prefabricated units due to the limited parking. As a result of property purchases and refurbishment, 42 properties would be in the Council's direct ownership by the end of the year.

The meeting ended at 3.27 pm.