

19 SEPTEMBER 2018

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel held in The Bradbury Room, Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Wednesday, 19 September 2018

* Cllr S P Davies (Chairman)

* Cllr D M S Poole (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

Mrs L D Cerasoli
* Ms K V Crisell
Mrs P J Lovelace
* N S Penman

Councillors:

* Miss A Sevier
* M A Steele
Mrs C V Ward
* Mrs P A Wyeth

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

Mrs S M Bennison
Mrs J L Cleary, Portfolio Holder for Housing Services

Also In Attendance:

Mr P Woodroof, Tenant Representative

Officers Attending:

Miss G O'Rourke, K Green, R Knott, R Stevens, Ms D Tenner, R Thomson and Mrs K Wardle

Apologies

Cllrs Mrs Cerasoli and Mrs Ward.

14 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2018 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

15 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by members in connection with an agenda item.

16 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

17 SHELTERED ACCOMMODATION

The Panel received a presentation on the remodelling of sheltered accommodation. It was noted that the Housing Revenue Account owned 19 older persons' schemes. 16 of these had been decommissioned in order to provide age restricted general needs accommodation. The remodelling of the accommodation included the conversion of communal space into self-contained flats, increasing the number of parking spaces and upgrading hallways, stairwells and landings.

Two remodelling schemes had been completed; one at Marryat Court, New Milton where two additional 1 bedroom self-contained flats had been created with five additional car parking spaces, and the other at Lawrence House in Hythe. This had created two additional 1 bedroom self-contained flats. Work on Wilson Court in Fordingbridge was due to commence creating two additional 1 bedroom flats and two additional car parking spaces. Completion was expected in early January 2019.

Further schemes would be developed in order to address the shortfall of accommodation in the area, in particular for the provision of emergency temporary accommodation.

The Panel expressed their support to the remodelling which had already been carried out and welcomed the progression of further schemes, to include one as emergency accommodation, in a timely manner in order to address the demand for housing.

18 DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY AND DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Panel received a presentation on the emerging Housing Strategy. A key priority was to provide more homes for local people. The draft Local Plan proposed that 10,500 new properties would be built over the next 20 years. The Housing Strategy (which would be aligned with the Local Plan) would seek to promote the creation of balanced communities for residents with a range of housing options that would be both affordable and sustainable. It would also seek to improve the housing circumstances for those most in housing need and to make the best use of housing, including support to the private rented sector to provide high standard properties.

An ambition was to provide 300 new homes in the next five years, in addition to those in the current programme. Various options would be considered in order to achieve this. Further engagement would take place with Homes England with regard to grant support. It was noted that a grant of £800,000 had been awarded from Homes England to the Stocklands scheme in Totton. The National Park Authority would also consider exception sites for social housing. The Council's own land holdings would be reviewed and there was a strong desire to provide more Council owned emergency and temporary accommodation.

The issue of B&B premises for sale on the open market and whether these could be used for temporary accommodation was raised. It was noted that planning permission would be required to change the use of any B&B accommodation.

The standard of properties in the private rented sector was discussed. It was noted that Environmental Health was responsible for enforcing any shortfalls. Relevant statistics could be provided to the Panel at a future meeting.

The draft Homelessness Strategy which would set the scene for the next four years was outlined. It would be reviewed annually.

The Strategy would set out how the Council would improve outcomes for homeless households, what applicants could expect from the Council, and how rough sleeping would be tackled with the aim to end rough sleeping by 2027. The Strategy would also set out how the Council would prevent homelessness.

19 HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY REVIEW

The Council was required by law to have an allocation scheme to determine priorities and procedures for the allocation of housing. The current banding system under the Council's existing policy was tabled. It was noted that 10 out of 11 applicants on the housing register were in "Priority" Band 3. It was not uncommon for applicants to wait 10 years before they were successful in a bid for a council property.

The Panel received some case studies of applicants demonstrating how allocations were currently made. It was noted that the examples were of applicants in current "priority" band 3 to demonstrate that changes were required in light of the different housing needs of individuals. Properties were largely allocated to applicants who had been on the waiting list for the longest period of time. The Panel recognised that housing need was an important factor when allocating housing. Each year only 300 properties would become available and the proposed draft Allocation Policy would seek to allocate housing to those most in need.

The main changes proposed to the Allocation Policy were presented to the Panel. There would be no change to the local connection, nor to Rural Parish allocations. Four housing bands were proposed which sought to address housing need ranging from those with an urgent need for housing to lower priority groups. It was anticipated that there would be a greater spread of applicants within the proposed housing bands than under the current policy, where most applicants were in Priority Band 3. The proposed bands had been discussed by the Homelessness Task and Finish Group and had been supported and would be brought back to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 21 November 2018 for further consideration.

20 UNIVERSAL CREDIT

A presentation was given to the Panel regarding Universal Credit, which incorporated six working age benefits. This included, for example, jobseeker's allowance, income support and housing benefit. The changes and roll out period were explained. It was noted that Universal Credit had been introduced in Hythe in June this year and was expected to go live in Lymington and Ringwood on 26 September 2018. Migration from legacy benefits to Universal Credit was due to be piloted from January 2019. Full migration was due to start nationally from July 2019. This would be a phased approach with details to be confirmed. Those in receipt of benefits would be contacted six months before they needed to make the whole new claim required for Universal Credit. Awareness needed to be raised to ensure that claimants knew that their benefits would stop if they did not apply. In the majority of cases the housing benefit element would be paid directly to the claimant. There was a concern that landlords in the private rented sector would be more reluctant to rent to those on Universal Credit as a result of uncertainty over the payment of rent. It was noted that the Council had trained staff members and had engaged with stakeholders to smooth the transition process.

Members asked whether it would be possible to send out a “red letter” to council tenants who would need to apply for Universal Credit. If feasible, this would be done as part of a wider exercise to ensure applications were made on time.

The success of the roll out of Universal Credit in Hythe was noted. This was a credit to the team for the hard work they had done in the period leading up to the roll out. It was noted that Job Centres did not provide assistance to fill in the entire application form.

A computer terminal to be located at Appletree Court and potentially at other local offices to enable people to make a claim for Universal Credit had been proposed, however IT issues needed to be fully considered to ensure that the Council’s IT systems could not be accessed and compromised.

21 USE OF RECEIPTS FROM RIGHT TO BUY SALES

The Panel received a presentation on the background to Right to Buy properties. In 2011/12 there had been only 10 sales under the right to buy. In March 2012, however there had been an HRA Finance Settlement whereby the District Council had bought itself out of the housing subsidy system and had borrowed and paid over to the Government £142.7 m for this purpose. This had been based on an assumption of seven Right to Buy sales per annum. The Government had subsequently increased the Right to Buy discounts to reinvigorate the scheme and had introduced a commitment requiring one for one housing replacement. It had also offered Local Authorities the opportunity to sign an agreement to retain housing receipts and use the money locally, which NFDC had done.

In 2017/18 there had been 32 Right to Buy sales. The Government only allowed receipts to be kept under certain conditions, for example, they had to be reinvested in additional affordable housing. If they were not spent within three years they had to be paid back to the Government with interest. NFDC had only £216,000 of unspent receipts. Much work was being done in order to provide additional affordable housing.

The Government was consulting on the “Use of receipts from Right to Buy Sales”. The Panel discussed the questions within the consultation paper. A number of the issues raised in the paper, such as extending the time to spend right to buy receipts, whilst supported, would not affect the Council as all receipts were expected to be spent within the current time frames. Other issues regarded flexibility around the receipts, which were welcomed. Views, however, were being sought regarding a restriction on the use of receipts on acquisition of property and whether a price cap per dwelling on average build cost should be introduced. This could affect the Council’s ability to purchase properties and would not be welcomed.

It was noted that the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services would respond to the consultation.

22 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S UPDATE

As the items already dealt with at the meeting, covered the main areas of activity within housing services, the Portfolio Holder had nothing to add.

23 WORK PROGRAMME

It was noted that a special meeting of the Panel had been arranged for 21 November 2018, to which members of the Homelessness Task and Finish Group had been invited. This meeting would consider the draft Housing Policies and Strategies.

It was agreed that:

- the Housing Maintenance Policy and updates on property acquisition and remodelling of properties would be included for the meeting on 16 January 2019; and
- the responses to the consultations on the housing policies and strategies would be included for the meeting on 20 March 2019.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be updated as reflected above.

24 DATES OF MEETINGS 2019/20

RESOLVED:

That the following meeting dates for 2019/20 be agreed:

19 June 2019
18 September 2019
15 January 2020
18 March 2020

CHAIRMAN