
Housing and Health Committee

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Tuesday, 12 September 2023 from 7.00 pm - 8.21 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Hayden Brawn, Ann Cavanagh, Kieran Golding, Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison (Chair), Peter Marchington, Ben J Martin, Tom Nundy, Chris Palmer, Richard Palmer (Substitute for Councillor Lloyd Chapman), Hannah Perkin, Karen Watson (Vice-Chair) and Tony Winckless (Substitute for Councillor Angie Valls).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Billy Attaway, Charlotte Hudson, Glyn Pritchard and Roxanne Sheppard.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (VIRTUALLY): Councillor Dolley Wooster.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Lloyd Chapman, Pete Neal and Angie Valls.

275 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Chair outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

276 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Ben J Martin declared a Pecuniary Interest with respect to Item 6, Housing Assistance Policy Review, and left the council chamber during the discussion.

277 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 4 July 2023 (Minute Nos. 170 – 177) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

Part B Minutes for Information

278 **Forward Decisions Plan**

The Head of Housing and Communities advised Members that a waiver for the Nightly Let Procurement would be added to the forward decisions plan for decision at the next Housing and Health Committee.

279 **Housing Assistance Policy Review**

The Head of Housing and Communities introduced the report which provided an overview of the current Housing Assistance Policy that was adopted by Cabinet in May 2018. She said the Cabinet Decision provided delegations for minor amendments to be made to the policy by the Head of Service in consultation with the Cabinet Member and the policy had been subject to minor changes, with the last small amendment being made in 2021.

The Private Sector Housing Manager commented on the small amendments to the policy which included changes to the means testing when granting funding applications and setting certain levels of grants to speed the process of the applications. He added that as part of the policy review, members were being asked to form a working group and agree the scope of the review.

The Chair recommended that Councillors Ann Cavanagh, Chris Palmer, Hannah Perkin and Karen Watson form the members working group. This was seconded by Councillor Cavanagh and on being put to the vote, was agreed.

The Chair invited members to make comments on the policy, which included:

- References to the timeframe of when assistance works would be completed would be useful to residents;
- how much of the funds could be recycled back into the Capital budget?; and
- it was important to ensure that the policy was accessible to everyone.

The Private Sector Housing Manager clarified that the Council could only recover up to £10,000 for a loan, and that any recoverable funds would be recycled back into the Capital budget to help fund any future loan applications. He added that the Council had a statutory six month period to process an application and considered it would be difficult to change the timeframe of completion of the works as this was down to the contracted builder. The Private Sector Housing Manager said that assessments had to be undertaken before the contractors started the works and he hoped the Members working group could consider the paperwork required to carry out the assessments and speed up the process.

Resolved:

(1) That Councillors Ann Cavanagh, Chris Palmer, Hannah Perkin and Karen Watson form a working group to support the policy review.

(2) That the terms of reference as set out at 2.9 of the report be agreed.

280 Temporary Accommodation Spend

The Head of Housing and Communities introduced the report which outlined the spend on Temporary Accommodation during 2022/23 and the current controls that were in place to manage the budget. The Head of Housing and Communities reminded members that it was a statutory responsibility of the Council to provide temporary accommodation.

The Housing Options Manager referred members to paragraph 2.10 of the report which outlined the increased rental costs as well as landlords leaving the rental market due to the cost of living increasing. She outlined that the current Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates had been frozen for several years and were one of the main reasons why people could not afford their rent. On average a 3-bed property in Sittingbourne was currently £1,350 per month and the LHA rate was £848, and in Sheerness the average rent for a 3-bed property was £1,200 per month with the same £848 LHA. Families across Swale were struggling to pay rent as well as pay for food which had contributed to the rising costs of temporary accommodation.

The Chair asked members to look and consider the interventions outlined in Appendix I and suggest any other interventions that officers could pursue. Comments raised included:

- The Council had to find ways to fund temporary accommodation, turning away people was not an option;
- did officers talk to Landlords and estate agents to keep residents in their homes?;
- were there any potential temporary accommodation properties that the Council could invest in;

- could officers work with housing associations to educate people in temporary accommodation about the importance of budgeting and paying rent?;
- the Council needed to look at utilising charities that helped people move;
- could officers put forward people in temporary accommodation for apprenticeships that historically were difficult to fill, such as plumbing?;
- could councillors help by lobbying government to increase the LHA rates?;
- recognised that it was hard for housing associations to refurbish properties when the government's energy requirements made it too expensive for the required refurbishment;
- it was important for the government to start looking at the LHA rates and ensuring they rose in line with inflation;
- there were long-term issues that caused funding gaps but thought that officers were doing a great job with the resources they had; and
- the market had to come down at some point so hoped that the Council would be able to take that opportunity to take stock of their own temporary accommodation.

In response the Housing Options Manager said that the Prevention Team were constantly having conversations with Landlords and Estate Agents to keep people in their homes. She added that the team first checked that any notices of evictions or notices of increased rent were done lawfully, then worked with the landlords and the residents to find ways of keeping them in their homes.

The Head of Housing and Communities said that now there was an opportunity for lobbying from members before the autumn 2023 statement. Officers could look at a better working relationship with housing associations to educate people in the borough better. She said they already had regular meetings with Southern Housing's senior management to raise the issue of selling stock and they were encouraged to reinvest in the borough.

The Chair thanked officers for all their hard work in managing the budget for temporary accommodation.

Resolved:

(1) That the current spend on Temporary Accommodation and the current mitigation measures in place at Appendix I of the report be noted.

Chair

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel