

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (CUSTOMERS AND PARTNERSHIPS) held in the Civic Suite 0.1A, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Thursday, 6th February 2020

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs A Dickinson – Chairman.

Councillors B S Banks, R E Bellamy, S Bywater, J W Davies, D A Giles, Mrs S Smith and Mrs J Tavener.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors T D Alban, S J Criswell, Ms A Diaz and Mrs S R Wilson.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors R Fuller and J P Morris.

53 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9th January 2020 was approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

54 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

55 NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel received and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which has been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st February 2020 to 31st May 2020.

56 HOMELESSNESS REVIEW AND STRATEGY

With the aid of report by the Housing Needs and Resources Manager (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) the Homelessness Review and Strategy was presented to the Panel. The Executive Councillor for Housing and Economic Development introduced the report and in doing so informed Members that the Homelessness Strategy was not due to be updated until 2022 but as the area had evolved it was thought to be beneficial to update it before then.

The Panel was informed that what had happened in Huntingdonshire was what had happened nationally in that there had been an increase in homelessness since 2010 but the number of homelessness cases had plateaued since 2015/16.

Members were acquainted with the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act and were informed that during the first year of the Act 2 out of 3 potential homelessness situations were successfully prevented. Also, over half of the successful preventions allowed the household to remain in their current home.

Subsequently there had been a downward trend of households placed in temporary accommodation.

It was clarified that the Council's strategy was to intervene at an early stage in order to prevent households from becoming homeless but also to ensure that there was a supply of affordable housing solutions for households. The Executive Councillor confirmed that the Council was attempting to move away from using temporary accommodation.

Councillor Davies enquired about the advice Members should give their residents if they are facing homelessness and was informed that if Members are approached then they should advise residents to approach the Council as Officers might be able to prevent them from becoming homeless. The Panel was informed that the prevention work included engagement with landlords because frequent causes of homelessness were their decisions to raise rents, terminate tenancies or sell their properties. It was noted that another aspect of preventing homelessness was the loan or bond scheme to help homeless households pay upfront rental costs for a home in the private rented sector.

Concern was expressed, by Councillor Mrs Smith, that the rough sleeping estimate had failed to capture the true number of rough sleepers in Huntingdonshire. However, the Panel was informed that the evidence gathered for the estimates came from many different agencies, which worked with, or were aware of, rough sleepers in Huntingdonshire. Members were assured that the Council was aware of the individuals who rough sleep, but engagement was challenging as some individuals had complex needs or choose to sleep rough. The Panel was informed that the launch of a street outreach service in December 2019 would allow more intensive work with rough sleepers to address a range of issues such as health and benefits issues as well as attempting to assist them off the streets.

A question was raised by Councillor Mrs Smith regarding sofa surfers and how the Council identifies them. Members were informed that individuals, including sofa surfers, had to self-identify as homeless with the Council or another agency to be registered as such, however if they do not self-identify then the Council are unaware of them. The Panel were advised that they would not be included in the estimates of rough sleepers as they are not street homeless.

Councillor Bywater commented that it was a difficult area to manage and the Council could only work with the data available to it. He added that he thought it was about minimising the risk and thought that the Homelessness Strategy was a good strategy which achieved this aim.

The Panel discussed the Council's engagement with further education in this area. It was noted that further education do not necessarily record details of pupils that may have insecure accommodation and engage with the Council on this, but there are future workstreams which could include engagement with further education to determine if this information might be available and could be acted upon.

The status of homeless EU nationals was raised in light of Brexit. The Panel was informed that currently things remain as they were but that in time a new immigration policy would be put in place which will determine the course of action

for homeless EU nationals. In addition to this, EU nationals can apply for settled status in the UK but that there were a number of criteria to meet before it is granted.

Councillor Giles asked if it was more prudent for the Council to spend money on a hostel. In response, Members were informed that it was the Council's aim to move away from using temporary accommodation and place people in fit and healthy accommodation. In addition, there were the practicalities of owning a hostel in respect to moving individuals and families out of their communities and having the additional challenges for those individuals in getting to work or taking the children to school. The Panel was also informed that the net cost of homelessness included money that cannot be recovered from Government. The Council paid Housing Benefit to households in temporary accommodation but due to the regulations not all of this can be reclaimed through Government. This would be the case irrespective of who owned the accommodation and so the Council owning a hostel would not reduce these costs.

Councillor Morris raised a concern about the high number of empty Ministry of Defence (MOD) properties across the District. It was reported that 23% of the MOD housing stock was empty nationally which is above their target of having only 10% empty at any one time. Councillor Morris asked, in view of the increasing homelessness and housing pressures within Huntingdonshire, what action the Council was taking to encourage the MOD to bring some of their long-term properties back into use. The Executive Councillor stated that the Council have approached the MOD with an aim of using their properties as temporary accommodation, however the MOD have stated that they do not want to release them in case of a change in operational requirements. In addition, it was noted that there was a financial risk to the Council if the decision was taken to take some MOD properties as the Council could only do this on the basis that the MOD could take them back if they required them. This would mean that the Council could spend up to £7m on updating the properties to a habitable standard only for the MOD to then take them back if their operational requirements changed. Following a question about Council Tax, the Panel was informed that the MOD does make a payment for empty properties.

RESOLVED

- a) that the priorities highlighted in the report now submitted be endorsed and
- b) that the Cabinet be recommended to approve the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Review and Strategy 2020 as a consultation document and authorise for the Chief Operating Officer, after consultation with the Executive Leader, to adopt the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Review and Strategy 2020 after reviewing consultation responses.

57 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Panel.

Members received an update from the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) on the Environmental Enforcement study.

(At 7.57pm, during the discussion of this item, Councillor R Fuller left the meeting and did not return.)

(At 7.58pm, during the discussion of this item, Councillor J P Morris left the meeting and did not return.)

Chairman