

DORSET COUNCIL - PEOPLE AND HEALTH OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 27 OCTOBER 2020

Present: Cllrs Andrew Kerby (Chairman), Pauline Batstone (Vice-Chairman), Tony Alford, Pete Barrow, Toni Coombs, Ryan Holloway, Stella Jones and Rebecca Knox

Also present: Cllrs Graham Carr-Jones (Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety, Laura Miller (Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health) Andrew Parry (Portfolio Holder for Children, Education, Skills and Early Help) and Peter Wharf (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Development and Change).

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

Sharon Attwater (Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Performance), Andrew Billaney (Interim Corporate Director for Housing), Vivienne Broadhurst (Interim Executive Director - People Adults), Richard Conway (Service Manager for Housing Standards), Sarah How (Service Manager for Housing Solutions), Theresa Leavy (Executive Director of People - Children), Steve March (Senior Environmental Health Officer) and Helen Whitby (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

9. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Robin Legg and Daryl Turner.

10. Declarations of Interest

Cllrs Pauline Batstone declared an interest in minute 13 as an owner of a property she rented. They had not been part of the discussions with landlords referred to in the report.

11. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2020 were confirmed. The Chairman would sign them at the earliest opportunity.

12. Public Participation

There were no statements or questions from Town and Parish Councils and members of the public.

13. Dorset Council Housing Allocations Policy 2021-2026

The Committee considered a report by the Interim Executive Director of People - Adults which outlined the process in drafting the new Dorset Housing Allocations Policy.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety introduced the report highlighting the need for the Council to adopt a Housing Allocations Policy by 2022 and the consultation undertaken. The new Policy had been drafted with the assistance of the Executive Advisory Panel and would replace those of the previous sovereign Councils.

The Policy is established to ensure the allocation of tenancies is carried out fairly and in accordance with the law. It aims to ensure fair and efficient management of the stock and a scheme that is accessible to those households in housing need. The wider questions on how to respond to housing need are being addressed in current work towards a Homelessness Strategy and an overarching Housing Strategy. The new Policy would reflect the Corporate Strategy. The Committee were asked to recommend the Policy and a delegation for the Portfolio Holder to make any necessary minor amendments to the Cabinet.

The Committee then received additional information about the Policy from the Interim Corporate Director for Housing. He explained the approach taken in preparing the policy, the consultation process and the proposed next steps. He highlighted that the Allocations Policy would form part of wider work to develop a Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy for Dorset Council.

The Chairman commented that he had researched the approach taken by other Local Authorities and commended the policy for its thoroughness and quality. Members raised various questions and commented on: monitoring; performance measures; activities taking place; that people should not be given false hope of gaining a property by registering; what "local" meant in the Dorset Council area; the possibility of parish councils having an opportunity to influence allocations in their area; schemes to encourage people to move to more appropriate sized accommodation; whether the financial resource limit of £60K was correct for people to be eligible to apply to the housing register and whether any formula was used to set this level.

The Committee asked that information about how and where the Policy would be monitored and reported should be included and asked for this to be reported to the Committee at a later date.

Members noted that there was to be a quarterly housing briefing to be produced for members, people were given information about alternative accommodation they could pursue, that parish councils could have more input at the planning stage of any developments in their area, and officers would discuss a scheme to incentivise people to move from larger family homes (when their families had moved away) with Registered Social Landlords.

Members thanked officers for the work undertaken in producing the Policy and unanimously:-

Recommended

That the Cabinet endorse the Policy, noting the work of the Executive Advisory Panel and recommend to Full Council:

1. the adoption of the Housing Allocation Policy
2. delegation of authority to the portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety to make minor amendments to the Policy and any amendments necessary to reflect legislative change.

Reason for Recommendations

To ensure Dorset Council has a legally compliant Housing Allocation Policy that meets the needs of the residents.

Decision

That information about how and where the Policy would be monitored and reported should be included and asked for this to be reported to the Committee at a later date.

14. Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for determining Financial Penalties 2020-2025

The Committee considered a report by the Interim Executive Director of People - Adults on the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for determining Financial Penalties 2020-2025.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety introduced the report by explaining that the Housing Standards Team had responsibility for responding to poor housing conditions and had a range of enforcement powers to ensure that accommodation provided was safe and met the minimum standards. The new policy was not significantly different from those of the previous sovereign councils.

It was noted that officers were carrying out more pro-active enforcement work with regard to empty properties and now had capital to progress compulsory purchase orders (CPO) when owners were reluctant to bring empty properties back into use. This approach meant that more owners were engaging with officers without the need for CPOs. Members also noted a project was underway across Dorset whereby letting agents were encouraged to assess and market properties correctly with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and improve them if they failed to meet the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard. A project of targeted enforcement was also commencing in Weymouth to tackle aspects of the poor private rented sector.

With regard to the risk assessment for the policy being low, it was explained steps to mitigate risk and ensure the correct procedures were followed. Hence the risk was identified as low.

Members noted that of the 300 formal complaints received in 2019-2020, 40 resulted in formal notices being served and only 10-15 of them resulted in notices for work to be carried out. Many of the formal complaints were resolved informally but there were cases where the tenant's perception of the problem was high when the risk to health was low. There was the chance that these are cases typically received as complaints by local councillors.

Members suggested that statistics around informal and other action which were currently not recorded and which would reflect positively on the service and policy should be collected. In response officers confirmed that information about informal actions which led to improvements was captured and that this could be shared with members following the meeting.

With regard to whether information gathered by people visiting properties was being shared, it was explained that the project in Weymouth, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, helped identify high risk properties which would then be inspected to ensure improvements were undertaken. The information gained through the project could be used in other areas at a future date. It was recognised that more could be done to cross reference information in order to target enforcement activity.

A member asked whether the team were included in the work of the Safe and Independent Living (SAIL) scheme whereby agencies visiting people's homes could ask other agencies to assist a person or family in need of support. It was confirmed that the team were part of this scheme and there was good join up between directorates and other partners.

With regard to whether a tenant might be put in a worse situation whilst improvements were being made, it was explained that enforcement action took into account the views of the tenant and the owner in order to arrive at the appropriate decision as to whether the tenant could remain safely in the property or an alternative needed to be found.

It was highlighted that the recommendation referred to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee rather than the Overview Committee and this change was noted.

The Committee supported the adoption of the policy.

Recommended

That the Cabinet adopt the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for determining Financial Penalties 2020-2025.

Reason for Recommendation

In April 2020 all existing Housing Enforcement Policies novated to the new Dorset Council. These policies remain in force until 31st March 2021 or until a new policy supersedes them.

The formation of Dorset Council on the 1 April 2019 required that the Council adopt one new Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for determining Financial Penalties across the new council area.

The new policy is not significantly different from those of the original sovereign councils. They have been amalgamated and updated to reflect changes in legislation and good practice.

15. **Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy**

The Committee considered a report by the Interim Executive Director of People - Adults on the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety introduced the report explaining that the previous sovereign councils each had different policies which meant there were inconsistencies across Dorset. The new policy would address these inconsistencies. The main changes were summarised in Appendix 2 to the report. Once approved, the policy would be publicised to encourage take up.

As to whether the assistance scheme could be used in conjunction with commercial borrowing, it was explained that the loans were targeted towards people who may have been refused commercial loans or find it difficult to access credit. Loans therefore have an element of risk attached to them but default levels are currently very low because Lendology CIC offer a range of repayment options to suit the applicant's circumstances..

With regard to whether any thought had been given to providing loans to foster carers or potential foster carers in order for them to be able to adapt their homes to facilitate this, it was explained that this could be considered under Recommendation 2 but had not been considered as part of the policy. Several members supported this suggestion. The Interim Corporate Director for Housing stated that he would take this and the broader question of support for foster carers and their housing requirements up with Children's Services officers.

The Committee supported the new policy.

Recommended

That the Cabinet:

1. Adopt the Dorset Council Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy.
2. agree that authority be delegated to the Corporate Director Housing and Community Safety in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing to:
 - (a) make minor amendments to the policy to comply with legislation and guidance;
 - (b) suspend the approval of any discretionary housing assistance offered in this policy;
 - (c) introduce new assistance to help private residential property should funding become available.

Reason for Recommendation

The Council is required by law to adopt and publish a policy detailing any assistance it wishes to offer to improve private residential property.

The formation of Dorset Council requires that a new Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy is adopted. On the 1 April 2019 policies from the original sovereign councils novated to Dorset Council. Generally, these policies are similar but not identical and therefore there are inconsistencies in some areas of assistance offered. A summary of the main changes to existing policies is shown in Appendix 2 of this report.

Financial assistance has several aims. It is targeted to:

- Improve the quality of the housing stock in Dorset
- Improve the ability of disabled people to access their property
- Reduce carbon emissions
- Improve people's health.
- Allow the Council to take advantage of and facilitate the uptake of external funding.

16. Committee's Forward Plan and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Committee considered its Forward Plan and that of the Cabinet.

The Chairman had asked Portfolio Holders to indicate whether there were any areas they wished to the Committee to address, some had responded to this request, others not. This gave the Committee a chance to look at items they wished to pursue. He hoped to be able to take this forward via an on-line facility.

A member reminded the Committee that some of the current Executive Advisory Panels (EAP) were due to report to the Committee at some point. Of particular importance was that focusing on the transition from child to adulthood as this transition needed to be seamless. It was agreed that an item on Transitions would be added to the Forward Plan for the meeting on 14 December 2020. It was noted that the EAP on Transitions had not yet met and that the Cabinet had recently taken a decision to wind up the current EAPs now that the new Scrutiny and Overview arrangements were in place.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety had asked the Committee to be involved in the development of the Council's Homelessness Strategy.

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health reminded the Committee that she now had two Lead Members, one of who would be contacting chairmen view a view to helping shape overview and scrutiny work so that the best value could be obtained from these Committees. She agreed with the importance of the transition from child to adulthood and was hoping to develop effective partnership working to address this.

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Development and Change referred to the EAP on Reset and Recovery which had just produced its final report. This had been referred to the Chairman of the People and Health and Place and Resources Overview Committees to consider the best way forward.

The Chairman raised the issue of timing, capacity and resources for any workshops which may need to be held to take matters forward.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education, Skills and Early Help thanked the Committee for including assistance for foster carers within the housing policies previously discussed. He also suggested that the Committee might like to hold an inquiry day into young people's mental health and wellbeing as this was consistently highlighted by them as an issue. He wanted the Council to have a mechanism by which their concerns could be taken into account so that any crises could be dealt with as speedily as possible.

Decisions

1. That an item on the Transition from Child to Adulthood would be considered at the meeting on 14 December 2020.
2. That an inquiry day to look at young people's mental health and wellbeing be added to the Forward Plan.
3. That the need to take forward work arising from the EAP on Reset and Recovery be noted.
4. The request from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety for the Committee to be involved in the development of the Council's Homelessness Strategy be added to the Forward Plan.

17. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

18. Exempt Business

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 am - 12.05 pm

Chairman

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