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PEOPLE AND HEALTH OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2025

Present: Cllrs Beryl Ezzard (Chair), Louise Bown (Vice-Chair), Jindy Atwal, Alex Fuhrmann, Ryan Holloway, Stella Jones, Steve Murcer, Jon Orrell, Mike Parkes and Byron Quayle

Also present: Cllr Alex Brenton, Cllr Steve Robinson and Cllr Gill Taylor

Also present remotely: Cllr Jane Somper

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

Andrew Billany (Corporate Director for Housing), George Dare (Senior Democratic and Governance Officer), Sam Poole (Interim Corporate Director for Commissioning & Improvement), Andy Frost (Service Manager for Community Safety), Ian Grant (Programme Coordinator), Steven March (Service Manager for Housing Standards) and Louis Wicks (Democratic Services Officer Apprentice)

19. Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

20. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

21. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2025 were confirmed and signed.

22. Public Participation

There was no public participation.

23. Councillor Questions

Two questions were submitted by a councillor, with responses given by the Cabinet Member for Health and Housing. The responses to the questions are attached to these minutes.

24. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

25. **Empty Homes Strategy**

The Cabinet Member for Health and Housing introduced the Empty Homes Strategy. The strategy had been developed in partnership with stakeholders, with a member Task & Finish group contributing to the strategy development. The Strategy set out all the options available for empty homes to be brought back into use, with enforcement being used as a last resort.

The committee discussed the financial aspects of the report, including £600k capital reducing to £500k per year in 2028/29, and the staffing capacity of the team to deal with the number of empty homes. The capital funding used to purchase empty-homes could be reinvested when the property is disposed. There was wide support from the committee to increase staffing capacity and investment levels, to bring more empty homes back into use.

Proposed by Cllr A Fuhrmann, seconded by Cllr R Holloway.

Decision:

To recommend to Cabinet that the Empty Homes Strategy budget is maintained and that priority be made into increasing staff capacity

In addition to this discussion, members asked questions of the officers, and the following points were raised:

- A compulsory purchase of an empty property would be a last resort, and some owners may want to sell their property to the council. Some empty properties could be repurposed by the council, or they could be sold within a few months.
- There were checks and balances to ensure value for money, which included internal process, a capital strategy board which assesses cost effectiveness, there were also groups which checked rates and tendering, as well as a responsibility of the Director of Housing to have oversight of projects.
- One compulsory purchase order had been made since 2021, however it was likely this would be needed again in the future and other legal remedies were possible, such as compulsory leasing.

Proposed by Cllr R Holloway, seconded by Cllr J Atwal.

Decision:

To recommend to Cabinet that it approves the adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy.

26. **Dorset Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025-2028**

The Domestic Abuse Programme Manager introduced the report. The Domestic Abuse Strategy was developed in conjunction with the Community Safety Partnership, which sought to avoid duplication and build upon existing work. He reflected on the progress made through the previous Domestic Abuse Strategy

and that the new strategy gave an opportunity to build upon work already undertaken to tackle domestic abuse over the next 3 years.

Committee members asked questions of the officers, and the following points were raised:

- In order to reach people affected by domestic abuse, there are local communication campaigns and national campaigns throughout the year.
- An initiative called the Dragonfly Project was a community-based domestic abuse awareness programme which trained community champions. Information about the project would be circulated to all members.
- The Safeguarding Families Together project and using talks in schools on healthy relationships were both used to prevent domestic abuse in young people.
- The strategy and its outcomes would be monitored through a delivery plan and performance measures, with formal monitoring through the Community Safety Partnership.
- Deprivation could be a contributor to domestic abuse; however domestic abuse could happen in all households.

Proposed by Cllr R Holloway, seconded by Cllr J Atwal.

Decision:

That the Committee recommend to Cabinet that the Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025-28 be approved.

27. **Age Friendly Communities**

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care introduced the report which encompassed a vision for Age Friendly Communities. It would build upon the work of the Thriving Communities programme. There would be differences to the implementation of Age Friendly Communities across the county, due to the differences between local areas. The Corporate Director for Commissioning and Improvement outlined the recommendations in the report.

Members discussed the report and raised the following points:

- How the age-friendly communities programme would be promoted.
- How decision-making could become more age friendly.
- There was a strong funding case for age friendly communities.
- External funding for specific age-friendly work was available.
- The vision for outcomes was that older people felt part of society more. Suggestions to measure this were social participation, better use of community transport, volunteer engagement rates, and the key performance indicators for entering into care.
- There was a concern that there was not enough meaning to age-friendly communities, and there needed to be more resources for it to be meaningful.

- There was an aspiration for a site in Bridport to be built as an age-friendly community.

During the discussion, the committee made the following recommendations.

Proposed by Cllr R Holloway, seconded by Cllr A Fuhrmann.

Decision: To recommend to Cabinet that it promotes Age Friendly Communities through local charities, businesses, faith groups, and local councils.

Proposed by Cllr A Fuhrmann, seconded by Cllr R Holloway.

Decision: To recommend that an Age Friendly Wheel be a part of every council report in the same way as equalities and environment is currently presented.

The recommendations set out in the report were proposed by Cllr R Holloway and seconded by Cllr J Atwal.

Decision:

That the committee recommend to Cabinet that it:

1. Endorses Dorset's application for Age Friendly accreditation by the World Health Organisation (WHO).
2. Endorses the integration of Age-Friendly principles into whole council strategy and planning considerations including Adult Social Care locality practice, commissioning and strategic planning.
3. Through the Council's OFC programme (Commissioning & Procurement & Community Partnerships Programmes), integrates age friendly principles into design of infrastructure, transport, housing, and public spaces.

28. Committee's Work Programme and Executive Forward Plans

The Committee noted their work programme and the executive forward plans.

29. Exempt Business

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 6.30 - 8.50 pm

Chairman

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**People and Health Overview Committee
15 September 2025
Questions from Councillors**

Question 1 - Submitted by Cllr Robin Legg

Newell House, Sherborne has been unoccupied for more than two decades. It is becoming increasingly derelict and a location for antisocial behaviour. Only last week the police wrote to Dorset of their concerns and warned that the Fire and Rescue Service regard the listed building as at high risk of arson attack. How will the proposed empty homes strategy be used to bring Newell House into residential occupation?

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

It would not be appropriate to discuss details of a specific case in a public forum. It is a matter of public knowledge that Newell House is a former school building which has been unoccupied for some considerable time. The strategy being brought before members is focussed on domestic accommodation only and specifically excludes action in relation to non-domestic buildings and dwellings. Whereas Councils have specific powers to deal with long term empty residential dwellings, corresponding specific legal provisions are not available for non-domestic buildings, who's reuse is generally subject to market forces. Despite this, the Council is aware of this building and action has been taken by Building Control, Conservation and the Housing Standards Team to liaise with the owner, secure the site, and protect against unauthorised entry. Dealing with buildings/land of this type, on this scale, sits outside of this strategy, and requires specific corporate funding and a multi-disciplinary team to assess and mitigate financial and other risks, to assess any viable way forward.

Question 2 - Submitted by Cllr Robin Legg

Recently the BBC conducted a survey of local authorities to establish the number of long term empty homes in each and whether the problem was getting worse. The article inferred that many authorities were more interested in the increased council tax revenue generated by empty properties than solving the empty homes crisis. Dorset's response to the BBC's Freedom of Information enquiry showed a significant deterioration between 2019 and 2025. The number of homes empty for at least twelve months rose from 6,404 to 7,716 in that five year period. An increase of 20.5%. Long term empty commercial properties saw an even steeper increase of 55.0% How can members be confident therefore that the empty homes strategy proposed by officers will bring improvement?

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

The Council's Empty Homes Strategy is a positive local response to what is a national issue. As with a lot of statistics, such data needs to be treated with caution. The above figures, likely obtained directly from the Council Tax baseline data, define empty properties as those unoccupied for 12 months or more (paying the long-term council tax empty home premium). 12 months is a short period empty, and based on our experience this data will include a considerable amount of 'churn', with properties empty pending renovation, sale, planning permission etc. This strategy focusses on properties which have been empty for at least 2 years, as these are more likely to represent genuine long empty properties.

The overall numbers of empty properties are largely caused by factors outside of the council's control. In part the strategy focuses on those very complex empty properties which will not return to use without some form of Council intervention – these are the 'real' empty homes. The strategy sets performance and reporting criteria based on current resources; this will enable members to monitor progress. The strategy will also maintain better data on trends, enabling us to assess our effectiveness and direct resources.

As stated previously, this strategy focuses on empty residential dwellings, and commercial buildings are outside of its scope.