

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 25 February 2021

(NOTE: This meeting was held as a remote meeting in accordance with the provisions of The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020).

PRESENT: Councillors Ben Curran (Chair), Tim Huggan (Deputy Chair), Sue Auckland, Penny Baker, Lewis Dagnall, Dawn Dale, Adam Hurst, Karen McGowan, Anne Murphy, Peter Price, Kaltum Rivers, Andrew Sangar, Richard Shaw and Sophie Wilson

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 An apology for absence was received from Councillor Paul Wood (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety).

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 Councillor Ann Murphy declared a personal interest in Item 6 on the agenda – Homelessness and Rough Sleeping – on the grounds that she is a Trustee of Ben’s Centre.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

4.1 The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 10th December, 2020 and 7th January, 2021, were approved as correct records.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 There were no questions raised or petitions submitted by members of the public.

6. HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING

6.1 The Committee received a report providing information on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on homelessness and rough sleeping in Sheffield and setting out actions that had been put in place to deal with it. The report also set

- out the arrangements that had been made to respond to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns in March and November.
- 6.2 Present for this item were Suzanne Allen, Head of City-Wide Housing Services , Tracey Ford, Communities and Development Worker, Daryl Bishop, Ben's Centre, Tim Renshaw, Archer Project, Maxine Stavrianakos, Head of Neighbourhood Intervention and Tenant Support Services and Zoe Young, Housing Options and Advice Service Manager.
- 6.3 Zoe Young stated that since March 2020, the Housing Options and Advice Service had seen a significant increase in people seeking temporary accommodation and there was a higher use of hotels, Bed and Breakfast accommodation and Council properties. She said that increase was, in some part, due to lockdown rules which prevented people who were staying with families or friends being allowed to stay where they were. The Council and its partners had worked to provide emergency accommodation and wraparound support to people at risk of, or found to be, rough sleeping in response to the pandemic. She stated that on 26th March, 2020, all Councils had been asked by the Government to give support to rough sleepers with immediate effect, and provide accommodation that had single en-suite rooms with catering facilities or provide food, and be accessible for people with disabilities. The Council block-booked suitable hotels which were managed by the Council and service providers, and were on hand daily, to provide housing support and offered additional security. Zoe Young stated that some people in emergency accommodation had no recourse to public funds. In December, 2020, the existing Weather Watch Scheme, which provided temporary accommodation should the temperature drop below zero, was replaced by the Winter Plan, which ensured that anyone found to be rough sleeping would be provided with emergency accommodation overnight or indefinitely if that was found to be necessary, regardless of the temperature. She stated that since the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force, changes required the Service to work with people for longer, to prevent the likelihood of them becoming homeless, although during the pandemic, prevention had decreased. As stated previously, one of the main reasons for homelessness during the pandemic was people being asked to leave premises by families and friends, with other reasons relating to domestic abuse and the ending of private tenancies, although this had decreased due to the temporary ban on evictions, and people leaving institutions such as care homes or prison.
- 6.4 Maxine Stavrianakos stated that she Chaired the Community Safety Sub-Cell Group, and that Community Safety Partnership had made available additional resources to work alongside the City-Wide Housing Service and the Housing Options and Advice Service to help tackle the problems facing rough sleepers.
- 6.5 Tracey Ford worked previously in the Substance Misuse Services, and was now seconded to the Community Safety Partnership in attempt to understand substance misuse and its effects. She had engaged with those who had been placed in hotels in getting to know them, and understand anti-social behaviour because of substance misuse and of those suffering disadvantages. The consultations held with those in hotels had proved helpful and was still in contact with some of them. In May, 2020, the Government appointed a National Recovery

Champion, who was working alongside Dame Carol Black, to research national treatment services and their availability. Sheffield was ahead of the game in engaging people with their experiences. During Covid, service providers, along with the Archer Project, Ben's Centre and St Wilfrid's, met twice weekly to address the needs of those that were vulnerable. A Recovery Forum had been set up, and its membership had been widened to include former service users and those who have suffered as they have a lot offer in term of their own experiences.

6.6 Daryl Bishop said many agencies had come together to co-ordinate what had to be done. At Ben's Centre, there wasn't the space to continue to work it does, so it had to close and become a donation centre for many items to be collected, such as toiletries, clothes, TVs etc. and given to those in need to make them as comfortable as possible. He said a magazine was devised in an attempt to interest people in other things rather than that was happening around them. He said Ben's Centre had worked alongside the Archer Project, St.Wilfrid's, HARK, soup kitchens and fare share in providing meals on wheels, and this was still operating as it had proved very successful. He said that Ben's Centre was helping to get its clients vaccinated, and had formed a Committee to look at how any gaps could be filled.

6.7 The Chair congratulated Tim Benshaw on his BEM award, and Tim Renshaw referred to the five perspectives to the work that had been undertaken during Covid. Firstly, the work that had been achieved by the Housing Team had been spectacular, the problems faced and the innovations that have been put in place need to be applauded. He said the establishment of the Housing First Team and the adjustment to the Winter Weather Plan was much improved, due to what it does with individuals. He said the way Services had worked together to give support to those living in hotels needed praise. He said the Archer Project had stayed open throughout the pandemic and increased the services on offer to seven days a week, due to a collection of services making it happen and making sure there was a contact point. He said some people left the hotels quickly, some were bullied, others were just not used to that environment and needed help dealing with that. He stated that service users got a better service in hotels, with two meals a day being provided as opposed to just breakfast in B&B accommodation, and they felt better looked after, had some sense of comfort, and settled home life. The complexity of the group who were prepared to stay on the street underlined the importance of the Changing Lives Fund, and this had highlighted the need for better communication on how to work with these groups by offering support. Tim Renshaw said it was essential to learn how to work with mental health services and contact services to give the help they need. Finally, he said that the Sector was a "can do" sector, that it had some dropped barriers that originally divided services and engagement on the street had worked really well, collaborative working had been extended and had worked across a whole range of disciplines such as health delivery out of the Devonshire Green Surgery who worked alongside other surgeries making sure the group was taken care of.

6.8 Members of the Committee made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were given as follows:-

- Initially there will be 30 Council owned properties and the Housing Options

and Advice Service will look for the right homes, carry out an assessment of need, check with different agencies and a Rehousing Panel would look into any vulnerable issues that might arise. The Service would look into the housing pool and work out the correct property for an individual and see what package was available to make it work. People would have the one-to-one intensive support they received when living inside the hotels and constant reviews would be carried out. The Service was also asking housing associations to make properties available, so that not everyone was concentrated in Council properties, as some people prefer private living rather than Council-type living. It was not just about providing a roof over someone's head, but providing a life plan for these people.

- Funding was an issue but the Housing Service wanted to continue with the Housing First model and was confident that some of the rough sleeper funding received, will be carried through. There were wider costs if the right housing options were not available. The holistic partnership with the police and the Community Safety Partnership, had all agreed that there should be different approach to tackling the issues and the need make the best use of resources available.
- The Covid 19 Cell Group, chaired by the Head of City-Wide Housing and senior managers from Housing, Care, Health and Public Health, would continue to oversee the existing emergency provision and the Exit Strategy from emergency accommodation. Based on what had been learned throughout the pandemic, there was now an opportunity to make transformative changes to improve the experience and outcomes for service users.
- The Homelessness Prevention Strategy Steering Group and Homelessness Prevention Forum would ensure that all partners were linked in and involved in Sheffield's strategic vision of early intervention and the prevention of homelessness, and deliver the strategic objectives of increasing prevention, supporting the most vulnerable, tackling rough sleeping, improving health, and housing options and accessing employment, education and training.
- It was acknowledged that post-Covid, practically speaking, there would be challenges as it was expected that there would be increases in domestic abuse. There were approximately 25 rough sleepers every night in Sheffield compared with 80 to 100 as was experienced in other core cities, but Sheffield was working towards zero number, and was determined to never giving up on people. It was thought that homelessness would increase due to the wider issues, but the Council would continue to make the best use of resources available to it. There was a tendency in Sheffield for mainly single people to become homeless, very few of them being female, however, women who were homeless were extremely vulnerable and additional support was in place for them. The Council deals with families facing homelessness as it has more provision to help families. Single males tended to have complex needs covering a multitude of different issues, and there was a need to pinpoint why they become

homeless. In northern cities, there was a tendency for people who turn 18 to the ask the Council for accommodation.

- Rough sleepers had complex needs affected by homelessness, domestic abuse, substance abuse, mental health issues and criminal justice. It was not just about providing housing for them and removing them from the streets, but there was a need to look at other factors, such as mental health and early life trauma, whether it was caused within the criminal justice system, homelessness or from human trafficking. Other local authorities only dealt with those in priority need whereas in Sheffield, the Council tried to help everyone who needs it.
- There was a risk of being reactive rather than preventive, and this was across all partnerships. When there was an increased demand for services, the Council became more reactive and not able to deliver on prevention in the way it would like to. The needs are so complex, and it becomes harder to deliver on everything. The Council needs to make sure it makes best use of the resources available in dealing with the impact of the pandemic and the associated issues on the most vulnerable in our society. It was recognised that it can be hard for some people to see their way forward, and the Council would take a “person centred” approach seeing everyone as individuals and working with them, and ensure that there was a whole range of staff and agencies to work together and complement each other.
- There was a need to provide decent affordable housing to give people a sustainable home through choice. Some of these people have had issues for the whole of their lives, and don't always trust people, and these issues could not be fixed in a short period of time.
- The Sector tends to think about crisis and reaction. This can be crisis bias and what was needed was a front to back service, delivering a thoroughly worked out programme. The other thing to look at was how, as a city, the Council could invest in prevention, as over last the decade £136bn investment in the sector had been lost, and this needed to be addressed.
- Communication had been really good in letting people know what was available and reassuring members of the public that there were things that could be done to help and this help had come from a whole range of services, the voluntary and community sector, soup kitchens, the service users themselves by sharing their experiences.
- Those with drug and/or alcohol use problems already lived within neighbourhoods around the city, and not within the town centre. The Housing Options and Advice Service would ensure that these people were fully supported and were not reacting to someone in crisis and the wraparound approach was essential to achieve this. These people were both perpetrators as well as victims, and there was a need to be clear that these people were adults with rights and responsibilities, and the Council will work with them.

- It was agreed that hotel type accommodation was not a suitable setting for longer-term housing as there was a significant risk that, as the lockdown was eased, hotel providers would not continue to offer accommodation, as they will be wanting to re-open their businesses. However, anyone finding themselves back on the streets, would be offered some type of accommodation. It had been recognised that we may not be able to stop offering hotel type provision. There were nine people currently living in hotels that had no recourse to public funds, but they would continue to be supported as they don't have the same options as others, i.e. they cannot access benefits due to an asylum issue or EU national status. The Council wanted to be confident that it always had something to offer people, such as a place of safety, whatever their circumstances.
- The majority of people who applied as homeless remained in their current accommodation, but if it became impossible to stay for whatever reason, the Council would help them plan their move rather than move when at crisis point, the worst scenario would be go into temporary accommodation, it was thought much better for a planned move to be carried out.
- The Private Sector Housing Team checked private landlords to ensure that they were fit and proper, and that property was of sufficient quality.
- As the furlough scheme ended, it would be difficult to predict how many people would face hardship. We might be able to look at Council accommodation and know how many are having problems, but we don't know how many might be having mortgage difficulties. The Housing Service was working closely the Revenues and Benefits Department who were aware of people who were claiming benefits, and would explore every avenue to identify areas of concern.

6.9 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Suzanne Allen, Tracey Ford, Daryl Bishop, Tim Renshaw, Maxine Stavrianakos and Zoe Young for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the report and the responses to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests that some formal recognition be made to those officers and volunteers who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic with the homeless and rough sleepers.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer on the Work Programme for the Committee.

7.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) approves the contents of the Work Programme; and

- (b) agrees that a meeting be arranged so that the Housing Repairs Service can bring an update to the Committee on a date to be arranged.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 8.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on Thursday, 18th March, 2021, at 5.00 p.m.

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