**22 September 2021 Housing Committee**

**Councillor Questions + Responses**

1. **From Councillor Meadows:** *When senior officers or managers of services for vulnerable people asked to from home during Covid; were their positions considered for example, managing the services for our rough sleepers? And how could they manage local services if working from home, especially if ‘home’ is say, in Scotland?*

Response: Thank you for your question about services to vulnerable people during the Covid lockdowns.

The Housing service continued to provide a high level of service to our most vulnerable residents throughout the pandemic, both in person and virtually, in line with Government and Public Health instruction and guidance.

During the Covid-19 pandemic the Council worked within strict Government and Public Health parameters, including for people to work from home unless involved in delivering essential services. In addition to provision of essential services, the Council also had a responsibility to protect the health and safety of our residents, staff and contractors.

Assessments were made of which services were essential as well as an assessment of which staff members were vulnerable themselves (for example owing to underlying health conditions, age or pregnancy) and needed to be shielded or lived with a vulnerable person that required shielding.

Subject to risk assessment, we identified how best to use available resources to maintain critical face-to-face service provision including:

* Providing essential emergency and urgent repairs services.
* Accommodating rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping under Everyone In. Including in person assessment and support and food for these vulnerable clients.
* Maintaining our Estates Service throughout the pandemic, including additional cleaning of common areas.

Where residents were particularly at risk, we quickly developed alternative service delivery models where appropriate, including supporting thousands of vulnerable tenants and residents in their homes through phone and other virtual contact.

Some managers and senior staff directing delivery of essential services worked from offices following a thorough risk assessment. In line with Government guidance, most council staff worked from home, with the council moving quickly to make use of technology to support home working which includes effective management of services.

In this respect, the location of managers’ homes or the reasons why they may have been working from home, has not adversely impacted the responsive and important work we were able to successfully provide to rough sleepers and other vulnerable residents.

1. **From Councillor Barnett:** *I would like to know why it is taking so long to relet houses. I have 7 at least in my ward that have been empty for months and at least 1 has been empty for 2 years (that is what I know about) with the great deal of residents that are waiting for a home it is not acceptable*.

Response: Thank you for your question about the time taken to let empty council homes.

As previously reported to Housing Committee, one of the most significant negative impacts of the pandemic has been upon our turnaround time for empty homes, meaning we have an unacceptably high number of void properties at this time.

As advised, this was caused by pandemic restrictions on what works the Council, and our contractors were able to undertake on our empty properties to meet the standard for re-letting, which has led to a backlog of empty council homes. As part of our Covid recovery plan we are committed to improving our empty homes re-let time.

As outlined in the ‘Housing Committee workplan progress update and Housing performance report - Quarter 1 2021/22’ being considered at Housing Committee on 22 September, as part of our recovery measures our performance on average relet time is now improving post pandemic.

Our recovery measures to continue to address this issue include:

* Provision of additional senior management capacity in the Housing Repairs & Maintenance Service.
* Approval of additional procurement options to increase our contractor base and the empty homes work contractors can carry out on our behalf.
* Commencement of significant recruitment campaign for additional permanently employed skilled trades staff within the Housing Repairs Maintenance Service. Over time this will increase our in-house capacity for direct delivery of works.

I am advised that you have had responses to earlier queries about specific empty homes in your ward. If you could provide details to officers of the empty homes referred to in your question, they can check whether there are any responses outstanding or update you on those properties.

1. **From Councillor Mears:** *Following the changes made by the Administration to Brighton and Hove City Councils Allocation Policy, which placed homeless people at the top of the priority list for council housing, we have seen many vulnerable clients being moved into Sheltered Housing in the city.*

*There have been some very serious issues that are now being experienced by residents and staff in our sheltered schemes. Many homeless residents placed in sheltered housing under the administration’s priority policy have Drug, alcohol, and Mental health issues affecting their lives but are being allocated in to our sheltered blocks without 24 hour support.*

*This is having a very serious effect on other elderly and vulnerable residents living in sheltered blocks and our staff trying to deal with the problems.*

1. *What steps are the administration taking to address these serious issues and protect all residents of sheltered blocks.*

Response: Thank you for your question about the Council’s Allocation Policy and people who have recently moved into the Council’s Seniors Housing schemes.

Since April 2020 there have been 85 lets to Seniors Housing schemes, of which 13 had a background of homelessness. Anecdotally there have been limited nuisance reports from residents. However, if there are known concerns at particular schemes, we take this very seriously and will investigate thoroughly. More information would be helpful in this respect.

In general terms, the Covid-19 emergency has had a profound impact on housing needs of the city, and the Council is looking at an appropriate response to meet these challenges. In line with statutory duties, the Council is housing those in greatest need and has prioritised allocations for those facing homelessness over the pandemic period.

While some housing applicants will present with complex needs, not everyone who faces homelessness will have drug, alcohol or mental health issues, or indeed have those issues and then go on to cause a nuisance or annoyance to others. However, we do know that with an ageing population, and because of the pandemic, older people’s needs are increasing across the board.

The Seniors Housing service has always worked closely with those residents with more challenging needs, often in partnership with health and social care colleagues, and / or more specialist organisations.

The Seniors Housing service is working closely with the Healthy Living Team to ensure that staff and residents have access to specialist advice and support. During the pandemic the team has provided a range of information to all residents on keeping well, either directly or through the post. This has also included information on accessing mental health support given the impact of the pandemic.

The Housing Service also has a Tenancy Support Team which helps those who are struggling to maintain their tenancy, including those living in seniors housing schemes.

If there are problems in communities, we encourage residents to raise this directly with the scheme manager or the service as soon as possible.

The Housing service is careful to ensure that whatever action we take, we are sensitive to the needs of everyone, including those being complained against. We wish to avoid stigmatising those who have faced homelessness or have mental health or other health, care and support issues as this would be a serious failing in our equalities duties.

1. *What is the current waiting list for housing repairs at council properties in Brighton and Hove?*

Response: As of Friday 10th September, the number of outstanding housing repairs was 6960.

As outlined in the ‘Housing Committee workplan progress update and Housing performance report - Quarter 1 2021/22’ also being considered at Housing Committee on 22 September, as part of our recovery measures, our performance on completion of routine repairs is improving post pandemic.

The Housing Repairs & Maintenance Service is prioritising repairs firstly by urgency and secondly by age and therefore this backlog does consist of many older jobs. So, a percentage of the overall figure will be lower priority jobs that are responded to in 20 days and the remaining will be jobs of a lower priority which are effectively forming the backlog. As the backlog of older jobs is addressed and works completed the average days to complete figure reported will increase temporarily.

As with our recovery plan to improve empty property turnaround times we are seeking to maximise use of our approved list of contractors for the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service to provide access to key resources.  The Service has also commenced a large-scale recruitment process that will begin to address the backlog and ultimately reduce the time taken to complete routine repairs.

1. *What is the current number of vacant council housing properties in Brighton and Hove, awaiting being let out to those on the housing list?*

Response: As of Friday 10 September, the number of vacant general needs and Seniors Housing council homes is 277.

As outlined in our response to the question from Cllr Barnett, as part of our recovery measures our performance on average relet time for empty is homes is now improving post pandemic.

4. *Through the Homeless Reduction Board, I have asked for a financial breakdown of money the Council has received from the Government for Homelessness and rough sleepers. This is information is still outstanding despite having been requested multiple times.*

*a) Please can the above information be provided.*

Response: Thank you for your question regarding the financial breakdown of funding which the Council has received for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping. I apologise that you have not received a reply to your previous requests.

1. The funding is as follows:
* Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) funding received from Government has been regularly reported to Housing Committee. The Council were awarded NSAP shorter-term/interim accommodation and immediate support revenue funding of £3,428,766 to 31 March 2021. This was the highest sum awarded to any individual local authority in the country. In addition, the council were awarded a capital sum of £1.752m with revenue support of £669,600 (over four years) to deliver 30 Home Purchase Policy, Housing First homes for move on by 31 March 2021, and £609,939 to deliver 20 units of high support accommodation for 3.5 years thorough partners St Mungo’s and Clarion.
* Rough Sleeper Initiative 4 grant awarded for single homeless including rough sleepers for 2021/22 was £3,302,305. This covers supported accommodation for single people as well as floating support.
* The council was awarded £6,240,090 in 2021/22 for Homelessness Prevention Grant. This is a combination of the previously called Flexible Homeless Support Grant and Homelessness Burdens Funding. These grants are awarded by Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) based on previous figures of homelessness and temporary accommodation. It is primarily to fund the management element of temporary accommodation that was removed from the housing benefit several years ago. It is also for the prevention of homelessness.
* Grant to provide private sector accommodation to ex-offenders who may become or are homeless and to whom we do not have statutory accommodation duties towards was £64,000. This is a one-off award.
* Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme (RSAP). Under the RSAP round 1 funding, the MHCLG awarded £0.700m towards a £2.800m scheme to enable the purchase of 12 new homes to be used for Housing Led Support for rough sleepers with complex needs. The council has also been awarded £511,800 to pay for the revenue support costs for these tenants up to the end of 2023/24. The RSAP round 1 funding also awarded £1.163m towards purchasing a further 30 properties under 10-year leases for Rapid Rehousing scheme aimed at lower need rough sleepers.
* More details are in the table below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Capital grant award 21/22 & 22/23 | Grant for revenue support costs 21/22 | Grant for revenue support costs 22/23 | Grant for revenue support costs 23/24 |
| Home purchase expansion to 30 properties to deliver Housing Led Support\* | 700,000 | 65,500 | 214,200 | 232,100 |
| 30x 10 year leased properties to deliver Rapid Rehousing Scheme | 1,163,000 | 99,076 | 178,500 | 178,500 |
| Totals | 1,863,000 | 164,576 | 392,700 | 410,600 |

b) *Can the Council confirm if the programme to provide accommodation to all homeless people in the city as has operated during the pandemic still stands or has now finished?*

Response: The service provision to homeless people and rough sleepers in the city during the pandemic has been subject to regular reporting to Housing Committee, including detailed reports in March and June 2021. There is a further report to Housing Committee on 22 September 2021. Key information includes that:

* The council continues to discharge its statutory accommodation duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act.
* The council will continue to seek to offer accommodation to all verified rough sleepers where this is permissible within the Council’s powers.
* In line with proposed easing and ending of national Covid-19 restrictions and opening up of the council’s usual homeless prevention and housing options services, Housing Committee in March 2021 agreed that by 21st June 2021, the accommodation offer to those at risk of rough sleeping, (the Covid- 2 cohort), made for the duration of the pandemic is ended where no accommodation duty is owed by the council.