

Contact Officer: Leigh Webb

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY PANEL

Thursday 27 August 2020

- Present: Councillor Harpreet Uppal (Chair)
Councillor Martyn Bolt
Councillor Richard Eastwood
Councillor Yusra Hussain
- Co-optees: Chris Friend(Co-optee)
Eilidh Ogden (Co-optee)
- In attendance: Councillor Peter McBride – Deputy Leader and
Cabinet Member for Regeneration
Councillor Rob Walker – Cabinet Member Culture and
Environment
Helen Geldart - Head of Housing Services
Sarah Clayton - Head of Housing Management
- Apologies: Councillor Richard Murgatroyd
Councillor John Taylor
Andrew Bird (Co-optee)

1 Membership of the Committee

Apologies were received from Councillor Richard Murgatroyd, Councillor John Taylor and Mr Andrew Bird (Co-optee).

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

3 Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Admission of the Public

All items were considered in public session.

5 Deputations/Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

6. Public Question Time

No questions were asked under this item.

7. Housing Rent and Support to Council Tenants and Support to Homeless Households and Rough Sleepers During the Covid 19 Pandemic

A report was submitted providing Panel members with information on the provision of services and support to Council tenants in relation to the payment of housing rent and to homeless households and rough sleepers during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The financial and employment situation of many council tenants has been adversely affected by Covid-19; employers have moved staff onto the furlough scheme creating a reduction in income, many others are working reduced hours, and some have lost their jobs. It was reported that Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing's (KNH), Income Management Team had responded to this by taking a range of pro-active steps to support tenants faced with financial hardship. This support is balanced with the need to collect rent payments and protect the tenant from falling into further debt.

With regard to arrears it was explained that all council tenants with an arrears balance are identified by an arrears escalation process and subsequently contacted by an income officer. Supportive discussions are held, and realistic re-payment plans agreed with customers offered budgeting advice and assisted with benefit claims.

Sarah Clayton gave a presentation to the Panel setting out details of the specific support measures for tenants to pay rent during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Following the presentation, questions and comments were invited and the following issues were raised:

- In response to the number of arrears cases that are on Universal Credit, it was reported that 54% were currently in receipt of Universal Credit.
- With regard to support to tenants, it was explained that work had been undertaken with the Courts to develop a protocol which ensured maximum support with tenants in difficulty as a result of Covid.
- In response to a question concerning potential increased arrears as a result of the end of the furlough scheme, it was acknowledged that tenants would be impacted and support measures were in place
- Members highlighted the importance of ensuring effective communication to ensure tenants are fully aware of the support available and are encouraged to engage at an early stage to access services
- In response to questions around support for private sector tenants and owner occupiers, it was explained that this was available through partner organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Fusion Housing
- The Chair raised the issue of the 2.7% rent increase which came into effect on 1st April and enquired if any consideration had been given to postponing the increase as a result of Covid.

Helen Geldart gave a presentation setting out details in respect of homeless households and rough sleepers. It was reported that in response to the national Covid 19 lockdown and government guidance that only essential house moves should take place, the letting of the Council's housing via Choose n Move was suspended on the 25th March. On the 13th May further government guidance confirmed that "non-essential" house moves could resume stressing that social landlords. Despite lower overall volumes of people presenting as homeless in the last 3-4 months, the levels of households requiring temporary accommodation has been higher during COVID-19 restrictions. Also, the length of stay has increased as people have not been able to move-on from temporary accommodation because of the restrictions placed on non-essential house moves across the housing market. From 123 households at the end of January 2020 there has been around a 65% increase in households in temporary accommodation.

With regard to roughsleepers, it was explained that Government's response to Covid 19 and rough sleeping was to bring in those on the streets to protect their health and stop wider transmission. Local Authorities were asked to support verified rough sleepers into appropriate accommodation by the end of the week commencing 23rd March 2020 and to continue to support people to stay in that accommodation until such time as restrictions ease and step down arrangements can be put in place.

It was reported that as at 31st March, the Rough Sleeping team within the Housing Solutions Service (together with colleagues and partner agencies) had successfully engaged with and accommodated all verified rough sleepers (14 individuals, 9 of which were known to services and entrenched rough sleepers) except for one person who chose to decline the support and accommodation offer. Outreach work to verify rough sleepers has continued in accordance with MHCLG guidance encourage and support them to accept and maintain temporary accommodation. In total it was reported that 40 verified rough sleepers have been accommodated since the start of lockdown. Of these 15 remain in temporary accommodation, 17 have been successfully moved on to more secure accommodation and 8 are being supported by staff to stay with friends or relatives until they are ready to move on.

During discussion of this item the following questions and issues were raised:

- Councillor Bolt placed on record his appreciation for the successful work of the Homelessness Team.
- In response to a question concerning the number of rough sleepers were from a Military background, Helen Geldart confirmed that none were.
- With regard to the individual refusing support, which was referred to in the report, Helen assured Members that ongoing efforts were continuing through the outreach teams.
- The Panel noted the issue of sustainability of funding both locally and nationally. It was reported that a business case was being drawn up to use Council resources when national funding is withdrawn.

RESOLVED –

1. The Panel noted the ongoing support offered to Council tenants to help with rent payments during the Covid 19 pandemic.
2. That effective, comprehensive communications methods be used to make sure Council tenants are aware of the support measures offered by the Council, with private tenants and owner occupiers facing difficulties being directed to partner organisations.
3. The Panel noted the strong working model in respect of homelessness and rough sleepers and acknowledged the positive effect of a holistic approach

8 Work Programme 2020/21

That the Panel's Work Programme for 2020/21 and forthcoming items/activities was submitted.

RESOLVED –

- 1 That the Panel notes that the issue of Tackling Inequality is being considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Panel
- 2 That an update in respect of Active Travel be scheduled into a future agenda.
- 3 That arrangements be made to re-arrange the cycle/walking study visit originally planned for March 2020.