

Growth and Prosperity Scrutiny Panel

Date: Monday, 26th October 2020, 6.00 – 7.20pm

Present: Councillor Sharpe – in the Chair
Councillors: Brooks, Critchley, Dickman, R. Garrido, Nkurunziza, Pevitt and Ward

Also in attendance:

Councillor Kelly – Statutory Deputy City Mayor & Lead Member for Housing
Councillor McCusker – Executive Support Member for Planning, Housing & Sustainable Development

Officers: Janice Lowndes – Assistant Director People & Communities
Andrew Leigh – Head of Housing & Strategy
Rachel Connelly – Head of Supported Housing
Jane Anderson – Head of Housing Advice & Support
Claire Edwards – Democratic Services

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Hesling, Jolley, Lewis and Weir.

2. Declarations of interest

Councillor R. Garrido declared an interest in respect of the item recorded under Minute 3 below (Homelessness Update) due to him being a Board Member of Forviva.

Councillor Kelly declared an interest in respect of the item recorded under Minute 3 below (Homelessness Update) due to her being a Board Member of Derive.

3. Homelessness Update

The Panel received a presentation summarising the report of the Strategic Director for People which had been submitted, updating Members on the continued work across the city in addressing homelessness and rough sleeping. The report indicated that the numbers of households presenting to the City Council as homeless and those placed in temporary accommodation had continued to increase. The pandemic had impacted on services and a number of changes had been introduced to address those changes. The report also highlighted that the city had been successful in obtaining additional funding from Government to support a number of initiatives – particularly around access to the private rented sector and rough sleeping. This work was being undertaken within the context of the City's Homelessness Strategy and accompanying action plan, which was monitored on a quarterly basis and involved a range of stakeholders who were engaging in homeless prevention work across the City. The report also included a summary of affordable housing delivery.

Additional reference was made to the following:

- The excellent working relationships that existed between the Council and its registered providers and other partners which had been strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The extensive efforts that were being undertaken to deliver more affordable housing in Salford, both through working with Registered Providers and direct delivery.
- The need to move forward to providing on-going support for a period once someone has moved into their settled accommodation, whilst the new home is established, with a view to preventing regression taking place in terms of their behaviour or their ability to manage.
- Tribute was paid to the hard work that had been undertaken across the service group to deliver services across the city through challenging times, in respect of which it was acknowledged that the presentation represented only a snapshot.
- The two national awards that had been won by the service at the Chartered Institute of Housing Awards in September 2020 – Frontline Team and Care and Support Team of the Year.

Members of the Panel asked that their congratulations be passed onto the officers involved, together with their thanks for the excellent work that had been undertaken dealing with extremely complex and difficult situations under very challenging circumstances.

The following questions were raised by Panel Members:

Q1 With regard to HMOs, was there a big turnover of tenancies?

A1 No, turnover was quite low. Most people who were rehoused remained in the properties. Due to the demand for one-bedroom properties not being met, and because in the private rented sector anybody under 35 was not eligible for the one bedroom rate (they were only eligible for the shared room rate), it was necessary to use Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) as a way of meeting that demand.

It was established that there were some exceptions to the shared room rate – for example, if somebody had been in temporary accommodation for more than three months, then they would be entitled to the one-bedroom rate. In addition, care leavers were entitled to the one-bedroom rate up to the age of 25.

Q2 What was the charge for the management service provided by the Council and what was provided to landlords for the charge?

A2 The management fee was 15% of the rent – the landlord was offered 85% guaranteed rent. The Council was responsible for collecting the rent, finding tenants and managing the properties.

Q3 Were repairs included?

A3 The Council undertook repairs for some landlords, others preferred to use their own contractors – this varied from property to property.

Q4 Was continued tenancy guaranteed?

A4 Where the landlord was being paid the guaranteed 85% of the rent then the Council would take on all the responsibilities in terms of finding/replacing tenants and paying rent to the landlord whilst the property was void. The Council had obtained some funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), which had enabled the purchase of insurance policies, providing insurance against some void loss and some loss of rental income, should the tenant not pay their rent or should their claim through Universal Credit or Housing Benefit not be paid.

Q5 With regard to the table on page 5 of the report, which contained figures showing a snapshot of the number of people housed in statutory temporary accommodation on the same date a year apart, could an indication be given regarding any improvement that had taken place between the end of March and the present time, given that the registered providers in particular had come up with a large number of void properties?

A5 From 1st April, the number of people housed in statutory temporary accommodation had increased by around another 15%, at 290 people up to the present time. The Council's portfolio had increased by around 70 properties from the three registered providers, with the majority of those having come from For Housing. Reference was made to those properties having been lost from the general needs let, however, due to the large amount of people who could be assisted by them being used for temporary accommodation, it was deemed a valuable use of that accommodation.

Q6 Had any thought been given to the possibility of adapting empty properties/buildings (office premises, etc.) for short term stays?

A6 Some conversations had taken place with owners/property developers regarding the above possibility, however, consideration needed to be given to the design and quality of such a conversion, together with the concentration of people that would be located in the building who could potentially have a range of vulnerabilities and behaviours that could cause issues.

Q7 Had consideration been given to providing basic 'pod' (bunk bed) type accommodation, similar to that available for overnight use in various major cities around the world?

A7 Information was provided with regard to the 'pods' that were available as part of the A Bed Every Night (ABEN) scheme which consisted of a heated room with an ensuite toilet and shower. Reference was made to a bid had been made to the Next Steps Accommodation Programme

(NSAP) in respect of some modular units. It was indicated that it would only be intended to use such accommodation as a short-term arrangement with the focus being on moving people into appropriate accommodation with the required support in place.

Q8 How well are the homelessness services linked into Test and Trace?

A8 The Council was linked in with Greater Manchester and with the health experts from the GMCA and its own Public Health team and was assisting where requested to do so by Test and Trace. Information was provided in relation to work that was being undertaken regarding issues around HMO accommodation and how that was being addressed.

Q9 What would be done to address potential issues relating to drug use and institutionalisation?

A9 With regard to institutionalisation, officers were very clear that the aim was for people to move on into suitable accommodation. In terms of the options available, the shared accommodation rate meant that many people could only access HMO accommodation, which many were reluctant to move into. Due to the complexities of the people concerned, shared accommodation wasn't always the most appropriate option, however, they were unable to access self-contained independent accommodation due to their financial circumstances. With regard to drug use, people would be referred to Achieve Recovery Services with the aim of moving them into suitable accommodation.

Q10 How much was the expertise of service users being utilised in supporting the Council to provide the best possible services for people?

A10 An agreement had recently been made with Salford Loaves and Fishes that they would lead on the above. The Council would be supporting them to talk to people with lived experience and assist them to help the Council to consider how it could improve the ways in which it approached and delivered services.

Q11 In terms of the increase in caseloads referred to in the report, what measures had been put into place to mitigate against the likelihood of officers' stress levels rising and potential staff absence?

A11 Regular 'one to ones' were undertaken with staff along with supervision, appropriate training and risk assessments. Arrangements had been made for peer support to be in place and there was an open-door policy for staff. Where possible, efforts were being made to explore other funding avenues with a view to bringing in more staff, although it was noted that there were no additional funding streams currently available in terms of the Housing Options Service. One of the impacts of the increase in caseloads on the Housing Options Service was that less work around homeless prevention was undertaken which meant that due to the statutory time limits involved, decisions were made on cases rather than the homelessness being prevented or relieved. Reference was made to the impact of home working on peer support and it was indicated that it was hoped that some housing options officers would be able to work in the office for some of the time in the near future.

Q12 How much cross-border co-operation was taking place between local authorities in respect of the ABEN scheme?

A12 The Council was part of the Housing Needs Group which was currently meeting on a weekly basis and involved the ten GM authorities. The GM authorities were in the process of introducing 'GM Think,' a data recording system in respect of rough sleepers which would enable their details to be accessed by whichever of the GM local authorities they were found in. Salford was about to become the first of the GM local authorities to adopt GM Think, with the aim that all ten authorities would adopt this shared database in the future.

Q13 What was the biggest obstacle currently faced by the service, or what change would make the biggest difference?

A13 Other than additional funding, guaranteed funding for posts in order to provide workforce longevity would make the biggest difference. Funding was continually allocated in 12-month blocks, which was a constant point of stress for the officers concerned and made it extremely difficult to maintain a consistent workforce.

Q14 Was anything in place to deal with the new rules that had been published in the Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules on 22nd October 2020, whereby permission to stay may be refused where a person had been identified as having been rough sleeping, in which circumstances any permission held by the person may be cancelled?

A14 It was indicated that further clarification would be sought in respect of the above matter.

RESOLVED: (1) THAT the content of the report and presentation be noted with thanks to Councillors Kelly and McCusker and the officers for their attendance and comments and for the comprehensive responses that had been provided to the questions that had been raised. It was indicated that a response to Question 14 would be circulated to Panel Members once further clarification had been obtained.

(2) THAT the report and presentation be circulated to all Members of the Council.

(3) THAT, with regard to the two national awards that had been won by the service at the Chartered Institute of Housing Awards in September 2020 (Frontline Team and Care & Support Team of the Year), it be noted that the Panel requested that their congratulations be passed onto the officers involved, together with their thanks for the excellent work that had been undertaken, dealing with extremely complex and difficult situations under very challenging circumstances.

4. Work Programme

RESOLVED: (1) THAT the Work Programme be noted.

(2) THAT arrangements be made for an update to be provided at the next meeting with regard to cladding replacement/sprinkler installation in respect of the high-rise blocks in Pendleton.

5. Date and Time of Next Meeting

Monday 23 November 2020 at 6.00pm.