

Your Plymouth

Monday 15 December 2014

PRESENT:

Councillor Kate Taylor, in the Chair.
Councillor Sam Leaves, Vice Chair.
Councillors Damerell, Sam Davey (substitute for Councillor Philippa Davey),
Downie, Mrs Foster (substitute for Councillor Martin Leaves), Morris (substitute
for Councillor Sparling), Parker Delaz-Ajete (substitute for Councillor Rennie),
Ricketts and Tuohy.

Co-opted Representative: Mr Steve Meakin

Apologies for absence: Councillors Philippa Davey, Martin Leaves, Rennie, Riley and
Sparling.

Also in attendance: Councillor Penberthy, Cabinet Member for Co-operatives,
Housing and Community Safety, Stuart Palmer, Head of Safer Communities, Di
Charlton, Service Development and Partnership Manager (Lead Officer), and Katey
Johns, Democratic Support Officer.

The meeting started at 4 pm and finished at 4.55 pm.

*Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes,
so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm
whether these minutes have been amended.*

22. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made by members in accordance with the
code of conduct.

23. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

24. **MINUTES**

Agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2014.

25. **REVISED TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The panel noted its revised terms of reference, the most significant change being the
transfer of the responsibility for waste to the Working Plymouth Scrutiny Panel.

26. **HOMELESSNESS**

The panel heard from Councillor Penberthy, the Cabinet Member for Co-operatives, Housing and Community Safety, who, along with Di Charlton and Stuart Palmer, provided an update on the current challenging homelessness situation in the City. Members were advised that –

- (a) homelessness had been rising in the City since 2010 and was expected to rise further given the exceptionally challenging economic and housing market environment;
- (b) in 2013/14 14,737 customers approached the Housing Options service asking for support in relation to their housing (a 40 per cent increase on the previous year – approximately 56 households every day);
- (c) 1,252 of those households were case-worked by a specialist housing advisor, 592 (42 per cent) of which went on to make statutory homeless approaches and 278 of which Plymouth City Council accepted a statutory duty to house;
- (d) so far this year, homelessness approaches were up 14 per cent and homelessness acceptances up 33 per cent;
- (e) prevention work carried out last year meant that 892 households did not become homeless. This year a target of 1,000 households had been set, with 505 having been achieved in the first six months;
- (f) the rising number of households in temporary accommodation continues to be a major concern and there was considerable overspend in relation to the Bed and Breakfast / Emergency Accommodation budget –
 - at the end of last year there were 109 households in temporary accommodation;
 - at the end of the last quarter (September) there were 126;
- (g) 93 families with children were briefly accommodated in Bed and Breakfast accommodation at some point in 2013/14 and were moved into leased houses within three weeks;
- (h) in the first six months of this year, 80 families had been accommodated in Bed and Breakfasts at some point;
- (i) with major welfare and social policy changes already impacting on people's accessibility and affordability of housing, it was expected that the introduction of Universal Credits in 2015 would further exacerbate the situation. People on benefits will not be used to receiving one monthly payment and may find managing their money difficult. This had led to tenant evictions in some of the Universal Credit pilot areas.

In response to questions raised, Members heard further that –

- (j) the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had advised that there would be an accelerated roll-out of Universal Credits. Whilst the complete programme would be rolled out in phases over two to three years, Plymouth should expect the first tranche during early 2015, targeting single claimants who are working/fit to look for work, the effects from which should be evident next autumn/winter;
- (k) whilst Plymouth would only be dealing with single claimants in the first tranche, should a claimant move to Plymouth from another area where Universal Credit was already in place their Universal Credit would move with them, regardless of what category claimant they were. This had already happened in Plymouth;
- (l) Plymouth had been successful at intervention work and constant review of the Emergency Welfare Fund has meant that it had been possible to identify areas to shift underspends to in order to provide support where it was most effective and needed;
- (m) good working relations with partners such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and credit unions had meant that once referred a person can be assessed quickly and their benefit entitlements identified and processed, minimising unnecessary claims;
- (n) one of the biggest groups to be affected by Universal Credits was those in social housing and Plymouth Community Homes (PCH), who had 80 per cent of the City's social housing, was very concerned. The Council had been working with PCH and its tenants around these changes and it had been quite alarming how many people were unaware and didn't know what they would need to do in order to make their claims;
- (o) the Council did work with private sector landlords and was doing its best to get the Universal Credit message out there. However, private sector landlords didn't tend to be part of any association and therefore contact was generally made on an individual basis. There was already an aversion in the private sector to taking in tenants on benefits so care needed to be taken to avoid setting any further alarm bells ringing;
- (p) with a large number of student-specific style accommodation being built in the City, some estate agents were seeing more accommodation which had previously been occupied by students, coming back onto the market. Whilst it would take some time for a clearer picture of this to build, the Council would welcome early conversations with landlords as it would consider taking any surplus into its temporary accommodation portfolio in order to ease pressure on its use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation;
- (q) the exploitation of vulnerable people was another concern and, whilst the majority of single homeless people would not be in the first tranche to receive Universal Credit, conversations had already commenced with adult social care, commissioners and partners to identify their need for support

when universal credit is implemented;

- (r) Universal Credit only covered the big “eight” benefits so this would not include care leavers, however, housing benefit was one and if a care leaver had been entitled to housing benefit then this benefit would transfer through Universal Credit;
- (s) there were many reasons why people slept rough, including substance abuse, anti-social behaviour and mental health. In Plymouth there was currently a cohort of 13 rough sleepers and, like many cities, it had adopted the ‘no second night out’ scheme which meant that no-one should have to spend two consecutive nights sleeping rough.

The Chair thanked Councillor Penberthy and the officers for the informative update and noted the report.

27. **UNAUTHORISED ENCAMPMENTS - UPDATE**

Further to the co-operative review undertaken into Unauthorised Encampments, the panel received an update on progress made against the recommendations.

There being no questions on the matter, the report was noted.

28. **CO-OPERATIVE SCRUTINY REVIEW - PROBLEM DEBT**

The Chair presented the Problem Debt report arising from the recent co-operative scrutiny review and thanked those panel members who had taken part for their contribution.

Steve Meakin commented that statistics from the Money Charity and the Insolvency Service indicated that –

- consumer credit debt reduced from £228 bn in Oct 2009 to £168 bn in Nov 2014;
- at the same time overall indebtedness was stationary at around £1.46 trillion;
- the reduction in unsecured debt was reflected in Plymouth in a reduction of the total insolvencies figures; 958 in 2009 down to 690 in 2013;
- while personal insolvency figures have reduced, the number of people seeking Debt Relief Orders had in Plymouth remained relatively steady and the number of people accessing the remedy in 2010 was equal to that of 2013.

In response to Steve Meakin’s comments about the latest national debt levels showing a decline in levels of personal indebtedness and his concerns about the Council becoming an ethical lender and what such a scheme might look like, the Chair advised that –

- (a) the report had been produced based on the evidence presented during the course of the review and from what witnesses had told the panel;

- (b) the idea of the Council being an ethical lender was new and was currently being explored by the Council's Social Inclusion unit with partners. It was hoped that when (and if) it was nearer to becoming reality, it would come back to scrutiny where the panel could look it in more detail. The recommendation in the report was simply saying that the panel supported the principle.

The report would be considered by the Co-operative Scrutiny Board at its meeting on Wednesday 17 December 2014 and Cabinet in January 2015.

The panel noted the report.

29. **TRACKING RESOLUTIONS**

In noting the tracking resolutions schedule monitoring progress against the panel's previous recommendations, the Chair was pleased to report that Tony Hogg, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon and Cornwall, had accepted the invitation and would be attending the panel's next meeting in March 2015.

30. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The panel considered its work programme for 2014/15 and agreed that –

- (1) the following additional items would be considered at its next scheduled meeting in March 2015 –
 - Emergency Welfare Fund Update
 - Framework for Working with Citizens and Communities Update
- (2) the outstanding co-operative review looking into the effects of the expansion of Plymouth University and its students on the surrounding residential areas would be undertaken early in the new year with membership comprising Councillors Kate Taylor, Tuohy and Ricketts and subject to their acceptance, Councillors Martin Leaves and Riley;
- (3) subject to submission of a PID to the Co-operative Scrutiny Board, a review on sex crimes is undertaken, focussing in particular on incidents taking place on campus, and looking at the 'No Means No' campaign.

31. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.