

Housing and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 5 February 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Finn, in the Chair.

Councillor Blight, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Cuddihee, Dingle, Goslin, Hendy, P.Nicholson, Poyser and Reilly.

Also in attendance: Councillor Dann (Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Sport, Leisure and HR & OD), Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities), Rosie Brookshaw (Democratic Advisor), Phil Burgoyne (Interim Head of Neighbourhoods, Homes and Communities, Plymouth Community Homes), Rob Cock (Head of Delivery, Livewest), Peter Honeywell (Transformation Architecture Manager), Dave Ryland (Head of Housing Standards), Ruth Tune-Holmes (Technical Lead), and Gary Walbridge (Strategic Director for Adults, Health and Communities)

The meeting started at 2.01 pm and finished at 4.18 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel 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.

26. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

27. **Minutes**

The minutes from the meeting held 04 December 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

28. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

29. **Improved Public Connectivity with Plymouth City Council**

Councillor Dann (Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Sport, Leisure and HR & OD) introduced the item and highlighted the following points:

- a) A motion on notice had been brought to City Council a year prior about how people connect digitally with Plymouth City Council (PCC);
- b) The motion on notice included the following:

- i) What the performance of the phone system was like;
- ii) How the phone system was advertised;
- iii) How people knew where to get hold of PCC;
- iv) Where the assessment of PCC contact centres were promoted;
- c) PCC's contact centre had changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and had moved to more digital interaction;
- d) There were nearly 60,000 calls to the Customer Hub between 01 April 2024 and 31 December 2024. 96% of these calls were answered;
- e) PCC were pushing their libraries and health and well-being centres as Community Builders so the public could contact the Council through those pathways;
- f) Blue Badge and bus pass application support was ongoing at Plympton, Plymstock and St Budeaux Libraries;
- g) Online digital assistance was also offered to those who were not digitally able.

In response to questions, it was explained:

- h) If a member of the public was registered as being digitally excluded, they would always be able to speak to a member of the team on the phone rather than be signposted online;
- i) Between April and December 2024, there were approximately 3.5 million hits on the PCC website;
- j) There were seasonal peaks and troughs to the number of calls to PCC.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

30. **Customer Services Strategy Update**

Councillor Dann (Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Sport, Leisure and HR & OD) introduced the item and highlighted the following points:

- a) A transformational programme was being implemented, looking at how PCC could work more efficiently and effectively using modern technology;
- b) Data would be used to target areas which require improvement;
- c) The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) would be explored to support social workers and Adult Social Care workers carry out their reporting;

- d) Feedback from members of the public regarding the use of the PCC website was taken on board and being actioned.

In response to questions, it was explained:

- e) The hope was that AI would increase productivity within PCC and that would create a good value return on the investment into the technology;
- f) PCC already used software to target those who may be vulnerable, including a low-income family tracker;
- g) Members of the public would be informed as to how their data would be used in the future to allow informed consent;
- h) In order to ensure a return on investment, PCC would be using the Government model 'Test, Learn and Grow'.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

31. **Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Update Jan 2025**

Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- a) PCC had built strong relationships across sectors with registered housing providers and other partnerships;
- b) To try and reduce Bed and Breakfast costs post COVID-19, PCC had three key strategies:
 - i) Increase activity to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first instance;
 - ii) To reduce reliance in pay-by-night accommodation;
 - iii) To focus on families and children;
- c) The next focus was around helping those in domestic abuse situations;
- d) There was Government investment to help Plymouth do better than any other Council in the country in terms of tackling homelessness;
- e) Plymouth Access to Housing (PATH) was one of the biggest temporary accommodation providers in the city and worked closely with PCC;
- f) 50% of lets were allocated to general needs housing through Devon Homes Choice;

- g) 70% of the offers from Plymouth Community Homes were addressed by the homeless cohort in Plymouth in December 2024;
- h) The solution to homelessness and temporary accommodation was more permanent accommodation;
- i) Funding pots for homelessness had been amalgamated to give PCC greater flexibility when working with partners;
- j) Thanks were given to the Housing Services Team and all partner organisations who worked to help those who had lost their homes.

In response to questions, it was explained:

- k) PATH would be delivering two houses with a total of 12 bed spaces available to let before the end of March 2025;
- l) Penge Churches Housing Association (PCHA) had 11 accessible homes in development for people with a history of homelessness;
- m) Local connection was an important part as to why people who were homeless stayed in Plymouth. There were also seasonal aspects which effected homeless numbers;
- n) Street begging did not equate to rough sleeping;
- o) Central Government were reviewing their strategy around rough sleeping;
- p) The PATH rough sleeping team kept a log of who was rough sleeping;
- q) Although volunteers helping at Christmas was useful, if members of the public wanted to volunteer all year round they could be contacted service providers as volunteers were needed throughout the year;
- r) Homelessness was part of the Complex Needs Alliance as every story was different;
- s) The nature of homelessness had changed in recent years due to the cost-of-living crisis;
- t) LiveWest had over 3,000 properties in Plymouth and void rates were not high and they worked with Devon Home Choice to prioritise homelessness;
- u) LiveWest were averaging 30 – 40 new builds in Plymouth, a portion of which were allocated to the homeless;
- v) Plymouth Community Homes (PCH) had on average 10 properties voided weekly, with an average void time of 31 days;

- w) At the year to date, PCH had let a total of 294 properties to homeless applicants;
- x) PCH had a development programme which aimed for 300 new properties a year;
- y) PCH and LiveWest were strategic partners of PCC within the Plan for Homes scheme;
- z) In the past nine years, Plymouth had 7,581 new homes built, 1,980 of which were affordable. Therefore, 26% were affordable homes and of that percentage, 65% were rented and 35% were low cost ownership;
- aa) In the past two years, LiveWest had delivered approximately 80 homes, 64 of which were for social rent using Homes England grant funding;
- bb) Homes England were more likely to provide funding to Plymouth due to PCC subsidising funds through reduced land value and topping up of viability gaps;
- cc) PCC allowed shared ownership and rent to buy models through their planning policies;
- dd) The Government had provided an increase in the Homelessness Prevention Grant for Plymouth and 49% of this would be used for homelessness prevention work, including stopping people from becoming homeless, preventing them from staying homeless, and staying out of the homelessness cycle;
- ee) PCC would learn from the work Young Devon were doing with the YMCA, which would lead to more work with prevention of young people, and Care Experienced young people, becoming homeless and more support for victims of domestic abuse;
- ff) This year to date, 11% of the presentations for homelessness were due to domestic abuse;
- gg) Work was being undertaken on PCC's supported and specialist housing needs assessment;
- hh) It was important to ensure that new communities were balanced communities;
- ii) Headline data sets were published in bi-annual performance reports;
- jj) A homelessness update would be brought to scrutiny every six months;
- kk) PCC would give a statement to Government about their intentions within the next five years due to the lack of renewal of the Joint Local Plan, however the Joint Local Plan was still the planning policy until after Local Government Reorganisation had taken place.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

32. **Work Programme**

The Committee agreed to note its Work Programme.

33. **Tracking Decisions**

The Committee agreed to note its Tracking Decisions.