

Housing and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 22 October 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Coker, in the Chair.

Councillor Poyser, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Cuddihee, Dingle, P.Nicholson, Penrose and Stevens.

Also in attendance: Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities), Councillor Stephens (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Transport), Andy Sharp (Interim Service Director for Street Scene and Waste), David Irving (Strategic Programme Lead, Housing Standards, Community Connections), Elliot Wearne-Gould (Democratic Advisor), Gary Walbridge (Strategic Director for Adults, Health and Communities), Jackie Kings (Head of Housing Solutions), Matt Garrett (Service Director, Community Connections), Mike Artherton (Parking, Marine & Garage Manager), Nick Shaw (Public Health Registrar), and Victoria Allen (Chief Executive, PATH).

The meeting started at 2.10 pm and finished at 4.13 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.

9. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

Appointment of a Chair and Vice-Chair

Due to the submission of apologies by the Chair and Vice-Chair, the Panel agreed:

1. To appoint councillor Coker as Chair for this particular meeting;
2. To appoint Councillor Poyser as Vice Chair for this particular meeting.

10. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

11. **Chair's Urgent Business**

The Chair welcomed Councillor P. Nicholson to the Committee, who had replaced Councillor Loveridge.

12. **Building Bridges to Opportunity Update**

Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the Building Bridges to Opportunity update report and discussed:

- a) The Cabinet decision was anticipated for March or June 2026, allowing time for a thorough process rather than a rushed approach;
- b) The framework had grown out of the Child Poverty Working Group's work and aimed to address drivers and impacts of poverty in Plymouth;
- c) A draft framework had been developed using a whole-systems approach, engaging partners across the public sector, other organisations, and communities;
- d) The framework focused on three core aims:
 - I. reducing the risk of falling into poverty;
 - II. enabling people to move out of poverty;
 - III. reducing harm for those living in poverty;
- e) Questions had arisen about why no hard target was set to end poverty in Plymouth; the reasoning was that many factors were outside local control, so the focus was on achievable local actions;
- f) The framework themes included:
 - I. Improving individual outcomes (education, skills, access to benefits and food);
 - II. Maximising community potential (neighbourhood and identity-based communities);
 - III. Optimising infrastructure and environment (green/blue spaces, transport links);
 - IV. Developing an economy that works for everyone;
 - V. Delivering services with communities to meet needs (including healthcare, banking, and postal access);
- g) Principles from engagement included trauma-informed practice, life-course approach, tackling inequalities, asset-based thinking, and upstream prevention;
- h) The framework had been mapped against the Plymouth Plan and aligned with other council strategies;
- i) Work was ongoing to identify outcome measures and metrics, using existing data sources rather than creating new ones;
- j) There was no promise of extra funding; the focus was on optimising current actions and resources;

- k) The approach linked strongly to prevention and upstream work already underway in the council.

Nick Shaw (Public Health Registrar) added:

- l) Engagement highlighted that how actions were delivered was as important as what was done;
- m) The framework would inform service delivery and policy decisions across the system;
- n) Public health would ensure principles were embedded in NHS neighbourhood planning and other strategies.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- o) Concerns about access to banking and NHS services, particularly in deprived wards, and the impact of service withdrawal on communities;
- p) The role of the council in mitigating these impacts, including exploring banking hubs and using libraries as shared spaces;
- q) Transport challenges for outlying communities and the importance of integrated planning;
- r) The need for a strong evidence base to influence national policy and support MPs in lobbying government;
- s) Opportunities for Plymouth to present “oven-ready” projects for government funding;
- t) Advocacy work being undertaken by councillors and officers, including lobbying for consistent increases in Local Housing Allowance and other measures through the LGA and MPs;
- u) The importance of cross-party support and continued advocacy before and after the national budget;
- v) Discussion on abolishing the two-child benefit cap, with reference to Gordon Brown’s proposal to fund this through taxation on online gambling;
- w) Challenges in selecting useful metrics and measures, and the intention to use existing data sources (Economic Strategy, Thrive Plymouth, Culture Strategy, Plan for Homes, Skills Strategy) to avoid creating a research industry;
- x) Plans for a public dashboard to present key indicators and vulnerabilities, alongside confidential data for internal use;
- y) The need for metrics to inform debate and highlight gaps for partnership action.

The Panel agreed:

1. To note the ongoing work as part of the Building Bridges to Opportunity programme;
2. To request that this item be reported back to the Panel before the framework is presented to Cabinet.

13. **Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Update**

Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping update report and discussed:

- a) The continuing pressure of the housing crisis, particularly at the extreme end of homelessness in the city. The long-term solution was the provision of more permanent and affordable housing through building programmes;
- b) The report highlighted the significant demand on the Housing Solutions team, which managed an active caseload of over 1,000 households at any one time, working closely with partners across the city to maintain temporary accommodation provision and reduce reliance on bed and breakfast placements;
- c) Recent government funding of £868,000 had been announced, to be used over the next 12 months with a strong focus on prevention work and systemic change to reduce reliance on short-term measures;
- d) The importance of trauma-informed and individualised approaches for those experiencing homelessness, including rough sleepers and those in hostels, was stressed as part of a nuanced and complex response.

Jackie Kings (Head of Housing Solutions) added:

- e) Demand for housing continued to grow nationally and locally, requiring creative solutions with partners such as BCHA and PATH to bring additional properties into the system at lower cost to the authority;
- f) Work was ongoing with social housing providers to utilise regeneration properties and deliver interim solutions, alongside strategic planning through the Homelessness Recovery Programme which addressed prevention, recovery, and system support across all cohorts including families, young people, and those with disabilities;
- g) The programme included immediate, medium-term (6–12 months), and long-term actions, recognising that recovery from the current challenges would take at least 10 years.

Victoria Allen (Chief Executive, PATH) added:

- h) Homelessness was a national challenge, and Plymouth partners were working creatively to respond, from street homelessness through to settled housing;
- i) Integration with health services was critical, given the complexity of needs among those presenting, and partnerships with private landlords were being strengthened to improve access to the private rented sector.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- j) Recognition of the efforts of officers and partners in tackling homelessness and the need for government to address barriers to housing delivery, including taxation on brownfield sites and funding for affordable housing;
- k) The importance of long-term investment in public housing and infrastructure, with suggestions for government to increase borrowing for housing and review local housing allowance rates to reflect rental values;
- l) Concerns about scapegoating planning authorities and the need for government to support councils in accelerating housing delivery;
- m) Increasing complexity among those presenting as homeless, including mental health needs and neurodivergence, and the impact of cuts to public services on access to healthcare;
- n) Support for frontline teams, including clinical supervision and integration of health and homelessness services, with new investment enabling recruitment of mental health specialists and occupational therapists;
- o) The significant pressures on staff managing high caseloads and the need for improved facilities and ongoing support;
- p) Trends in homelessness presentations, with the majority from deprived areas and private rented sector tenants affected by Section 21 notices, alongside domestic abuse and family breakdown as leading causes;
- q) Updates on the Royal Building acquisition and subsequent delivery of over 180 temporary accommodation units through external investment and partnerships, with further planning underway for its future use;
- r) Ways in which the public could support homelessness work, including compassion, volunteering, donations to reputable charities (PATH, Shekinah, Plymouth Soup Run), and use of StreetLink for referrals.

The Panel agreed:

- 1. To note the report and the progress made in addressing homelessness and rough sleeping pressures;

2. To endorse ongoing actions to address homelessness with compassion, resilience, and impact;
3. To request a future report providing a breakdown of households approaching the Council for housing advice, including geographic and demographic trends;
4. As part of the above report, to receive updates on the implications of the upcoming national budget for housing provision at a future meeting.

14. **City Centre Car Parking**

Councillor John Stephens (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Transport) introduced the City Centre Carparking report and discussed:

- a) The briefing paper provided insights into ongoing efforts and the landscape of city centre parking as Plymouth undergoes significant growth and transformation;
- b) The essential role of car parking services in supporting the delivery of key public services;
- c) Updates on utilisation and the summary outcome of a previous demand and utilisation analysis commissioned from WSP on future growth and demand;
- d) Collaboration with Homes England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to develop a detailed master plan for the city centre, assessing the impacts of growth and new homes on the transport network and parking, and informing an integrated transport and parking strategy;
- e) Continued support for public transport viability and events across the city;
- f) Commitment to sustainability and carbon reduction through investment in electric vehicle charging facilities, including updates on EV charger installation and structural assessments of car parks to accommodate heavier electric vehicles;
- g) Customer experience improvements and accessibility initiatives, such as wider parking bays and dedicated spaces for individuals with hidden disabilities.

Andy Sharp (Interim Service Director for Street Scene and Waste) added:

- a) The recommendations sought endorsement for developing an integrated transport and parking strategy, not detailed plans;
- b) The work was linked to a significant opportunity arising from the £4.4 billion defence investment and the creation of 10,000 homes, which would reshape the city centre and waterfront;

- c) External expertise was being commissioned to develop the master plan, and consultation with elected members and the public would be a strong aspect of the process;
- d) The integrated strategy would ensure transport and parking were considered as part of wider redevelopment plans.

Mike Artherton (Parking, Marine & Garage Manager) added:

- e) Car park utilisation trends remained largely consistent with previous reports, with no significant reductions observed;
- f) Some areas were showing growth, and patterns of use reflected the established purpose and visitor types for each car park;
- g) The data included in the report was similar to last year's findings, indicating stability in usage.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- h) Whether lower demand at certain car parks was influenced by public realm improvements and perceptions of disruption due to construction works in the city centre;
- i) Concerns about conflating car parking usage with wider city centre redevelopment and master planning work, and reservations about endorsing a strategy without sufficient detail;
- j) The need for early and meaningful public consultation on master planning principles to avoid perceptions of a "done deal" and ensure genuine engagement;
- k) The scale of proposed redevelopment, including references to media images of high-rise developments, and the importance of understanding potential impacts on existing car parks and retail viability;
- l) The historical context of Plymouth's post-war redevelopment and the need to avoid repeating mistakes by ensuring a vibrant, mixed-use city centre with residential presence;
- m) Officers reiterated that recommendations were for developing an integrated strategy, not approving detailed plans, and confirmed that consultation would be integral;
- n) Members stressed that transport strategy must encompass all modes of travel, including walking, cycling, and public transport, alongside car parking provision;

- o) The importance of cross-panel and whole-council involvement in shaping the redevelopment strategy, recognising that the issue spans housing, transport, environment, and growth;
- p) Agreement that scrutiny should begin with this committee but extend to wider membership and potentially the Scrutiny Management Board to coordinate cross-cutting issues;
- q) Officers confirmed that the Natural Infrastructure and Growth Panel would have a key role given its remit for transport policies and strategies, but acknowledged that housing and delivery aspects also warranted involvement from this committee.

The Panel agreed:

- 1. To note the car parking report for the previous 12 months;
- 2. To refer future scrutiny regarding the development of an integrated transport and parking strategy to the Scrutiny Management Board and Natural Infrastructure and Growth Scrutiny Panel, as appropriate.

15. **Renters Rights Bill**

Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the Renters Rights Bill report and discussed:

- a) The Renters' Rights Bill represented a major reform of the private rented sector, replacing the previous Renters Reform Bill with only minor wording changes;
- b) The Bill was structured in four parts, with Parts 1 and 4 expected to be implemented first within six months to two years, and Parts 2 and 3 phased in over up to ten years;
- c) Key changes included tenancy reform, abolition of Section 21 evictions, introduction of rent controls, a ban on rental bidding, protection against discriminatory practices, and new grounds for possession that were fairer for all parties;
- d) Enhanced enforcement powers for local authorities were proposed, including civil penalties of up to £7,000 for minor offences and up to £40,000 for serious or repeat non-compliance;
- e) The Bill would introduce a new private rented sector database and landlord ombudsman, extend the Decent Homes Standard and Awaab's Law to the private sector, and set clear expectations for property safety and quality;
- f) Plymouth City Council had taken a proactive approach, completing a legislative gap analysis, mapping stakeholders, reviewing policies, and establishing a Strategic Programme Lead post to coordinate delivery;

- g) The Council was participating in national and regional workshops, including co-chairing the South West Operational Delivery Forum (Operation Jigsaw), and had begun pilot testing IT systems and developing training programmes;
- h) Challenges remained, including staffing levels falling short of what would be required, uncertainty around new burdens funding, and potential IT system upgrades to meet future reporting requirements;
- i) Despite these pressures, the Council was committed to delivering a robust, fair, and effective implementation that protected tenants, supported responsible landlords, and strengthened public confidence in enforcement;
- j) Good landlords should have nothing to fear from enforcement, but criminal landlords would face tougher action under the new powers.

David Irving (Strategic Programme Lead, Housing Standards) added:

- k) The Bill was already having an impact on the market, with landlords reacting to anticipated changes despite not knowing all details;
- l) National figures indicated that approximately 19% of private rented sector landlords were selling up and leaving the market, which could affect Plymouth, although good landlords were expected to remain.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- m) Support for provisions allowing tenants to request permission to keep pets, noting the positive impact on wellbeing and the importance for those who had experienced long-term homelessness, where pets were often key companions;
- n) The wider implications of pet ownership rights, which would extend beyond the private rented sector to affordable housing, affecting over half of Plymouth's population;
- o) Timeframes for implementation, with Royal Assent potentially within two to three weeks if parliamentary sticking points were resolved, followed by a six-month window before enforcement duties commenced;
- p) The database was expected to be operational approximately two years after Royal Assent, with preparatory work already underway, including pilot registration of landlords and engagement with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on communications;
- q) The Council anticipated incremental updates to policies such as HMO licensing, electrical safety, and civil penalties, with executive decisions likely within the next month to enable readiness;

- r) The importance of minimising the risk of judicial review during implementation and the Council's involvement in national pilots to gain early experience;
- s) The commitment to keep members informed through email updates and briefings, with further scrutiny if major new policies were required.

The Panel agreed:

- 1. To note the report and the proactive steps taken to prepare for implementation of the Renters' Rights Bill;
- 2. To receive ongoing updates on progress, including any significant policy changes or implications for enforcement.

16. **Action Log**

The Panel agreed to note the progress of the action log.

17. **Work Programme**

The Panel agreed to request the following items be added to the work programme:

- 1. Central Park Ponds Project Update;
- 2. Plymouth Active Leisure (pre-decision);
- 3. Public Toilet's Strategy Review;
- 4. Allotments.