

Agenda Item: 4

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES POLICY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the People and Communities Policy Committee of South Norfolk District Council held on Thursday 3 November 2022 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present:	Councillors: D Bills (Chairman), S Blundell, M Dewsbury, T Holden and S Nuri Nixon
Apologies for Absence:	Councillors: B Duffin (with V Thomson appointed substitute), N Legg and J Wilby
Substitute:	Councillors: V Thomson
Cabinet Member Present:	Councillor: A Thomas
Officers in Attendance:	The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), the Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager (R Dunsire) and the Democratic Services Officer (L Arthurton).

47 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Wilby, N Legg and B Duffin.

48 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interests were made.

49 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the People and Communities Policy Committee held on 21 April 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

50 BEST IN CLASS HOUSING – TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families presented the report, which set out a plan for a temporary accommodation model to address the double impact of the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, both of which had increased demand for affordable housing in the District.

Members noted that the Council had an excellent reputation in supporting residents with housing issues. It was also noted that the Council was about to face an increase to demands resulting from the following issues:

- the Cost-of-Living increase
- the Covid19 pandemic
- Ukrainian crisis/asylum seekers
- reduced housing stock
- private renting sector issues
- ongoing nutrient neutrality issues

Members were advised that the report formed part of two phases in the Council's proposed response. The report before members addressed the immediate problems faced by the Council. This would be followed by a second report in the New Year to address the long-term situation. The Committee heard that the Council was utilising bed and breakfasts as a short-term measure to house those in need of temporary accommodation, although this was an expensive option.

The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that the Council worked with 14 Housing Associations in the District and had 100 percent nomination rights on their properties.

Members were reminded that the Council had a statutory obligation to deliver housing services under the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Although the Council no longer had its general housing stock, the authority was required to support residents who were at risk of homelessness or were homeless. The Council currently had several properties dedicated to temporary accommodation, namely: Kestrel House, St Andrews and the Manse (a private sector lease).

Conversation turned to the current demand and projected forecast regarding temporary accommodation. Members noted that demand for services would continue to grow, and officers faced difficulty moving people out of the system. Independent reports also mirrored the Council's conclusions regarding the projected increase in numbers.

Regarding the need for investment, members were advised that the Council's current temporary accommodation provision was at 98 percent capacity.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives informed members about the difficulties with private rental agreements and increases in rent charges. She further explained that private landlords controlled rent levels and to whom they let their properties; which further impacted the situation.

In respect of Housing Associations' responsibilities to invest more in properties for the District, Members were informed that Housing Associations faced the same problems as the Council did in moving people on from properties alongside the ongoing nutrient neutrality issues.

In reference to issues around costs, members heard that bed and breakfasts had been used as an overflow for temporary accommodation, but this had led to a significant increase in costs. Officers gave further details on the expenditure detailed in section 5 of the report and then took members through the staffing responsibilities within the structure. Areas for further investment alongside the benefits of capitalising on current staff was also highlighted. These additional costs had been factored into the overall projections going forward.

Following a question on the finance in the report, officers confirmed that they would review the figures and update them, if necessary, before the report went on to Cabinet.

The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families explained that the Council needed to look at mitigation strategies to help in the long-term, but reassured members that the right steps were being taken for the current situation.

A question was raised on whether the Council could lease properties for temporary accommodation, and it was noted that officers had investigated this approach would limit the amount of housing benefit that the Council could reclaim.

Further clarification was given on the overall temporary accommodation process. One member asked if the Council had looked at alternative options for housing aside from the building or purchasing of properties and reference was made to other authorities' use of caravans and converted shipping containers as accommodation. Officers confirmed that this had been looked at, but it was felt that the approach had limited usage and that this would still be subject to nutrient neutrality issues. The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives suggested that these alternative options would be included in the report to allow Cabinet to see the full picture.

Discussion turned to the areas where the Council was looking to invest in temporary accommodation. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that it was important to look at where properties were situated and their accessibility. Areas of suitability would be assessed by their facilities, such as bus routes and local connections.

A concern was raised in respect of the costs associated with using a consultant to undertake work for the Council on researching properties. Several members agreed and shared concerns that this money would be better spent in helping residents.

In response, officers explained that consultants were required because they had the specialised expertise needed to assess properties, which was not available at the Council. The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families further reassured members that the temporary accommodation figures in the report were a worst-case scenario and that other options could be utilised if available.

A further question was asked regarding the long-term need for properties if demand reduced. Officers explained that it would be unlikely to reduce significantly and that additional properties would allow the Council to have resilience going forward. Members noted that it was not the Council's intention to have a large housing stock and felt the figure within the report was reasonable. It was suggested that further details on the long-term utilisation of the additional housing stock be added to the report for further clarity.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives emphasised that if the proposed investment seen in the report was not agreed upon by Council, the overall costs for the authority would increase. A further impact would also be seen on the Council's other services.

In respect of working with private landlords to keep families and individuals in their homes, instead of moving them into temporary accommodation, officers explained that there was a *Whatever it Takes Fund*, where the Council works with landlords to keep people in their properties as long as possible.

Officers drew members' attention to the other services the Council provided to support the proposals in the report.

In response to a question on how the recharging between the two Councils worked when a resident was placed in the other authority. Officers explained that the authority would claim the full amount from their side. The Councils also had regular meetings to review the process to help utilise further options to help with demand.

The Chairman thanked officers and members for their contributions, and it was

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND THAT CABINET RECOMMENDS TO COUNCIL TO:

Capital Items

1. Create an additional capital budget of £1,808,000 to purchase additional temporary accommodation.
2. Delegate authority to the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Better Lives to purchase individual properties up to £750,000.

Revenue Items

3. Agree to the extension of contracts for temporary additional housing staff up to £266,200 per annum, (funded BDC 45% / SNC 55%) to deal with additional demand on housing services.

4. Agree the recruitment of 1 x FTE officer for every additional purchase of 10 units of temporary accommodation, which will be paid for by the additional income received from those properties.
5. Prioritise allocations in temporary accommodation within its own stock, and in the event, that capacity cannot be found within its own stock, place in Broadland District Council stock first.
6. Utilise capital reserves to pay for specialist support to speed up the purchase of properties.

(The meeting concluded at 10.40 am)

Chairman