

STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 5
15 OCTOBER 2014	Public Report

Report of the Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Services

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PORTFOLIO PROGRESS REPORT FROM THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND HOUSING SERVICES

1. PURPOSE

To provide Members with a progress report from the Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Services in relation to matters relevant to this committee.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to scrutinise the progress made on those aspects of the Cabinet Member's portfolio relevant to this Committee by providing challenge where necessary and to suggest ideas and initiatives to support the continued delivery of priorities within that portfolio.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

3.1.1 Providing affordable, warm, safe and secure housing is the cornerstone of a strong society.

3.1.2 Whilst this principle supports the entire Sustainable Community Strategy, it most closely aligns with the priority to achieve strong and supportive communities.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1.1 The Council's Constitution sets out the responsibilities of the Cabinet Member, including:

- Homelessness, housing options and Supporting People
- Traveller sites

4.1.2 These responsibilities fall under the remit of the Strong and Supportive Communities Scrutiny Committee.

4.1.3 Other responsibilities contained within the Constitution fall outside the remit of this Committee and are therefore not included in this report.

5. KEY ISSUES

5.1.1 Empty Homes

Since late 2013, the number of long term empty properties has remained at a steady level, since spiking prior to the submission of the base form to calculate the New Homes Bonus allocation last October. Having spent most of the time this year focused on the more challenging cases, focus has shifted from data cleansing and reducing numbers quickly, which will be the primary focus in the coming months. The current number of long term empty homes is 430. This time last year, it was 550.

5.1.2 The current number of properties being charged the empty homes premium (150% of council tax) is currently 114.

5.1.3 The total number of empty homes brought back into use through the intervention of the Empty Homes Officer from the 1st April 2013 to the 31st March 2014 was 128.

5.1.4 EDMOs

3 Empty Dwelling Management Orders have been applied for this year, with one having been successful. The other two applications have been revoked, due to one of the properties finally being put on the market after 7 years empty, and the other after the owner began works to refurbish the property. Having been empty for a combined total of 20 years, finally seeing a resolution to these three problematic properties is extremely positive.

5.1.5 Empty Homes Partnership

The partnership with Cross Keys Homes has enabled properties with a combined total of being empty for 24 years to return to use. Empty for different reasons and periods, the 5 properties brought back to use have done so through a combination of lease and repair, as well as purchase and repair, allowing Cross Keys Homes to increase their stock by direct purchase from the owner.

5.1.6 One of the properties purchased direct from the owner was bought solely through using email contact, as the owner moved to Canada three years ago. After tracing her through social media and explaining what options were available to her, she decided on a sale to Cross Keys Homes, allowing her to purchase her dream home in Vancouver, as well as allowing a family of five to move into the property.

5.1.7 Consulting with other councils

Our Empty Homes Officer has initiated a forum to share and consult on best practices with other councils in the area. Over the past 12 months, the Empty Homes Officer has worked with Huntingdonshire DC, Fenland DC, South Holland DC, and Rutland CC. This has led to the setting up of the Eastern Region Empty Homes Forum, allowing colleagues from other councils to meet up and share experiences, as well as seek advice from others in the same position.

5.1.8 Being the chair of the forum has allowed our Empty Homes Officer to represent the forum on the executive for the Empty Homes Network, and help shape their focus both politically and administratively for the coming months and years. This has provided valuable experience and knowledge, of what is happening at the forefront of the empty homes arena.

5.1.9 Award

Our Empty Homes Officer has followed on from his 'Highly Commended' award at the 2013 Empty Homes Conference by winning the overall award of Empty Homes Practitioner of the Year. Voted for by leading figures in the empty homes world, this is a significant achievement, and highlights the work and progress our Empty Homes Officer has achieved for Peterborough as a city in dealing with the issue of empty homes.

5.2 Housing Related Support

5.2.1 The focus of the Housing Related Support programme is on the prevention of homelessness and includes the provision of homeless hostels, floating outreach support and drop in services to vulnerable groups such as young people at risk, offenders or people at risk of offending, young parents, victims of domestic abuse, single homeless and homeless families, people with mental health illness, those who are chronically excluded and people with learning disabilities. Housing Related Support funding contributes towards the cost of support staff providing these services.

5.2.2 A new performance monitoring framework for providers of Housing Related Support (formerly Supporting People) has been developed which will allow providers to effectively and accurately report on the numbers of vulnerable people entering and exiting housing related accommodation, floating and drop-in support services. As well as monitoring how long people stay in and utilise these services, the framework will also detail how homelessness was prevented by the support staff.

5.3 Care and Repair

5.3.1 The Care & Repair team continue to assist vulnerable, old and frail people including disabled adults and children, to continue to live independently in safe and warm homes. Last year the Agency was recognised at the highest level, receiving two national Foundation Awards. The first award was for delivering the best Home Improvement Agency (HIA) handyman service in England & Wales. The second was achieving runner-up in the Agency of the Year Award. Furthermore the Agency has just obtained a national award winning the National Foundations "Integration Champion" category. All the awards were presented at the House of Lords. The awards demonstrate the Agency's high level of performance in the Home Improvement Agency field, both in terms of the quality of delivery and best value. The most recent award demonstrates how the Agency has worked with Housing, Health and Adult Social Care and Children's Services to improve the quality of life for local people.

5.3.2 The agency's work reduces costs for Health and Social Care by

- Reducing accidents and falls
- Reducing ailments linked with poor or inappropriate housing.
- Relieving anxiety.
- Reduces pain.
- Reduces visits to the Doctors, Drop in Centres and Accident and Emergency.
- Reduces hospital admissions and assists with hospital discharge.

- The work can prevent untimely moves into residential care and reduces the requirement or the frequency of home care.

5.4 **Housing Options (known in Peterborough as Housing Needs)**

5.4.1 **Homelessness in Peterborough**

The Housing Needs Service continues to deliver a housing options approach when dealing with clients who contact the authority for assistance and will seek to prevent a household's homelessness wherever possible.

5.4.2 The number of clients contacting the service remains high. In the last financial year we were contacted 25,009 times by clients for advice and assistance, of which 5,418 were seen face to face by an officer. We have a number of options when preventing homelessness and have been successful in a large number of cases, which may have otherwise resulted in the household becoming homeless and the Council needing to accommodate in temporary accommodation while seeking alternative accommodation.

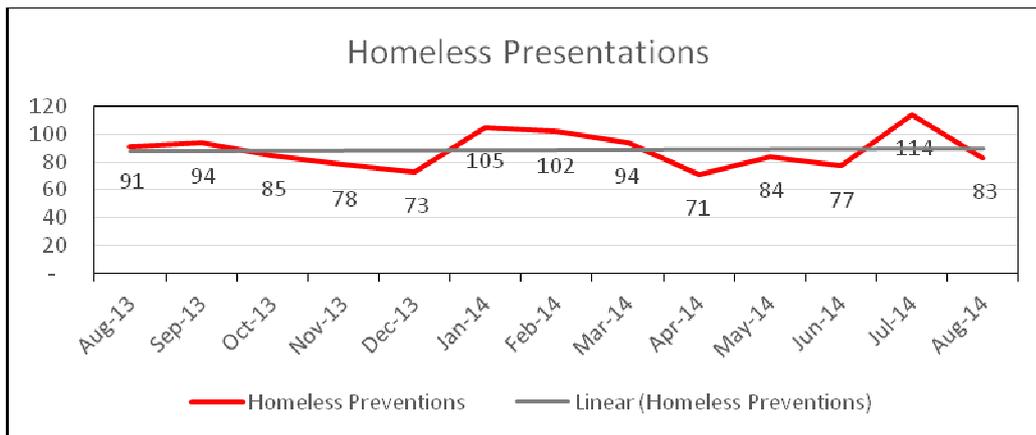
5.4.3 We have achieved this by:

- Negotiating with householders/landlords to resolve issues which led to the threat of homelessness
- Liaising with Housing Benefit to resolve payment issues
- Taking steps to improve security in the home to allow victims of domestic violence to remain in the home (Sanctuary Scheme)
- Delivering the Mortgage Rescue Scheme / mortgage debt advice
- Supporting households to move to alternative affordable accommodation in the private sector

5.4.4 The team of specialist officers focussing on homelessness prevention are currently made up of 11 officers, however 3 of these posts are funded temporarily through grants received from the DCLG. The funding for these posts is due to end on the 31 March 2015 with no likelihood of further funding being made available.

5.4.5 In 2013/14 we accepted homelessness applications from 1,095 households. This is marginally less than 4 years ago (1,326) of the 1,095 applications, 250 were accepted as 'statutorily homeless' and owed a full housing duty. This is in contrast to the national picture, which has seen increases in homelessness acceptances since 2010.

5.4.6 The graph below shows the number of homelessness presentations between August 2013 and August 2014



5.4.7 Rent Deposit Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments

5.4.8 We continue to offer a Rent Deposit Scheme to enable persons to access an interest free loan to be used for the upfront costs associated with securing a property in the private rented sector.

5.4.9 This has created a real opportunity for the prevention and relief of homelessness and also increased access to permanent accommodation. In 2013/2014 a total of 232 households were assisted into private rented sector accommodation through this scheme totalling £100,521.

5.4.10 The Tenancy Relations Service

5.4.11 Peterborough City Council has a Tenancy Relations Officer based within the Housing Needs team. This service offers support to both tenants and private sector landlords. It aims to promote good relations between tenants and landlords and encourage good practice in the private rented sector.

5.4.12 The service provides advice on disrepair, possession, deposit protection, security of tenure, rent and rent arrears and unlawful eviction. The service has been successful in establishing a framework for dealing with illegal evictions and utilised its power to prosecute under The Protection of Eviction Act 1977 and currently has 4 prosecution cases pending alongside supporting 267 households in the last 12 months.

5.4.13 The Peterborough Homes Allocations Policy

5.4.14 The Housing Needs Team continues to work in partnership with the 10 Registered Providers of social housing who have significant numbers of housing stock in the city to allocate their properties through the Peterborough Homes Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

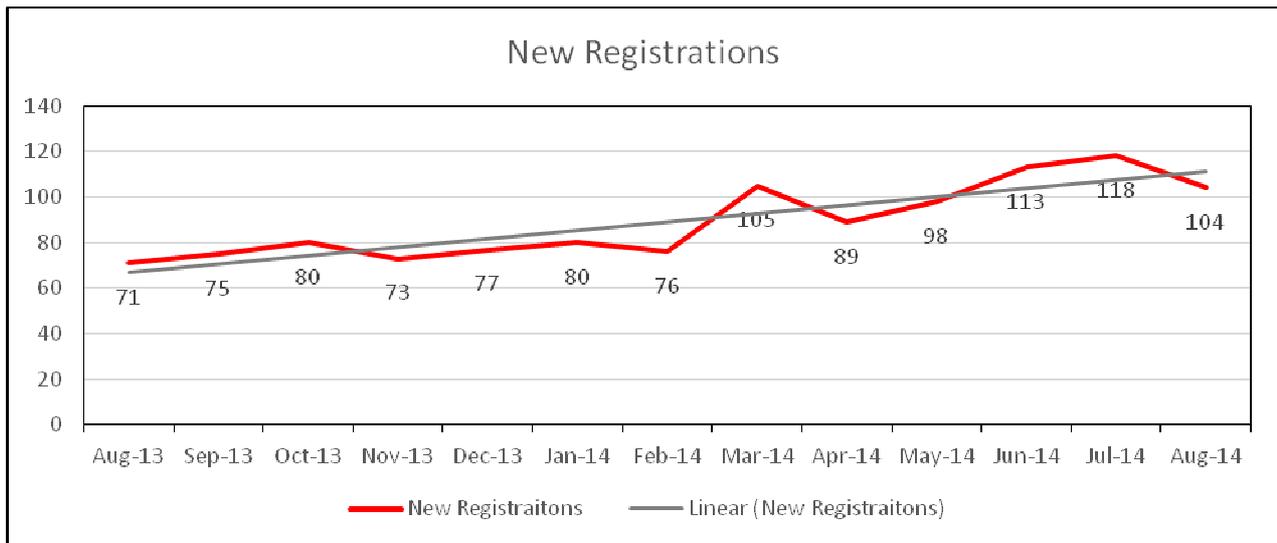
5.4.15 In April 2013 the council embarked on a comprehensive review of the Housing Register and made the following changes to the allocations policy:

5.4.16 Setting the entry criteria to the housing register to allow only those in the most urgent housing need to join. This includes homeless households, those who are threatened with homelessness, those living in insanitary or unsatisfactory housing conditions, those who need to move for social/welfare reasons or where failure to assist in moving will cause particular hardship

5.4.17 Only accepting applications from those who have a local connection with Peterborough demonstrated by having lived in the area for 6 of the last 12 months or 3 of the last 5 years,

those who are working in the city, or those who need to move to the area for special reasons

- 5.4.18 Excluding applicants who own suitable accommodation or those who have sufficient financial resources to secure suitable accommodation by other means from joining the housing register. (This will not apply to those over 55 and eligible for sheltered accommodation)
- 5.4.19 Continuing to exclude those who have behaved in an unacceptable manner. This will be determined by the Council or RSL being satisfied that the applicant or a member of their household has previously been guilty of unacceptable behaviour which would make them unsuitable to be a tenant, or the applicant or member of the household having been served with an injunction by the council or their landlord to stop them behaving in a way which causes nuisance or annoyance to others, or the applicant or a member of the household having current tenancy arrears in excess of 8 weeks rent, or the applicant or a member of the household having any outstanding former tenant arrears.
- 5.4.20 Additionally, the bedrooms standards policy that had previously been more generous was changed and brought in line with the criteria that will be applied to the Local housing Allowance (Housing Benefit) claims from April 2013.
- 5.4.21 In order to support the RSL's in managing the issue of the removal of the spare room subsidy the allocation policy also made provision to give band 1 priority to those who were assessed as under occupying their social housing tenancy. This has been relatively successful, but the continued demand for 1 and 2 bedroom properties has meant that many households are still unable to move into smaller accommodation.
- 5.4.22 In addition to the above changes we also included a number of additional preference categories, which gave increased priority for those who had a long standing local connection with the city (through 5 years continuous residence), those making an economic contribution to the city through employment or voluntary work in the area, and ex-servicemen and women who have been discharged from service in the last 5 years.
- 5.4.23 These changes have been implemented over the last year and having reviewed all applications on the housing register this has meant that the number of applications on the register has been greatly reduced to 2,918 as at August 2014. New applications to join the Housing Register have remained consistent over the last 12 months
- 5.4.24 The graph below represents the number of new registrations by month from August 2013 until August 2014



5.4.25 Partnership Working

The Health to Home Project was launched in January 2014 following a successful bid to the Department of Health Homeless Hospital Discharge Fund. The fund was set up to tackle the health inequalities faced by homeless persons and to prevent homeless persons being discharged to the streets. The project was a partnership between Peterborough City Hospital, Axiom Housing Association, Peterborough Streets, and Housing Needs and employed one Hospital based nurse and two outreach workers. Outcomes include 50 homeless persons being assisted into accommodation, developing a Hospital Discharge Protocol, providing training and information sessions to nurses, and a Homeless Persons Patients Charter.

5.4.26 During the last 12 months the Housing Needs Team have designated officers to ensure joint working between resettlement staff at HMP Peterborough and the Housing Needs service and promote homelessness prevention. This prevents offenders being released onto the streets and in turn making a crisis homelessness presentation to Housing Needs. The main aim of this work is to ensure that there is a planned approach to the prison discharge and accommodation need.

5.4.27 The early identification of those in housing need is essential in order to carry out preventative intervention which can avoid homelessness before individuals reach crisis point. This service will be further enhanced by the development of a Prison Discharge Protocol in late 2014.

5.4.28 Rough Sleeping in Peterborough

5.4.29 Peterborough City Council has a Rough Sleeper Outreach Officer to assist individuals who find themselves sleeping rough after losing their accommodation. The Rough Sleeper Outreach officer has made great strides in ensuring that those who are rough sleeping are assisted before they reach a point where they are entrenched. This work is continuing and we are now taking steps to tackle entrenched long term rough sleepers in the city who we are working to assist through a personalised approach to leave the streets. The number of known entrenched rough sleepers in the City is currently 14.

5.4.30 Mortgage Rescue Scheme

- 5.4.31 Peterborough City Council has been actively promoting the Government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme. This Scheme enables a homeowner who is at risk of losing their home because of mortgage arrears to be assisted by working with a local housing association to purchase their property who then rents it back to them. This Scheme enables both homeless prevention and increases the stock levels of our partner housing associations.
- 5.4.32 At the end of March 2014 we had completed on 24 mortgage rescues and had a small number which were pending completion and where funding had been agreed to ensure that these cases completed. We were the best performing authority in the East and South East areas of the Country and the reputation of the officer in the Housing Needs team was further enhanced by the HCA zone agent who referred a number of authorities to us for advice and guidance.
- 5.4.33 Unfortunately the Mortgage Rescue scheme ceased on the 31 March 2014. However we still have a number of tools available to us to support households who find themselves in financial difficulty and where we are unable to keep them in their home.
- 5.4.34 Single Person Homelessness**
- 5.4.35 In July 2014 Peterborough Streets ceased trading following financial difficulties. This resulted in the immediate closure of their Park Road Charity shop and the decommissioning of their Crisis Private Rented Sector Scheme.
- 5.4.36 Peterborough Streets delivered projects which mainly supported single homeless persons. They were the lead organisation in the delivery of No Second Night Out in Peterborough and the Crisis Private Rented Sector Scheme to assist single people into private rented sector accommodation. They did not provide any accommodation for homeless people.
- 5.4.37 The No second Night Out Project continues to be delivered jointly by Axiom Housing Association and Peterborough City Council and is operated from The New Haven Night Shelter at Towler Street, Peterborough. This Project assists new rough sleepers into accommodation by providing an emergency crash bed and support into suitable accommodation, reconnection to support services and access to health and wellbeing services.
- 5.4.38 The Crisis Private Rented Sector Scheme supported single homeless persons into private rented sector accommodation, primarily shared accommodation. This Scheme was unfortunately decommissioned with the closure of Peterborough Streets. Housing Needs have submitted a proposal to the funder to re-establish the scheme with another partner agency and expect to re-establish the Scheme soon.
- 5.4.39 Other services provided by Peterborough Streets included the distribution of the Big Issue and the provision of a 'care of' address' facility for rough sleepers. The Big Issue continues to be supported by the city and is now distributed through Peterborough Council for Voluntary Service on Lincoln Road. The 'care of' address' facility previously delivered by Peterborough Streets is being provided temporarily by the Salvation Army whilst Housing Needs explore a permanent site and provider.
- 5.4.40 We recognise the important role that partner agencies have in the delivery of services to homeless persons and those at risk of homelessness and continue to work with the Faith Sector to maximise opportunities to support vulnerable rough sleepers who are often

resistant to services. We know that the church is an important touch point for this group and have developed signposting services and leaflets that have been acknowledged as good practice within the wider faith community. We are working with Churches Together to raise awareness of homelessness, rough sleeping and services through a church service in October. The development of the Light Project Peterborough led by members of the Park Road Baptist Church is also supported by Housing Needs. The aim of the Project is to establish a winter night shelter and assist Housing Needs to provide cold weather provision during the winter months with the aim of minimising loss of life, reducing rough sleeping and maximising engagement with this client group. We expect to trial the night shelter during February 2015 and further extend this provision in the years that follow.

5.4.41 This year's cold weather provision will run from November 2014 until March 2015 and we will include the February trial within the provision. This will continue to be monitored by the Housing Needs Service and will be activated where spells of exceptionally cold weather, measured by a period of three consecutive nights or more when the temperature is below zero degrees centigrade.

5.5 Housing Enforcement

5.5.1 The housing enforcement team continue to address poor property conditions within the private rented sector in the City. The privately rented sector is continuing to grow faster than any other housing sector and in some areas of the city the private rented sector now comprises over 40% of the housing stock.

5.5.2 During the last year the team has received over 850 complaints about housing conditions such as properties without heating, suffering from damp and mould, overcrowded housing, unsafe electrics, and blocked drains. Many landlords comply with requests from Officers to carry out repairs but there remain a significant level of landlords who, for whatever reason, do not provide safe, warm decent accommodation to their tenants.

5.5.3 More specifically the team are continuing to find that some landlords will illegally evict tenants rather than carry out repairs. This is predominant in the Central and East area of the City where almost all the enforcement activity takes place.

5.5.4 Over the year the Officers have served 167 notices on landlords for a variety of issues such as:

- requiring information about the landlord and the property
- renting out a property without a valid Energy Performance Certificate
- improvement notices to address disrepair
- not complying with house in multiple occupation regulations
- overcrowding properties

5.5.5 Most landlords comply with notices received but the ones who do not result in the works being carried out in default of the notices served and the landlords facing prosecution. During the last year 15 cases have resulted in the Council taking action against the landlord in this way.

5.5.6 Of the cases brought before the court for prosecution all landlords/agents have been found guilty thereby giving us 100% success rate. All cases are widely publicised in local and trade press which helps to improve compliance in certain areas for the future.

- 5.5.7 One letting agent has been prosecuted twice this year for a number of offences relating to houses in multiple occupation that had not been licensed, failure to provide the council with information and management offences.
- 5.5.8 In the Central and Millfield area there has been a requirement to licence houses in multiple occupation that applies to smaller HMOs (3 people, 2 households), known as Additional HMO Licensing. This has been in place since 2009 and expired in June 2014. During the scheme, where a landlord failed to licence a property the authority had a duty to take over the management of that property. During the scheme 5 properties were subject to such orders. One property remains in the control of the council, having been made subject to a final management order which lasts for 5 years. Our partner agency manages this on a daily basis and the rental income from the property is retained by the council towards paying the costs of the improvement works carried out to bring the property up to a safe standard.
- 5.5.9 With the end of the Additional HMO Licensing scheme looming a consultation was undertaken in December 2013 with a view to the introduction of Selective Licensing within the Central and East area of the city as an alternative. It is anticipated that final proposals will be presented to Cabinet within the next few weeks.
- 5.5.10 During the summer the BBC ran a series called 'How Safe is Your House'. One of our officers spent a number of days filming with the BBC and one of the current cases that is going through court for prosecution featured in the programme.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 It is anticipated that the Scrutiny Committee will comment on and make recommendations relating to the updates provided in this report in order that delivery potential is maximised for the benefit of our communities.

7. CONSULTATION

N/A

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Comments and recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee members will be considered as part of the ongoing development and delivery of specific business areas.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 9.1 N/A

10. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – case studies