

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Tuesday 24 March 2015

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders, Hollick (Chair), Wade, Hill and Smith.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Laura Higgins, Dave Scholes, Shaibur Rahman and Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

No apologies

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

3. NON-STATUTORY HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

The Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager reported that Oxford has a large historic problem with homelessness. Many homeless people have a combination of Mental Health and alcohol or substance abuse issues.

The Panel heard that the City Council receives grant money from DCLG which it tops up to provide a total of £1.4m which funds a wide range of services. The City Council funding is protected over the medium term but the level of the government grant is decided annually. A small cut in the grant last year was manageable but significant cuts in future years would change the landscape. The County Council also currently provides a £3.8m of funding but this is reducing to £2.3m. It is difficult to predict the impact that these cuts will have on the homelessness pathway.

There are currently 220-230 hostel beds in the city and this number is being maintained, whereas nationally, bed numbers are declining. However, given the funding reductions, it seems likely that the quality of some types of provision will be reduced.

While there is some smaller scale homelessness provision in Abingdon and Cherwell, many homeless people come to Oxford from the neighbouring districts and also from further afield due to the concentration of facilities here. Once homeless people have settled in the city, they tend to stay. Local authorities now have local connection policies.

The high demand on bed spaces means that some people are on the streets, and some have been there for 2-3 years. There has recently been a slight increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough. Between June 2012 and December 2014 new rough sleepers spent an average of six nights on the street. There is a big focus on getting new rough sleepers off the streets quickly. Some people are now being given deposits for Private Rented Sector housing to free

up bed spaces but this represents a big cultural shift and there have been relatively few moves in to private sector accommodation.

The Panel heard that the City Council has good links with the Homeless Liaison Police Officer and Health services. There are operational procedures in place to ensure that no one should be discharged onto the streets and the City Council is normally given 24 hours of notice. Health services make a financial contribution to the homelessness pathway and also fund the mental health pathway. Moves towards pooled budgeting across different agencies are would be challenging but welcome.

The Panel resolved to monitor the impact of County Council cuts and requested further information on the numbers of individual homeless people who access services.

4. VERBAL UPDATE ON THE JOINT COMMISSIONING OF HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES

The Housing Needs Manager advised that the County Council is currently leading on the joint commissioning of housing support services and an update paper will go to the Health Improvement Board at the end of April.

The Panel were advised that the City Council has sought to influence the commissioning to achieve the best outcomes for the city. There will be a dispersal of bed spaces to districts, which was a City Council aim.

The homelessness pathway demands throughput but bed blocking is a problem because there is a lack of move on options in the city. The Panel noted that the housing situation in the city is not likely to improve any time soon.

The City Council is looking at property fund investment models that could increase the availability of housing at affordable rates. Due diligence is currently being done and neighbouring districts have been approached. The Panel noted that the City Council has a duty to provide best value and that the Inequality Scrutiny Group is deliberation of these kinds of options.

5. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The Team Leader for Spatial and Economic Development advised that Panel that the City Council is obliged to follow new government guidance.

The change affects the City Council's policy of seeking contributions towards affordable housing from developers of smaller sites of 4-9 dwellings. Since this policy was introduced in February 2013, it had generated approximately £500k per year in additional funding. This funding has been building up to enable a more sizeable investment.

Reading and West Berkshire Councils are challenging this government decision and the City Council is providing data to support this challenge.

In response to a question about whether the City Council can stop developers from deliberately building 9 dwellings to avoid affordable housing contributions, the Panel heard that the City Council can ensure good use of land through its planning policies. This is an issue that officers are very alive to. Some developers have tried to artificially sub-divide plots and have been challenged.

The Panel resolved to monitor the impact of the new government guidance after 6 months.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

Noted.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.30 pm