

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 3 September 2015

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders, Hollick, Wade, Smith (Chair), Benjamin, Henwood and Humphrey.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing and Property), Matthew Bates (Team Leader Planning Policy), Frances Evans (Housing Strategy & Performance Manager) and Lyndsey Beveridge (Principal Planner)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Scott Seamons, Board Member for Housing
Dave Scholes, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

3. PERFORMANCE MONITORING (HOUSING MEASURES) - QUARTER 1

The Head of Housing and Property provided updates on the following performance measures:

HC016: Number of affordable homes for rent delivered – the target would be met by the end of this month.

HP003: The number of people estimated to be sleeping rough – a street count was conducted in May and 18 people were found to be sleeping rough. It was estimated that there were 146 unique rough sleepers seen bedded down in Oxford over a 3 month period (April 2015 to June 2015). A detailed report was available for quarter 1 which could be shared with members.

In response to a question, the Panel heard that the number of families living in temporary accommodation was within target (NI156). The Council had recently been using more of its own stock to accommodate homeless families compared to previous years when the majority were housed in private rented stock.

The Panel heard that two sheltered schemes had been converted to temporary accommodation a few years ago. The Panel questioned when these sites would be developed as planning approval had been granted some years ago. The Head of Housing and Property advised that he could not see this happening in the foreseeable future because these sites provided about 30 temporary accommodation units and the pressure on homelessness was only likely to increase. The homelessness budget had been overspent by £200k last year and

pressures around Homechoice and the nightly spend had not gone away. There was a need to communicate this message to local residents.

The Panel questioned the Council's performance on rent collection (CS010 & CS013) and whether all was being done to improve this. The Panel heard that the Council has the right resources in place and had recently invested in software which could improve the Council's efficiency in this area. Welfare reforms had made it more difficult for the Council to achieve its targets and disposable incomes were challenged. The government had also announced housing association and Council tenants with household incomes of over £30k would be made to pay market rents to remain in social housing. The additional income generated would have to be paid to government.

Resolved:

The homelessness report for quarter 1 would be circulated to the Panel.

4. MID-POINT REVIEW OF THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2013-18

The Housing Strategy and Performance Manager introduced the report and advised that the Council's Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan had been found to be fit for current purpose. Of the 61 key milestones, 45 actions had been completed and were now embedded into day to day service delivery. A further 11 would be completed within the lifetime of the strategy and 5 had been delayed. No changes were recommended to the strategy or action plan at this stage but a further review would take place in June 2016 once the implications of new national policies and the Autumn Spending Review were better understood.

The Panel were also advised that the City Council was in the process of completing the Gold Standard 10 local challenges. Many other authorities had not yet started this process. The first challenge had been awarded for corporate commitment to tackling homelessness and a second challenge would be submitted by officers the following day. In response to a question, the Panel heard that this involved responding to questions and providing evidence to demonstrate that the Council delivered on its policies and strategies.

The Panel questioned what data the Council keeps on people who are not eligible for services, such as those who had refused an offer of housing. The Housing Strategy and Performance Manager advised that the Council provides advice, information and signposting to assist customers and offered to provide to the Panel some details on the types of services being provided.

The Panel questioned how the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) pilot had gone and the Housing Strategy and Performance Manager offered to speak with colleagues and provide more information to the Panel.

In response to a question about the recommissioning of homelessness services with reduced funding, the Panel heard that this process was led by the County Council and was now in its final stages. There would be no hostel closures or

loss of bed spaces in the city. The main challenge to the homelessness pathway was a lack of move on accommodation. This was caused by a lack of sustainable accommodation in the city that was available at Local Housing Allowance rates.

The Panel questioned where in the city people tend to present as homeless and whether many applications were received from people from neighbouring districts. The Panel heard that there were handfuls of such cases and that it was often difficult to identify where responsibility for these individuals lies. Not all local authorities make provision for non-statutory homelessness so services located in Oxford did have an attraction effect to some extent.

The Panel noted that Age UK had been awarded funding to speed up hospital discharges for older people and asked which agencies the City Council was working with on homeless hospital discharge protocols.

The Panel asked what support the City Council provided to credit unions and whether such provision was sustainable. Officers offered to come back on this.

The Panel questioned the City Council's approach to preventing begging. The Panel heard that homeless people shouldn't need to beg and that the City Council had an anti-begging campaign that encouraged people to support resources for homelessness rather than people who were begging. This included business cards, leaflet and online information. The Panel requested to see some of this campaign literature.

Resolved: The Panel would request the following:

- A report following the next review of the homelessness strategy and action plan (expected in June 2016),
- Data on the information and advice provided to customers to who the Council does not owe a duty to house,
- Information about the MEAM pilot,
- Information about improving homelessness discharge procedures,
- Information on support provided to Credit Unions,
- Anti-begging campaign literature.

5. HOMELESSNESS PROPERTY INVESTMENT

The Head of Housing and Property introduced this report. The Panel heard that the City Council was leveraging in external funding to buy properties to prevent statutory homelessness. Properties would be let to homeless households at Local Housing Allowance rates, releasing capacity in hostels. St. Mungo's would manage the properties and would be incentivised to move tenants on within 2 years, which would require intensive work with these households. The scheme aimed to provide a return on the Council's investment while also mitigating some of the increasing demand on homelessness services.

The Panel questioned whether the City Council would have flexibility and control in order to support tenancies exempt or excluded from the ordinary rules that apply to maximum Local Housing Allowance rates. The Panel received assurances that such controls were in place.

The Panel questioned what would happen at the end of a 2 year tenancy if the household was unable to move on. The Head of Housing and Property advised that households would not face eviction but that there would be a knock on effect and a risk that the homelessness pathway would become blocked. St. Mungo's would work with households to improve their employment prospects with the aim that they could afford to move on into private rented accommodation. This would be very challenging but St. Mungo's had a good record and the Council's Welfare Reform Team had also proven that it was possible to get results.

The Panel questioned whether neighbouring districts had been consulted and heard that the districts were aware. The City Council could choose where to buy properties and may get better value for money outside of the city boundaries but factors such as schooling would be taken into account when housing families. Two other authorities outside of Oxfordshire would also be investing in this fund and in future there could be flexibility of movement across these three areas.

6. OXFORD GROWTH STRATEGY

The Board Member for Transport, Planning and Regulatory Services introduced the report and explained that it contained nothing substantially new but provided a useful summary of the current position.

A Principal Planning Officer highlighted an error on page 96 of the paperwork (paragraph 17 of the report), where '£50,000 for Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire Examinations' should read '£50,000 for Vale of the White Horse and West Oxfordshire Examinations'.

The Panel questioned whether the Council had looked at potentially cheaper alternatives to the proposed additional resources, such as co-funding some of this work on a county-wide basis. The Panel heard that there was a joint working process but not full agreement on some issues, so there was a need for the City Council to frontload evidence to the Oxfordshire Growth Board. Two districts were trying to evidence that Oxford's housing needs could be met within Oxford, for example through the removal of height restrictions and certain environmental protections. The City Council was identifying sites on the edge of the city for housing development and the Districts were not necessarily keen to carry out such work on a joint basis.

The Panel asked whether there was scope for the City Council to negotiate on issues such as housing density and height restrictions in the city, or to consider sites outside the city on major transport routes, in order to find middle ground and seek agreement with the districts. The Panel heard that there had been positive engagement with some districts and less positive engagement with others. The Board Member advised that finding solutions to Oxford's unmet housing need would require difficult decisions about sustainability that would have to balance a range of views. However the evidence that Oxford's housing need far out-scaled its capacity meant that progress was now being made towards agreement of Oxford's unmet housing need that would need to be met outside of the district. The Board Member advised that the housing need figure that the City Council had agreed to accept [from the Strategic Housing Market Assessment] as a working assumption for the purposes of calculating the unmet

element, was at the lower end of future projections and would not meet the affordable housing needs by some way.

The Board Member advised that height restrictions were very important to the character of Oxford but that did not mean that a completely flat skyline would be desirable. Some higher developments on selected sites could be appropriate if they are carefully designed, such as potentially at the Oxpens site.

The Board Member advised that the City Council would consider whether high density housing would be appropriate on future development sites. It was unlikely that there were streets of older housing within the city that could feasibly be redeveloped and replaced with new housing blocks, as suggested by a Panel member.

The Panel expressed disappointment that so far, only student accommodation had been allocated on the Oxpens site. The Panel heard that the City Council was awaiting the latest plans for selling the site from the landowner, London and Continental Railways.

A Principal Planning Officer advised that the City Council had assessed that there was capacity for 10,368 additional housing units in Oxford in the period from 2011-31. This was a slight increase on the figure given in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), and was a significant increase from the SHLAA in previous years. This was a very ambitious figure that made some very optimistic assumptions about density and overcoming constraints, and hence it should be seen as an absolute upper limit.

The Panel questioned what else the City Council was doing to get its message across. The Panel heard that the City Council was seeking to influence districts' local plans and had successfully pushed for a 2 year time frame for Cherwell to review its local plan. South Oxfordshire (SODC) would be the last of the 4 neighbouring districts to review its local plan, with examination anticipated in late 2016. SODC's latest draft assumed a contribution of 3,000 new homes towards meeting Oxford's unmet housing need, and considered three sites; land South of Grenoble Road, Wick Farm north-east of Barton, and a new settlement near Lewknor off junction 7 of the M40 motorway. The Board Member advised that he was not confident that Grenoble Road would be SODC's preferred option.

The Panel questioned who owned land South of Grenoble Road and how many houses could be accommodated on this site. Principal Planning Officers advised that this depended on the size parcel of land in question but that the site could accommodate at least 4,000 homes. The City Council, Thames Water Utilities, Magdalen College were the major land owners.

The Panel asked whether improved transport links would be part of any urban extension of Oxford and heard that this would be part of the detailed work including routes for cycling, walking and buses. The Board Member advised that the Cowley branch line represented an opportunity to improve public transport in that part of the city, along with new or extended bus routes. More ambitious options, such as trams, were unlikely.

The City Council was also continuing to engage at Leader and officer level and using political persuasion and argument to challenge undesirable alternative options, such as developments near Swindon or in more distant Oxfordshire

villages, which would be less suitable for meeting Oxford's needs. The preferred option for meeting Oxford's needs is through sustainable urban extensions around the edge of the City. The City Council's position had been clearly represented in local media. The City Council was also making a technical and political case to national government.

7. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer made the following proposals which were agreed by the Panel:

- Due to delays in housing-related decisions going to CEB, an additional Housing Panel meeting could be scheduled for 5 November 2015. This would enable the Panel to pre-scrutinise decisions on the Sheltered Housing Review, Private Rented Sector Strategy and Housing Energy Strategy.
- As a consequence, an informal meeting scheduled for 26 October 2015 would be cancelled.
- Housing Panel members would be invited to the Finance Panel's budget review meeting on 7 January 2016 (5.30pm start) to consider the Council's Housing Revenue Account business plan and other budget proposals relating to housing.
- That a report on rent arrears would be scheduled to come to the Panel meeting in December.

Councillor Sanders apologised that she would be unable to attend the budget review meeting on 7 January 2016.

8. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the notes of the meeting held on 4 June 2015.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.33 pm