

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 10 December 2015

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

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing and Property), Tom Porter (Allocations Manager) and Damon Venning (Rents Team Manager)

17. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Elise Benjamin.

Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services, was also unable to attend.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

19. HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT - 2015/16 QUARTER 2

The Head of Housing and Property introduced the report and advised that 113 new homes had been developed in Oxford this year under the Council's affordable homes project. The newly redeveloped Bradlands sheltered housing scheme, which included 49 units of accommodation, would be opening the following day.

The Head of Housing and Property advised that 39 rough sleepers were identified in November during a count and that this result had been reported to government. This represented a 50% increase on the equivalent count of 26 the previous year. Of these rough sleepers, some had no connection to the city, some had no recourse to public funds, some were entrenched rough sleepers and some were accommodated. The provision of services in the city was thought to attract homeless people to Oxford and the homelessness pathway was currently full.

The Head of Housing and Property reported that the City Council had for the first time breached the law by housing a homeless household in bed and breakfast accommodation for over 6 weeks. The Council was using general needs stock as temporary accommodation and a number of interventions were successful.

In response to a question about the time taken to process benefit claims, the Head of Housing and Property advised that IT systems had been down for a

week in November but that performance was again moving in the right direction and officers had more recently been processing claims within 7 days.

The Panel resolved:

- To request a briefing note from the Head of Housing and Property on rough sleepers in the city, including where they originated from;
- To request a visit to the new housing developments in the city, including the newly redeveloped Bradlands site;
- That the Chair would ask to go out with officers on outreach to rough sleepers and report back to the Panel;

20. RENTS PERFORMANCE

The Rents Team Manager introduced the report, which had been requested by the Panel. The Housing Panel noted that the overall rent collection rate was above target as of 31 October 2015. However, the total arrears of tenants owing more than 7 weeks rent was over target. The Rents Team Manager advised that these arrears had increased the previous autumn and had remained over target since. The Panel received assurances that officers were in contact with these tenants and that total arrears of tenants owing more than 7 weeks rent were no longer increasing. The Rents Team Manager advised that a new piece of software called RentSense had been procured which would track payment patterns and enable the Rents Team to target its resources more effectively, based on more up to date information. The Council was the first local authority to implement this software. It went live in mid-November and the results would be seen in the next 2-3 months.

The Panel noted that the Council was procuring a new debt collection agency contract and questioned why this function was being outsourced and what controls the Council would have over debt collection. The Rents Team Manager advised that two agents would be responsible for collecting all Council debts where Council officers had been unsuccessful. The two agencies would be incentivised to compete with each other and their staff would be well trained and would wear cameras.

The Panel questioned what the Rents Team was doing to promote payment by Direct Debit. The Rents Team Manager advised that current take up was 40% but this figure would rise to 50-60% if tenants in receipt of full housing benefit were excluded. The Panel heard that the Council does promote payment by Direct Debit to tenants but cannot insist on it. The Panel suggested that the Council should explore options for incentivising Direct Debit and that one option should be to enter these tenants into a prize draw. The Panel also suggested that the Council should set targets around increasing Direct Debit take up, noting that any targets should be exclusive of those tenants in receipt of full housing benefit.

The Panel also asked questions about the impacts of welfare reforms. The Rents Team Manager advised that the Council had been part of a Universal Credit pilot project which had enabled it to be ahead of the game compared to many other local authorities. The Council had also applied to be a trusted partner of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Panel resolved to:

1. Request the procurement documentation relating to external debt collection agencies;
2. Continue to monitor rents performance;
3. Make two recommendations to the City Executive Board:
 - I. That the Council should look at ways of incentivising Council tenants to pay rent by Direct Debit, including the option of holding a prize draw;
 - II. That the proportion of eligible Council tenants paying rent by Direct Debit should be a performance indicator in future years.

21. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS UPDATE

The Allocations Manager introduced the report, which had been requested by the Panel. The Housing Panel noted the proposed change from a fortnightly lettings cycle lasting 13 days to a weekly cycle. The Allocations Manager advised that 79% of bids were submitted during the first week of the current cycle. This change, which would be authorised by the Head of Housing in early 2016, would help to minimise the loss of rental income to the Housing Revenue Account when properties become vacant. It should also even out the workload of the Allocations Team, enabling a greater focus on assisting non-bidders. The Panel welcomed this change as a sensible move, provided that any demographics that tended to bid later in the lettings cycle would not be disadvantaged as a result.

The Panel questioned what methods of bidding were available to people who were disabled or visually impaired. The Allocations Manager advised that assisted bidding was available and that family members or support workers could help bidders too. The Panel suggested that an officer with an equalities background should review the bidding process to highlight any equalities issues or provide assurance that there were no such issues.

The Panel noted that of 428 offers of housing made in the first 7 months of the year, 64 were refused. The Panel questioned how the number of refusals could be reduced and suggested that providing internal photos or holding open house sessions at advertised properties would help. The Allocations Manager advised that refusal reasons were varied and that there was a need to look at whether refusals were reasonable or unreasonable. Some people refused an offer of housing for spurious reasons although there were already penalties that could be applied if a bidder was clearly timewasting. The Panel suggested that officers should provide a breakdown of reasonable and unreasonable refusal reasons and consider positive ways of reducing these.

The Panel resolved to:

1. Request a breakdown of refusal reasons, including both reasonable and unreasonable refusals;
2. Make two recommendations to the City Executive Board:
 - I. That a review of the Choice Based Lettings bidding process should take place to highlight any equality issues;
 - II. That Council Officers should explore positive ways of reducing the number of offers of housing that are refused.

22. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel resolved to:

- Cancel the meeting provisionally scheduled for 11 January 2016;
- Schedule a replacement meeting for 1 February 2016;
- Pre-scrutinise the following City Executive Board decisions: Externally Leased HRA Properties - Rent Setting, Private Sector Housing Policy and A Housing Company for Oxford.
- Not pre-scrutinise a City Executive Board decision on the Replacement of Housing Computer Systems;
- Accept an invitation to attend a session with tenants on tenant involvement to mark the Council's recent TPAS accreditation and consider future plans;
- Request written updates on the implications of national housing policy changes.

23. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

24. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted that the next normal Housing Panel meeting will now be held on 1 February 2016.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.25 pm