

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Wednesday 9 March 2016

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders, Wade, Smith (Chair), Benjamin, Henwood and Gotch and Geno Humphrey (Co-optee),

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Rowley

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing and Property), Daryl Edmunds (Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team Manager), Tom Porter (Allocations Manager), Martin Shaw (Property Services Manager), David Watt (Finance Business Partner), Anna Winship (Management Accountancy Manager), Alan Wylde (Housing Development & Enabling Manager), Nigel Kennedy (Head of Financial Services) and David Edwards (Executive Director City Regeneration and Housing)

34. APOLOGIES

The Panel was advised that the following people were unable to attend:

- Councillor Dee Sinclair (item 7)
- Councillor Tom Hayes (item 9)
- Jack Bradley (item 6)

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations.

36. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - JANUARY 2016

The Head of Housing introduced the report and said that the overall picture was positive. The number of households in temporary accommodation was a challenge but this pressure was currently being held. There had been significant improvements in rents performance and the commentary around these measures would be circulated to the Panel.

37. DE-DESIGNATION OF 40+ ACCOMMODATION - YEAR 5 REPORT

The Allocations Manager introduced the report and explained that this was the final year of a five year programme of de-designating most of the Council's properties that were designated to persons aged 40 years and over.

The Panel questioned the levels of incentives available to people who may wish to downsize and heard that these were comparable with those offered by other local authorities in the region. Incentives were not always the key issue and the quality of accommodation and support with moving were more important to many people. Council officers would be actively seeking views of tenants who were

under-occupying larger properties in Barton and using this information to help to inform new developments nearby at Barton Park.

In response to a question about bungalows, the Panel heard that these types of developments were relatively low density but Council officers were exploring options to develop new bungalows in some small infill sites.

The Panel noted the report and agreed:

- To request a report to scrutiny on under-occupation in the Council's housing stock and incentives and support for downsizing.
- That information previously requested on Choice Based Lettings refusal reasons would include details of requests to make minor adaptations to Council properties.

38. GREAT ESTATES PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Property Services Manager introduced the report and provided a presentation that included before and after photographs of individual schemes. He said that the great estates programme had been delayed due to uncertainties around Housing Revenue Account funding and that a resulting under-spend would be carried into next year. Some cyclical maintenance budgets would also be rolled in to funding allocated to estates regeneration. Over time, the effects of this programme should be seen in tenant satisfaction measures.

In response to a question about member walkabouts, the Head of Housing advised that local members needed to be involved when schemes were being drawn up. The survey methodology that had been developed at Barton would be rolled out to other areas. This would involve taking a holistic approach on an estate-wide basis to identify significant problems and working up a rolling four-year programme of priority schemes, as £4.8m over four years would not solve all issues.

The Panel asked whether Barton was the only site with a masterplan and when other masterplans would be developed. The Head of Housing advised that there was not yet a timetable for developing further masterplans but member involvement would be built in to these plans.

The Panel welcomed plans to survey and assess all garage sites and heard that pragmatic decisions would be made on whether to redevelop garage sites based on factors such as condition, location and usage. The Board Member for Housing advised that he would encourage community groups with storage needs to rent garages.

39. TOWER PROJECT UPDATE

The Head of Housing and Property Services Manager introduced this report.

The Panel questioned whether the budget allocated for tower block refurbishment included works to kitchens and bathrooms and the installation of CCTV. The Panel heard that kitchens and bathrooms were replaced on a cyclical basis and that the Oxford Standard specifications were built in to ongoing maintenance works and budgets. CCTV was also being installed in

priority areas. All tower blocks now had CCTV with the exception of Hockmore Tower.

In response to a question about payment options and whether potential difficulties in obtaining contributions from leaseholders would affect the delivery of the project, the Panel heard that the £20m that has been budgeted for represented the full cost of project and no income had been assumed for ten years. There were a number of payment options and all leaseholders would be treated individually but it was expected that in most cases the Council would be taking an equity stake in the properties and recovering the refurbishment costs in future. Some landlords were expected to be able to afford their contributions and the Council would pursue these if necessary.

40. SECURITY IN TOWER BLOCKS

The Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team Manager introduced the report and explained that each tower was different. A Public Spaces Protection Order was in place at Foresters Tower which had had a significant impact on reducing anti-social behaviour (ASB), whereas relatively few issues were reported at Hockmore Tower. Different types of groups tended to congregate in communal areas at some blocks and within a tower block there may be issues on certain floors that residents on other floors may be unaware of. Different enforcement approaches were taken with different age groups and an appreciative enquiry was being undertaken to engage directly with youths.

The Scrutiny Officer explained that a brief survey had been sent to the seven Block Reps in order to canvas their views on ASB issues in tower blocks. Block Reps had been asked to respond using their own knowledge and opinions and five responses had been received. The Scrutiny Officer summarised the responses and said that the following observations could be made:

- The results were skewed towards Hockmore Tower.
- The majority of Block Reps stated that ASB and crime took place 'quite often' but none had responded with 'very often'.
- The majority of Block Reps stated that residents were 'quite affected' by these issues.
- No Block Reps stated that residents were 'not affected' by these issues.
- Issues of vandalism and graffiti, noise, rubbish or litter and damage to property were considered by more than one Block Rep to be either a 'fairly big problem' or a 'very big problem'.
- A minority of Block Reps responded that residents typically felt 'very unsafe' in communal areas during the evening and / or 'at night'.
- Block Reps had also provided some suggestions for improving security.

In response to a question about whether there was a need for outside shelters where youths could congregate, the Panel heard that there was an excellent range of facilities in the city and officers routinely signposted youths to these. However, some individuals were not interested in any facilities. The appreciative enquiry aimed to enable the Council to better understand what youths wanted and use that information to fund these things, for example through the Youth Ambition programme.

The Panel welcomed the youth work as excellent and also welcomed plans to reduce graffiti tagging across the city, including by possibly involving artists and commissioning murals.

In response to a question, the Panel heard that Youth Forums had been created in response to 12-15 year olds at Barton saying that they wanted a voice. The Panel encouraged plans to mainstream this work in various ways including through engaging young people in community groups and helping to support elderly residents.

The Panel noted the importance of good youth club provision and questioned whether youths who generally behaved badly tended to be rewarded, for example with trips, while those who generally behaved well were not. The Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team Manager agreed and said that rewards for positive behaviours, such as attendance at certain clubs, were being looked at and could potentially include things like free leisure activities. These ideas had not yet been developed into reality as officers wanted to make sure that schemes could be cost-neutral.

The Panel questioned whether feedback would be provided to residents following a door knocking exercise at Evenlode Tower and whether there were plans to do this at other towers. The Panel also noted from the survey responses that there was a request for occasional police patrols at Hockmore Tower.

The Panel agreed to make the following recommendations:

1. That door-knocking to seek views from residents on the behaviour of groups of young people in communal areas should be rolled out to other towers.
2. That the local police teams should be asked to undertake occasional patrols of tower blocks, and where necessary should be given the means to access communal areas of other towers, as they can at the two towers at Blackbird Leys.
3. That the Council should continue to look at ways of integrating youth engagement activities with other forms of resident and community engagement.

41. ALLOCATION OF HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION FUNDS

The Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager introduced the report and said that the City Council was maintaining a £1.3m budget for homelessness prevention but cuts to County Council budgets were presenting a major challenge.

The Panel questioned what would happen when the County cuts took affect at the end of the coming financial year. The Panel heard that funding is rarely allocated for more than one year at a time and that officers would be taking stock and assessing what was business critical from April 2017 onwards. There would be very significant changes to the provision of services and support in the city. Talks were taking place between the City Council and district and health partners on pooling resources but there would inevitably be difficult decisions about re-commissioning services.

In response to a question, the Panel heard that the Council would know more by summer 2016 and that there could be an opportunity for member involvement at that stage.

The Panel questioned how many big Issue Sellers were being supported in Oxford. The Panel heard that the Big Issue comprised two sister organisations, a sales arm which operated in most cities and a foundation that worked to support vendors in fewer locations, of which Oxford was one. Of approximately sixty vendors based in the city a cohort of some thirty individuals that had accommodation and wanted to move through the system were receiving specific support.

In conclusion the Panel expressed disappointment at the County Council cuts and agreed to request a further report to Scrutiny in summer 2016.

42. A HOUSING COMPANY FOR OXFORD

The Housing Development and Enabling Manager introduced the report and explained that it sought agreement to the principle of setting up a Local Authority wholly owned housing company and delegated authority to set up an appropriate company structure. The overarching aim of the Company was to increase the supply of affordable housing.

The Panel then heard from a public speaker who spoke on behalf of Homes for Oxford.

In response to a question about the merits of a Community Land Trust model of ownership, the Panel heard that initial discussions had taken place. The Council needed to view any opportunities at specific sites on their merits and ensure best value. The report was not seeking decisions on any sites other than Barton and nothing else was being ruled out or given a green light at this stage. In the short term, the Company would not be doing anything the Council wasn't planning to do anyway. These plans included delivering homes at Barton and estate regeneration. Other sites the Council was planning to develop would come forward in due course and be subject to separate decisions. The Company would also enable further opportunities that may follow in future, such as developing outside the city.

In response to a question about whether the articles of the Company could preclude it from investing in alternative housing models, the Panel heard that the articles of the Company would be drawn as flexibly as possible and the Company structure would enable the Company to partner with anybody but there was a need to balance risk given that the Company would be wholly Local Authority owned.

The Panel observed that there may be merit in appointing non-executive Directors from the start in order to bring in outside expertise and high profile support.

The Panel also sought and received assurances on the following:

- That there was sufficient officer capacity at senior levels.

- That the Company would be able to rent out properties on a range of tenures including social and market rent.
- Any General Fund borrowing would be prudent and affordable.
- That the terms of the loan facility would be determined when the Company required the funding.
- That future executive decisions would be open to scrutiny.

The Panel agreed to welcome and support the creation of the Company and make the following recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That the Company articles should be drafted in such a way so as not to preclude entering into any funding arrangements or partnerships that could help to increase the supply of affordable housing, including working with alternative housing providers and models (such as co-housing or a community land trust).
2. That consideration should be given to enabling wider member oversight and input into decisions delegated to officers, in particular decisions about the articles of the Company, shareholder agreements, and details of agreements regarding the acquisition of affordable housing at Barton Park.

43. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted that members of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel would be encouraged to attend the joint session on 11 April which would be focused on tenant involvement.

The Panel also noted that members were being asked to contribute suggestions for the 2016/17 scrutiny work programme. An item on under-occupation and a homelessness prevention funds update would be added to the long-list.

44. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

45. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.20 pm