

Agenda Item 7

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Wednesday 15 January 2014

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders, McCready and Hollick.

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT: Linda Hill (Co-optee)

OFFICERS PRESENT: Mathew Metcalfe (Democratic and Electoral Services), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services), Bill Graves (Housing Services), Nerys Parry (Housing Services) and Dave Scholes (Housing and Communities)

37. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from the Chair (Councillor Val Smith) and Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing and Property.

38. WORK PROGRAMME AND REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel received an updated forward work programme and agreed to note its contents.

39. RENT ARREARS ANALYSIS AND PROFILES

The Panel received a report of the Head of Customer Services which provided an update on rents arrears as previously requested by the Panel.

Helen Bishop, Head of Customer Services attended the meeting and introduced the report.

In response to questions, Helen Bishop said that when a tenant went into arrears they were sent a letter, followed by a telephone call and then a visit. If this contact failed, then a notice seeking possession would be sought and finally a Court Order. She added that the Council did not use bailiffs to recover money or goods for rent arrears, but they were used for Council Tax arrears. She further added that as soon as a tenant did not keep to their Court Order agreements, Officers immediately contacted them and went back to the Courts. Rents Officers also met each quarter with Court officials to discuss best practice.

Panel members asked about the impact of the welfare reforms. In response Helen Bishop said that it was still too early to assess the impact and that a further report to the Panel in six months would give enough time to establish any impact.

The Panel agreed:

- (a) To thank Helen Bishop for attending the meeting;

- (b) To ask for six monthly reports on rents arrears and the impact of welfare reforms to be submitted to the Panel with the first one in May/June.

40. NO SECOND NIGHT OUT - DETAILED PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

The Panel received a report of the Head of Housing and Property which provided additional details on rough sleeping numbers in Oxford, especially in relation to No Second Night Out.

Nerys Parry, Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager attended the meeting and introduced the report. She acknowledged that the numbers of rough sleepers were rising, but these were not dramatic and the authority was responding to this. There was a target of no more than five rough sleeping, but this was a local target as no national one existed.

In response to questions concerning mental health issues, Nerys Parry said that good links existed with the mental health providers in the city, however they too were experiencing pressures on their resources and beds. Regarding people with no local connection, she said that the Council had a robust local reconnection policy and officers worked to reconnect people. However there was an Exemptions Panel which considered special cases where reconnection may not be possible.

Regarding hostel accommodation, Nerys Parry said that there was an adequate pathway in Oxfordshire and she was not looking at expanding this pathway at present. She felt that the problem was in move-on and moving people from hostel accommodation into the private rented sector, however 70% did move into more settled accommodation.

Nerys Parry said regarding funding that any reduction in the capacity of the pathway would increase the numbers of rough sleepers and that the pressures from the welfare reforms were still to be assessed.

The Panel agreed:

- (a) To thank Nerys Parry for attending the meeting;
- (b) To receive an update of the impact of any budget reduction by the Oxfordshire County Council on the Supporting People budget.

41. IMPROVING QUALITY IN THE PRIVATE RENT SECTOR - A CITY COUNCIL LETTING AGENCY

The Panel received a report from the Executive Director, City Regeneration following a request from the Panel for further information on the benefits and risks associated with the possibility of establishing a City Council letting agency.

Dave Scholes, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager attended the meeting and introduced the item.

Councillor Hollick felt that it would be useful for the different arms of the Council to work together on improving the quality, covering three areas:

- Physical improvement, e.g. better insulation etc.
- The rights of tenants, e.g. references from tenants about landlords
- Financial, e.g. security of leases

In response Dave Scholes said that the present environment was very landlord dominated. Landlords wanted the maximum flexibility and ability to make money. The Council did try where possible to secure longer tenancies, two years for example, but there were many challenges with this.

The Panel agreed:

- (a) That it was not appropriate for the Council to establish a Local Letting Agency with the purpose of driving up housing standards in the private rented sector in the City;
- (b) That the Council should further consider alternative approaches to this, that would seek to achieve the same policy objective through different means and to refer this to the Board Member for Housing.

42. SATISFACTION WITH PARKS - DETAILS OF SURVEY RESULTS

The Panel received a report of the Head of Leisure, Parks and Communities following a request from the Panel for further information on the performance of Parks Services and performance indicator LP013.

The Panel, following a downward trend in performance wished to see further information on a satisfaction survey including the methodology used, the numbers and locations of respondents and the questions asked and the reasons for any dissatisfaction.

In response to questions raised prior to the meeting concerning dog fouling, the Head of Leisure and Parks asked that the Panel be informed that there were bins for dog mess and that normal litter bins could also be used. Officers regularly patrolled the parks to catch offenders and in some cases these officers were plain clothed. He would be speaking with the Council's Media Team on how best to advertise that offenders could and would be issued with fixed penalty notices.

The Panel discussed the report and felt:

- That actual users of the parks should be consulted rather than using the Talk Back Panel, for example football clubs;
- That the Parks Friends/User Groups should be surveyed on their satisfaction of their parks, groups that were established to work with the Council to improve the parks and green spaces in the City;
- That following the increased investment in parks especially in play areas, that this should be monitored to ensure that these facilities are maintained;
- That dog fouling continued to be a problem and that every effort should be made to ensure adequate bin provision and that there should be greater

use of publicity to highlight the problem and the penalties available to to the Council to tackle this.

The Panel agreed:

- (a) To forward the comments made at the meeting to the Board Member for Leisure and the relevant Executive Director and to have any comments reported back to the Panel;
- (b) To continue to monitor satisfaction of the Parks Service.

43. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the note of its meeting held on 5th December 2013.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.30 pm