

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Wednesday 5 October 2016

HOUSING PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Henwood (Chair), Pegg, Sanders and Wade, Geno Humphrey (Co-optee).

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Rowley (Housing).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Bill Graves (Landlord Services Manager), Deborah Haynes (Energy Efficiency Projects Officer) and Tom Porter (Allocations Manager)

63. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Goff and Thomas and from Stephen Clarke (represented by Bill Graves).

64. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations.

65. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 1

The Landlord Services manager introduced the report. He said that most measures were on track and commented on the following:

- NI156: use of temporary accommodation – this target had been breached and there were big concerns about homelessness in the City.
- DS012: gas and responsive repairs completed on time – there was a marginal dip in performance.
- BV066a: percentage of rent collected – performance was good, particularly as the 1% annual reduction in rents made this target harder to achieve.
- HC004: homelessness cases prevented – there were big pressures due to high rent levels and landlords reducing the availability of accommodation, which resulted in some customers having to leave the private rented sector.

In response to a question about mitigating the impacts of the buoyant private rented sector on homelessness, the Allocations Manager explained that the Council had lobbied Government for a higher Local Housing Allowance rate that better reflected the market in Oxford. The Council used some general needs stock as temporary accommodation, was decommissioning sheltered accommodation blocks as demand was low and could provide Discretionary Housing Payments but not for the life of a tenancy. It was not uncommon for the Council to have to place people outside the County due to the lack of available and affordable accommodation.

The Panel questioned whether people in temporary accommodation were typically singles or families. The Panel heard that the majority of cases involved dependent children or pregnancy. Most were housed within a year but those with a need for 5 or 6 beds could have to wait years. Single cases didn't tend to have the same level of vulnerability and the Council's duty in those cases was to provide advice rather than accommodation. From April 2018 singles under the age of 35 would only receive a room-based rate, which was likely to be at least £20 per week short of what would be required to rent a room in Oxford. One future option the Council could explore was possibility of providing Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) accommodation.

The Panel noted the distinction between single homeless cases and rough sleepers, who were very visible in the City. The Panel heard that some rough sleepers were not classed as street homeless because they had accommodation and noted concern about the impacts of cuts to complex needs services for these groups.

66. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS REFUSAL REASONS

The Allocations Manager introduced the report. He said that the Council had made 766 offers of housing, which involved a lot of work and of these about one sixth had been refused. He said that there would always be different views on what was suitable and gave examples of what types of refusal reasons were considered to be reasonable (e.g. a documented need for adaptations) and unreasonable (e.g. décor). People would be penalised after two unreasonable refusals.

The Panel questioned how the Council ensures that people on the transfer register who wanted to downsize were not penalised for refusing offers. The Allocations Manager said that 18 refusals were from people in this situation which would have otherwise been treated as unreasonable. However, six of these had later re-bid and downsized, so it was worth making this exception.

In response to a question about whether relocation was a reasonable ground for refusing an offer of private rented accommodation, the Panel heard that Choice Based Lettings was the system for allocating social housing. In these cases people did have a right of appeal and if someone required hospital treatment or had dependent disabled relatives in the City, they would not be placed out of the area. The Panel asked what happens if someone lost their out of area private rented accommodation through no fault of their own. The Allocations Manager said that the Council had a duty to house people for two years, after which that duty would pass to the local authority for the area in which they lived.

The Panel considered the information available to people bidding for properties through the Choice Based Lettings scheme and questioned whether it would be possible to describe the sizes of rooms. The Allocations Manager said that his team did not always know the exact layout of properties. Three bedroom properties were assumed to have two double bedrooms and one single bedroom but some properties had quirky layouts and the size of other rooms such as kitchens could vary quite a lot. The team tried to gather as much information as possible but most properties were advertised before they became vacant. After a viewing, people may be given overnight to consider whether to accept a

property but the time properties were vacant had a direct cost to the Council in rent foregone

The Panel questioned whether the Council was being too harsh in the way it judges refusals for families. Officers reassured the Panel that this was not the case.

Councillor Wade left the meeting at the end of this item.

67. UNDER-OCCUPATION IN THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING STOCK

The Landlord Services Manager introduced the report which provided an update on a report presented to the Panel in February 2015. He said that the incentives for downsizing were largely unchanged and remained among the most generous in the country but demand was not changing. Only 10% of over 60s were found to be open to considering downsizing despite the incentives on offer.

Overall 60% of Council properties were under-occupied but there had been a fairly significant drop of 140 under-occupied properties. Some of these were due family members moving in to avoid the bedroom tax. The Council had written to under-occupiers and a home-swapper event had raised the profile of mutual exchanges but had not resulted in any people downsizing.

The Panel commented that the suitability of available accommodation was a big factor and that older people wanted to remain close to friends, family and amenities. The Panel questioned whether people could have the opportunity to view and assess properties, perhaps staying overnight, with a view to potentially downsizing. The Landlord Services Manager said that this could hold up properties and cause void losses. A show home was potentially an option, perhaps using sheltered stock, but he had not come across this idea elsewhere. The Panel also noted that the neighbourhood was likely to be a big factor for people.

The Panel noted that the Council was waiting for information from Government on the policy of introducing flexible tenancies, which was expected to include the introduction of five year tenancies for new social tenants, successions and some transfers, after which there would be mandatory grounds for possession. It was hoped that exceptions could be made for people fleeing domestic violence, downsizers and people in regeneration areas and this case was being put to Government.

The Panel questioned how these changes were being communicated to tenants and heard that there had been a piece in the Tenants in Touch magazine but that the publicity wouldn't start until the details of the policy were clearer. The Panel noted that some people may exercise their right to buy in advance of the flexible tenancy and pay to stay policies coming in. In response to a question, the Panel heard that these changes would affect over 60s as well as working age questions but despite higher rents for many households, staying put was likely to remain the cheapest option for them.

The Panel noted that any decisions on the local implementation of Flexible Tenancies and Pay to Stay are on the Panel's work plan for pre-decision scrutiny.

68. ENERGY STRATEGY - HOUSING & PROPERTY

The Energy Efficiency Projects Officer provided a presentation of the Council's Energy Strategy 2016-20 (published as a supplement to the main agenda) and offered to provide a written response to Councillor Wolff's submission (also published as a supplement to the main agenda). She said that the Council used the affordable warmth definition of fuel poverty and that the health impacts of fuel poverty were huge.

The Panel heard that the Council was evaluating the work of the two Energy Advice Officers, who were being employed for two years and were aiming to make contact with all Council tenants. £37k of savings had already been identified from people accessing the Warm Homes Discount but it was not possible to quantify everything, for example the benefits of referrals to the Citizens Advice Bureau for financial advice. Officers had found that some households and in particular older tenants had refused to switch from electrical to gas heating, either because they had reservations about gas or because they did not want intrusive work taking place in their homes for a week or more.

The Panel questioned how thermal efficiency was measured and heard that SAP calculations were used. SAP calculations did not tell you everything but their use was a statutory requirement and the Council had no funding to develop an alternative. In addition, Home Quality Marks could be considered, housing stock data was being added to a national database and the Council's surveyors had excellent local knowledge which all helped.

In response to a question about the use of heat pumps, the Panel heard that there were three different kinds; ground source, air source and water source. They were run on electricity so they were not renewable but they could act as the reverse of a fridge. If well installed and used correctly, heat pumps could provide a 3:1 ratio of heat output to electricity used, which represented a good deal. However, heat pumps did not always perform and there were high risks around relying on them as a main source of heat. There were some heat pumps in use across the Council's housing stock but some had had to be removed. The Council would continue to evaluate where their use may be an appropriate solution.

69. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

The Panel noted the work plan and agreed that:

- Cllr Thomas would be asked to suggest a tighter scope for the university land management for the Chair to approve between meetings.
- The HMO item would include a focus on the rules around determining the numbers of HMOs allowed in a given area and whether more information could be included on the weekly planning lists.
- Geno Humphrey would provide a verbal update on the scope and progress of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's review of the Tower Blocks Project.
- The Leaseholder relationships item should be taken when the court proceedings relating to the Tower Block Project have concluded.

The Landlord Services Manager provided a verbal update on the current state of leaseholder relationships. He said that previously these relationships, which were largely financial, had not been great but that overall they were much improved since the appointment of a Leasehold Management Officer some 15 months ago who acted as an advocate for leaseholders. Leaseholders affected by the Tower Block Project were unhappy with the size of the bills they had received for refurbishment works.

In response to a question about the duration of the court proceedings, the Landlord Services Manager advised that they were likely to conclude after Christmas.

70. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

71. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel agreed to move the meeting scheduled for 3 May 2017 to 26 April 2017 to avoid the County Council elections.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.15 pm

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