

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Monday 1 February 2016

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

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Dave Scholes (Housing Strategy & Needs Manager), Ian Wright (Service Manager Environmental Health) and Michael Browning (Private Sector Safety Team Leader)

25. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Elise Benjamin and Councillor Gill Sanders.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

27. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING POLICY

The Environmental Health Service Manager introduced the report. The Panel heard that Oxford had a relatively high proportion of private rented accommodation and relatively low levels of owner-occupation. In an otherwise deregulatory era, Government was strengthening the regulation of this sector. The new private sector housing policy sat under the Council's Housing Strategy.

The Panel asked a wide range of questions, including about; how the Council can identify other properties owned by landlords, whether more could be done to return empty properties to use, what was being done to address the issue of beds in sheds and how any priority area for the selected licensing of non-HMO private rented sector accommodation would be evaluated. The Panel heard that the Council would need permission to introduce a selective licensing scheme covering more than 20% of the geographical area of the city. Any assessment of priority areas for selective licensing would be based on how best to maximise the stock that would be covered by the scheme, as well as the volumes of service requests and reports of anti-social behaviour in different parts of the city. Ideally the sector would pay for its own regulation, as happens with HMO licensing.

The Panel questioned how tenants in the private rented sector would be encouraged to engage in the consultation and heard that this was a challenge with the exception of students as private rented sector tenants were disparate and not formally organised in groups.

The Panel noted that the Council's primary focus to date had been on regulating the houses in multiple occupation (HMO) market. The Panel questioned the links and information sharing between the HMO enforcement and planning

enforcement functions and found that the while some checks were in place, the Council could not legally refuse a HMO license application on the basis that planning permission had not been sought or granted. Refusals could only be based on the condition of the property and a fit and proper person test.

The Panel questioned what could be done to address the issue of rubbish or bulky items being left outside HMOs, for example when students vacate these properties at the end of term. The Panel heard that there were various enforcement options the Council could use, including serving a notice on the landlord to remove items within 7 days and the option of works in default, where the Council could remove the items and bill the landlord. In the event that the landlord then refused to pay, a charge could be held against the property until such a time as it was sold.

The Panel questioned how residents could report an unlicensed HMOs or an HMO in poor repair and heard that this facility was available online.

The Panel agreed to scrutinise a refresh of the Council's Empty Property Strategy and will have the opportunity to scrutinise the Private Sector Housing Strategy again following the public consultation.

The Panel supported the general approach taken and agreed to make five recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That direct invitations to comment should be sent to Parish Councils and any lease-holders forums, in addition to the stakeholders listed in the report.
2. That the consultation should be promoted through channels such as the Your Oxford newsletter and that further consideration should be given to how the Council can best engage with private rented sector tenants, perhaps through an 'appreciative enquiry'.
3. That the Council should make fuller use of the powers available to it to enforce the removal of waste and bulky items left outside HMO properties.
4. That Council Officers are asked to provide an update on the feasibility of increasing the number of free bulky items collections available to tenants living in HMOs. This should include the feasibility of offering free bulky items collections on a 'per household' rather than 'per property' basis.
5. That the facility to report suspected unlicensed HMOs should be promoted more widely, including through Tenants in Touch.

28. EXTERNALLY LEASED HRA PROPERTIES - RENT SETTING

The Head of Housing Strategy and Needs introduced the report. He explained that the formula for rent increases on HRA properties leased to partner organisations was based on the target rent formula that had previously been applied to Council houses with up to five bedrooms. The Panel questioned the impact of the rent increases on partner organisations and supported the approach outlined in the report.

29. UPDATE ON THE REVIEW OF OLDER PERSONS ACCOMMODATION /REVIEW OF SHELTERED HOUSING

The Head of Housing Strategy and Needs provided a presentation on the Review of Older Persons Accommodation and explained that thirteen

recommendations had come out of this review. The Panel heard that a report would be presented to the City Executive Board (CEB) in March but that a draft report would be available and could be circulated to members soon.

The Panel made the following comments:

- variations in life expectancy in the city should be factored in to age growth projections;
- the Tenant Scrutiny Panel should be updated and engaged with;
- the Age UK Home Share scheme, once approved, should be promoted in the Older Persons' Guide and on the Council's website.

The Panel supported the approach being taken and agreed not to pre-scrutinise the CEB report at the March Panel meeting.

30. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted its work programme and the provisional meeting dates for 2016/17.

The Panel agreed to hold a joint session with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel focused on Tenant Involvement on 11 April 2016.

31. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

32. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

33. CONF EXTERNALLY LEASED HRA PROPERTIES - RENT SETTING - CONFIDENTIAL APPENDIX

The Panel did not discuss the confidential appendix.

The meeting started at 17:00 and ended at 18:55