

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

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Monday 13 November 2017

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Goff, Henwood (Chair), Pegg, Sanders and Wade.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Tanya Bandekar (Service Manager Revenue & Benefits), Bill Graves (Landlord Services Manager), Simon Warde (Tenant Involvement Manager), Katie Ball (Income Manager) and John Mitchell (Committee and Member Services Officer)

131. APOLOGIES

None received

132. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

133. VOID PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

The Chair reported that Councillor Rowley had been unable to attend the meeting but provided the following observation in advance: "I hope the Panel will be reassured by the voids report. For various unavoidable reasons detailed in the report, the time taken to re-let void properties was getting out of hand, and I know this has been a concern for a number of Members, including of course myself. Officers have done very well to bring the problem so quickly under control: we are now well within our targets, and doing well on benchmarking."

The Landlord Services Manager was pleased to report the progress with this matter since the team dealing with it had been reconstructed and the accompanying processes re-engineered, all of which had resulted in moving the Council's performance (when compared with other authorities) from the bottom

to the top quartile. Among other things, tenants now dealt with one member of staff throughout the process rather than several. There was stability in the new team which had settled down well.

Tenants are legally required to give 28 days' notice of intention to quit. While the notice period cannot be shortened, in practice if a tenant wants to return the keys early, officers are pragmatic and can waive the rental charge so that void work can begin and the property can be re-let more quickly. It was noted that the internal audit had seen no need to recommend the production of a formal policy to cover this area of work, regarding a service level agreement between the Council's parties as being sufficient.

Officers were ready and willing to share the team's good practice with other authorities as and when the opportunities arose.

Agreed that it would be helpful for Members to be given a tour of void properties.

134. TENANT INVOLVEMENT

The Chair reported that Councillor Rowley had been unable to attend the meeting but provided the following observation in advance: "Many congratulations are due to the tenants and officers shortlisted for awards; we are now one of the best Councils in the country for tenant involvement, and this is due not only to the hard work of our own Team but to some brilliant tenants bringing new ideas to the table and making a huge commitment to the work. I hope the Panel will find the updates on progress with its recommendations useful."

The Chair was pleased to note the progress made since the recommendations made by the panel in April 2016.

The Landlord Services Manager noted that it had, in places, been possible to go further than the Panel had suggested. He was particularly pleased to report that the introduction a new housing management system (for which the contract would be awarded later in the month) would radically improve the online service provided to tenants, enabling swifter and more interactive engagement between tenants and the many and various Council services.

Members noted that a similarly interactive facility for them to report matters of concern to them to Council officers would be helpful.

Agreed that it would be helpful for members to be aware of who the tenant representatives are in their Wards. Suggestions from Members for good tenant representatives would be welcome.

In relation to the TPAS Regional Awards in February, the deadline for nominations is the end of November and the involvement team will be nominating some of our tenants.

Further information about the Trailblazer project mentioned in recommendation 14 was requested. The Landlord Services Manager to follow up with the Housing Strategy & Needs Manager.

Agreed that it would be helpful to resurrect the previous practice in which Members of the Panel meet tenant representatives, say, once a year. This could be combined with the proposed tour of voids mentioned above.

135. RENT PERFORMANCE

The Chair reported that Councillor Rowley had been unable to attend the meeting but provided the following observation in advance: "Rent arrears are under control and for the last two quarters they have been at slightly lower levels than at the same times last year. We will continue to work to bring down arrears while maintaining due sensitivity to circumstances and doing all we can to avoid eviction through tenancy sustainment work."

The Service Manager Revenue & Benefits spoke to the report. While the outcome at the end of September was very slightly below target, the overall value of rent to be collected had increased by £360k and, at the end of March 2017, arrears were at their lowest level for 6 years. The overall picture was very positive.

By way of context she explained that the team of 13 colleagues had been subject to high levels of turnover and sickness but the team was now stable and almost fully staffed.

There were seasonal spikes in arrears (usually around summer holidays and Christmas).

Escalation processes for relevant tenancy types have been introduced which allows the early stages of rent recovery to be automated which means that staff can focus on cases where there are higher levels of debt.

There have been 5 evictions in the current year to date, set against a benchmark of 20 for comparable authorities. This positive outcome is largely attributed to high levels of tenant engagement.

Former tenant arrears are dealt with on a case by case basis. The principal focus is now on new tenants with the aim of preventing arrears from building up in the first place.

The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) is a cause for concern as its consequences feed through into residents' lives. There is an expectation that arrears would increase although at the moment there was no observable impact, as we are only in week 4 of full service.

It was noted that the Council had instigated a number of measures to mitigate the negative consequences of UC on residents which included personal budgeting support and assisted digital support and the recent allocation of £50k to support those in need. The criteria by which the latter would be made available were currently being worked up.

The Council has provided good quality advice and information about the consequences of UC and the need to maintain their rent.

The relatively few cases of very high levels of arrears were largely in relation to vulnerable clients. For such cases, as well as signposting to supporting organisations such as the CAB, every effort was made to secure repayments at a reasonable and affordable rate.

136. NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Chair reported that Councillor Rowley had been unable to attend the meeting but provided the following observation in advance: "The number of households in temporary accommodation is well within target and I congratulate officers on this success. As the Panel knows, this has allowed us to transfer ten new properties which we purchased as temporary accommodation to the HRA to be used as permanent social lets."

The Housing Strategy & Needs Manager spoke briefly to the data which had been provided at the Panel's request. The data illustrated a reduction in the number of families with dependent children or expected babies and single households in temporary accommodation compared to December 2016. He noted that a small number of new properties have been purchased as temporary accommodation.

In response to a question about whether the Council had considered using prefabricated homes, the Housing Strategy & Needs Manager confirmed that the Council were looking to use off-site construction methods in a number of small developments.

In discussion about garage sites, the Housing Strategy & Needs Manager said that each garage location had been surveyed and all had plans either to continue to be used as garages or with an alternative use such as development, parking or grassed area. Some garage sites did not have sufficient access for construction traffic which limited their potential for housing.

An event to be run by WODC in relation to Blenheim Properties may be of interest to the Panel; details to be provided.

137. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

The proposed plan was noted and agreed. Three items were currently scheduled for the December meeting. It was noted after the meeting that two of those items (Oxford City Council's Tenancy Strategy and Policy Statement and Review of Home Choice Pilot) will not now be going to the CEB until January and will therefore have to wait until then for the Panel too.

138. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the notes of the meeting held on 12 October

139. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The dates of the next meetings agreed as shown below. Note the start of the meeting on 11 December is now 3.30.

- 11 December at 3.30pm
- 16 January 2018
- 8 March 2018
- 9 April 2018

All meetings begin at 5.00pm unless otherwise stated

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.30 pm