

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 8 March 2018

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillor Henwood (Chair)
Councillor Sanders
Councillor Wade
Geno Humphrey (Tenant Co-optee)

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Committee Services Manager), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing Services), Frances Evans (Strategy & Service Development Manager), Dave Scholes (Housing Strategy & Needs Manager) and Stefan Robinson (Scrutiny Officer)

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillor Rowley (Board Member for Housing)

148. APOLOGIES

Apologies had been received from Councillors Goff, Paule and Thomas.

149. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

150. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 3

The Head of Housing Services introduced the Quarter 3 Housing Performance Report. Key issues within the report were highlighted, which included:

- The year end target for granting planning permission for new homes had been exceeded.
- There continues to be good performance in limiting the need for temporary accommodation. In the last quarter, the number of households in temporary accommodation was 100 against a target of 120 or below.
- A rise in rent arrears was anticipated due to the roll out of universal credit.
- Staffing levels were back to the usual level for the Income Team.
- There had been a rise in the number of rough sleepers recorded as part of the annual rough sleepers count. This had increased from 47 in November 2016, to 61 in November 2017.
- The average time taken to process new benefits claims had not reached the target, in part due to staffing matters.

In response to a question from the Panel, The Head of Housing Services clarified that the HC016 performance indicator related specifically to affordable homes for rent, whereas HC006 showed the total number of affordable homes

built including those under shared ownership arrangements. The Panel requested that more detail be circulated after the meeting on why there had been delays in processing new benefits claims.

The Chair asked what method was used to collect data on the number of people rough sleeping in the City. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said the figure of 61 recorded rough sleepers was the number recorded as part of the annual count in November 2017. This was the figure that was submitted to Central Government as part of wider national recording.

A local estimate of 89 was also made, based on the total number of recorded rough sleepers, plus any unrecorded individuals that were presumed to be rough sleeping. Responding to further questions, The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said the annual count was carried out between midnight and 4am, and that it extended to known rough sleeping hotspots outside the city centre.

The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager assured the Panel that a detailed and robust methodology was applied to counting rough sleepers, and explained that only those who were bedded down were counted. At the last quarterly count, which was undertaken for internal recording purposes, 40 rough sleepers were identified. Responding to a question from the Chair, it was clarified that counts were not undertaken whilst severe weather emergency protocols (SWEPE) were in place.

Panel members expressed concern that 22 individuals had been rough sleeping for more than 6 months. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager explained that efforts were made to get rough sleepers into overnight accommodation, and support networks were then placed around them. It was noted that some individuals would refuse this help. However, help would remain available to them. The Panel requested that more information be circulated to show the network of organisations that support rough sleepers in the homelessness pathway.

151. ALLOCATION OF HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION FUNDS IN 2018/19

The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager introduced the report which was due to be presented to the City Executive Board on 20 March 2018. The report outlined recommendations concerning the allocation of funding for homelessness prevention activities. Key issues for the Panel were highlighted, including:

- The City Council continued to operate pooled budgets with partners.
- Approximately £1.8m for 2018/19 was recommended for allocation towards homelessness prevention.
- Funding was prioritised for securing supported accommodation beds and outreach services.
- Approximately 167 beds were available across all accommodation types, which exceeded the target of 150.
- In addition to bed spaces, there were 10 places of safety spaces available.

In response to questions, it was clarified that Emmaus intended to operate without grant funding from the City Council after two more years. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager offered to provide more information to one

member after the meeting about the funding arrangements associated with Edith Kempson House.

The Panel agreed that the [City Conversation](#) event held in November 2017, which brought together various partners to discuss Homelessness, was a positive event. However, there was a need for this momentum to continue, and for actions or proposals to be developed. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said that £150,000 had been allocated over two years to support this work. A steering group and a worker had been identified to take this forward. The objective was to have developed a charter for all partners to sign up to by May 2018. The Panel requested that the work of the steering group and the Charter return to the Panel later in 2018.

152. OXFORD CITY COUNCIL'S TENANCY STRATEGY & POLICY

The Strategy and Service Development Manager introduced the report which was due to be presented to the City Executive Board on 20 March 2018. The report contained a Draft Tenancy Strategy and a Tenancy Policy, as the current policy was due for renewal. The Strategy and Service Development Manager highlighted key issues to the Panel, which included:

- There were no fundamental changes to the proposed Strategy and Policy.
- The Housing and Planning Act 2016 sets out a mandatory requirement for Local Authorities to offer flexible fixed term tenancies. However, until such time that guidance is issued on the implementation of this requirement, it is recommended that the City Council's policy is to continue with its current offer of lifetime tenancies.
- Some tenures were offered at 80% of the market rate (which were still above Local Housing Allowance rates) and shared ownerships options are still not affordable for many people.
- The Strategy and Policy must be reviewed once the new regulations come into effect, and this will be brought back to the Panel and City Executive Board.

Members of the Panel asked why some Local Authorities were already introducing flexible fixed tenancies. It was explained that these authorities would review the status of their tenants after 4 years to assess their affordability and whether they could downsize. This would lead to a higher rate of tenant turnover.

The Panel expressed concern over the impact the mandatory element of the new legislation could have on the City Council and its tenants. The Strategy and Service Development Manager explained that the new mandatory arrangements would require more resources to deal with an increase in occupancy reviews, and the need to support more housing reallocations. It was clarified that the mandatory fixed term tenancies would only apply to new tenants.

The Chair asked whether the current policy would lead to house blocking, where one tenant may occupy a larger home for an extended period of time. The Strategy and Service Development Manager said there were alternative provisions and incentives people to downsizing, and this was effectively managed without the need for fixed term tenancies.

The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said some housing associations had already introduced flexible fixed tenancies for new tenants. The Council's own

housing company would set its own tenancy strategy, but had already committed to offering lifetime tenancies, as this was a condition of the Oxford Register of Affordable Housing.

The Head of Housing Services said Central Government's intention was to reduce under-occupation through the mandatory arrangements. However, the Panel and the Board Member for Housing were concerned about the impact compulsory moves would have on tenant wellbeing, community cohesion and the maintenance of properties. The Panel were also concerned about the lack of good quality small housing units. Officers clarified that there may be exceptions for mandatory downsizing where children, for example, are living at home.

The Strategy and Service Development Manager explained that the Draft Strategy would go out for a four week public consultation on 21 March 2018. The Panel noted that the median level of personal income of residents in Oxford compared to the average rental cost in the City presented a challenge for affordability. Nationally, rental costs were calculated to be approximately 25% of net household income; however this was calculated at 35% for Oxford. The National Housing Federation suggests that spending over a third of household income on housing costs can negatively impact on the affordability of other essential services.

153. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel received an update from the Committee and Member Services Manager on the future work programme. Key issues were highlighted, including:

- There were several items left on the work programme.
- The work programme would be reviewed in full in the new municipal year.
- The Oxford Local Plan would go to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 3 July 2018, and the Panel would review the housing policies on 5 July 2018. It was recommended that the whole meeting be dedicated to this issue.

In response to questions from the Panel about the suitability of homes for an aging population, the Head of Housing clarified that new homes were built for lifetime occupancy, and £1.4m was invested each year into adapting existing homes.

The Panel agreed that empty garages should remain on the work programme, for possible consideration at the next meeting. The Head of Housing agreed to provide the Panel with an update at a later meeting date.

The Panel also agreed that the following be added to, or remain on, the work programme:

- The Tenant Satisfaction Survey.
- Actions taken following the City Conversation event (Autumn 2018).
- The Homelessness Reduction Act (Autumn 2018).
- Evaluation of temporary accommodation purchases.
- Private sector regulation and oversight (e.g Houses of Multiple Occupation).
- Leaseholder relationships.

Officers said they would look at the option of scheduling a June 2018 meeting of the Panel.

The Chair offered his thanks to the Panel and officers for their work over the past year.

154. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the notes of the meeting held on 16 January 2018.

155. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted that the next meetings were scheduled as follows:

June (to be confirmed)
5 July 2018
11 October 2018
12 November 2018
4 March 2019
8 April 2019

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.20 pm