

# Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Monday 3 August 2020

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## Committee members present:

Councillor Bely-Summers (elected Chair)                      Councillor Aziz (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Gotch    Councillor Taylor  
Councillor Wade    Councillor Wolff  
Tony Buchanan, Housing Panel (tenant co-optee)

## Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer  
Carolyn Ploszynski, Planning Policy and Place Manager  
Tom Rice, Principal Planner  
Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Team

## Also present:

Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery  
Lucy Warin, Oxford Tenants Union  
Alex Zinkov, Oxford Tenants Union

## 1. Election of Chair for 2020/21

Vice-Chair, Councillor Aziz, sought nominations for the role of Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel for the civic year 2020/21.

Councillor Bely-Summers was **ELECTED** Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel for the civic year 2020/21

Having been elected, Councillor Bely Summers took over as Chair.

## 2. Apologies

None

## 3. Declarations of interest

None

#### **4. Housing Panel Work Plan**

The Panel considered the proposed workplan for the forthcoming year.

The following requests were made and **AGREED**:

- To reschedule the date of the next meeting from 02 September to 03 September
- To seek an opportunity for the Panel to discuss the issue of hidden homelessness
- To schedule papers on Housing's contribution to carbon reduction as early as possible.
- To add the CIL Charging Schedule to the work plan.

#### **5. Notes of previous meeting**

The notes of the meeting held on 07 November 2019 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

It was also **AGREED** that the following be provided:

- An update on the progress made on the Champion Way project (community led housing)
- An update on the work of the Lived Experience Advisory Forum
- A briefing on the action being taken in light of growing rent arrears by tenants in Council properties and the support being provided.

#### **6. Housing Delivery Plan**

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery, introduced the report. A Housing Delivery Plan was a government requirement for councils whose housing completions were below 95% of their housing requirement over the past three years. It was unclear whether the Council fell into this category because central government to date had been unable to clarify which historical measures the Council should be measured against. Regardless of whether it was mandated by central government or not, the Council had decided to develop one. Doing so had proven a particularly useful exercise in making clear the importance of ensuring the sites identified for development in the Local Plan are indeed completed; to meet its housing requirement (not including the unmet need met by neighbouring councils) Oxford would have to see 100% of its sites developed each year to 2036. The main housing sources arose from the Council, Oxford University, colleges within the University, and private developers, and the plan sought to identify and defuse any barriers to delivery before they could result in a shortfall in housing delivery.

The Panel raised a number of questions regarding the following:

- Actions being taken to support the delivery of the Julian Housing and Lucy Faithfull sites. The Julian Housing site was reported to be on track, having only recently received planning permission. The Lucy Faithfull site had been subject to a hold up due to the presence of a 15<sup>th</sup> century friary beneath it, requiring archaeological investigation, but it was otherwise moving forward.
- The reasons behind the significant disparity between the level of the Council's delivery under different measures. This was due to a quirk caused by Oxford being unable to meet its housing need. For the years without a government agreed target, if the Council were to be held up against its overall housing needs based on demographics as opposed to deliverability (a figure recognised by government in the current Local Plan as undeliverable) this would result in a very high target, meaning a significant shortfall. If the figures were based on Oxford's ability to deliver, this would mean a much lower target and a much higher proportion therefore achieved.
- The levels of response to the Council's outreach activity with site promoters. It was suggested in response that the timing was unfortunate; the first round of outreach had commenced in the middle of lockdown.
- The impact of possible future changes to the planning system. Particular concerns were expressed by Councillor Hollingsworth over ministerial proposals for automatic permission to be granted to certain properties. The impact would be to negate many of the Council's policies in its current Local Plan whilst not speeding up housing delivery. In other changes, the upcoming update to rules around permitted development rights were in the process of being put into a briefing paper which would be distributed to all councillors, but it was noted that the rights to extend upwards in most areas would have a potentially deeply detrimental impact on Oxford's efforts to retain views of its skyline, and conversion rights had in other places enabled conversions of offices into particularly low-quality housing.

The Panel also discussed the timelines of the report's programme of engagement and progress to date. The Panel was informed Covid impacts had necessitated a prioritisation within the programme of engagement, focusing primarily on individual meetings with developers. Whilst prioritisation measures were an appropriate and indeed correct course of action, it was suggested by Panel members that remote working had had time to become normalised and that it would be beneficial to all stakeholders were the Council to indicate the dates by which paused activity would be recommenced. It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendation to Cabinet:

**That the Council updates its programme of engagement and progress to date to include dates for recommencement of paused activities.**

## **7. Presentation: Impact of Covid on Private Rented Sector Tenants**

The Panel welcomed two representatives from the Oxford Tenants Union to speak on the impact they had seen of Covid-19 on private rented sector tenants.

Following an introduction to the work of the Oxford Tenants Union the Panel were informed of the changing challenges faced by tenants during the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially, concerns were raised over failures by landlords and agents to maintain social distancing, attending properties for viewings unannounced or entering without tenant permission. Latterly, problems had arisen in shared properties where tenants had been

held responsible for the full rent following the departure of a house-mate. The pressure of paying rent during the pandemic had caused many people to be 'sick with worry' throughout, and those who had few alternative options were facing sofa-surfing or rough sleeping. Maintaining people in their homes was suggested to be the best means of preventing a significant rise in homelessness. As one of the places nationally with the most acute ratio between rents and earnings, Oxford would be particularly vulnerable to such an increase.

Panel members sought clarification on the scale of the problems within Oxford and the proportion of people the Council would have a duty to house. Knowing these figures precisely was acknowledged to be a challenge, with multiple advice providers in the city, and the unwillingness of people to seek help until being at the point of near-crisis.

In discussion it was recognised that the Council held very little power over landlords. However, it was suggested that the experience of the Tenants Union was that communication over good practice, and raising awareness of tenants' needs could be important ways of improving tenant-landlord relations during the pandemic. Raising awareness of tenants' rights was also an important undertaking. The difficulty in communicating with at-risk tenants, and landlords was recognised as challenging. A challenge faced by the Tenants Union was in communicating information on tenants rights to non-English speaking communities, many of whom had an elevated housing risk profile.

Panel members discussed whether there existed a need for a social lettings agency. The concept was given support by Panel invitees on the basis that if it followed similar schemes elsewhere in the county would increase the availability of social housing in a city with a high unmet need.

The mutual threat to landlords and tenants caused by the pandemic was noted by the Panel, though it was recognised that the earlier and more acute damage would be felt by tenants. Being able to support and intervene early was identified as crucial in preventing homelessness but there was a potential blockage in knowing who was at risk until very late stages.

In a context of growing job losses and increased benefit claimants, the Panel discussed the high levels of non-compliance by landlords following the legal ruling that 'no DSS' clauses in adverts were discriminatory.

It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendations:

- **That the Council uses its existing channels of communication to share information on tenants' rights and advice relevant to the pandemic, and that it will seek to use its existing links with local community groups to improve access to such information amongst non-English speaking groups.**
- **That the Council identifies tenants at risk of eviction and communicates with them proactively regarding the advice and support available to them.**
- **That the Council uses its convening and influencing power to hear, collect and share the experience of renters and landlords with a view to signposting to good practice and increasing awareness of the potential for lose-lose situations if such good practice is not followed by landlords.**
- **That the Council agrees to the Tenant Ambassador Review recommendation of increased communication between the Council's allocations team and its homelessness team.**

## 8. Date of next meeting

The Panel **NOTED** the amended date of the next meeting, 03 September 2020.

**The meeting started at 6:00pm and ended at 7.55 pm**

**Chair .....**  
**2020**

**Date: Thursday 3 September**

*When decisions take effect:*

*Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired*

*Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued*

*All other committees: immediately.*

*Details are in the Council's Constitution.*