

Remote meeting

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 8 October 2020

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Committee members present:

Councillor Bely-Summers (Chair)	Councillor Aziz (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Gotch	Councillor Taylor
Councillor Wade	Councillor Wolff

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager (Revenue and Benefits)
Amanda Ford, Team Leader (Planning Policy)
Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Manager
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer
Phil McGaskill, Revenues Manager
Carolyn Ploszynski, Planning Policy and Place Manager
Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager

Also present:

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery
Tony Buchanan, Housing Panel (tenant co-optee)

18. Apologies

None

19. Declarations of interest

None

20. Housing Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the proposed workplan for the remainder of the civic year, which was **AGREED**.

21. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 03 September 2020 were **AGREED**.

22. Housing Performance Q1

The Panel **AGREED** to change the agenda order, to hear the Housing Performance Q1 item before the response to the Planning for the Future government consultation.

Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager introduced a report detailing the Council's performance across its housing activities. Before introducing the main issues it was explained that Covid had made target-setting and delivery more difficult.

The demands on homelessness-related services had increased over normal numbers, with elevated numbers presenting as homeless week on week. Nevertheless, despite higher numbers the Council had been successful in keeping the numbers in temporary accommodation within the targets set for a non-pandemic impacted environment. Some measures for work on rough sleeping had not been able to be provided with the provider having to concentrate on running the emergency accommodation required under the 'Everybody In' policy. Over the course of two weeks at the start of the lockdown period, it was necessary to find 121 rooms, which was achieved. Interim provision at Canterbury House and the YHA had also been established. The Council had successfully secured from central government approximately £1m for the Next Steps programme, to support that accommodation and additional move-on options also and had another bid in the pipeline for further long-term accommodation. The impact of the Council's efforts in implementing the 'Everybody In' policy meant that counts of street homeless showed a decrease in the number of individuals, with 25 at the last count.

In other areas of the Council, the demands of Housing Services had continued throughout the lockdown period, with the service needing to adapt its processes to enable new lets and repairs to continue, with the latter playing a key role in identifying and providing support for vulnerable tenants during the pandemic.

In the area of construction and the building of social housing, the pandemic had caused severe disruption, with work having to be paused during the lockdown on the majority of sites. This was due largely to the challenges of social distancing, but also because of disruption of supply chains. Following the lifting of lockdown, catch up work had commenced. The year to date delivery of affordable homes stood at the end of the quarter at 33, with an anticipated 93 to be delivered by the end of the financial year.

In discussion, the Panel discussed the following:

- The adequacy of the number of homes being delivered in comparison to the number waiting for housing. It was recognised that the number did need to increase, but that the Council was taking what steps were available to increase supply.
- The Council's responsibilities towards rough sleepers from outside the City's boundaries. It was explained that the Council would look to connect individuals with other districts responsible for supporting them at the point of assessment but would provide emergency accommodation if required while an individual's links to another area were established.
- Details of future bids for additional funding from government, which would be used, if granted, to supply an additional 20 Housing First homes at affordable

rents. This would focus on providing homes for those within the rough sleeping pathway, rather than broader issues around housing likely to arise from the pandemic.

The Panel also expressed concern at the prospect of provision of emergency shelter for those homeless people with particular vulnerabilities or difficulties accessing emergency housing, particularly those with no recourse to public funds and women fleeing domestic abuse. A protocol for providing emergency winter shelter for rough sleepers was being developed. The Panel suggested that it was necessary to monitor gender breakdowns of access through the 'Everyone In' policy to identify any in homelessness arising from domestic abuse. The Panel **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet.

- 1) That the Council commits to continuing to provide emergency accommodation to rough sleepers over the winter period, including those with no recourse to public funds.**
- 2) That the Council carries out a gender breakdown regarding who has been housed through the 'Everybody In' scheme to enable a more detailed understanding of the gendered impact of homelessness during Covid-19.**
- 3) That the Council reviews the suitability of its emergency accommodation to those rough sleepers who have specific vulnerabilities and ensures the needs arising from those vulnerabilities are provided for**

23. Oxford City Council's response to the Planning for the Future White Paper August 2020

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Supply, introduced a report presenting the response by the Council's officers to central government's consultation on far-reaching changes to its planning rules, the Planning for the Future white paper. The proposals in the white paper were introduced as the most profound challenge to democratic management of planning since 1947 and would remove from both councils and local people the ability to have any meaningful say in the Planning process. Local policies, such as housing numbers and environmental standards, would be replaced with centrally mandated standards. Centralisation of s.106 funding would likely result in the reduction of affordable homes being built. Considerations of the purpose and impact of a building would be deprioritised in relation to its aesthetic appeal, with as-yet-undefined 'beautiful' buildings automatically being granted planning permission.

A concurrent consultation was also being undertaken by government, to which the Panel's attention was drawn. The key proposal was that the threshold of dwellings in a development required before the provision of or contributions towards social and affordable housing that would be required from developers would increase from 10 to 50. With Oxford's large number of small to medium size developments, this would have a very significant negative impact on the number of social and affordable houses being delivered within the City. Other losses to affordable housing numbers were expected to arise from another government proposal, to increase the number of 'starter homes' in developments, which would be taken out of the requirement for affordable housing delivery, thereby reducing the numbers further.

Carolyn Ploszynski, Planning Policy and Place Manager, and Amanda Ford, Team Leader (Planning Policy) introduced the technical elements to government's proposals and the Council officers' response. The overriding objective, according to the proposals, was that the government wished to see more high quality homes being delivered faster, but it was the view of the officers that these objectives are unlikely to be achieved through the proposals being suggested. In Oxford it could mean housing sites being lost to other uses, or conservation areas being put in blanket "protection zones" reducing the amount appropriate development.

In response to the report, the Panel discussed a number of issues including:

- The challenges of drafting a new Local Plan within 12 months and agreeing it within 30 months, which was suggested by Panel members and officers to leave little or no opportunity for public consultation or evidence gathering. Further, it was reported that the response from MCHLG to many practical challenges around implementation remained unclear.
- Whether it would be possible to bring in zoning proposals of sufficient granularity to prevent unsuitable development. It was explained to the Panel that it would be possible to bring in the necessary granularity, but only if a master-planning exercise was undertaken. However, the level of master-planning required to deliver such granularity was reported not to be deliverable within the 12 month period proposed by the government.
- What would happen under the proposals to viability testing. As with the paper as a whole there are lots of questions that remain unanswered but a regional infrastructure levy could render viability testing as presently known redundant. A key concern with this is that for Oxford, with its greater land values compared to its surrounding areas, a regional levy set at a generally viable level for all would mean reduced funding for infrastructure and affordable housing in Oxford.
- The criteria against which 'beautiful' buildings would be judged. No clarity on this issue had been provided by government, but there was particular concern that the focus was on the beauty of buildings solely, rather than the broader streetscape in which buildings would be situated.

The report was **NOTED**.

24. Date of next meeting

The Panel **NOTED** the date of the next meeting, 05 November 2020, and the invitation to participate in the Housing element of the Budget Review Group meeting on 06 January 2021.

25. Confidential Session

The Panel **AGREED** to pass a resolution in accordance with the provisions of Paragraph 4(2)(b) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 to exclude the press and members of the public during discussion of this item on the grounds that it might involve disclosure of exempt information as described in the relevant paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

26. Domestic Arrears during Covid

Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager (Revenues and Benefits), and Phil McGaskill, Revenues Manager presented a report to the Panel on the Council's management of domestic arrears during Covid.

To date, the Council was reported to be tracking along a similar trajectory to 2018, but behind 2019. In 2019 the Council had implemented a strategy of engage and persuade, which had led to one of its most successful years of arrears reduction. If the impact of money sent to the Council regarding DWP but awaiting advice on which account to credit it to, the Council's arrears figures were doing better than in 2018.

With the opening of the courts, the Council had begun considering its approach to formal court proceedings. One area of growth in arrears related to those tenants over six months in arrears; for these tenants the intention was to begin serving notices seeking possession. Oftentimes, those not engaging with the Council's softer efforts to address arrears less formally would do so after receiving a letter seeking possession. The time delay between serving such a notice and going to court would be six months, allowing significant time for the tenant to start addressing their arrears. It was the Council's intention usually to seek suspended possession on terms, not evicting the tenant but giving them the opportunity to stay in the property if progress was made against the arrears.

Garage arrears had increased sharply at the start of lockdown, largely due to those wishing to surrender their garage tenancy being unable to present their keys back. However, with focus from officers these arrears had largely been cleared and were trending towards normal levels.

For the Rent Guarantee scheme, numbers were actually running at half the level of 2019.

The Panel sought more information about enforcement and the protection of vulnerable tenants facing enforcement. The Panel were informed that the Council had a very strict code for enforcement agent behaviour and a lot of work had been devoted to finding companies with the ability to deliver on those exacting standards. One aspect of the company was their strength in using technology and training for their operatives in identifying vulnerable tenants, and the Council had actually learned on a number of occasions of vulnerabilities that were previously unknown. Complaints were very low.

The question was raised whether there was capacity to track the level of people facing arrears who have language barriers. The team was in the process of adopting a new system of recording, which would be more sophisticated and provide the opportunity to track and interrogate a lot more fields. The Panel also examined in more detail the protections for those with English as a second language.

NB There are no confidential minutes for this item.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.50 pm

Chair
2020

Date: Thursday 5 November