

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 4 November 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Bely-Summers

Councillor Diggins

Councillor Fouweather

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Linda Smith (Chair)

Councillor Wade

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People

Ian Wright, Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety

James Pickering, Welfare Reform Manager

Melanie Mutch, Empty Homes Officer

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

16. Apologies

None

17. Declarations of interest

None

18. Housing Panel Work Plan

The Panel **AGREED** that owing to a delay in the expected report on the response to the Tenant Satisfaction Survey results there should be an additional meeting on 16 December 2021 at 5pm. The Panel would also consider a Housing Performance update for the last quarter.

19. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 06 October 2021 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

20. Landlord Services Performance Dashboard

Chair of the Panel, Councillor Linda Smith, updated Panel members regarding the housing performance dashboard. The ongoing challenges from the QL implementation were still preventing the publication of this information. This was **NOTED** by the Panel.

21. Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities presented the report to the Panel. Key issues that the report dealt with were historical demand for DHP, and the anticipated increase in demand for DHP payments at a time of financial challenge for the Council. In the previous year the Council had exceeded the grant support from government by 22%, or £101k. Spending beyond the government's grant is also expected in the immediate future, particularly as central government had reduced the level of its grant support. A series of mitigations had been put in place to minimise the impact on the Council's general budget. The pandemic had hit DHP recipients particularly hard, with many having few alternative options other than this funding. Families subject to the benefit cap were particularly reliant on this support (66% of Council DHP spending went to this group), particularly lone parents with more than two children whose ability to work sufficient hours to qualify for alternative benefits was seriously impeded by their childcare situation. Changes to Universal Credit announced in the government's Budget would help those able to work, but would be of very little benefit to those not working or working few hours.

A vital part of the Council's approach to the DHP process was the allocation of case workers to DHP recipients to work with them to find solutions to their specific challenges. This approach had repeatedly shown good outcomes for individuals; for example, even with the pandemic 31 recipients had made their way into work in the previous financial year. James Pickering, Welfare Reform Manager, underlined the importance of this in light of the fluctuating income from government. Finding long-term solutions was the only viable path to take.

The Panel explored the possible mitigations put in place by the Council to mitigate the consequences of spending on DHP beyond the government grant and found itself to be in strong support of all the existing and proposed suggestions.

One issue raised was that it unclear to members whether the portion of DHP spend coming from the HRA (ie spending on DHP for Council tenants above the government grant) was specifically budgeted for, given that spending might be anticipated to be not inconsequential, £50k or so. It was the view of the Panel that providing a dedicated line in the budget is important in providing transparency, particularly to Council tenants, whose rental payments underpin the HRA.

Other issues raised by the Panel included the 'trap' effect of the DHP and the length of time some recipients stay on it, eligibility criteria and other forms of support.

It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendation to Cabinet:

- 1) That the Council includes a line within the HRA section of its proposed 2022/23 budget for DHP expenditure beyond the government grant.

22. Empty Homes

Ian Wright, Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety, presented a Panel-requested report on Empty Homes.

For Council Tax purposes, an empty home was defined as one which was unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for a period of over six months. Empty homes in Oxford were problematic, given the pressures on housing and land in the city. Currently, 262 properties had been empty for between six months and two years, and 114 for over two years, nine of which had been empty for over 10 years. Properties awaiting probate did not contribute to these figures, which stood at 184, and similarly the 54 properties being renovated. Nationally, there had been a significant rise in the number of empty homes; Oxford's figures were currently on an upward trajectory also. Although the rise was disappointing in light of the stresses on housing stock, a 2018 report commissioned suggested that Oxford tended to perform strongly against the national average, ranking 29th out of 326 councils nationally.

The Council had an Empty Homes Officer, responsible for collating information about empty homes in the City, and working with internal and external bodies to try and bring them back into use, as well as managing any nuisance arising from the empty homes. Owners were incentivised to bring homes back into use through a loan scheme, though uptake on this was fairly low. Increased Council Tax on empty properties was also an incentive.

Legislation around long term empty homes was not well-crafted, meaning legal responses to tackling empty homes such as Empty Homes Management Orders were not often relied upon nationally or locally. Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) were neither cheap nor easy; owing to this the Council no longer had a budget to pursue CPOs.

Discussion was held by the Panel over the degree to which the Council's premium on Council Tax incentivised the bringing of empty homes back into use, and whether higher premiums might be more effective. In response, it was explained that for homes empty for a shorter duration the increased council tax did prove to be an incentive. However, for those paying the top tier of premium, empty for ten years or more, it was not an effective deterrent. It was not possible, however, to raise this premium further as the Council was already charging the legal maximum. The similarity and cross-over between second and empty homes was discussed, with the current treatment favouring second homes on the basis that they could not be charged any premium. It was not known by officers present whether a premium could be charged for second homes, and a request was made by the Panel that this be clarified for the next meeting.

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Supply, joined the meeting at this point.

Other issues explored by the Panel included options for houses purchased through CPOs, and whether there were ways to reduce reliance on a dedicated budget. However, the point remained that owners of CPO'd properties would get market value of the home, including any development potential, meaning little opportunity to make significant profit through redevelopment existed.

With empty homes being brought back into use contributing to the figures used for working out the New Homes Bonus, the Panel sought more information on whether a replacement scheme was likely to be put in place by central government after 2022. Councillor Hollingsworth explained that it was unclear; central government was prone to making announcements with little notice or guidance, though there was considerable

back bench pressure from Conservatives to establish some form of replacement. The Panel requested a breakdown of the number of empty homes contributing to the New Homes Bonus figures to be provided.

Addendum to the minutes.

Further to the requests for more information made by the Panel, the following information was received:

- 1) It was confirmed by the Council Tax team that it was not legal to apply a Council Tax premium to second homes. It is legal to give discounts, but the Council does not do this.
- 2) Concerning empty homes and their contribution to the New Homes Bonus, the following was received:

Empty Homes figures for New Homes Bonus calculation from 2011-22.

The table below details Empty Homes brought back into use for the purposes of the New Homes Bonus. The figures quoted are for Empty Properties brought back into use over and above any additional Empty Properties recorded throughout the year.

Year	Difference in Housing Stock	Empty Homes brought into use	Total Units Added	Value of Award for the particular Year only *
2011/12	411	55	466	£472,960
2012/13	657	145	802	£823,536
2013/14	327	16	343	£388,121
2014/15	265	102	367	£334,885
2015/16	210	14	224	£414,857
2016/17	557	-52	505	£509,952
2017/18	475	1	476	£333,267
2018/19	220	23	243	£13,126
2019/20	339	-30	309	£105,861
2020/21	421	-97	324	£157,451
2021/22	533	18	551	£419,139

* The amounts quoted are the award amount in respect of that particular year only.
The full amounts rec'd for NHB are bigger, as most yearly awards are paid for four years.

23. Dates of next meetings

The Panel **NOTED** the dates of future meetings, including the extra meeting scheduled for 16 December at 5pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.15 pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 16 December 2021