

# Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 2 September 2021

www.oxford.gov.uk



## 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:

Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing Services

Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager

Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Manager

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

## Also present:

Councillor Diko Blackings, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless

Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services

Tony Buchanan, Tenant Ambassador

Anthony Church, Tenant Ambassador

Geno Humphry, Tenant Ambassador

Olga Siddon, Tenant Ambassador

David Simons, Tenant Ambassador

Brenda Walton, Tenant Ambassador

## 1. Apologies

Councillor Blackings had sent an e mail warning that she would be delayed in arriving. This was **NOTED** by the Panel. There were no other apologies.

## 2. Declarations of interest

None

## 3. Housing Panel Work Plan

Councillor Diko Blackings joined the meeting at the commencement of this item.

It was proposed by the Chair that the Panel consider the Cabinet paper on Small Sites Development Proposals at the November meeting, which was accepted by the Panel.

There was a request for more information regarding the progress of Selective Licensing, which the Scrutiny Officer agreed to follow up on.

Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing, requested that the reports on the Tenant Satisfaction Survey in October and the Housing White Paper in November be switched around, which was accepted.

A presentation by the Empty Homes Officer on their work was also requested, with the Scrutiny Officer to organise a suitable date. This suggestion was accepted.

The Chair also brought to the Panel's attention that Council had referred work to the Panel around DSS discrimination in lettings. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would pass on to Housing the actions required by the motion which referred the work to the Panel, and would ask for an update report on progress in April 2022.

The work plan was **AGREED** by the Panel subject to the above changes.

It was also **AGREED** that the Chair would work with the Head of Housing to develop a performance dashboard, which would be considered as a standing item at each meeting.

#### **4. Notes of previous meeting**

The notes of the meeting held on 04 March 2021 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

#### **5. Housing Performance Q1**

Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager, presented a Housing Performance update report to the Panel, taking in the activity of the Housing service area, but also Housing-related service areas.

For the Council's activities around rough sleeping and homelessness the challenging situation of undertaking its work in a new way, through the pandemic and the 'everyone in' policy was noted. Housing's current focus was on getting those people who had been taken off the streets moved on into longer-term accommodation. The pandemic had brought increased presentations of people as homeless, but with changes such as the end of the eviction ban, the furlough scheme and the recommencement of evictions that number was liable to remain elevated. Despite the challenges, however, securing accommodation was proving successful, with 252 having been moved on to date. Since the publication of the report Canterbury House had been vacated, and attention was being turned to those housed at the YHA. The Council's work was being supported by a successful bid for RSI funding from central government, which would partially be used for a social lettings pilot to trial enabling access to private lettings from former rough sleepers. Overall, number of rough sleepers was reducing, with 24 recorded at the last count in Q1, down from 62 in 19-20. Other KPIs about temporary accommodation and successful outcomes from homelessness prevention interventions were also being met.

Traditionally the Council's affordable housing targets were reported on annually. However, owing to the long term work needed to deliver housing developments it was deemed more appropriate to have a four year target instead to drive performance, set at 1200 affordable homes. In the first quarter 49 affordable homes had been delivered, compared to 123 in the entire year prior.

The main focus around the Council's own housing stock in terms of KPIs was over decarbonisation and retrofitting, with the aim that fewer than 46% of homes would be

rated below an EPC rating of C for 21-22. Compared to a baseline of 54%. This is being supported by financial investment from the council, alongside bidding for grant funding from central government, a successful bid for LAD1B fund means work can get underway on 240 properties with the worst performing properties being targeted first.

In response to the presentation the Panel raised a number of questions. Assurances on the steps being taken to ensure harder-to-house rough sleepers were sought as the 'everyone in' policy was starting to be wound down. This area was recognised by officers to be a challenge, but the ambition was to make every person leaving temporary accommodation at the YHA an offer of suitable accommodation, which would be supported by funding through both the Next Steps accommodation programme, and the Rough Sleeping accommodation programme. This funding could be used not only to provide accommodation itself, but support to the individuals in their accommodation. Floyds Row would also, once repurposed, be able to temporarily house and support a number of individuals.

Challenge was provided by one of the Panel's guests, Tony Buchanan, over the meaning of successful housing of homeless individuals as he had received reports from a number of individuals stating that their accommodation was not supporting their recovery. One of the discoveries of the 'everyone in' exercise was the size of the hidden homeless in Oxford, sofa surfing rather than being street homeless. Successful housing was determined by the security of that housing, suitable for their needs and affordable within benefit allowances. It was recognised, however, that getting people with lived experience to feed into Council services was extremely important, and that with the challenges of Covid this may have reduced relative to the engagement there had been before with the Lived Experience Advisory Forum.

Clarity was also sought over the meaning of successful outcomes relating to those owed a homeless prevention duty. Definitions in this area were determined by government and were not set by the Council but included at-risk individuals being allowed to stay in their current property for over six months, or rehousing at-risk individuals before they became homeless. Those who don't get a positive outcome and become homeless the council will continue to work with and support them under a homelessness relief duty. Other outcomes recorded include losing contact with households.

The Panel made enquiries over the Council's retrofitting plans, specifically over whether the improvements did indeed lead to lower bills, and the degree to which tenants were involved in decisions over which specific types of retrofit were undertaken, particularly in relation to ground-source heat pumps. In response, the focus of measurement around retrofitting was on EPCs, but improvements to EPC ratings would inevitably lead to reduced bills. The exact quantum of those reductions would not be known, however. For ground-source heat pumps, previous pilots had shown them to be relatively unsuccessful locally, although technology was always improving so requires continued monitoring and review. A wider point made clear by other authorities undertaking retrofitting projects on a wider scale had been how crucial involving tenants in discussions over changes to their homes was. Officer experience to date showed that time invested in understanding tenant needs paid dividends in terms of reduced disruption and higher satisfaction by the tenants. Despite a time pressure from central government, the Council had asked for an extension to ensure that tenants could be suitably consulted with.

Following questions around rent-arrears levels the Panel welcomed the news that the Council's earlier intervention process was working well and despite the pandemic levels of rent arrears were in line with pre-pandemic figures.

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

1) That the Council, as Covid restrictions ease, increases the breadth and depth of its engagement with the Lived Experience Advisory Forum and other similar groups in shaping Council homelessness services.

## **6. Introducing Tenant Engagement**

Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Manager, gave a presentation to introduce members of the Panel to the different fora and avenues through which the Council engages with its tenants and leaseholders. He was supported by representatives of these fora, the tenant ambassadors.

The Tenant Involvement Team is comprised of four permanent staff, and an apprentice to join imminently, funded from the Housing Revenue Account. It exists to ensure compliance with the Regulator's 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard' through tenant involvement in the development, monitoring and scrutiny of Council tenant and leaseholder services. In 2016 the team was awarded accreditation by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) and was awarded Team of the Year. The accreditation which was re-awarded in 2020.

Alongside its more targeted engagement with the tenant ambassadors, the team provides a number of avenues for engaging with tenants more broadly: The Tenants In Touch magazine, facebook and tenant involvement web pages.

The Tenant Involvement team is not the sole source of tenant involvement, with consultation being undertaken centrally through the consultation team. The Tenancy Management and Communities Team also engage with tenants on a regular basis for consultations. It has been found that a mix of online and telephone yields the best balance between cost and accessibility. Postal surveys were no longer cost effective and therefore were used only on request, but door to door surveys could be, particularly in plugging gaps in responses via other methods.

Looking ahead, the Tenant Involvement team's work would primarily be focused on preparing for the upcoming Housing white paper, where within every strand there is a significant element pertaining to tenant involvement. Other key areas would be responding to the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman regarding complaints processes, and issues arising from the Building Safety Bill. Two other areas of focus were setting up in-depth assessors, whose job it will be to monitor satisfaction levels, and identify and solve areas of dissatisfaction, and to establish a Housing Development Working Group to involve tenants in the pre-planning stages of development sites and post-completion inspections to ensure they are of satisfactory standard.

In the future, it was hoped that tenants might also be able to become involved in performance monitoring around issues such as gas safety, void turnaround times, and incidences and themes around antisocial behaviour. Also, creating a Tenant and Leaseholder Board – a body attended by senior officers and fed into by tenant ambassadors – would create a direct communication link between tenants and senior decision-makers.

The Tenant Ambassadors presented their areas of involvement with the Council.

Brenda Walton and Geno Humphrey spoke about their involvement with contract tender evaluations. A number of ambassadors have been trained by the Council to look at new contracts, as well as renewal tenders. When tender documentation is received by the

Council it is passed on to participating tenant ambassadors, who score each one against the same matrix as Council officers. The only difference is that – at the request of the tenant ambassadors – the price is not included. Ambassadors are supported by council officers if they need help with clarification of technical issues. Having scored each tender individually, a joint meeting between ambassadors and council officers is held, where a consensus score is reached. The procurement team subsequently add in the effect of the different prices offered to determine the favoured contractor.

Anthony Church introduced his involvement with the Great Estates team. The level of involvement requires between two to four meetings per month with stakeholders of the Great Estates programme. The role of the ambassador is to identify areas suitable for makeovers, collecting resident views and ideas and ensuring they are put forward, and scoping proposals for upgrades. Stakeholder meetings, including ambassadors, are then held to agree priorities between different proposals.

David Simons talked about tenant involvement in interviews via stakeholder interviews. Tenant ambassadors are briefed beforehand, where the advert, job description and person specification are talked through, with the opportunity for clarification and model answers provided. During the interviews themselves, ambassadors are asked to score responses to the questions. These scores are fed back as part of the wider interview process. The involvement of the ambassadors does not stop at the point of interviews, however, but there is feedback on how a particular applicant was chosen, with full transparency over the scoring process given to ambassadors. The appointed candidate also gets to meet the ambassadors for a talk as part of their induction process.

Tony Buchanan spoke about the Housing Ombudsman Residents Panel. The role of tenants in the Housing Ombudsman Residents Panel is one which is determined in central government's Housing White Paper. This involves national level work, but also working with the Council to establish and maintain a complaints procedure in accordance with good practice recommended by the Housing Ombudsman, and is followed to the new regulatory requirements as set out in the new Complaints Handling Code.

Olga Siddon introduced the variety of issues she had been invited to participate in as a tenant, from Environmental Improvement, to the proposed Housing and Homelessness Strategy, to making a response to central government's green paper on Health and Disability. She stressed that she had become aware of it though information shared in the Tenants in Touch magazine, but her involvement had grown organically. The work of the Tenant Involvement team was lauded, and the benefits of being able to be involved highlighted.

Issues raised for discussion by the Panel included:

- The level of tenant involvement in choosing housing development partners. There had been some engagement between the Tenant Involvement team and Housing Development around five years previously to do surveys and inspections, but there had been little of that type of engagement since then.
- The mechanism by which it was decided which tenders would have tenant ambassador input. There was no formal policy; the value Tenant Involvement could add was becoming more recognised as it participated in more procurements but it was not a recognised step in the tendering process. Practically, it was not possible to support tenant engagement in all tender processes, but there was officer support for making the Tenant Involvement team aware of what was coming up in order to allow tenant ambassadors to choose which they wishes to become part of. One issue to be noted was the

proportion of development being run through OCHL, rather than directly through the Council itself.

- The challenges faced by older people in making their voices heard in an increasingly digital environment. Whilst it would be dealt with in greater detail at a future meeting, confidence was expressed that through using a number of consultation methods the Council had managed to capture in its annual tenant satisfaction survey a representative number of responses from older people.
- A request was made for a summary of the actions to be taken in light of the responses to the tenant satisfaction survey.
- The adequacy of tenant representation on the Council's Resident's Panel of hundreds of local residents. It was confirmed that there was tenant representation. However, GDPR restrictions on use and storage of data meant there was not the opportunity to build on that group outside of work already undertaken by the Resident's Panel.
- The number of people trained to be procurement ambassadors. Around 8 people have been trained in procurement, with more anticipated.
- It was noted that there was not a formal process for having tenant ambassador involvement in interviews, and that the new Executive Director of Housing and Communities had been appointed without tenant ambassador input.

Possible issues that were raised for future recommendations were as follows:

- Support for the development of the Housing Development Working Group, and within its scope include engagement with tenants on internal design ideas in addition to those mentioned
- That tenant involvement in procurement is formalised and made less ad hoc
- Having a specific older people's tenant ambassador to ensure the specific needs of this group were being met.
- Replicate the Residents Panel just for Council tenants or find a way to get permission to engage with the subset that are tenants. The former could possibly be done through the use of permissions gained from the tenant satisfaction survey. A total of 420 people did give permission to be contacted in future.
- That tenant ambassador involvement in appointments, particularly senior appointments, in Housing be formalised.

## 7. Dates of next meetings

The Panel **NOTED** the dates of future meetings and the Panel's continuance in a virtual format.

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm**

**Chair .....**

**Date: Wednesday 6 October 2021**