

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Wednesday 2 February 2022

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 Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager

Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Manager

Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Officer

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

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

Dave Simons, Tenant Ambassador

31. Apologies

Stephen Clarke tendered apologies for the meeting.

32. Declarations of interest

None

33. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Panel **AGREED** the proposed work plan. It was **NOTED** that the Scrutiny Committee had agreed to consider the Allocation of Homelessness Prevention Funding owing to the delay of the report going to Cabinet.

34. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 16 December 2021 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

35. Allocation of Homelessness Prevention Funds

As above, it was **AGREED** this item would be deferred and passed to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration owing to the delay of the report going to Cabinet.

36. Social Housing White Paper Readiness and Tenant Satisfaction Survey Response

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager, presented to the Panel the report on the progress of the Council regarding the progress of its response to the Tenant Satisfaction Survey and readiness for the Social Housing White Paper.

Actions to improve the repairs service were on track. An SMS reminder and notification system was expected to go live in July, and a live dashboard to track underperformance in different areas had been designed and scoped, with an expected go-live of November. Dynamic Resource Scheduling was being used for half of operatives, with full take up expected by July. Just in time delivery was now in place through a contract with Grafton. A solution to enable follow-up visits to be booked whilst the operative was on-site was also being used by half of operatives with full take-up expected by July. The reporting, viewing and tracking portal for tenant repairs was slightly delayed because of changes made in the background by Microsoft, with expectation it would be running by October. Much progress had been made on damp and mould re-inspection visits, with all cases within the last two years checked on and prioritisation of cases occurring when reported. EDI and customer care training had been planned and was being rolled out to all staff. ODS had appointed a project manager to develop a Customer Service Strategy.

Following this, members asked about the certainty of estimated time frames, particularly in relation to QL-related issues. The time frames provided were felt to be robust, but the work was reliant on a small number of individuals within the Council, making unexpected work for them more likely to cause delays. The Council's awareness of mould and ventilation issues for highly efficient houses was queried. It was confirmed that this issue formed part of the consideration of which interventions to use for the Council's retrofitting programme.

To address feedback by tenants that the quality of the home was a concern for a number the Council was undertaking a long-term £51m improvement programme. A stock condition survey would be undertaken to identify works required, with the contractor being appointed by April 2022. The Great Estates work, with a budget of £1.1m would also continue.

Interest was expressed by Councillors in being able to contribute ideas to the Great Estates programme, but many felt they were being held back by a lack of knowledge how the programme worked. It was **AGREED** that this topic would be referred to Democratic Services to be added to the list of topics for all-member briefings post-election. The briefing would be based on the recent report submitted to the Leaders meeting on the process for Great Estates sign-off.

With a view to readiness for the implementation of the Social Housing white paper the Council was in the process of recruiting an engagement team to deliver the engagement plan. The recruitment was expected to be complete by June, subject to budget sign-off. Better data capture and a customer portal to enable better digital access were expected to be launched in June, with completion by 2024. Engagement plans would also include leaseholders as well as tenants.

Anti-social behaviour (ASB) had been an area of divergence between the Council and a number of tenants, with difference of opinion over whether responsive measures should be preventative or punitive. To address this, an engagement process was underway for completion in July and greater information was to be available at the same time online about the support the Council could provide. The new ASB policy was already in place.

Finally, the integration of the Housing, Communities and Community Safety functions would increase cross-working and improve outcomes. To date, pilots had been completed. In addition to this, extra front-line staff would be recruited (subject to budget approval) in April. An external review of how the Council delivers its services to tenants was imminently to have instructions issued, with the report expected by the end of May.

Concern was expressed at the low level of satisfaction shown by leaseholders and the possible reasons explored. One cause was the different nature of the relationship, with many leaseholders did not live in the property itself but rented it out so they tended to see the Council as a source of bills rather than providing enrichment to the community. An area of improvement identified, however, was providing more information. A number of leaseholder ambassadors had been working with the Council to develop a leaseholder handbook, with information relevant to the specific needs and interests of leaseholders.

Another area of concern was over whether the action plan's response to the dissatisfaction amongst younger people over the quality of their homes, solely investing in digitalisation, was sufficient. Officers were keen to capture feedback from younger tenants soon after moving in on their experience relative to their expectations. It was expected, however, that the overall increase in engagement would also provide a strong steer as to necessary future avenues of work. The Panel suggested the recruitment of younger tenant ambassadors. As part of that, it would be useful to know the age breakdown of those responding to the tenant satisfaction survey who were willing to be contacted.

The capability to use the survey data to understand views by residents on different estates was questioned. Ward-level responses could be tracked, but it was not possible to be more granular. This was an area identified by officers for follow-up in order to identify priority issues for each ward.

Councillor difficulties with tracking progress on case work were commented on. It was explained that all member enquiries to ODS should go via the Contact Centre, which would enable the issues to be logged. This would then provide a facility for councillors to track case work updates.

The report was **NOTED**.

Councillor Diko Walcott left the meeting at the conclusion of this item.

37. Tenant Involvement Presentation

Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Team Manager, and Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Team Officer, provided a verbal briefing on the practical issues around supporting tenant involvement.

The growth in interaction between landlords and their tenants as required by the Social Housing white paper would mean a significant increase in the number of tenant ambassadors. The process of publicising opportunities and identifying suitable individuals was one which takes time and planning. Likewise, matching to suitable opportunities and providing training and equipment was also a practical challenge. A

large number of the groups require specialist knowledge, for example on fire safety, or procurement, and volunteers need to be brought up to speed. Equally, at times it has been necessary to pay for basic broadband or find spare hardware to lend to ambassadors. This provision was, however, rather ad hoc and inconsistent, and it was suggested that having an external company provide a standard 'offer' would be preferable.

The possibility of incentivisation for volunteers was explored. A big issue was their inclusion within benefit calculations, which made it complicated. Many did not necessarily want to be ambassadors for financial gain or reward. However, the Panel did feel it was necessary that people's work should be recognised as opposed to remunerated. Ideas included free leisure centre access, or invitations to the Lord Mayor's reception, a specific event on their behalf, or long-service recognition.

Tenant ambassador, Dave Simons, felt that his involvement as a tenant ambassador over the past three years had been exceptionally rewarding, an experience shared across the tenant ambassadors. Digital support was valuable as it coincided with his private life. Civic recognition, such as the Mayor's Ball, would be welcomed.

38. Tenant Engagement and Empowerment - Final Question and Recommendation Forming

The Panel **AGREED** to send in any additional recommendations to the Scrutiny Officer by e mail for inclusion within the draft document.

39. Dates of next meetings

The Panel **NOTED** the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 18:00 and ended at 19:30

Chair

Date: Tuesday 22 March 2022