

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Monday 13 March 2023

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Committee members present:

Councillor Dunne (Chair)

Councillor Fouweather

Councillor Rawle

Councillor Sandelson

Gill Taylor

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director (Communities and People)

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing

Amie Ricketson, Strategy and Service Development Manager

Mark Smart, HRA Surveying Manager

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Ian Wright, Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety

Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing, Cabinet Member for Housing

1. Apologies:

Anthony Church

2. Declarations of interest

3. Housing and Homelessness Work Plan

The Panel noted the work plan. The Scrutiny Officer asked the Panel to suggest ideas by email for inclusion on the work plan for the next municipal year which would be discussed at its next meeting, recognising that there was already sufficient material to be considered at the meeting scheduled for 24 April 2023.

4. Notes of previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the previous meetings.

5. Update on the development of a Tenants Forum

The Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety introduced the report which had been requested by the Panel for its meeting in November 2022 which had been adjourned. The report explained that, once Selective Licensing had moved to the enforcement stage in the New Year, further engagement was planned to take place with tenants and with other organisations that work in the city.

Cllr Smith commended the Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety for his leadership of the team which had worked extremely hard on the introduction of Selective Licensing and she explained to the Panel that the first stage of the Selective Licensing work had been to engage with landlords to raise awareness of the scheme and to arrange for them to acquire licences. The team had now begun to focus on engagement with tenants and to ensure that they were aware of their rights under the scheme.

Cllr Smith also drew the Panel's attention to the work the Council was doing in preparation for its response to the white paper on social housing which will focus more on engagement with tenants.

The Panel resolved to note current position with regard to the development of a Tenants Forum.

6. Damp and mould in Council owned and managed accommodation

Mark Smart, HRA Surveying Manager, introduced the report and highlighted that the Council had changed its strategy away from a reactive one. The Council had commissioned a stock condition survey which had begun in March 2023 and was to provide better detailed knowledge of condition across the housing portfolio.

The Council had also asked Oxford Direct Services (ODS) to be more proactive in its approach to identifying damp and mould issues whilst visiting properties for other repairs and Housing Services had supported this writing to tenants and asking them to report such issues. ODS had been monitoring damp and mould calls and had responded as a priority.

The additional funding requirement had been recognised and £250k had been confirmed in the 2023/24 budget year in order to support the works and Property Services the Panel was assured that Property Services would continue to work closely with Housing Management, the Contact Centre and ODS to ensure that there was a holistic and focused approach with damp and mould cases being provided within Property Services's monthly building compliance report.

Cllr Smith thanked the Panel for requesting the report and said that she hoped it provided reassurance that the Council and ODS had taken the matter seriously and that there was now a clear commitment to monitoring situations and not to sign jobs off until there had been an improvement rather than simply providing advice. Cllr Smith was satisfied that there were good systems in place to monitor jobs and works which went far beyond mere publicity.

The Panel welcomed the report. In response to questions, the Panel established that:

- Basic monitoring equipment was available to tenants which displayed humidity and temperature levels which can but that there had been little take up;

- Humidity controlled extractor fans were installed during the past two years;
- The Council's website was reviewed and information regarding heat and ventilation was clarified;
- Letters were sent to tenants who were not using fans although they were provided and officers were meeting with the tenant involvement team to consider how that might be effected more easily;
- The Council wrote to the Secretary of State to say that new legislation, nicknamed 'Awaab's Law', should cover private rented as well as social housing;
- The Council also made representations that the review of the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) which was begun in 2018 should be completed as a matter of urgency and should re-categorise damp and mould so that it was considered as a category 1 hazard rather than category 2;
- The Council was encouraging tenants in the private rented sector to report damp and mould issues to the Council so that it could use that as a trigger during its inspection programme;
- The Council was also the enforcing authority for housing association tenants and had taken action against housing associations previously and so encouraged tenants in housing association accommodation to report issues too;
- The Head of Housing Services had set up a task group with an action plan to ensure that every aspect both operational and strategic was under the task group's attention;
- The Council had not yet had any issues where it was unable to install fans and extractors in internal bathrooms because there were practical workarounds.

The Panel resolved to note the report.

7. Housing Performance Report

The Strategy and Service Development Manager reminded the Panel that both Quarter 2 and Quarter 3 reports were before members which gave them the opportunity to track progress readily. She introduced the Quarter 3 report for the Panel in some detail.

In response to questions, the Panel established that:

- Asylum seekers at the Kassam were not included in the figures because their accommodation was not provided by the Council;
- The Council anticipated increasing numbers of people involved in Homes for Ukraine were likely to need support and that officers were working closely with hosts and guests on that;
- That retrofitting had been targeted on types of accommodation, either archetype or geography, rather than on needs of tenants so as to achieve the maximum yield;
- That the Council was working on its investment programme and had recently commissioned a review of the Housing Revenue Account, considering stock and decarbonisation, and that needs of tenants with a longer-term investment approach was being considered.

8. Housing, Homelessness, and Rough Sleeping Strategy

The Strategy and Service Development Manager introduced the report and the Executive Director (Communities and People) drew the Panel's attention to the fact that its recommendations relating to the draft Strategy in October 2022 had been accepted

and incorporated. Cllr Smith congratulated officers for the work that was evident in the Strategy and for the success of the public consultation which had seen over 100 responses received as well as 60 individuals, representing 27 different organisations, attend different stakeholder events.

The Panel commended the breadth and depth of the strategy and was pleased that its previous recommendations, on the draft Strategy, had been accepted.

In response to questions, the Panel established that selective licensing did not apply to those properties now registered as holiday homes because it was not the main home of those renting them.

The Panel raised questions regarding the level of shared ownership against social rent and, given the length of waiting lists for social housing, questioned why the Council did not consider itself able to be more ambitious in its target for higher levels of social rent. The Panel heard explanation and recognised that there were a great number of different elements to why particular targets were adopted and that the rationale behind each one was multi-faceted. However, the Panel noted that the Council stated in the Strategy that “by the end of this strategy period, we are seeking to ... Let the majority of the Council’s new affordable homes at a social rent level, approximately 40% of the market rent.”

The Panel recognised that there was an element of elasticity in the definition of ‘majority’ but considered that consideration should be given to how the Council might be able to consider moving towards having a greater proportion of the Council’s new affordable homes let at a social rent level than a simple majority.

The Panel resolved to make the following recommendation to Cabinet.

That the Council works with OX Place to consider how it might move towards having a higher percentage of new homes let at social rent level than a simple majority.

9. Date of next meeting

The Panel noted the date of its next meeting, Monday 24 April 2023.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.07 pm

Chair

Date: Monday 24 April 2023

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.