

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Wednesday 5 July 2023

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Committee members present:

Councillor Diggins (Chair)

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Fouweather

Councillor Rawle

Councillor Sandelson

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Peter Matthew, Interim Executive Director of People and Communities

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Alan Chandler, Senior Refugee and Migrant Officer

Paul Reid, Rapid Rehousing Manager

Amie Rickatson, Strategy & Service Development Manager

Pat Andrade, Tenancy Management Manager

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing

Apologies:

No apologies were received

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Peter Matthew, who had recently joined the Council as Interim Executive Director (Communities and People).

3. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel **agreed** the notes of the meeting held on 24 April 2023 as a true and accurate record.

4. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the provisional Work Plan and the list of suggested items for Scrutiny-commissioned reports at Appendix A.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the list of items at Appendix A had been scored and ranked in accordance with the TOPIC criteria (Timely, Oxford Priority, Public Interest, Influence and Cost).

The Panel agreed to add the following items to the Work Plan and requested that the Scrutiny Officer work with officers to schedule the items throughout the remainder of the municipal year:

- Housing First Acquisition Programme Progress/Outcomes
- The performance of Housing Associations operating within the City
- Housing Services Transformation (presentation)
- City of Sanctuary Accreditation (including review of Council's current position)

In discussion, the Panel agreed that it would determine whether a further item on the implementation of refugee resettlement in Oxford (evaluation, lessons learned and improvements) was required after consideration of agenda item 8: Future Resettlement Commitments for New Refugee Families. The Panel agreed to add the 'alternative 'innovative' solutions to the housing crisis' suggestion to the longlist of ideas for Scrutiny-commissioned reports for the next municipal year, for consideration by the next year's Panel.

The Panel discussed the possibility of commissioning an item on the implementation of the Selective Licensing scheme, which could take the form of a report or a presentation, and requested that the Scrutiny Officer engage with officers around the feasibility and indicative timescales of bringing the item forward in the current municipal year.

During the 2021/22 municipal year, the Panel had considered an item on 'Housing and Carbon Reduction'. There was discussion around whether or not the Panel should request a report updating on the decarbonisation programme. The Scrutiny Officer advised that this would likely now fall under the remit of the recently established Climate and Environment Panel, but consideration could be given to hosting a joint meeting with the Housing and Homelessness Panel. Panel members added that they may wish to have a particular focus on the impact of decarbonisation of Council homes on tenants. The Panel requested that the Scrutiny Officer look into this outside of the meeting.

In addition, the Panel requested that the Scrutiny Officer work with officers to schedule the following regular/standard items throughout the remainder of the municipal year:

- Housing Performance Monitoring
- DSS Discrimination Motion Update
- Tenants' Forum

The Head of Housing Services advised the Panel that Housing Services was due to review the Tenancy Strategy during 2023/24, which was linked to Registered Provider performance. The Panel noted the suggestion that this could link in with the broader piece of work suggested around the performance of housing associations and requested that the Scrutiny Officer work with the Head of Housing Services to define a proposed scope.

The Panel further requested the Scrutiny Officer to engage with officers around the possibility of training related to financial viability being delivered to the Panel, with an opportunity for discussion.

5. Report back on recommendations

The Panel **noted** the following Cabinet responses to its recommendations:

- Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28
- Tenancy Agreement

6. Housing Performance Monitoring

The Strategy and Service Development Manager introduced the report, which set out the Council's performance on a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) relevant to Housing Services for Quarter 4 of the 2022/23 municipal year.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The reasons for the increase in homelessness were wide-ranging; there was no single issue which was causing the increase but it was apparent that the impact of the cost of living crisis was starting to hit. This was a trend which was being seen across the country.
- The Strategy and Service Development Manager would ask Finance colleagues for further information on why there had been a reduction in arrears of just over £250,000. The Panel had expected this figure may have increased as a result of the cost of living crisis.
- Work was underway to address the number of rough sleepers without an offer of accommodation, however this strand of work was a real challenge and there were acute pressures in Oxford which were also being seen across the country.
- The Council had a small amount of discretionary funding to place particularly vulnerable rough sleepers in hotel accommodation if required.
- The Council kept internal records on the reasons for residents becoming homeless; however the records were reliant on self-declaration from tenants, which was not always forthcoming. The data could be made available to the Panel at a future meeting.
- Housing Services was actively working to prevent homelessness by working with the Private Rented Sector, for example through the Landlord Mediation Programme.

The Panel requested the following amendments be included in future housing performance reports:

- % of Council owned housing stock that has an EPC rating below C – the definition of 'below C' needed to be clarified, as it was not clear whether 'below C' meant A-C or D-F;
- Total number of affordable homes in Oxford completed in year – the end of year target stated 'none set'; it was requested that this be reframed to state whether or not the Council was on target, as there was a multi-year target set;
- That a RAG rating based on whether a target was met or not met be included in future housing performance reporting, to aid accessibility.

7. Future Resettlement Commitments for New Refugee Families

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, highlighting that the commitments outlined in the report were consistent with Oxford's values as a City of Sanctuary and aligned with work to date supporting refugees.

Alan Chandler, Senior Refugee and Migrant Officer added that the proposed commitment to resettle 8 refugee families per year for 5 years was determined to be manageable and sustainable; the commitment was consistent with the commitment in previous years. He advised that a number of factors had fed into the proposed commitment to resettle 8 families per year for the 5 year period – including the availability of affordable accommodation in the City and capacity to offer wraparound support to those families.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The commitment to resettle 8 families per year over the 5 year period was a minimum; there was a small amount of flexibility within the scheme to allow a small number of additional families to be resettled in any given year without impacting on resources.
- The commitment aimed to balance ambition to support as many refugee families as possible with the number of available properties coming forward.
- There were a range of variable and fixed costs related to the scheme.
- The report was set in the context of the variety of other work the Council does to support refugees, as such it should be considered in the round.
- It was difficult to predict the number of properties which would be forthcoming.
- The scheme would be reviewed annually in terms of financial viability.
- Families were monitored regularly to check how they were settling in and that they were accessing the support available; the first year of resettlement included intense wraparound support.
- Families were placed in various locations across the City, dependent on where properties became available; refugee families were not necessarily in close proximity to one another.

The Panel **agreed** to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council clarifies its position in relation to the flexibility within its commitment to resettle more than 8 refugee families per year for the next 5 years; explicitly stating that any significant surplus will be rolled into the following year's commitment, but that there is capacity to support a small number of additional families in any given year.
2. The Council considers the language used within future reports and documents to ensure that individuals and families entering the UK having fled war, conflict and/or persecution are given equal status regardless of their country of origin.

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager, Alan Chandler, Senior Refugee and Migrant Officer and Paul Reid, Rapid Rehousing Manager left the meeting and did not return.

8. Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey 2022

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, highlighting that the results of the Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey 2022 had been positive overall. She advised that there were a few areas for improvement which the Council would be focusing on – namely communications and repairs; improvement work was already underway in respect of repairs, as new technology was due to be rolled out imminently which would enable tenants to log their own repairs on the system, which would streamline the process.

Pat Andrade, Tenancy Management Manager presented the survey's key findings to the Panel, alongside the actions which had subsequently been put in place. In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Council was undertaking a rolling stock condition survey which would inform capital programmes of work to improve housing stock in a strategic way; the worst performing homes would be surveyed first and the rolling survey would put the Council in a stronger position in terms of maintaining housing stock.
- The survey was conducted via a QR code and via telephone.
- It was difficult to encourage tenants to take part in the survey; but if the Council could demonstrate it had listened to the views of respondents then engagement may increase in future.
- Housing Services took note of best practice and had an ambition to embed a culture of learning from complaints to enable continuous improvement.

The Panel **agreed** to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council includes information on the number of Council tenants per ward in future Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey reports.

9. Dates of future meetings

The Panel **noted** the dates and times of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.02 pm

Chair

Date: Wednesday 2 August 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.*