

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

Committee members present:

Councillor Diggins (Chair)

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Clarkson

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Rawle

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services

Amie Rickatson, Strategy & Service Development Manager

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Stephen Cohen, Refugee & Resettlement Manager

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager

Steve Stansfield, Building Compliance and Safety Manager

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Sandelson sent apologies.

27. Declarations of Interest

None.

28. Chair's Announcements

None.

29. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the meeting held on 05 October 2023 as a true and accurate record.

30. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the Work Plan. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Work Plan had been updated since the previous meeting; the 'Housing Associations' Approach to Tenant Engagement' item agreed by the Panel at its previous meeting was the only item which had not yet been scheduled in. The Scrutiny Officer would work with officers in Housing Services to plan this in and keep the Panel informed.

The Panel **agreed** the Work Plan as set out in the agenda pack.

The Panel agreed to consider agenda item 7 (Building Safety & Compliance Within Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Stock) next, followed by agenda item 6 (Housing Performance Monitoring) and then return to the agenda as listed.

31. Building Safety & Compliance Within Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Stock

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which provided an update on current Building Safety and Compliance performance relating to the Council's Housing Stock. The Panel was informed that this was an area of responsibility that the Council took extremely seriously and would not compromise on; it was a priority area for the Council.

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager gave an overview of the contents of the report, highlighting that it focused on the Council's responsibility as a landlord for ensuring compliance with statutory requirements. The report included a brief outline of some of the key legislative requirements. Monthly compliance reporting was better than it had ever been and the Council was taking a proactive approach in terms of resolving issues such as damp and mould. There was always room for improvement and further investment, specifically in relation to changes in legislation, but the Property Services Manager reported that compliance was in a positive place.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Council was encouraging tenants to raise issues through the use of newsletters, tenant communications and reactive repairs; there were aims to go further towards encouraging tenants to report issues through a communications campaign in Winter 2024.
- Initial response times when tenants had raised issues around damp and mould had been challenging, but the Council was working hard to understand the nature of issues raised and prioritise accordingly – this was a key piece of ongoing work; Housing teams and the Contact Centre were fully briefed and aware that damp and mould were to be treated as priority cases.
- Full timber fire doors were being installed in tower blocks, which were compliant with fire regulations but not popular with residents as they were not as aesthetically pleasing as composite doors.
- Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service was pleased with the Council's progress in relation to fire safety.
- The Council was developing a programme for fire doors in low-rise blocks early in the New Year.
- Lifts were monitored and maintained on a monthly basis via a contractor; when lift issues occurred they tended to have a big negative impact on residents in terms of access.

- The Council employed the services of specialist external contractors in relation to some elements of compliance – largely the high risk elements of compliance; the Council had good relationships with internal and external partners.
- The relevant regulations stated how prioritisation in terms of compliance activity should be undertaken.

The Panel:

1. **Noted** the contents of the report.
2. **Requested** that a regular update report on Building Safety & Compliance within Housing Revenue Account Stock be submitted to the Panel for consideration on a biannual basis going forward.

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager and Steve Stansfield, Building Compliance and Safety Manager left the meeting and did not return.

32. Housing Performance Monitoring

Amie Rickatson, 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 2 of the 2023/24 municipal year.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- A DAHA Accreditation and Domestic Abuse Review Group Update report was scheduled to be considered by the Scrutiny Committee in January 2024.
- The Strategy and Service Development Manager would share figures relating to how many children were on the housing register waiting list versus how many children were present in the statistics, in order for the Panel to understand additional level of need.
- The DAHA Accreditation was not expected to be achieved until 2025.
- In terms of lobbying work, the Council was part of the recent Emergency Homelessness Summit and was a signatory of a letter submitted to Central Government regarding Temporary Accommodation ahead of the Autumn Statement.
- There had been a significant increase in presentations from victims of domestic abuse over the past year, likely due to changes in legislation.

Cllr Clarkson left the meeting and did not return.

- The definition of a major void was in relation to the condition of the property, rather than it being a large size.
- The summer was not seen as a particularly difficult time in relation to the Prevention Duty compared to any other time of year.

The Panel noted the contents of the report and requested the following for the next Housing Performance Monitoring report:

- Metric to be listed next to the KPI (i.e. if a KPI is measured in days, result/target to say 'X days' for clarity).
- Inclusion of narrative around EPC ratings to understand the full picture of EPCs across Council housing stock and confirm the timetable for reaching the target.
- For rent collection, to clarify that an 11% decrease means an 11% decrease in the value of arrears.

Amie Rickatson, Strategy and Service Delivery Manager left the meeting and did not return.

33. Housing Complaint Handling Performance Q1 & Q2 2023-24

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which provided an update on the Council's complaint handling performance in relation to the landlord function for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 2023/24. Overall, it was a positive report, but complaints was an area where the Council could always improve.

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager provided an overview of the contents of the report.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- There would be the ability to drill down into the 'other' category for complaints in respect of ODS to understand what those complaints related to.
- Oxford City Council and ODS provided different services, which was why the nature of complaints for the two organisations were different.
- The Landlord Services Manager could provide a further breakdown of compensation paid at the next Panel meeting, to highlight the number of people receiving compensation and the rate of compensation generally paid out.

The Panel:

1. **Noted** the contents of the report.
2. **Requested** that regular updates on Housing Complaint Handling Performance be submitted to the Panel.

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager left the meeting and did not return.

34. City of Sanctuary Accreditation [presentation]

Stephen Cohen, Refugee & Resettlement Manager provided an overview of the slides included in the agenda pack, which set out the work that the Council was doing towards achieving City of Sanctuary Accreditation.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- There would be a report on this topic to Cabinet in 2024, which Members would have the opportunity to input into via the usual pre-decision Scrutiny model.
- This was a Council-wide piece of work, with buy-in from all service areas, including senior management.
- The Accreditation was awarded to individual institutions, but the Council was working in partnership with other organisations, including the County Council.
- Asylum Welcome was undertaking a Needs Assessment and part of that work would involve interviewing individuals from a variety of different circumstances, including those with insecure immigration status.
- There was a huge focus on the proactive and reactive work the Council could undertake in relation to individuals who had recently been granted refugee status being evicted from hotels and becoming homeless.

The Panel requested that a regular update on progress towards City of Sanctuary Accreditation be added to the Work Plan, initially on an annual basis.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council advocates for safe legal routes into the United Kingdom for those fleeing war, conflict and/or persecution during Refugee Week and more broadly on an ongoing basis, linking in with the lobbying element of the City of Sanctuary Accreditation work.

35. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates and times of future meetings.

The Scrutiny Officer reminded the Panel that it was invited to join the Budget Review Group meeting on Tuesday 09 January 2024 for Scrutiny of the Housing element of the Budget.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.07 pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 7 March 2024

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.