

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 7 March 2024

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Committee members present:

Councillor Diggins (Chair)

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Rawle

Councillor Sandelson

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Gail Siddall, Regulatory Services Manager

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Ossi Mosley, Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager

Francesca Barr, Senior Rough Sleeping Officer

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager

Katherine Mayes, Customer Care and Complaint Manager

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Aziz sent apologies.

36. Declarations of Interest

None.

37. Chair's Announcements

None.

38. Notes of the previous meeting

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

39. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the Work Plan. The Scrutiny Officer provided the following updates on Scrutiny-commissioned items agreed at previous meetings:

- Landlord Services Transformation (Social Housing (Regulation) Act Compliance) – in discussion with the Chair, the item had been deferred to the July 2024 Panel meeting, as Housing Services were awaiting the outcome of the pilot assessment.
- Housing Associations' Approach to Tenant Engagement – owing to capacity constraints within Housing Services, the Chair had agreed to put this item on hold indefinitely until more capacity was freed up to support this work.

The Panel noted the updates from the Scrutiny Officer and agreed the Work Plan as set out in the agenda pack.

40. Report back on recommendations

The Panel noted the following Cabinet responses to its recommendations:

- City of Sanctuary Accreditation

41. Allocation of Preventing Homelessness Grant 2024/25

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which set out the proposed Preventing Homelessness Budget allocations for 2024/25 and recommended the grant of a lease of the Floyds Row premises. This was an annual report and it set out all of the work the Council was doing in Oxford to realise its ambition of nobody having to sleep rough in the city.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Council was holding conversations with fellow commissioners of the Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance to support the Alliance to set a balanced budget given increased service costs; the outcome of those discussions was expected to be confirmed in the coming weeks.
- The recommendation regarding the grant of a lease to the Floyds Row premises was a retrospective approval required by the Council's Constitution, as the lease was from 09 May 2023 to 01 April 2024 and much of that lease period had passed.
- There were pressures on the Preventing Homelessness Budget in 2024/25; as a result some of the services funded in 2023/24 could not continue to be funded in 2024/25. The impact on service users was expected to be minimal.
- There was some homelessness provision for couples, but not in women-only provision where the other partner was male.
- The Council's financial contribution to the Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance was set over a number of years.
- Council officers met monthly with a representative from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and highlighted the pressures within local government in relation to Housing. In addition, the Leader of the Council had made representations to the Secretary of State, particularly in relation to homelessness.
- The saving arising from the new Somewhere Safe to Stay service model in 2024/25 would be an ongoing saving that would be used to support the Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance in future years.
- The Council was committed to ensuring adequate ongoing funding for the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP); any underspend in relation to

that service could be spent on other Housing-related services or rolled forward into the following year's SWEP budget, subject to required approvals.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council carries forward any underspend in SWEP funds to the next financial year, specifically earmarked for SWEP to ensure financial resilience of that vital provision.

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager, Ossi Mosley, Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager and Francesca Barr, Senior Rough Sleeping Officer left the meeting and did not return.

42. Implementation of Selective Licensing

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which provided an update on the year one actions of the Selective Licensing scheme. She highlighted that Oxford's Selective Licensing scheme was one of the largest in the country and Oxford City Council was the only authority where the whole city was covered by the scheme.

Gail Siddall, Regulatory Services Manager added that the timescales for implementation were very tight and as a result, officers had endured a particularly intense period of work. She provided an overview of the challenges during implementation as set out in the report and advised that the scheme would help the Council address poor conditions in private rented housing stock within the city. The Council was currently recruiting for more enforcement staff.

Cllr Dunne left the meeting and did not return.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The estimates set out in the report were based on the Council's existing data on private rented sector housing in the city.
- Tenants were becoming more aware of measures such as the use of Rent Repayment Orders if their private rented property was unlicensed.
- The Council had robust financial penalty policies for cases where unlicensed properties were identified and landlords did not comply with the requirement to obtain a licence.
- The figures in the report would be checked by the Regulatory Services Manager to ensure they only covered the year one period, as the current figures appeared to cross over into year two.
- The initial Selective Licensing scheme plans included the rollout of a tenant communication and engagement campaign, however this work had not yet started.
- If Members had any contacts for tenants' unions, officers would be happy to engage with them if Members shared details.
- The 60% inspection target for private rented properties across the city was deemed tough but realistic based on the information available.
- Targets would be set for year two of the scheme.
- The Selective Licensing fees were reviewed annually; the scheme was required to be cost neutral (i.e. income must equal expenditure).
- The Council did not hold data on tenants' success using Rent Repayment Orders.

- The Council's Tenancy Relations Officer would prevent evictions from properties which were not licenced, as eviction from unlicenced properties was illegal. Once a property was licenced, eviction notices could be served, so Selective Licensing did not prevent evictions.
- Most students lived in HMOs, which were not covered by the scheme; private rented properties managed by the universities were exempt from the scheme as they were required to comply with a separate code of practice.
- A combination of incentives for submitting Selective Licensing applications and working hard with letting agents was likely responsible for the success of the scheme in year one.
- Licences were issued for five years.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council rolls out a Selective Licensing scheme communications campaign aimed at tenants to raise awareness of the scheme and tenants' rights; and actively engages with tenants unions as part of the campaign.

Gail Siddall, Regulatory Services Manager left the meeting and did not return.

43. Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager introduced the report, which set out the Council's Landlord Function self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. The Panel had reviewed the previous self-assessment in October 2023 against the current standards, however changes were proposed to the self-assessment, which were set out in the report. Following correspondence received by officers earlier in the week, compliance with the broader organisation-wide self-assessment relating to the single complaint handling code would not be a requirement until 2025/26, with reporting commencing in 2026/27. Officers were seeking clarity on what this meant for the Council.

The Panel raised issues with some of the wording relating to governance within the self-assessment, for example the document was not reported separately to the Scrutiny Committee or Full Council. The Panel requested that the Scrutiny Officer highlight the required changes to the Landlord Services Manager.

The Panel also queried the Council's definition of the 'Governing Body', as this was not terminology that the Council used, but it would be useful for the Council to ensure clarity on what was meant by this. In addition, the Panel noted the following:

- Criteria 9.3 – the Panel was of the view that this should at least be 'in part' compliant.
- Criteria 9.5 – the Leader of the Council already had responsibility for complaints within her Cabinet Member portfolio.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council sets out its definition of what the 'Governing Body' referred to in the complaint handling code is in respect of the Council, to ensure clarity across the organisation.

44. Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey 2023

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager introduced the report, which set out the results of the Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey 2023. He introduced Katherine Mayes, who had recently joined the Council as the new Customer Care and Complaint Manager. Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing added that the survey results were generally good news, but there was always more to do to drive continuous improvement.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Council was performing well in comparison with other authorities.
- There was no trend where there was dissatisfaction with communal areas; each case was very specific to that particular location and sometimes related to issues outside of the Council's control (e.g. grass verges managed by Oxfordshire County Council).
- The Council was now using Power BI for reporting and could identify trends within different age groups.
- The measure related to safety and security (high-rise) was a new measure introduced this year; next year's survey would offer an opportunity for comparison.

The Panel noted that page 12 of the report (page 102 of the full agenda pack) stated that two-thirds of residents highlighted the time taken to complete repairs and outstanding/forgotten repairs as key areas of dissatisfaction. The Panel queried whether or not survey respondents had the option to tick more than one option on this question, as if they did then the results did not necessarily point to that equalling two thirds of residents – as the same residents could have selected multiple answers. The Panel requested that the Landlord Services Manager follow up on this and report back via the Scrutiny Officer. In addition, the Panel requested to see a copy of the anonymised raw survey data.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

45. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates and times of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.55 pm

Chair

Date: Wednesday 3 July 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.