

# **Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 10 October 2024**

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## **Committee members present:**

Councillor Qayyum

Councillor Mundy

Councillor Rawle

## **Officers present for all or part of the meeting:**

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager

Katherine Mayes, Customer Care and Complaints Manager

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager

Abigail Bird, Housing Options Team Leader

Jonathan Malton, Committee and Member Services Manager

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor

## **Also present:**

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

## **Apologies:**

Councillor Diggins sent apologies and was substituted by Councillor Qayyum as Chair for this meeting.

## **11. Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Qayyum stated that she was currently a resident in a Council property; it was not a pecuniary interest but made the declaration for reasons of transparency.

## **12. Chair's Announcements**

None.

## **13. Notes of the previous meeting**

The Panel agreed the notes of the meeting held on 3 July 2024 as a true and accurate record.

*Panel agreed to consider item 7 next on the agenda, then item 6, followed by the remaining items as listed.*

## **14. Temporary Accommodation and Homelessness Update**

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities introduced the report and acknowledged the challenges Oxford currently faced with temporary accommodation. A record number of people and households were presenting as homeless and eligible for Council support, but there were not enough temporary accommodation units to meet the current demand. While existing stock was sufficient in previous years, the Council was now increasingly relying on nightly accommodations, such as bed and breakfasts or hotels.

Cllr Smith recognised that this setup was less than ideal for families and highlighted the financial pressures it placed on the Council. She noted the ongoing mitigation efforts aimed at reducing costs and the number of families, particularly pregnant households and those with children, needing temporary accommodation.

Cllr Smith also emphasised the Council's progress, sharing a letter from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that commended the work of the Housing Needs Team.

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager reiterated that despite ongoing efforts, there remained high demand on temporary accommodation, particularly in terms of weekly placements. He added that the Council had invested in staff focused on homeless prevention, achieving a 50% success rate in prevention duties, and that private sector leasing scheme was also being actively pursued. It was noted that the procurement of the new temporary accommodation framework had been successfully published and was currently in active tender.

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services, Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager, and Abigail Bird, Housing Options Team Leader were also in attendance to discuss the item and answer questions.

During further discussion, the Panel noted the following points:

- Primary factors driving increased homelessness in the city were largely beyond the Council's control such as evictions from private rented sectors linked to high rental inflation and cost-of-living pressures.
- Local challenges faced by Council included rehousing asylum seekers from hotels and the city's disproportionately high number of domestic abuse cases. There had also been statutory changes which lowered the threshold for priority needs and intentional homelessness decisions reducing eligibility for temporary accommodation.
- Oxford rehousing efforts extended to surrounding Oxfordshire towns through reciprocal agreements between local authorities. Comprehensive suitability assessments were conducted and residents' preferences for outside-city housing were considered to ensure appropriate placements in these units.
- Council received a Homelessness Prevention Grant, allowing for the expansion of staff without adding pressure to the general budget. This funding was crucial for delivering services, and the authority was awaiting confirmation of the grant for 2025, hoping for guidance from the Autumn statement or December announcements.

Cllr Smith welcomed the recent progress on the Renter's Rights Bill which bans no-fault evictions within the private rented sector and noted that there were more lobbying work to do to increase funding for temporary accommodations.

The Panel noted the report; no recommendations were made.

## **15. Housing Complaint Handling Annual Report 2023/24**

Cllr Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities introduced the report highlighting the Council's commitment to ensuring that tenants are heard and that complaints lead to meaningful service improvements. She noted the importance in promoting accountability and transparency, allowing the Council to reflect on its performance and continuously improve its landlord services.

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager presented a slide deck which had been included in the minutes pack. Katherine Mayes, Customer Care and Complaints Manager was also in attendance to discuss the item and answer questions.

Cllr Rawle queried about the number of complaints received, whether it was proportionate to the number of tenants, and how the Council compared to other local authorities. The Landlord Services Manager noted that satisfaction with complaints handling had declined across local authorities, though full annual reports were yet to be published, with many expected to release their figures in October. The Council would compare its data against other authorities of similar size.

In terms of repair delays, Cllr Rawle asked if ODS had clear action plans to reduce response times and manage tenant expectations. The Landlord Services Manager explained that delays were caused by various factors, including labour and product shortages, specifically for issues related to damp and mould. He added that ODS was adhering to timelines prescribed in the government's new guidance on health risks associated with damp and mould.

Cllr Rawle also raised concerns about tenants facing communication issues with their tenancy management officer but reluctant to file a formal complaints. She asked how the tensions were being managed prior to escalating to complaint stage. The Landlord Services Manager acknowledged the issue, explaining that tenancy management officers often spent significant time assisting other tenants, leading to delays in communication. To address this, repair-related calls were redirected to the Contact Centre. The Council was also working on landlord transformation proposals aimed at improving the wider landlord services, which was due to Cabinet in December. The Customer Care and Complaints Manager added that tenant dissatisfaction was handled sensitively to ensure they did not impact how tenants were treated in the future.

Cllr Qayyum asked if the Council tracked costs-related information in complaints, such as repair work, compensation, and officer time. The Landlord Services Manager responded that whilst compensation was tracked and would be further developed under the forthcoming Compensation Policy, the focus remained on ODS's "Fix it First Time" approach to minimise repeat visits for repairs by resolving issues correctly on the first attempt.

The Committee requested further data from quantifying costs incurred from repeat visits and additional expenditures associate with complaints.

The Committee noted the report; no recommendations were made.

**16. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan**

The Committee noted that the Landlord Services Transformation (Social Housing (Regulation) Act (Compliance) presentation had been deferred to a future meeting.

The Committee also noted three items added to the Work Plan, following changes to the Forward Plan. These items were due to Cabinet in December:

- Housing Revenue Account 30-year Business Plan and Asset Strategy
- HRA 5-year Investment Programme and Delivery Arrangements
- Tenancy Engagement and Management

Further amendments to the Work Plan would be liaised and agreed with the Chair.

**17. Dates of future meetings**

The Panel noted the dates of future meetings.

**The meeting started at 6:08 pm and ended at 7:00 pm**

**Chair .....**

**Date: Thursday 7 November 2024**

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*Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired*  
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*All other committees: immediately.*  
*Details are in the Council’s Constitution.*