

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

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Committee members present:

Councillor Diggins (Chair)

Councillor Mundy

Councillor Qayyum

Councillor Rawle

Councillor Stares

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager

Carolyn Devenney, Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer

Alan Chandler, Senior Refugee and Migrant Officer

Tom Porter, Senior Strategy and Service Development Officer

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager

Katherine Mayes, Customer Care and Complaints Manager

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor

Also present:

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

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Jupp sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

No apologies were received

18. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Theo Jupp.

19. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Asima Quayyum declared she lived in a Council property ; it was not a pecuniary interest but made the declaration for reasons of transparency.

Councillor Edward Mundy declared he lived in a Council property; it was not a pecuniary interest but made the declaration for reasons of transparency.

20. Chair's Announcements

None.

21. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the meeting held on 10 October 2024 as a true and accurate record.

22. Furnished Tenancy Scheme

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, introduced the report, highlighting the number of tenants using the scheme and that it was cost neutral to the Council.

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager, Carolyn Devenney, Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer, and Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager were also in attendance to answer questions.

Councillor Rawle noted that a very small percentage of social homes are furnished on average in Oxford, compared to a much high percentage in the private rented sector. The Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer responded that they couldn't comment on the private sector, however stated that there had been more demand for the scheme and how the Council was promoting the scheme to residents.

Councillor Mundy asked if the scheme was offering good value for money for residents. The Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer responded that residents could have different options for the length of their tenancies and the Council had many residents over the 5 years.

Councillor Diggins inquired whether residents can use the same furniture if they swap tenancies and if this applies only at the beginning of their tenancy. The Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer clarified that residents can take the furniture to their new property only if they are moving into another OCC property. Carpets and curtains will remain in situ.

If residents move outside of Oxford or to another Housing Association, the items will be returned and recycled within the Scheme. However, for items that cannot be reused, such as mattresses, these will be gifted to tenants moving to a non-OCC property.

Councillor Mundy asked about the impact this scheme had on the Hosing Revenue Account. The Landlord Services Manager noted the pressures on the HRA budget, however it is currently a cost neutral scheme, but it is kept under review.

The Panel agreed to make the following recommendation:

- 1. That the Council establishes relationships with local organisation, including charities, to enhance the reuse and recycling of used furniture under the Furnished Tenancy Scheme, with an aim to reduce wastage by extending life of furniture that may still hold value for temporary housing or community projects.***

23. Implementation of Refugee Resettlement in Oxford

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, and Alan Chandler, Senior Refugee Migrant Officer introduced the report.

Councillor Rawle queried how refugees had access to the scheme and the communication is given to those leaving the scheme. The Senior Refugee Migrant Officer responded that the families are offered up to two years of support which is provided by our partner Asylum Welcome to enable the families to become independent, after which, the Council offers a 'light touch service' signposting those seeking advice, enabling their independence from the resettlement programme.

Councillor Diggins asked about how the scheme operated, to which the Senior Refugee Migrant Officer commented that the Council secure predominantly private rented properties, although the Council has successfully secured additional Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) to procure 4 properties for the council's housing stock, to be used to house Afghan families until they no longer need those homes. The recent acquisitions would be retained for the council's future use. To secure private rented accommodation the council pays a holding fee, 2 months' rent in advance and helps with furnishing. From when families arrive, they will be supported to apply for universal credit, offered access to therapeutic counselling, education, training, and employment to give them the best possible chance to become independent and to sustain their tenancies. Many families will remain in the same property that they were initially offered after completing the programme.

Councillor Diggins asked if there was a maximum of families the Council could support. The Senior Refugee Migrant Officer responded that there was no maximum for how many properties the Council could secure for the scheme.

Cllr Stares left the meeting.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

24. Housing Performance Monitoring (2024/25 mid-year)

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, and Tom Porter, Senior Strategy and Service Development Officer briefly introduced the report.

Councillor Diggins asked why the void relet performance seemed to be decreasing as per the report. The Landlord Services Manager responded that progress had been made but expected a reset by the beginning of the new financial year.

Councillor Diggins responded that that there seemed to be improvement. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager responded that homelessness continued to be a challenge but with a higher prevention targets were a positive step and improving the mediation service specialising between landlords and dealing with disputes.

Councillor Diggins also asked about the breakdown of Council's prevention duty outcomes. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager stated that this data was known which would be shared with the Panel outside of the meeting.

Councillor Qayyum left the meeting.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

25. Housing Complaint Handling Performance (Q1 & Q2 2024/25)

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager noted there was a backlog that was expected to be completed before the end of the year and that complaints had doubled compared to last year.

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities commented on transparency and the work of the team in resolving the complaints.

Councillor Mundy asked about the complaints going to the Housing Ombudsman and any correlation with national trends on tenant satisfaction. The Landlord Services Manager responded that the last few years saw the Council improve its overall tenant satisfaction rating when compared to the national average.

Councillor Diggins asked if complaints were being upheld and if there was an expected impact with more damp and mould complaints being received. The Landlord Services Manager expected these complaints to increase over the next few quarters but noted better communications with tenants and Oxford Direct Services.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

26. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Panel noted the Committee's current work plan.

27. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at Time Not Specified and ended at Time Not Specified

Chair
November 2024

Date: Wednesday 27

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.