

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 7 July 2016

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Goff, Henwood (Chair), Pegg, Sanders, Thomas, Wade and Humphrey.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing and Property), Michael Browning (Private Sector Safety Team Leader), Bill Graves (Landlord Services Manager), David Rundle and Ian Wright (Service Manager Environmental Health)

BOARD MEMBER PRESENT: Councillor Price (Corporate Strategy and Economic Development)

52. APOLOGIES

The Scrutiny Officer opened the meeting and said that there were no apologies.

53. ELECTION OF HOUSING PANEL CHAIR

Councillor David Henwood was elected Chair for the year.

54. APPOINTMENT OF A TENANT AS A CO-OPTED MEMBER OF THE HOUSING PANEL

The Panel agreed to re-appoint Geno Humphrey as a co-opted member of the Panel for the year.

The Panel questioned the background and process for appointing a co-optee and considered a proposal that there should be two tenants on the Panel, with one appointed each year for a period of two years, or at least an overlap in their terms while the newer co-optee got up to speed. The Panel agreed to seek the views of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Panel already had 7 members in total and cautioned against increasing the membership.

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

56. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - 2015/16 QUARTER 4

The Head of Housing and Property introduced the quarterly performance report, which set out Council performance against higher level indicators at the end of March 2016. He said that the Council had achieved strong results in challenging

circumstances. The key pressure was on homelessness, rough sleeping and the use of temporary accommodation.

In response to a question about the numbers of children in temporary accommodation, the Panel heard that the majority of households in temporary accommodation were families with children. Most of the 120 households in temporary accommodation were housed in general needs stock which was suitable and secure. These households did not have to regularly move to new accommodation and change schools. The use of private rented stock had been falling over a number of years but the Council had for the first time last year breached the 6 week time limit on housing a family in bed and breakfast accommodation. The Council was buying additional stock to be used as temporary accommodation through a real lettings investment which was managed by St. Mungo's Broadway.

The Panel requested to monitor the following information over time:

- The total number of children in temporary accommodation;
- Numbers of families and single person households in temporary accommodation;
- The average length of time spent in temporary accommodation.

57. TENANT SATISFACTION

The Landlord Services Manager introduced the report and said that the Council was working more closely with tenants than ever before. He said that the response rate was very low and both overall satisfaction and overall dissatisfaction were down slightly but within the confidence interval. The STAR survey conformed to a standardised methodology that was used across the sector and enabled comparison. The Council was also looking to hold appreciative inquiries involving recent users and complainants, as these had been used to improve processes in other services. The Panel also heard that there had been a spike in demand for fencing repairs following bad weather which caused a national shortage of timber but there was no longer a backlog.

The Head of Housing and Property added that the results about listening and acting upon feedback were disappointing because the Council did do lots of in depth tenant involvement, drilled down into the drivers of satisfaction and acted on the feedback tenants provided.

In response to a question about whether tenants were offered feedback forms following repairs, the Panel heard that satisfaction from feedback forms was 95%. The Panel commented that tenants they came across were generally happy and that within the data there were lots of positives. The Panel suggested that the Council should release results data to local newsletters and through the Tenants in Touch magazine.

The Panel asked about the shifting of tenant services online and heard that the Tenant Portal had been launched last year but that channel shift would be a slow process given that half of tenant households included at least one person over the age of 65.

58. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING POLICY

The Board Member for Corporate Strategy & Economic Development introduced the report. He said that the consultation feedback had generally been positive but only 17% percent of respondents had been landlords, so there was a need to proceed with care. Respondents had generally supported the Councils aims which included focusing on energy efficiency, reducing carbon emissions, food poverty and beds in sheds. This report would set the strategic framework for future interventions in the private rented sector. Legal advice would be sought prior to the development of a selective licensing scheme, which would be subject to a public consultation and at least two further reports to the City Executive Board. The intention was that the scheme would be self-funding and reflect the range of conditions in the private rented sector.

The Panel asked a number of questions including about the scale and risks around the roll-out of a selective licensing scheme, and how good landlords would be encouraged and rewarded. The Panel heard that the preference was for selective licensing to be rolled-out city-wide because all but three wards could already be considered to have a high proportion of privately rented properties. However, approval from DCLG will be required for such a scheme. There was a need to get good landlords onside from the beginning and fee structures would be set to encourage good practices, as with the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupations (HMOs), while robust enforcement action provided a deterrent.

The Panel also asked about the illegal subdivision of HMOs and issues around Airbnb properties. The Panel heard that these were complex issues and that action had already been taken regarding a landlord who had illegally subdivided properties in an attempt to avoid HMO licensing. The Environmental Health Service Manager explained the circumstances in which these might be properties of interest to his team, for example if an Airbnb property was advertised with breakfast included.

The Panel questioned measures to improve energy ratings and the possible use of social prescribing to improve housing conditions. The Panel heard that it was now a legal requirement for landlords to provide an Energy Performance Certificate and the Council was targeting the poorest performing properties. Social prescribing had been tried in other areas and a housing and health cost calculator had been developed and is being used but there was a need to convince health partners such as the local Clinical Commissioning Group to invest in prevention. The Board Member said that closer working between health and housing formed part of the Council's devolution proposal and the new development at Barton Park had been awarded with Healthy City status.

The Panel considered the consultation methodology and questioned the locations and outcomes of road show events, the use of social media and whether feedback was provided to respondents. The Panel heard that the choice of locations was based on findings from a previous consultation. The Panel noted that future consultations on specific schemes were likely to attract a bigger response than the overarching Policy document. The Panel commented that they would like to see road show events at other locations and the use of local newsletters to advertise consultations and provide feedback to communities. The Panel suggest that future consultations exercises should be carefully designed and that members should have an opportunity to contribute suggestions.

The Panel agreed to make the following recommendation to the City Executive Board on 14 July 2016:

- That careful thought is given to future public consultations on private sector housing interventions and that members are specifically invited to comment on the range and style of any consultations.

59. REVIEW OF LORD MAYOR'S DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME

The Private Rented Sector Team Leader introduced the report. He said the scheme had been introduced 23 years ago and was last reviewed 8 years ago. The proposal was to enhance the scheme by offering an increased bond above Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, which were significantly below market rents in the City, and also offering a loan equating to 6-8 weeks rent in advance.

The Panel strongly supported the scheme and the proposed enhanced offer and questioned why the Private Rented Sector Team had only been able to help eight households last year given that 252 assessments had been undertaken. The Panel heard that the market had shrunk in recent years and that refusals were largely due to landlords rejecting applicants. A survey last year had revealed that only 5% of landlords and agencies would accept Housing Benefit claimants, despite 70% of this group being in work. Applicants with rent arrears would also be refused unless they had a repayment plan in place. Applicants were required to find properties themselves and needed to be motivated to encourage landlords to take them on but were signposted to 'tenant ready' courses.

The Panel questioned the level of funding available for the scheme and the risk of the enhanced offer being suspended due to lack of funds. The Panel heard that the scheme was funded from a one-off £50k reserve and that expenditure would be monitored in-year. The expenditure and the number of clients assisted would be reviewed and reported annually. The Panel suggest that a report should come to the City Executive Board and Scrutiny after one year so that if necessary, any funding changes could be picked up in the following budget round.

The Panel agreed to make the following recommendation to the City Executive Board on 14 July 2016:

- That after the pilot year a review of the enhanced offer including expenditure, the number of clients assisted and refusal reasons is reported to the City Executive Board.

Councillor Sanders left the meeting during this item.

60. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

The Panel agreed to add the following items to the work plan for consideration later in the year:

- Empty garages and former garage sites;
- Proposed changes to the status of people living on boats;
- Difficulties accessing the private rented sector for people in receipt of Housing Benefit;

- Land management by the universities.

The Tenant Co-optee advised the Panel that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel would be reviewing the tower block refurbishment programme and offered to report back on progress later in the year.

The Panel agreed to invite members of the Finance Panel to the meeting on 3 May 2017 for joint consideration of the progress of Oxford City Housing Ltd at the end of its first year.

61. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

62. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted the dates of future meetings and agreed to continue with a 5pm start time.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that five meetings had been set but that some flexibility could be applied during the year, for example if a major housing decision was going to be taken in a month when no Panel meeting was scheduled.

Councillor Goff apologised that she would be away for the meeting in October.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.55 pm

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