

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Wednesday 1 March 2017

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

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing and Property), Clare Bold (Options Officer), Ossi Mosley (Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer) and David Rundle (Private Rented Team Leader)

82. APOLOGIES

No apologies.

83. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations.

84. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 3

The Head of Housing said that there had been no significant changes since the previous performance report and that the quarter 3 report represented a good set of results. He highlighted the following points:

- The use of temporary accommodation was within target but the Council was using some of its general needs stock as temporary housing.
- The number of people sleeping rough was high and challenging to contain.
- There had been some delays in the delivery of new affordable housing.
- A housing company had been established and its two-year development plan would deliver 260 new units.

The Panel questioned how many units would be delivered at Dora Carr Close as this was referenced in two indicators that had different targets. The Head of Housing said that HP006 included other schemes too but that he would provide details separately on how many new units would be delivered where and when.

The Panel questioned whether social housing owned by the housing company would be subject to Right to Buy. The Panel heard that the government intended to extend Right to Buy to social housing stock owned by local authority housing companies. The details, such as qualification periods and discounts, had not yet been announced and could be different than for social housing owned by local authorities directly.

The Head of Housing offered to look into an empty property case in Northway.

85. COUNCIL SUPPORT FOR HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS ACCESSING THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Private Rented Team Leader introduced the report and said that it was potentially relevant to everyone because anyone could lose their job or become ill and need Housing Benefit. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates paid to Housing Benefit recipients are based on an area within a 30 minute commute of Oxford, not on market rent levels within the city itself. The Panel commented that it was an excellent report.

The Panel questioned whether the 3% of landlords who accepted Housing Benefit tenants included landlords of houses in multiple occupations (HMOs). The Private Rented Team Leader said that they did not. The Council did not use HMOs for statutory homelessness and had no powers to require landlords to accept tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit. Landlords tended to perceive Housing Benefit recipients as high risk tenants and often faced paying a 30% insurance premium and higher mortgage interest rates when letting properties to them. The 3% ranged from ethical landlords to those who were maybe looking to take advantage of people but in his experience, most landlords were good.

The Panel noted that half of statutory homelessness cases resulted from private rented sector (PRS) evictions and asked about the typical reasons for PRS evictions. The Private Rented Team Leader advised that approximately one quarter of PRS evictions were due to a breach of tenancy (e.g. non-payment of rent). The remainder of evictions tended to stem from a change in the landlord's circumstances, e.g. a decision to sell the property, or in some cases, seeking higher rents from tenants in work. However, there was no duty on landlords to provide a reason so analysis was difficult.

The Panel noted the difficulty people on Housing Benefit in particular faced in providing three months rent in advance and heard that some landlords even required 12 months rent in advance.

The Panel welcomed the Council's new Rent Guarantee Scheme as an excellent initiative and asked for initial feedback. The Private Rented Team Leader likened the scheme to a small snowball that was rolling. There had been 8 lets to date and the scheme had just received national publicity, which had resulted in four phone calls from other local authorities in one day. The scheme was consistent with the government's Homelessness Reduction Bill which was focused on providing help at an earlier stage. He was confident that it was a good model that was working but there was a financial risk to the Council in guaranteeing rents. Tenants were selected from a prevention list and those in temporary accommodation. There were some difficult cases and it may be that some people would fall out of the scheme but the Council had not had to pay out yet.

The Head of Housing added that the scheme was aligned with the Council's approach to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), attaching conditionality and helping people into work through training. The scheme was experimental but was making inroads at the margins.

In response to a question the Panel heard that landlords had to pass a fit and proper person test. All properties were visited and checked and the Council did not use any properties with a category 1 hazard. The Panel heard that the banning of letting agent fees was unlikely to have a significant impact on the market because the costs would be passed on in other ways.

The Panel thanked officers for an excellent report and commented that the significant gap between Local Housing Allowance Rates and market rents in the city was likely to continue getting worse.

86. SERVICES FOR ROUGH SLEEPERS

The Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer said that the number of rough sleepers in the city was currently high (186 individuals had slept rough during September to December 2016) and that rough sleepers tended to have significant needs. Rough sleeping was not illegal or banned but the Council's view was that sleeping rough was dangerous and harmful to individuals. An assertive outreach team totalling 10 people were commissioned to support and engage rough sleepers, undertake an initial assessment and provide options for accommodation, which could include private rented accommodation, family, the homelessness pathway or contacting other areas where rough sleepers had a local connection. It was recognised that this model did not work for all rough sleepers so the Council had commissioned small specialist projects totalling 10 beds to provide accommodation and intensive support to entrenched rough sleepers and those with multiple complex needs. The Council funded a lot of services in the city but there were particular challenges around individuals who refused to engage, those who were not eligible for services (e.g. because they had no recourse to public funds), those did not wish to leave the city and those who continued to sleep rough despite having access to accommodation.

The Panel raised concerns about people sleeping in tents including people whose tents had been slashed. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer said that the Council did not issue tents and that these people should speak to the outreach team. This team visited all the places where people were known to be sleeping rough, either late at night or early in the morning. The police and day services were all aware of the work of the outreach team and how to refer people to them.

The Panel questioned whether clear guidance was provided to recipients and providers on how the local connection rules were applied and what peoples' rights were. The Panel heard that these rules flowed from the Council's Allocations Policy which had been agreed by full Council but that the homelessness pathway was less stringent than the Allocations Policy.

The Panel asked about a group of people sleeping at Osney power station who had recently moved there from a former car showroom site on Iffley Road, and how the Council was engaging with them. The Head of Housing said that the Council had made efforts to engage with this group but had been refused. Because of this the Council had no way of verifying whether these people were from Oxford and had previously been sleeping rough in the City. The Panel questioned whether the assertive outreach model may be too intrusive and pushy to be effective with groups such as this. The Panel commented that some rough sleepers had agency and a voice and could potentially provide useful

feedback to the Council. The Head of Housing said that dialogue was key but that the model was deliberately assertive because the Council believed that sleeping rough was bad for people.

The Panel questioned how the repatriation process worked for people with no recourse to public funds and whether embassies were involved. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer said that this was part of the commissioned service. In practice it involved accompanying people to an airport or bus terminal and ensuring there would be someone to meet them at the other end. Only a small number of people accepted support with repatriation.

A member of the public was invited to comment and suggested that former rough sleepers should be utilised as middlemen as this can help to gain the trust of rough sleepers and make for more effective engagement. This approach had worked successfully in Hong Kong. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer said that St. Mungo's did use some peer workers but that she would take this suggestion away.

The Panel resolved to:

- Welcome the excellent report.
- See any comments made about the outreach service by rough sleepers.
- See any documents or leaflets given out by the outreach service.
- Request further information about the repatriation process.

87. ALLOCATION OF HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION FUNDS

The Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer introduced the report which set out how the Council would spend £1.4m of homelessness prevention funds in 2017/18. The provision of homelessness services were about to go through unprecedented changes due to the phased withdrawal of 100% of the County Council £1.5m budget for housing related support, which would end completely in 2019. A pooled budgeting arrangement involving the City Council, the other Oxfordshire district councils and the Clinical Commissioning Group would replace some of the homelessness beds that were being lost. Through this arrangement the Council had committed £161k of prevention funding to maintaining some supported accommodation services that had previously been funded by the County Council. The Head of Housing said that the city needed a minimum of 150 beds and the Council would prioritise making up the shortfall (108 beds are funded from pooled budgets in the city beyond April 2018). The most pressing issue was the replacement of Julian Housing (dispersed housing across the city) as 83 beds would be lost from April 2017. The Council was already in discussions about this.

In response to a question, the Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Officer confirmed that no prevention activities would stop in 2017/18, aside from one small funding reduction to a provider that was becoming self-sufficient. In 2018/19 there would be a need to reallocate funding to meet the challenges from County Council cuts. At this stage there were uncertainties about the impacts of the Homelessness Reduction Bill and Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer funding but officers would come back to members with costed proposals for 2018/19 at the appropriate time. The Panel also noted that £250k previously allocated to topping up Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) was being removed in 2017/18 but heard that only a fraction of this funding was likely to be

utilised in the current year and the Council's DHP grant allocation had been significantly increased for the coming year.

The Panel questioned whether the severe weather emergency provision was sufficient. The Head of Housing said that there was adequate flexibility to meet need and that any people seen sleeping rough during severe weather had done so not because of a lack of provision but through choice.

88. REPORT FOR APPROVAL: UNIVERSITY HOUSING NEEDS

The Panel agreed that the report should better reflect the following areas of disagreement between the Panel and the University of Oxford:

- The University's claim that the Council had not delivered new housing.
- The University's claim that sites in Wolvercote and Northern Gateway are too far from university facilities to be suitable for student or postdoc accommodation.
- The Panel's view that the University should do more to maximise accommodation on sites it owns.
- The Panel's view that the University should do more to ensure that their lower paid support staff can be suitably accommodated in the city.

The Panel agreed that the recommendations should include the following points:

- The need for a continued dialogue with the universities aimed at building shared concerns and shared effort.
- The need to encourage the University to present their plans for accommodating students and postdocs.
- The need for the University to do more to ensure that their lower paid support staff can be suitably accommodated in the city.

89. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

Noted.

90. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Agreed.

91. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Cllr Goff apologised that she would be unable to attend the next meeting.

The Panel questioned whether substitutes could be allowed. The Scrutiny Officer said that he would advise against this and that consistency of membership was important due to the focused nature of the Panel's remit. Suggested meeting dates for next year would be shared with Panel members soon for their agreement.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.55 pm

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