

To: City Executive Board
Date: 19 September 2017
Report of: Housing Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)
Title of Report: Draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present the recommendations of the Housing Panel on the Draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022
Key decision:	Yes
Executive Board Member:	Councillor David Henwood, Chair of Housing Panel
Corporate Priority:	Meeting Housing Needs
Policy Framework:	Housing Strategy 2015-18
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices
None

Introduction and background

1. The Housing Panel considered the Draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022 at a meeting on 12 September 2017. The Committee would like to thank Mike Rowley, Board Member for Housing, Dave Scholes, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager, and Frances Evans, Strategy and Service Development Manager, for presenting the report. The Panel would also like to thank the following external guests for their very helpful contributions; Sue Jackson from Outreach, Neo, a homeless person, and Sgt. Peter Neale and PC Paul Arnold from Thames Valley Police.
2. The Strategy and Service Development Manager introduced the report and highlighted the five key strategic aims and priorities. She said there will be a six week consultation running from 21 September to 3 November 2017 and various stakeholders will be invited to engage in a variety of ways. The Council will be actively targeting hard to reach groups and plans to go out to attend their meetings.
3. The Board Member for Housing added that the Council cannot solve the housing crisis in the city and needs to work with a range of partners. The Council is making

strong representations to government about national housing and homelessness policies and funding.

External contributions

4. The Chair invited the external guests to speak and they were very helpful in informing the Panel's deliberations on the draft strategy and two other reports about homelessness.
5. The Service Manager of the Oxford Street Population Outreach Team (SPOT) said that her team is fully funded by the City Council and includes seven outreach staff working within the parameters set by the Council, its partners and national government. They work on the basis that rough sleeping is harmful and dangerous and is not a safe option for people, so all alternative options are explored. Rough sleepers have very differing needs that should be considered on an individual basis so it is not helpful or accurate to describe them as being a 'community'. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough in Oxford, with about 25 new arrivals per month. The Council is looking creatively at options that St. Mungo's have some experience of from Bristol, Brighton and Reading. She welcomed Council initiatives such as looking to utilise empty buildings as shelters.
6. Neo said that in his view the numbers of rough sleepers are under-stated but he agreed that the numbers of new rough sleepers are increasing, with a number of recent new arrivals coming from Banbury. These people have complex issues and there is a need to break down barriers and build their trust but the approach taken by Outreach is too heavy-handed. The local connection policy is a big issue because some rough sleepers have been in the city for a long time and are clearly not going anywhere so they need more help. It is now starting to get cold, which will lead to increased alcohol and drug use as rough sleepers struggle to cope. There are not enough beds in the city and although the churches are coming together to provide 10 extra beds, this will not be enough and rough sleepers need somewhere warm they can go 24 hours a day. He said he is looking to open a shelter and has volunteers, some money and public support but needs a suitable building.
7. Sgt. Peter Neale said that there are massive vulnerabilities associated with rough sleeping and the feelings of hopelessness that go with it, including addiction, drug debt and human exploitation. As it gets colder, more drugs and alcohol will be consumed, resulting in more ancillary crimes such as shoplifting and thefts, as well as more begging and used syringes being left in public places. The police try to minimise the impacts on the public and push rough sleepers towards Outreach and other support services. The police have a welfare-based system for dealing with begging, with people given three warnings before civil or criminal options are explored. The police have a homeless liaison officer within their problem solving team who is visible in the city centre and is sometimes out until 4am.

Summary and recommendations

8. The Panel welcomed the strategy and heard that there was a comprehensive plan of engagement in place for the consultation, including focus groups, 'drop in sessions' and an online survey. These will be promoted via various channels including posters in community centres, leaflets and social media. The Panel said that it would be helpful for leaflets to be placed in the pigeon holes of all members.

Recommendation 1 - That leaflets promoting the consultation are provided to elected members and that paper copies of the survey are also made available to members.

9. The Strategy and Service Development Manager said that the Council wants to engage with service users and people like Neo (as well as stakeholder representatives) during the consultation, and that they could provide their views confidentially. The Panel note that homeless people will be very difficult to consult with and suggest that the Council tries to establish some sort of homelessness 'service user group' to engage with on issues of homelessness and decisions that affect them. This is likely to be difficult to do in practice and may require involving an external facilitator but is worth further consideration, including looking at whether this has been attempted successfully elsewhere.

Recommendation 2 - That consideration is given to how the Council engages with rough sleepers and service users on the strategy and other issues that affect them, including the option of forming a 'service user group'.

10. The Panel asked what is being done to address specific empty properties in the city and heard about the staged approach the Council takes to bringing long term empty (i.e. over 6 months) homes back into use. A county-wide officer group is also in place. The Panel asked how councillors and members of the public can report empty properties in the city and suggest possible alternative uses for them. The Strategy and Service Development Manager said that the Council has an online reporting tool and could do some publicity around empty homes linked to the national Empty Homes Week in October.

Recommendation 3 - That as part of Empty Homes Week the Council promotes the issue of empty homes and its online reporting tool.

11. The Panel noted that the evidence base makes reference to 13 properties within the Council's housing stock being long-term empty as of 1 April 2017 and questioned why this is the case. The Panel heard that this is likely to be due to structural issues or renovation works being underway. The Panel suggest that this should be explained in the documentation so as not to give the wrong impression.
12. The Panel heard that combining the housing, homelessness and empty property strategies into one document was more efficient than producing and consulting on three separate strategies, and felt that this should be recognised in the documentation. The Panel also commented that in producing one overarching strategy, it was important that the more specific key issues did not get lost.
13. The Panel welcomed the successes from the previous strategy and suggest that the documentation should also highlight any key learning points from the previous strategy, as this could provide useful additional insights. The Panel heard that lessons learnt in recent years have informed the proposed future actions.

Recommendation 4 - That the final documentation should include:

- a) ***Some explanation in the evidence base as to why 13 Council-owned dwellings were long-term empty as of 1 April 2017.***
- b) ***Some recognition that combining the three strategies and holding one consultation saved officer time and some costs.***
- c) ***Some mention of learning points from the previous strategies as well as successes.***

14. In discussion the Panel also noted that:

- Services are in place to support rough sleepers and this support is made clear to them but people needed to want to engage and seek help.
- Problems with drug use are societal not specific to homeless people and require a range of solutions including addition support, police operations targeting dealers and help for people to repair their circumstances.
- There is an issue with dealing with people who want to sleep rough given that the 1824 Vagrancy Act is very outdated and there is a work stream to investigate this.
- The Council is broadly aiming to provide the same level of service despite financial pressures from rent reductions but is taking a more innovative approach.
- There is a backlog of assessments for home adaptations from Occupational Therapy and an increasing number of cases of people having changing and complex needs.
- While the Council owns 62 5-bed and 392 4-bed homes, mostly in the city, only around 12-15 of these become available each year.

Further consideration

15. The Panel agreed to scrutinise the Strategy and the post-consultation stage before it is presented to the City Executive Board in early 2018.

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