

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Monday 11 September 2017

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

OFFICERS PRESENT: Frances Evans (Strategy & Service Development Manager), Dave Scholes (Housing Strategy & Needs Manager) and Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer).

BOARD MEMBER PRESENT: Councillor Mike Rowley (Housing).

GUESTS PRESENT: Sue Jackson (Oxford Street Population Outreach Team), Neo, Sgt. Peter Neale (Thames Valley Police) & PC Paul Arnold (Thames Valley Police).

112. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Liz Wade and Stephen Clarke (represented by Dave Scholes).

113. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

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

The Panel resolved to co-opt Geno Humphrey for the remainder of the 2017/18 Council year.

115. DRAFT HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2017-2022

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 engaged in a variety of ways. The Council would be actively targeting hard to reach groups and going out to engage with them at their own meetings.

The Board Member for Housing added that the Council could not solve the housing crisis in the city and needed to work with a range of partners. The Council was making strong representations to government about national housing and homelessness policies and funding.

The Chair invited the external guests to speak to inform the Panel's deliberations on the strategy and the two subsequent items.

The Service Manager of the Oxford Street Population Outreach Team (SPOT) addressed the Panel. She said that her team was fully funded by the City Council and included seven outreach workers who worked within the parameters set by the Council, its partners and government. They worked on the basis that rough sleeping was harmful and dangerous and was not a safe option for people, so all other options would be explored. Rough sleepers had very differing needs that had to be considered on an individual basis. As such it was not helpful or accurate to describe rough sleepers as being a 'community'. There had been a significant increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough in Oxford, with about 25 new arrivals per month. The Council was looking creatively at options which St. Mungo's had some experience of from Bristol, Brighton and Reading. She welcomed Council initiatives such as looking to utilise empty buildings as shelters.

A homeless person known as Neo addressed the Panel. He said that in his view the numbers of rough sleepers had been under-stated but he agreed that the numbers of new rough sleepers were increasing, with a number of recent new arrivals coming from Banbury. These people had complex issues and there was a need to break down barriers and build their trust but the approach taken by Outreach was too heavy-handed. The local connection policy was a big issue because some rough sleepers had been in the city for a long time now and were clearly not going anywhere and needed more help. It was now starting to get cold, which would lead to increased alcohol and drug use as rough sleepers struggled to cope. There were not enough beds in the city and although the churches were coming together to provide ten extra beds, rough sleepers needed somewhere warm they could go 24 hours a day. He said he was looking to open a shelter and had volunteers, some money and public support but needed a building.

Sgt. Peter Neale addressed the Panel. He said that there were massive vulnerabilities associated with rough sleeping and the feelings of hopelessness people felt, including addiction, debt and human exploitation. As it got colder, more drugs and alcohol would be consumed, resulting in ancillary crimes such as shoplifting and thefts, begging and used syringes being left in public places. The police tried to minimise the impacts on the public and to push rough sleepers towards Outreach and other support services. The police had a welfare-based system for dealing with begging, with people given three warnings before civil or criminal options were considered. The police had a homeless liaison officer in their problem solving team who was visible in the city centre and sometimes out until 4am.

In discussion and in answer to questions the Panel noted the following:

- The Council wanted to engage with service users and people like Neo, as well as stakeholder representatives, and they could provide their views confidentially.
- The consultation survey would be available online but paper copies could be provided on request and people could phone in with their views. There would also be posters in community centres, leaflets, etc., and focus groups based around the survey questions.
- Services were in place to support rough sleepers and this support was made clear to them but people needed to want to engage and seek help.

- Problems with drug use were societal not specific to homeless people and required a range of solutions including addition support, police operations targeting dealers and help for people to repair their circumstances.
- There was an issue with dealing with people who wanted to sleep rough given that the 1824 vagrancy act was very outdated and there was a work stream to investigate this.
- Combining the three strategies was more efficient but it was important that specific issues did not get lost.
- People could report empty properties online and the Council took a staged approach to bringing them back into use. There was also a county-wide officer group.
- The Council was broadly aiming to provide the same level of service despite financial pressures from rent reductions but was taking a more innovative approach.
- There was 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 owned 62 5-bed and 392 4-bed homes, mostly in the city, only around 12-15 of these became available each year.

The Panel welcomed the Strategy and agreed to make the following recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That leaflets promoting the consultation are provided to elected members and that paper copies of the survey are also made available to members.
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'.
3. That as part of Empty Homes Week the Council promotes the issue of empty homes and its online reporting tool.
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.

116. OPTIONS PAPER ON ADDITIONAL HOMELESSNESS PROVISION FOR THE CITY

The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said that county council budget cuts were significantly impacting the provision of homelessness accommodation in the city. The Council had identified a need for 150 beds to meet ongoing needs and the report was seeking to deliver the shortfall. The Council was close to securing an agreement for 22 new units of accommodation with 24 hour support for people with complex needs and would be seeking planning consent before Christmas. This scheme could also include 15 units of move on accommodation which would help to alleviate a blockage. In the meantime the Council was seeking to ensure that half the beds at Simon House remained available for a further year. Approval was also being sought for a further 5 units of accommodation for rough sleepers with mental health and addition issues.

In discussion the Panel noted:

- The expansion of the 'Housing First' model (Acacia Housing) was very welcome.
- Some concern about the choice of A2 Dominion as a development partner based on their responsiveness to existing tenants, although they were relocating their Oxford office to be closer to more of their tenants.
- The issue of homeless people moving on into private sector housing was very difficult and the Council was continuing to use a range of different and innovative strategies to address this.
- The Council had little leverage with landlords to encourage them to make properties available for move on accommodation and any carrots the Council could offer became less effective as rents continued to rise.
- A future report would be presented to members on options for the future of Simon House, which could involve linking it with other sites to maximise the viability of affordable housing.

The Panel endorsed the recommendations and agreed to request more information about the Age UK Oxford Homeshare project, which matches older people who have a spare room with a younger person who needs affordable accommodation.

117. THE USE OF EMPTY BUILDINGS AS TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager said that the report responded to a Council motion and did not propose any definite actions at this stage but provided an update on work that was continuing. The report identified three types of scheme that might be viable. There were some empty premises in the city but discussions with landlords aimed at utilising these had not produced any results to date. The Council had an active work plan and if opportunities did arise then the Council would act but this route may be a dead end.

In discussion the Panel expressed some disappointment that no buildings had been found for any schemes and noted that:

- The greatest need in the city was for additional severe weather emergency provision. Plan B was to utilise community and sports centres at night but the Council would prefer a dedicated space.
- There were some 300 homes in the city that had been empty for over 2 years and about 70 that had been empty for over 10 years. The Council had sought to bring these back in to use but this was not easy to do.
- Commercial properties were likely to be more suitable than residential properties for homelessness provision but it was also very challenging to bring these back into use.
- The Council and its partners were relatively successful at engaging with new rough sleepers.
- Organisations in the homelessness pathway could exercise some discretion where people had no local connection in certain circumstances.
- The future of Lucy Faithful Housing would be the subject of a report to members in the near future.

The Panel endorsed the recommendations and agreed to request a verbal update in 6 months' time.

118. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

Noted.

119. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Agreed.

120. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.00 pm

This page is intentionally left blank