

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 12 October 2017

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

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Hollingsworth (Planning & Regulatory Services) and Rowley (Housing)

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing Services), Ian Wright (Service Manager Environmental Health), Alan Wylde (Housing Development & Enabling Manager) and Becky Bell (Home Improvement Agency Team Manager)

121. APOLOGIES

Apologies were noted from Cllr Angie Goff.

122. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

123. REGULATING THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services and the Environmental Health Service Manager introduced their report. They said that the intention was to improve standards in the non-HMO private rented sector. The proposal was to do so by using new powers to issue civil penalties to rogue landlords who failed to comply with an Improvement Notice. The penalties would be retained by the Council and used to fund two fixed term officer posts. Most landlords operating in the city were good and had nothing to fear from this approach, which was considered to be fair and effective. A selective licensing scheme had been considered but rejected on the basis that to be acceptable to government, a scheme would have only covered part of the city, and not necessarily those areas where enforcement actions were concentrated. This would have created unfairness and flaws in the system.

A representative of Oxford Community Forum addressed the Panel. He said that his organisation has opposed the introduction of selective licensing for HMOs and questioned why the Council was intent on intervening in the private rented sector, rather than the social or universities sectors. He said that landlords were not aware of what the Council was doing and would feel insecure about the implications of further interventions. He questioned what safeguards would be in place to govern the use of these new powers.

The Environmental Health Service Manager explained the background to HMO licensing and provided assurance that landlords would have opportunities to comply before being served with a penalty.

In discussion and in response to questions the Panel noted that:

- The approach was not expected to impact rent levels;
- Tenants were protected from retaliatory evictions;
- Officers would use a range of data sources, intelligence and experience to identify the properties most likely to be in disrepair;
- Once an offense had been identified, three senior officers and a lawyer needed to be satisfied at various stages before an intention to issue a civil notice was given to the landlord.
- The appeals process had not been tested and income would need to be carefully monitored;
- The Council would be the first in the country to take this approach although others were considering doing so;
- The names of landlords issued with a civil notice would not be made public, although they would be placed on a government database.
- For very serious offenses landlords may face banning orders, although that power had not been used yet.
- The Council would be targeting poor housing rather than specific geographies.

The Panel agreed to request an annual report in order to monitor spend and numbers of inspections and enforcement actions taken.

124. DRAFT HOUSING ASSISTANCE AND DISABLED ADAPTATIONS POLICY 2018

The Board Member for Housing introduced the report and said that a very rare thing was happening - the government was increasing a funding stream. This was giving the Council flexibility to top up Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG), taking the maximum DFG to £40k, introduce discretionary Adapted Home Grants of up to £10k and introduce discretionary Safe and Secure grants of up to £1k. These would help to ensure that people were able to return home from hospital sooner, reducing bed blocking, and to help prevent falls.

The Home Improvement Agency Team Manager added that the funding was channelled through the Better Care Fund and was increasing from £500k in 2012 to £1m in 2020. Government had signalled that the intention was to fund further increases into the future. The Council's Policy was being refreshed to better reflect the aims of the Better Care Fund.

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

- Many elderly people were frightened to spend their savings on adaptations; hence the introduction of non-means tested funding.
- The Council was actively promoting the grants to various groups and organisations across the city and had produced a number of leaflets to be placed in GP surgeries, pharmacies, community settings etc.
- Support is provided to applicants by a case worker.
- Flexible Home Improvement Loans are very popular and the full amount is always allocated.
- Direct Services provide can undertake works competitively but the trading company business plan assumes no growth in this area.

125. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 1

The Head of Housing Services introduced the report. He said that the rough sleeping figure for the end of June (HP003) should read 180. Progress was being made to improve the rents performance (BV066a).

The Panel expressed concern that there was insufficient resource in the team dealing with rent collection. The Head of Housing Services explained the nature of the resourcing issues in that area and the challenges created by the introduction of Universal Credit. He said that progress had been made since June.

The Panel noted that Universal Credit recipients could only elect for their rent to be paid directly to their landlord once they had got into arrears.

126. TOWER BLOCK FIRE SAFETY - VERBAL UPDATE

The Head of Housing Services explained that the Council had placed a variation order with its contractor to remove and replace the aluminium composite material (ACM) rain screen installed on parts of the two tower blocks in Blackbird Leys. The contractor had initially proposed a non-combustible ACM product as a replacement but to provide maximum reassurance to residents the Council had requested a non-ACM aluminium rain screen. This would require the fittings installed on the blocks to be changed but the £150k cost of doing this could be absorbed within the existing budget. It would also extend the timescale for replacement by a couple of months to July 2018. The resident reference group had been advised and was supportive of this decision. The Council was confident that it was taking a sound decision that went over and above the Council's obligations.

A leaseholder addressed the Panel and expressed concern about the risk of arson or a terrorist attack on one or more of the Council's tower blocks. The Head of Housing Services responded that the blocks were secure and contained no unacceptable fire risks that would exacerbate damage or harm in the event of a major incident.

127. LUCY FAITHFULL HOUSE

The Head of Housing introduced the report and explained the reasons why authorisation was being sought to demolish Lucy Faithful House. He said that the building was old-fashioned, in poor condition and the internal layout was such that refurbishment would not be desirable. The plan was to redevelop the site as residential accommodation and to maximise the delivery of affordable housing.

In discussion and in response to questions the Panel noted that:

- Asbestos surveys were being undertaken ahead of demolition early in the New Year.
- Alternative uses for the building (e.g. as a severe weather shelter) had been considered but ruled out on the basis that there was adequate

capacity elsewhere and insufficient time (and no budget) to make the building safe and find a suitable management organisation.

- The building had recently been used by a guardianship organisation but there had been significant concerns and complaints about safety, resulting in Environmental Health action.

The Head of Housing Services offered to share information about severe weather accommodation with members.

128. HOUSING PANEL WORK PLAN

The Panel noted that two housing decisions are going forward to the City Executive Board in December and asked the Scrutiny Officer to set a provisional panel meeting.

The Panel also asked to bring the empty garages report forward to March.

129. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

130. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.45 pm